ROLL TO SAVE VS. PREJUDICE: RACE IN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a critical examination of how players of the fantasy role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons use the concept of race, both in and out of the game. The study of race in role-playing games has been neglected, and this is a tragedy, because these games offer a unique space where the concept of race, often a difficult and uncomfortable topic of conversation, is questioned, criticized, and reshaped by the players. Role-playing games are spaces of encounter between the players and a cast of imaginary others, and this requires a degree of empathy on the part of the players that makes role-playing games a space of ideological change, as players are forced to consider the world from viewpoints both familiar and alien.

The theoretical framework within combines a phenomenological analysis of roleplaying games that allows non-gamers to understand the practice and importance of these games with critical race theorists such as bell hooks, Paul Gilroy, and Patricia Hill Collins that defines what race is and how it affects all of us on a day-to-day basis. This thesis is also based on interviews with geographically diverse set of gamers who demonstrate the highly personal nature of gaming, and how race takes on a multitude of meanings both within the fictional game settings and around the gaming table.
For all the worlds that never were
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INTRODUCTION: WHY D&D MATTERS

The first time I played a game of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), I decided I wanted to be an elf. From the first time I had read *Lord of the Rings*, I’d been enchanted by the notion of Tolkienian elves, forever young, yet steeped in wisdom. The idea of living forever in an environment of indolent intellectualism appealed to me. Then too, I just wanted to be someone else. Taking on a different racial identity in the real world had never appealed to me, and I rolled my eyes at my cohorts who appropriated African American culture. It seemed idiotic and offensive to me for a bunch of white, middle-class kids to pretend to be “street” or “thug” without experiencing any of the hardships that had produced those identities. Clearly, though, pretending to be an elf was different. Fantasy races were something else entirely. Or so I’d decided.

Most of my preconceptions were shattered when I had to introduce my elven princeling into the game’s shared fantasy world and reconcile my notions of “elf-ness” with those of my friends. First, I was told that elves only lived marginally longer than humans. No immortality for me, even in fantasy. More importantly, my infatuation with elves wasn’t shared by my friends, their characters, or the inhabitants of the fictional world we played in. As my friends and I embarked on our adventure, my character was repeatedly derided for his race – sometimes in the form of playful ribbing from my friends, making fun of me for playing an elf. ¹ Sometimes it was more “serious racism,” where characters within the game’s narrative would treat my character differently, or refer to him by slurs such as “pointy-ears” or “flower fairy.” I gave back as good

¹ While this last example is targeted at me and not the character, there’s a great deal of transference between character and player. I will elaborate on the importance of this later in this thesis.
as I got, adopting a mantle of aloof superiority and making snide comments about the so-called “barbarian races.”

My friends and I were consciously caricaturing real-life racism and homophobia, drawing on a language that combined everything from stereotypes common among gamers to uncomfortable conversations with overtly racist family members. Sometimes racism was played for laughs, especially when it was presented in over-the-top, strawman form. But we were all a bit disturbed by how easy it was to think in terms of race, to use it to define our perspectives and make assumptions about others, even in the context of a fantasy world. Moreover, as the campaign progressed, the large-scale political problems caused by racism had a dramatic effect on the plot. Antagonists went free or were able to operate with impunity because they were of a favored race within the world’s political structure. Our characters were treated unfairly and suffered because of being a racial minority. Each of the players had to question what race meant, both within and without the context of the game, especially when we noticed and commented on uncomfortable similarities between the stereotypical portrayal of orcs and racist stereotypes about African Americans. Playing D&D didn’t awaken me to the idea that race was a problematic social construct, and it didn’t magically make me understand what it was live as a member of a subaltern class. In fact, the instructional texts of Dungeons & Dragons are often openly racist, in that they use race as a meaningful distinction between persons and uphold anachronistic notions of what “race” means. But because race is a central concept in D&D, and because roleplaying games are based around constructing and empathizing with imagined others, playing D&D gave me a means to discuss the meaning and effects of race with people that I otherwise wouldn’t have had that conversation with.

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2 I use “persons” instead of “people” because many of those persons are not human.
Roleplaying games matter because they force players to explore the ideas of “self” and “other,” to chart the space between, and to decide how much space there really is. When players play roleplaying games, they create characters to interact with each other and with a fantasy world. Those characters are both distinct from the players and part of them. Players create characters that they have to be able to empathize with, but who have histories, personalities, and points of view different from those of their progenitors. Roleplaying games rely on and foster empathy for other people. Players work with the other people to create a shared story, and that creative process relies on understanding and empathizing with people who exist within the collective imaginations of the group. More than movies, television, novels or video games, roleplaying games insist that their players must step outside themselves and look at a situation from different points of view. Roleplaying games are therefore an ideal subject of study for how people interpret and use race, both in fictional settings and in real life. Race is one of the most powerful markers of otherness that people ever experience, but roleplaying games rely on the ability of the players to bridge the gap between self and other. It is no surprise, then, that roleplaying games have a profound effect on the ways that their players understand race, not just in the game, but in real life as well.

Roleplaying games shape and reshape the meaning of race. And the reason they can do this is the same reason I initially dismissed the connection between race as a real-world construct and race as it existed in the game. Because roleplaying games are spaces of play, they let players talk about race in ways normally considered taboo. People can experiment with modes of thought that would be considered offensive or outright racist. They can dissect them, analyze them, use them and discard them. They can try on being someone else, or at least an image of someone else that they construct in the shared and imaginary game-space. Concepts of race are
important, and therefore uncomfortable, awkward, and even painful to talk about. But within the
play space of a roleplaying game like Dungeons & Dragons, these concepts are made safe,
accessible, and acceptable subjects of conversation, debate, and re-examination.

So, Why Does D&D Matter?

Tabletop roleplaying games have received scholarly attention from various disciplines,
especially as spaces of social interaction, most notably in Gary Allen Fine’s *Shared Fantasy*
(Fine). But there remains very little research on how players deal with race when playing
tabletop roleplaying games, despite the fact that race is incredibly important in most major
roleplaying game systems. This lack of research is surprising, because as I stated, roleplaying
games are about stepping into the position of an imaginary other. I have chosen to focus this
thesis on Dungeons & Dragons, more commonly called D&D, in order to keep the focus
manageable. I chose D&D because race is especially important in it, because it’s more well-
known than most roleplaying games and therefore more likely to be familiar to my non-gaming
readers, and finally because it has a very broad player base, and thus is a logical entry point for
recruiting informants to interview.

Despite the fact that D&D takes place in fantastic settings that contain unrealistic
elements like magic and monsters, players still have to be able to place themselves convincingly
within them. Even characters who are otherworldly elves or a brutish orcs remain vessels for the
player, and the player must be able to empathize with and through them. Similarly, the idea of
race in the game settings is both distinct from and inextricably linked with the way that players
view race in the real world. The way that players view race within the context of the game
matters, because those views are both an extension of deeply-held real-world beliefs, and
because D&D and games like it can be places where those beliefs are opened up for discussion, and for change. In this thesis, I have used an interdisciplinary body of literature to establish a scholarly framework, performed textual analysis of D&D’s instructional texts\(^3\) in order to establish how the game material informs the player’s expectations, and combined both of these with interviews from a small pool of players to provide a sample of what race “means” in the practice of an actual gaming session.

The purpose of combining a critical analysis of how race is treated within the instructional texts of Dungeons & Dragons with an investigation of how players conceptualize race while playing the game is to balance criticism of the racist elements of D&D with an accurate assessment of how much those elements affect and reflect on the attitudes of the players. D&D uses the term “race” where “species” would be more appropriate, and many of the fantastic races portrayed in D&D are disturbingly similar to negative stereotypes deployed against people in the real world. D&D’s deployment of race is also markedly similar to the pseudoscientific racism of the 19\(^{th}\) and 20\(^{th}\) centuries, a point I will elaborate on throughout this thesis. But personal experience and anecdotal evidence tell me that when roleplaying game (RPG) players actually play D&D, the use of race is far more complicated than the stereotypes every gamer is familiar with. I’ve been playing D&D for more than a decade. I’ve been in dozens of different gaming groups, both online via internet forums, and in real time. And each one of these groups has understood and used the term “race” a little differently. Some groups have understood “race” within the game as something absolute – all dwarves act like this, all elves act like that. But most players, and most groups, use race in a more complicated way. Each race has a set of stereotypes and generalized characteristics

\(^3\) By “instructional texts,” I mean D&D’s rulebooks. I use this term throughout this thesis in order to distinguish between printed texts and the metaphorical “texts” of roleplaying game sessions.
associated with it, a set defined by both the fantasy genre in general and D&D specifically. Most players are at least vaguely aware of these stereotypes when creating a character. But in all my years of gaming, I’ve never met a player who treated those stereotypes as iron-bound rules that absolutely define the horizons of a character’s potential. Players instead tend to embrace some stereotypes and reject others, using the symbolic structure of race in D&D where it is convenient and disregarding it where it isn’t, all in the service of telling the kinds of stories that individual players and gaming groups are interested in. This is not to say that stereotypes don’t sometimes limit player perception, lead to conflict, or stymie creativity. But the use of race in D&D is a complicated and extremely nuanced exercise that deserves more than a simple dismissal as an offshoot or reinforcement of racism in the real world.

Having said this, the way that race is used during a gaming session is still inextricably bound with the ways in which a player understands race in the real world. My research here investigates the complicated ways that players understand and make comparisons between “race” in the real world and “race” in the worlds of D&D.

Critical Bits: What exactly is D&D?

Before I begin the main body of work, I want to give a brief explanation of what Dungeons & Dragons is, in the hope that scholars who are not also gamers might find this work useful and interesting. D&D is a tabletop roleplaying game (RPG), also called a pen-and-paper RPG, or PnP RPG. These games are the antecedents of massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPG’s) like World of Warcraft. Tabletop RPG’s traditionally involve a small group of players, usually between three and five, gathered around a table telling a story to each other. D&D is by far the most famous tabletop RPG. Its narrative, especially with regardsto
race, is firmly grounded in the canon of high fantasy literature, most especially J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth corpus. The game’s designers have cannibalized elements from a wide body of lore, including John Milton, Dante Alighieri, and numerous real-world mythological and religious traditions.

While the actual game can be summarized as a rules-heavy version of “playing pretend,” and the particulars of the game vary widely from group to group, there are some core elements that remain constant in most D&D games. Each player except one has a single character who represents them in the gameworld. The character is generally described on several sheets of paper referred to as a “character sheet” which describes their personality, appearance, and personal history as well as their game mechanics. The amount of effort and detail put into developing the character’s persona varies wildly, and can consist of anything from a few lines to dozens of pages, though somewhere between a couple of paragraphs and a few pages is the normal range in most groups. Amidst all these details, however, a few are of primary importance: Race, class, and level. In D&D parlance, “race” indicates which of several humanoid species the character belongs to, and has an enormous effect on the character for reasons I will discuss shortly. “Class” is the character’s profession, and determines what abilities and powers the character possesses. These classes are generally based on fantasy archetypes, and include roles such as “wizard,” “fighter,” and “rogue” (also sometimes called a “thief”). “Level” indicates how advanced a character is within their chosen profession. Low-level characters may have trouble fighting a few orcs and spend their time running menial errands, while high-level characters are capable of ruling (or decimating) entire kingdoms.

There are two more aspects of characters that bear mentioning in relation to race: characteristics and skills. Each character possesses six primary characteristics: Strength,
Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma. These scores generally range between eight (below average) and eighteen (exceptionally good), and represent the character’s innate faculties or abilities. Skills, on the other hand, usually denote what activities a character has learned to excel at, as opposed to characteristics which represent natural ability. As I will discuss in further detail below, a character’s race affects both characteristics and skills by providing bonuses and penalties to certain scores based on stereotypes embedded in the fantasy genre.

Every player but one has a single character whom they portray during a game of D&D. The final player takes on the role of Dungeon Master, and in the parlance of the game, this person is not actually a “player.” This is because the Dungeon Master is assumed to be “outside” the game in a sense, since he or she does not interact with the gameworld through a single character, but rather provides the logic and rules of the world itself. The Dungeon Master, commonly called the DM, describes the world, provides adversaries and challenges for the players to overcome, and often provides the bulk of the plot, although player decision and input are also vital to the process. The other individuals involved in the game, the players, interact with each other and with the non-player characters (NPCs) portrayed by the DM.

The “game” element of “roleplaying game” comes from the fact that decisions are arbitrated not through player or DM fiat, but by a certain amount of random chance. When a player wants to accomplish a task and success is not certain, he or she must make a check, often called a “roll.” The player or the DM rolls a die and compares the result to another number that

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4 I have capitalized these characteristics in order to show that I’m referring specifically to the way they are conceptualized within the game of D&D.

5 Sometimes players will take turns filling the role of Dungeon Master, but generally only one individual fills that role at any one time.
represents the difficulty of the task. For example, if Jane the Dwarf Fighter were to attempt to climb a cliff, her player would roll a die, then add together the result of the roll with Jane’s Athletics skill and her Strength characteristic. This check would then be compared with a difficulty determined by the DM, based on the narrative factors at play. The game master might assign a very difficult check if it were a frost-covered cliff in the middle of a blizzard, for example, while a check to climb a low wall might be relatively easy.

While the rules for D&D at first seem to provide a rigid and complicated framework for using skills and characteristics to resolve challenges and determine the course of events within the game, the actual practice of play is largely up to an individual gaming group. While some uses of characteristics and skills are fairly self-explanatory, many more are quite vague. The above example of Jane climbing a cliff seems quite straightforward – roll a die, factor in the character’s skills and characteristics, and determine the result based on a pre-determined difficulty. But even for this relatively simple task, the DM can assign whatever difficulty they think is fair based on the conditions. A DM might also decide to have the character make multiple checks to represent a long climb, or require additional characteristic checks, such as a Constitution check to determine whether or not the character becomes dangerously tired during the climb.

The above example shows how the DM can tweak the rules, but the DM and the group as a whole have far broader power to choose how to use the framework that D&D provides. One of the best examples of this is how the game handles interpersonal skills. The Charisma characteristic denotes a character’s force of personality and general facility at influencing people,

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6 This example is simplified. This check could be performed in several different ways, depending on the edition of D&D.
and there are a number of skills\textsuperscript{7} that determine how good a character is at reading, bullying, manipulating and persuading others. But while the game provides rules for resolving interactions between characters, individual gaming groups have wildly different approaches to how they use these rules to tell a story, and how much of an interaction’s outcome should be determined by a player’s storytelling ability (i. e., “role-playing”) versus how much should be determined by dice rolls and a character’s quantifiable skills and abilities (“roll-playing”). For example, if a character was trying to bribe a guard to get a comrade out of prison, some groups would require a full narrative description of the event, with the DM and player carefully speaking the exact lines that the player’s character and the guard were exchanging, up to and including accents and gestures. In other groups, the player might simply say “my character bribes the guard,” and make a skill check, treating the interaction as an abstract situation completely arbitrated by the rules. Still other groups would strike a balance between the two, with the player describing how he presents the bribe to the guard, the amount, and his general arguments, with the DM using the die roll and the character’s skills and characteristics as a basis, adjusting the difficulty of the task based on the player’s narrative description. While D&D’s instructional texts provide a set of rules for playing a game, there is an extremely broad range of possible uses and interpretations for those rules.

Despite the latitude that gaming groups have in determining how to apply the rules of the game, characteristics and skills are still a core feature of any D&D character. Without the mechanical structure of the game, the players wouldn’t be playing D&D, they’d be participating in a “freeform” or rules-less game. Because race has a direct impact on a character’s statistics in

\textsuperscript{7} The number and exact details of these skills varies between editions. The current (5th) edition of the game includes skills such as Insight (“determine the true intentions of a creature,”) Deception (“convincingly hide the truth,”) Intimidation (“influence someone through overt threats,”) and Persuasion (“tact, social graces, and good nature”) (Crawford et al. 178-179).
the form of bonuses or penalties to various skills and attributes, it has an instant and indelible effect on the way that character is perceived, both in and out of the game. Elves are quick but often fragile, with many editions of the game giving them enhanced Dexterity at the cost of a weak Constitution. Elves have traditionally also benefitted from enhanced senses, especially vision; a trait that clearly echoes the superior senses of Tolkien’s elves. Half-orcs, on the other hand, are physical creatures, and often have bonuses to Strength and Constitution, usually with a concomitant penalty to Charisma and Intelligence. Because D&D is at once an exercise in storytelling and a sort of small-scale wargame, these mechanical benefits both reflect the intellectual legacy of D&D’s source material and reinforce existing racial stereotypes through the process of play. For example, a player who wants to make a strong front-line fighter type will naturally gravitate towards a half-orc, because a half-orc is far better suited to the role than an elf, according to the game’s rules. An elf, on the other hand, would make a poor choice for a front-line fighter, because of her inferior constitution, meaning she would be easier for an enemy to kill. And since many players without a strong preference for playing one race or another for narrative reasons will choose the race for a character based on mechanical efficiency, the mechanical elements tend to reinforce the stereotypes of each fantasy race. Players get used to seeing half-orc barbarians and elf archers, not just because these reflect established archetypes of fantasy literature, but because they have become archetypes of D&D as well, thanks in large part to the way that the mechanics of race shape player choice. There’s no rule preventing a half-orc from being, say, a wizard, but there are significant mechanical penalties to doing so, and so many players dismiss the notion of bucking stereotype out of hand. While different groups place different levels of emphasis on combat efficiency versus storytelling, mechanics are a key
component of D&D. The rules give the game shape and substance, and make it more than just “playing pretend.” The rules are essential to D&D’s identity as a game, and they are equally important in shaping the way that players understand race within the context of the game.

Roleplaying gamers are used to thinking about race as both a mechanical and narrative factor, because it is a defining aspect of every character they create in both of those areas. Each race is loaded with strong thematic associations that come from both the fantasy literary genre and D&D’s own gaming culture. In the context of D&D, though, “race” refers to different species of sapient creatures, rather than physiological or social subgroups within a specific species. Humans are the “jack-of-all-trades” species, essentially an unmarked racial “norm” similar to the way that critics have identified white, middle-class males as the default protagonists of American popular culture. Many of my informants identified this trend. As one of them said, “I imagine a character concept I’d like to play, and if race is important to that concept I’ll take that race, but if it's not, I'll play a human.” Non-human races form a spectrum of racial others who embody archetypes and stereotypes: dwarves are industrious smiths and craftsmen, gnomes are clever and inventive, and elves are fey, beautiful, and otherworldly. Nonhumans are just that. Non-humans. They are marked by their difference from human, which is tacitly understood as “normal” within D&D’s instructional texts. While players are theoretically free to construct non-stereotypical characters from nonhuman races, the tendency among many players, and of the instructional texts themselves, is to rely on stereotypes, because they provide familiar and instantly recognizable tropes, not to mention convenient mental shorthands. While this is not the same thing as stereotyping real people in the real world, it encourages the same sort of problematic and uncomplicated thinking that makes real-world stereotyping so dangerous, and
all the more dangerous because many players see no particular problem with it. As one of my informants said, of the theoretical “average D&D player,” “They're just looking to relax and have a good time, and sometimes keeping things stereotypical and simple is a good way to do that.” Furthermore, by conflating “race” with “species” and assigning specific physical and mental attributes to those “races,” D&D’s instructional texts are perpetuating the idea that race is primarily biological, rather than a social construct.

Dungeons & Dragons handles race in some deeply troubling ways, especially in its instructional texts. Yet the problems I have just described only apply to race in D&D in a very broad sense. The preceding paragraphs summarize how race exists in game manuals and in the gestalt consciousness of D&D subculture. This description is filtered through my perspective as both an academic who has been taught to see race as a social construct, and a gamer who has seen players from a wide variety of social and cultural backgrounds use fantasy racial stereotypes in many different ways within the context of D&D games. And while I have described the process of play as a mechanical exercise, how to accomplish goals and “play by the rules,” the description I have given is a fairly flat one. D&D is not a board game in the traditional sense, like Monopoly, Risk, or anything else out of the Milton Bradley catalogue. Rather, it is a combination of tactical simulation, storytelling exercise, and bull session. How much of each element is included in a game is determined by the tastes and dynamics of an individual gaming group, but D&D always operates on multiple levels of communication and interpersonal interaction (Mackay 60.) The difference between in-game and out-of-game interactions is the most obvious division when it comes to describing the different types of communication that occur around the gaming table. When it comes to ideas about race, many players seem to operate under a dual consciousness, arguing “race” to mean one thing in the context of the game and...
something completely different outside of it. Some of my informants outright said this, usually stating that because the different races within the D&D gameworld were actually biologically distinct species, the term “race” had a totally different meaning in the context of D&D than it did in real life. But with further scrutiny, I’ve found that there is a great deal of “bleed,” or areas where in- and out-of-game ideas blend together. “Bleed” refers to the concept of thoughts or emotions that transfer from a player to his or her character, or vice versa (Stark 39). This is a term developed by the scholars of the Scandinavian Knutepunkt conference, an annual academic conference dedicated to examining the prominent Nordic Live-Action Roleplaying (LARP) subculture. While there are significant differences between the practices of LARP and tabletop RPG’s like D&D, bleed is a concept applicable to both, since in both cases the character cannot help but be part of the player who portrays them.

Since “race” as an in-game concept is inextricably tied through bleed to race as it exists beyond the gameworld, it is unsurprising that the ways in which game mechanics reflect racial difference mirrors real-world deployments of race as a marker of absolute biological difference. In-game races often echo specific racial stereotypes, or at least broad cultural stereotypes often heavily associated with race. Most importantly, despite the fact that some players disavow a connection between race in real-life and race within the game, many other players self-consciously use their games as spaces to discuss epistemologies of race with each other. D&D is at its core a game of make-believe, a story hammered out between players on a rough anvil of compromise with imperfect tools of mutual understanding. The process of creating this story necessarily involves creating a set of shared epistemologies, a unified vision for how the group’s fantasy world operates. One of the most important understandings that members of a D&D group have to work out between them is a shared understanding of race; including how it affects
people’s lives (both imaginary and real), how it shapes a person’s character, and even the basic definition of the term itself.

In order to analyze the actual process of playing the game, I use the phenomenological framework established by Daniel Mackay in *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game* (Mackay 60). Mackay’s taxonomy breaks the performance of roleplaying game into four nested spheres that describe the different levels of social interaction that the players simultaneously operate on and between during a game of D&D. Innermost is the Drama sphere, the background against which the story takes place. This sphere consists of the fictional world in which the game is played. This includes both the player’s inventions and the rules, mechanics, and setting elements defined by D&D’s texts. The next sphere is the Script, which consists of the DM’s plans for how the events will unfold. It is the plot of the game, and the plans which each individual player has for their characters when they take a seat at the table. The third sphere is the Theater, which contains the events happening within the game as the players describe them sitting around the table. This is the plot of the game as it actually occurs in the interaction between all players, and consists not only of the sum of all the plans of players and Dungeon Master, but also of the unforeseen consequences of their interaction. The fourth and final sphere is Performance, which is encompasses everything that happens around the table, both in and out of game. It encompasses not only the events of the story, but the social environment of the gaming table.

I use Mackay’s taxonomy throughout this project in order to more specifically describe how race is discussed, debated, and used during a game of D&D. The reason Mackay’s model is so useful is that the most significant discourse on race occurs in the places where spheres bleed together. Between the Theater and Performance spheres, for example, players negotiate between the way they understand race and the way that they think their characters understand race. As
I’ve implied before, many players operate under complicated and often contradictory notions of how race plays into the game. But while all the players know that the universe they’re talking about is fictional, they still have to use real-world knowledge as a basis for their understanding of fictional societies. Each of them places different levels of importance of constructs such as race, gender, and nationality in the gameworld, perhaps based (at least in part) on the weight of importance they give to their real-world equivalents.

Chapter Previews

The Interludes serve as examples of the gaming process, and demonstrate how race functions in play. I have created a sample gaming group that I use throughout this thesis to help illustrate the complex social interactions and epistemological conversations that go on during a game of D&D, as well as how such conversations are often hidden behind innocuous (and occasionally obnoxious) group dynamics. Furthermore, since sample games are a common pedagogical tool in D&D instructional texts, it will help readers to learn the game in the same way that players do, in order to bridge the gap between gaming and academia for readers who are not familiar with both.

Chapter One provides an overview of my theoretical framework on race. This is where I establish how I understand race as a scholar, tying together the work of a number of different theorists including Paul Gilroy, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins. I have attempted to create a coherent critical framework that acknowledges that race is a social construct created and shaped by social, economic, and cultural forces. I discuss how race is influenced by economic factors and deployed in the interest of creating and maintaining the dominance of people in power, how race shapes perception of self and others on an individual level, and how grand narratives such as
science help tie personal stories and economic forces together, and reinforce narratives of race on a vast scale.

Chapter Two provides a critical reading of race within the texts of D&D, both the actual game sourcebooks and a brief look at how race operates within the fantasy genres that most directly affect D&D and its players. I also introduce and discuss the concept of “layered canonicity,” and how Dungeons & Dragons both affects and is affected by fantasy genre convention.

Chapter Three brings the work of the previous chapters into a more robust conversation, to fully articulate how player viewpoints, D&D’s instructional texts, and fantasy genre conventions operate simultaneously during the process of play. I use the work done by scholars such as Alexander Galloway, Lisa Nakamura, and Tanner Higgin on the function of race in massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPG’s) to provide an additional framework, since this is the most closely related body of work to my own. The outcome of this conversation is that while D&D’s instructional texts are racist, the players and the games they create with those rules are not, and can in fact be places where epistemologies of race change for the better.

So, Why Should You Listen to Me?

I’ve already mentioned how my experience and identity as a gamer led me to start this project. My gaming experience helped me to see the critical gap between how race is portrayed in D&D’s sourcebooks and how it’s handled in play. My history as a gamer has also had a tremendous impact on the interviews I performed while researching this thesis. Being a gamer has allowed me to perform interviews and interpret my findings with more reliability than I
might have otherwise had, since I’m extremely familiar with gaming parlance and have been able to question players about their perspectives on race in the hobby without sounding inquisitorial or overtly critical. And it also means that I can have conversations about race in gaming more naturally and more productively than any non-gamer could. My identity as a gamer means that my informants see me as someone who can be trusted to understand not “them” but “us.” As much as possible, I have tried to rigorously apply my scholarly framework to this study, and to prevent my love for the hobby from affecting the honesty with which I report its often-troubling relationship with race.

I also want to volunteer my personal demographic information, given that it undoubtedly contributes to my understanding of race as a scholar. I am a white, upper-middle-class male from the United States. I am an academic in the humanities, and am inclined towards progressive social politics. All of this means that while I like to think of myself as someone who understands intellectually what prejudice and racism do to people, I have little personal experience with the negative impacts of race, except through friends, cohorts, and students. I understand gaming personally, but my understanding of how race affects nonwhite people has been shaped by academic literature rather than first-hand experience.

Throughout this thesis, I will refer to “my informants” or “my interviews.” My methodology for this part of the study was fairly simple, but the results I obtained from it have been incredibly useful. I recruited subjects from two internet forums that have large communities of roleplaying gamers, GiantITP.com and myth-weavers.com. The GiantITP forums belong to a popular webcomic about D&D, and has a very active community which consists primarily of gamers. Myth-Weavers is a website dedicated to play-by-post gaming, a type of roleplaying game conducted via internet forum. Many of the players also play or have played in real-time
gaming groups, and while my recruitment was done via the internet, my research questions were specifically about real-time gaming experiences. For each participant, I conducted a roughly thirty-minute interview that focused on establishing his or her understanding of how race in D&D and race in real life function as identity markers. More broadly, the purpose of the study was to understand how epistemologies of race bleed into each other (or don’t) between in-game and out-of-game circumstances, and between performative spheres within the game. I have included my basic interview questions in Appendix A, but my readers should be aware that I did not always ask all of these questions, and that I asked follow-ups during the interview in order to better achieve my overall research goals with each informant. Readers may note that I did not ask my informants to identify themselves based on race. This was intentional on my part, because I did not wish to give an inquisitorial tone to the interview, or make it seem as if I was out to demonize roleplayers as racists. While this choice makes it more difficult for me to consider the effects that an individual informant’s race might have had on their answer, I consider this a benefit as much as a drawback. Because I did not ask my subjects to reveal their racial background as part of the interview, I did not prime them to think about their own race as a central factor in how they saw race operating in the game. Therefore, when I asked my subjects about their perceptions of race both in and out of game, the discussions evolved more organically than they might have if I had made my informant’s own race a central topic of conversation.

It is evident from my experience as a player and my work as a researcher that race plays a large role in any game of D&D. It affects the construction of characters from both mechanical and narrative points of view, and the way that players understand race in both the real world and the gameworld is a constant conversation.
Interlude: Intro to the Gaming Narrative

In order to bridge the gap between the theoretical framework and the experience of sitting at the gaming table, I have created a “gaming narrative” that recurs throughout this thesis. This narrative represents extracts from the meetings of a fictional gaming group. This game and the players described herein are a gestalt of my experiences as a gamer, and those related to me by my informants. While this narrative is fictional, I believe that this is the best representation of how the concept of race is deployed, contested, and shaped within the four nested spheres of Mackay’s model, and in the bleed between them.

It’s worth noting that this concept borrows from the best practices of game design. When game designers for D&D and other tabletop RPG’s design a game, they usually include examples of play to help players understand how the often-complicated rules interact with each other. In some ways, my model of understanding race in D&D is simply another set of interpretive “rules” added on to the way that players understand the game. Therefore, I think it’s appropriate to use the same methods game designers use to introduce new players to the game in order to help my academic readers understand both the game itself and the way I believe race is represented within the game.

Below is a list of the players. I have given a brief description of each player, with details that are relevant to understanding the narrative. Next to their real names, I have included the character they play within the game. The format is for these descriptions is (Gender, Race, Class, Character level). As I explained earlier, this is the standard shorthand way to summarize a character, which reminds the reader how central race is as an identity marker within the system and setting.
Alex (Dungeon Master) Alex is a white Performance Studies senior. Alex is gender nonconforming.

Tanisha (Shagga, Female Half-Orc Barbarian 7) Sharon is an African American Ethnic Studies senior.

Kevin (Biddle Bumpkin, Female Gnome Cleric 7) Kevin is a white English junior.

Gordon (Glorious Godfried, Male Elf Bard 7) Gordon is a Chicano Accounting junior.

Phyllis (Incanta, Female Human Wizard 7) Phyllis is a Caucasian sophomore majoring in Chemistry.

This group is composed of several friends who all attend the same small liberal arts college. The members of the group come from a variety of backgrounds, and are between nineteen and twenty-two years of age. They have been gaming together for about a year, and most of them knew each other well before that. Today, they are starting a new campaign, and this section of narrative will focus on the character creation process, both as a way to introduce my non-gaming readers to the gaming world, and as an excellent starting point for demonstrating how race operates and bleeds between the performative spheres. Note that the narrative is single-spaced, while my interlinear notes and explanation are double-spaced.

Finally, I should warn my readers that this narrative will sometimes contain crude and/or sexual humor, moderately juvenile behavior, and frequent reference-based humor that draws on a complicated and tangled network of novels, video games, movies, and other fictional works. Some of these elements may be offensive or insulting to some of my readers. Some people may think I am simply trying to make this thesis more “entertaining” by catering to the lowest common denominator, while others may believe I am being insulting or derisive towards gamers themselves. None of these things are my intention. These sections are based on gamers that I and my informants have known and played with. They are meant to represent, if not to actually portray, real people. Real people are often offensive and problematic. I can only offer my
assurances that these gamers represent some of the people who play D&D, and that these narrative sections offer, as much as possible, an accurate representation of what goes on around the gaming table. While this narrative has been crafted to help illustrate my thesis, meaning that race will come up in this group more often than it would “on average” at a gaming table, these are meant to represent useful excerpts, not the entirety of a campaign. In essence, I am asking non-gaming readers to trust me, and I trust that my readers who are also D&D players themselves will find some measure of verisimilitude in these accounts. What follows is an introduction to the group of gamers and their characters, and a first look at the format that these sections will follow throughout this thesis.

The group is meeting in Alex and Tanisha’s apartment, their usual gathering place. The scene opens with a discussion of the new campaign the group is about to embark on.

Alex: All I’m saying is that if you didn’t want a total party kill, you shouldn’t have put the portable hole inside the bag of holding. Especially while you were already on the Astral plane.

Phyllis: It was sound in theory. And hey, we did kill the Lich Queen.

Kevin: I still think we should’ve tried to talk it out with them.

Gordon: It’s no good, man. Those with Githyanki. They’re a bunch of crazy xenophobic asshats. And, y’know, you did steal one of their Silver Swords.

Tanisha: And hid it from the rest of the group. Somehow.

Kevin: Yeah, investing those points in Bluff and Sleight of Hand was pretty much the best decision ever.

Phyllis: Until the Sword Stalkers jumped us. Githyanki pretty much kill other races on sight. If you steal a sword, they torture you for days first. I did everybody a favor.

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9 A term that indicates that all the player’s characters were killed at the same time. Often marks the end of the campaign.
This seemingly innocuous conversation about the events of the previous game illustrates a number of important concepts about the performativity of D&D and the place of race within it. First, the players are constantly switching between different levels of performativity, without clear distinction (or, at least, without distinctions that are clear to someone not sitting at the table). Alex is speaking in the performative sphere, because they are talking about events that happened within the game, but also referring to the fact that the motivations for those actions came from the players are well as the characters. While there is a theoretical separation between the reasons that the character might do something and the motivations of the player controlling that character, the difference is murky and difficult to enforce or perceive, and both players and Dungeon Masters know it. On the other hand, we have another example of a case where the separation between the theater and performance spheres was maintained. Kevin’s character stole the aforementioned sword, and his fellow players know that his character had done it. Yet, because Kevin’s character was able to prevent their characters from finding out about it, the group’s players were bound by the conventions of the game not to act to take the sword from him, despite knowing that it would cause their characters problems.

This example also provides evidence of the way race operates as a marker of inherent difference. In his first sentence, Gordon is speaking about knowledge obtained from D&D sourcebooks, which belong to the dramatic sphere. According to these sources, the Githyanki, a race of sentient humanoids dwelling on a different but closely-connected plane of existence known as the Astral Plane, are universally xenophobic. We can see that Phyllis has the same understanding of the information contained within the drama sphere, based on the way she agrees with Gordon. We don’t yet know how either of these characters perceive race as operating
in the real world, but we now have one example of them taking the information contained within
the drama sphere at face value, at least as it applies to a group of enemies.

**Alex:** Okay, well, that game’s done. You guys had a pretty good run. I also really
appreciate the fact that nobody got pissy about the way things ended.

**Tanisha:** Eh, fair is fair. We all knew what we were getting into when we let Kevin play
a Rogue.

**Kevin:** I still feel a little bad about it, though. I’m going to run a cleric this time. Be the
healer to atone for my sins and such.

**Alex:** Cool. This is as good a time as any to go ahead and do character creation, then. I
assume everybody’s got their basic character layouts, and we can go ahead and roll for stats?

There is a chorus of assent from the group, and the players begin rolling dice to determine their
character’s ability scores. Some games allow players to allocate a set number of points to
determine their ability scores, but this group has elected to determine them randomly using dice.

**Tanisha:** Hmmm… not bad at all. One ten, but I can dump that in Wisdom, since
Shagga’s going to be a bit of a hothead anyway.

**Alex:** You’re still planning on running that half-orc barbarian, then?

**Tanisha:** Yep.

**Phyllis:** Nice. That’s a strong combination. You going Frenzied Berserker, I assume?

**Tanisha:** I hadn’t considered that, but now that you mention it…

**Kevin:** An FB with ten wisdom and Barbarian will saves? Good god, she stubs her toe
and we’re all gonna be mincemeat.

**Gordon:** Half-orc? That’s a little on the nose, isn’t it? I mean, don’t you get enough of
being an oppressed minority in real life without playing one in D&D, too?

**Tanisha:** The difference is that here, if I run into Billy Bob Dumbass, I can put an axe
through his skull and not go to jail for it.

**Gordon:** Fair point. And it’s still better than playing a Drizzt clone.\(^\text{11}\)

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\(^\text{11}\) Drizzt Do’Urden is the protagonist of a popular series of fantasy novels based on Dungeons & Dragons. Enough
players create ersatz versions of the character that the idea of “Drizzt clones” has become a joke within D&D
gaming subculture.
Tanisha: Also, I’ve always wanted to try this archetype. I think it’ll be fun to subvert all that “noble savage” crap.

Phyllis: Eh… I got a lot of crap scores. So I want to avoid anyone with too much multi-attribute dependence. Think I’ll go wizard. Human for the bonus feat, natch.

Kevin: Gnome cleric for me. It’s been a while since I represented one of the short folk. Say hello to Biddle Bumpkin, trickster-priestess!

Gordon: Nice. Just don’t go all Loki on us this time. As for me, I’m going to be playing Glorious Godfried, the prettiest elf dude in the kingdoms. Is there a spell to produce body glitter?

Some of the character names may sound odd to my non-gaming readers, but each one has several layers of meaning that a gamer will recognize. The choice of a character’s name can indicate how “serious” a roleplayer the character’s gamer is. “Biddle Bumpkin,” for example, is frivolous-sounding and comical, and might mean that Kevin’s character is intended as comic relief, or simply doesn’t take the game all that seriously. It can also reflect how the player understands race as it exists within the gameworld. For example, Gnomes are often stereotyped as buffoons, illusionists, mad inventors, and many characters play portray them as intentionally “wacky” or anachronistic. Tanisha’s choice of “Shagga” for her half-orc, with its harsh, heavy sound, seems to fit with the standard conception of half-orcs as brutish and uncouth. It also bears a striking resemblance to Tolkien’s “Shagrat.” (The Two Towers, “The Choices of Master Samwise”). Roleplaying games have a complex cultural lineage, and interactions within the game reflect that.

In addition to the cultural lineage of gaming, this portion of the narrative shows the complexity of navigating between performative frames, and the nuanced and highly individualized approach that different players have to character creation, as well as how their epistemology of race fits in with that concept. Players have a variety of reasons for the choices they make during character creation, and we’re starting to get a sense of the way that each
these players thinks about race in both in- and out-of-game contexts. Tanisha and Gordon, for example, both explicitly connect the functions of race in- and out-of-game. They both feel that half-orcs represent a wrongly-oppressed minority group within the game’s setting, and they believe that this is a point where the function of race in-game mirrors the way it’s deployed as a tool of oppression out-of-game. While Tanisha and Gordon are joking a bit, and Tanisha’s implication that she’s playing the character as a sort of power fantasy about getting back at racists is mostly in jest, it remains true that both of these players see a direct connection between the operation of race in real life and the function of race in the game. This is particularly interesting in the case of Gordon, who, as I outlined earlier, seemed perfectly content to take an essentialist view of race when it came to the antagonistic Githyanki, but seems interested in examining the nuances of race when it comes to player characters. Yet on the other hand, Gordon is also deploying a well-known stereotype within the gaming subculture of elves being androgynous and effete, regardless of gender. Since we have not yet seen the players working with race inside the game, we will have to wait and see how their understanding of race within the gameworld develops.

Phyllis, on the other hand, seems to view race as simply another factor that influences how effective the characters are within the mechanical simulation aspect of the game. She approves of Tanisha’s choice of race not because of the way she’s using it to subvert or enter into conversation with ideas of race, but because playing a half-orc is an optimal choice in terms of the character’s mechanical effectiveness. Her own choice to play as a human is similarly motivated by her desire to increase her character’s abilities within the game. Kevin’s motivation is, at least explicitly, centered in the performative frame, since he wants to “make up for” his actions in the previous game by playing a role that will support his fellow players. This is a clear
example of bleed, because Kevin’s in-game choices are determined not by the story occurring within the game’s narrative, or how he wants his character to fit into the setting, but by the dynamics of the real-world social group. At the same time, his choice of race, gnome, seems designed to suit his personal desire to play a character of the “trickster” archetype, since this is one of the roles frequently associated with gnomes as a race.
The critical frame for my work is necessarily multidisciplinary. In this chapter I describe my approach to critical race theory and the epistemology of “race” I will employ for the purpose of this study. In addition to this general outline of my scholarly approach, I describe how critical race theory has been applied to online roleplaying games, the closest parallel I have discovered to my own work. I use a combination of ideas to create a critical frame through which I can examine race in tabletop roleplaying games. I needed to invent this framework myself, because no existing literature accurately explains how players create a shared understanding of race in the process of playing a game of D&D. At the same time, this framework helps to explain where my ideas fit within the broader field of critical race theory. In explaining this framework, I also detail how I use phenomenology, specifically the work of Daniel Mackay, to understand and describe the experience of playing roleplaying games.

Before I discuss how my informants look at and think about race in the context of D&D, it is vital to explain how I understand race as a scholar. At its most basic level, “race” refers to a set of assumptions made by one person about another person. One person looks at another person and notes a certain set of physical characteristics. To the looker, those characteristics indicate that the person being observed belongs to a specific racial category. Based on this pre-defined category, the observer makes assumptions about how the subject thinks, acts, feels, and exists in the world based on his or her physical appearance. The idea that “race” is a useful category to describe people presumes that people who look similar will act similarly, and will share attributes beyond those physical characteristics. This only covers the application of specific racial categories, however. In order to be applied, these assumptions have to exist, and have to be
reproduced within a specific cultural context. My informants and I are all either Americans or originally from Western Europe, and so we have similar but not identical notions of what “race” means. While there are significant differences between myself and some of my informants regarding how we perceive race within D&D’s instructional texts, I believe the above definition of what race is suffices for the purposes of this project. Subjects I interviewed all indicated that they believe that race in the real world is a socially constructed marker of difference with limited biological basis. As one of my informants said, “Race is a word that divides us when in actuality we are less than one percent different. To be truthful I think the word race applies to dogs and cats better than it applies to humanity.”12 While it is not surprising that people who chose to participate in an interview about race and D&D had fairly nuanced understandings of what race is, this does not make their responses any less worthy of consideration. It simply proves that while D&D’s instructional texts are indubitably racist, the attitudes of the players are considerably less easy to summarize and require more nuanced investigation.

D&D’s instructional texts are nevertheless rife with racism, and this has some powerful effects. As I discuss in more depth in chapter 3, the instructional texts of Dungeons & Dragons use “race” where “species” is more accurate. The game assumes that “race” is a useful, even vital descriptor that marks fundamental, inborn differences between sentient individuals. My understanding of race as it operates in the real world is very different. In my view, race is something that is created by people and used as both a tool of categorization to achieve (faulty) understanding and as a weapon against others. I owe this understanding to a number of different scholars. Paul Gilroy’s work has been especially important for me in terms of understanding race in regards to economic factors, as well as providing a Marxist view of what race is and what it

12 The informant was referring to the differences between individual breeds of dog and cat, not the differences between dogs and cats as species.
does. bell hooks, on the other hand, has helped me understand race as something that emerges out of culture and mass media, and how race affects people on a personal level. The work of Patricia Hill Collins has been especially useful in providing a more comprehensive view of race as a gestalt concept created and reinforced by numerous seemingly disparate factors, and most especially in how science has been deployed to reinforce race as a category.

Gilroy Was Here: Race and Class

Despite how persistent some ideas about race seem to be, racial categories are never static. Instead, “racial formation,” according to Paul Gilroy, is a “continuous and contingent process” (Gilroy 61). While on the surface a “race” can seem to be simple descriptor (i.e., people who have skin of a certain shade are “black,” while others with a different shade are “white”) the meaning of those categories is constantly contested. Within any social unit where race is considered a significant identity marker, there is an ever-evolving conversation about “what it means to be ______.” Not only is there a constant struggle to define what it means for an individual to claim or be assigned particular racial categories, “Race formation also includes the manner in which ‘races’ become organized in politics, particularly where racial differentiation has become a feature of institutional structures” (Gilroy 63). Race is an arbitrarily constructed category based on superficial biological differences such as skin color, but because people believe it to be important, it comes to define the way that people interact with each other on both individual and institutional bases. Race can determine the way people treat each other, and the way that they are treated by the social and political institutions that dominate their lives. But, as Gilroy points out, exactly how those effects are manifested is a subject of constant struggle. People fight to change the way that a given racial group is perceived and treated. People struggle
to determine who belongs in which racial category. Perhaps most significantly of all, however, there is also an ever-present conversation about what race means.

I have said that I understand race as a socially constructed category. We are taught to recognize certain physical traits and then taught to make other assumptions about the person possessing those traits, assumptions which have no basis in objective reality. But as Gilroy notes, “biology cannot be wholly dismissed as a factor in the formation and reproduction of race” (Gilroy 63). Not because race is actually a fact of biology, but because biology is inextricably bound up with the history of racial formation. I understand race as a construct, but when I open a D&D sourcebook, it’s obvious that my view is not universal. The social conversation that is race is not just about what belonging to a particular race means, but also what race itself means. This is one of the reasons that this project is so important: Playing D&D is one place where the conversation is carried out, and where players are often confronted with wildly different notions of what “race” means.

“Race” is an arbitrarily constructed category. The amount of melanin in a person’s skin says nothing about their character. But the process of racial formation is not arbitrary, although it is so complex that it often seems as if it were. And while race starts out as something that is applied to a person by external forces, it’s impossible for someone living in a society where race is considered meaningful to not internalize their own racial identity. It becomes a lens, a way of seeing oneself in relation to the surrounding world. This is one of the primary ways in which “race” comes to seem like a natural, even objective difference between people. And although cultural theorists generally agree that race is a construction, there are vast disciplinary differences when it comes to what forces are most important in the constructive process.
Some theorists, like Gilroy, argue that race is bound up with economics and the struggle between social classes. These theorists believe that race is not an identity category divorced from other identity markers like class, gender, or nation, but rather “a salient feature in a general process whereby culture mediates the world of agents and the structures which are created by their social praxis” (Gilroy 36-37). In other words, it’s more useful to think of race not as a unique identity marker, but rather an element of identity and society that is inextricably bound up with other ways of classifying (and often oppressing) people. Marxist theorists on race, such as Gilroy, believe in the primacy of economic factors in determining social relationships. They assert that race is most closely tied to class (Gilroy 41), and that race is ultimately used in the service of maintaining capitalist interests. In other words, when a capitalist society contains racial minorities who are disenfranchised, it is because the owners of the means of production use racial difference as a way to separate that minority from the bulk of the proletariat and turn them into an under-class which can be systematically exploited for cheap labor. This does not, however, mean that race is simply another form of class. As Gilroy says, race “is not confined to the immediate relations of production” (Gilroy 50), but is rather a product of historical forces which predate Marx’s economic models and the industrialized world in which they arose. Race is bound to class and other identity markers, but it is still distinct from them in both its causes and its effects.

Despite the fact that race is distinct from class, the two are still inextricably tied together, and economic forces have had an incontrovertible and often dire impact on the way that race is constructed. Economic interest encouraged the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and the slave labor provided by people stolen from Africa helped fuel the early American economy. There was an

13 Who are usually either interchangeable with or inextricably bound to the state and its apparatuses.
economic incentive to dehumanize African slaves, to construct the notion of a “black race” as something subhuman so as to lubricate the bloody machinery of capitalism.

Not only does the capitalist economic system create wealth using minority groups as cheap labor for the benefit of the propertied classes, it is also responsible for maintaining the poverty and deprivation in which people of color often live. One of the most pervasive and insidious ways that it does so is by creating a culture of consumption which encourages, as Cornel West puts it, “the reduction of individuals to objects of pleasure” (West 16). It encourages everyone, including minorities, to see other human beings as nothing more than ways for them to obtain pleasure, whether by means of sex, exploitation for profit, etc. This attitude not only encourages those with power to exploit those without, maintaining the existing system of imbalance and exploitation, it also keeps marginalized groups weak and fractured, with each individual simply trying to acquire as many material goods and as much material pleasure as they can, without regard for changing an inherently unfair system. Moreover, particularly in the case of the American capitalist system, the engines of commerce propagate a constant stream of images that denigrate and devalue people who do not adhere to the white, middle-to-upper middle class normal (West 16-17). Although conditions are slowly changing, there was and remains a persistent denigration of physical and cultural characteristics which are perceived as “not white.”

Presenting this as the norm teaches people who are not members of this group to loathe their own culture and that the only way to be successful is to assimilate into the dominant culture, to serve its interest and abase oneself before it in the hope of earning favor. Yet, despite the seemingly overwhelming power that industry, media, and the market have in creating and maintaining racial hierarchy, class and economics are not the only factors that help to construct
race as a concept. Race is a product of history, it is a lie repeated so often that it has become
truth.

Who’s Story? Race and History

History is not just a dry and dusty recitation of names and dates. History is stories, and
race is something we learn to inhabit and to perform from those stories. bell hooks makes this
painfully clear in Yearnings (hooks 3-4), in which she describes growing up “within the context
of an apartheid social structure where practically every aspect of black life was determined by
the efforts of those in power to maintain white supremacy…” (hooks 3). She learned early on
that because she inhabited a black body, she was marked as different. In entertainment, people
like her were clowns and cowards. On the news, they were victims of brutal violence simply
because they looked like her. Even more poignantly, she learned from the stories of people
around her, and the threats to her life and person that those stories implied. When she speaks of
being a young black woman who had to fear looking a white man in the eye or being caught
alone with white men lest she be raped, she is telling the stories that make up what it was for her
to be black.

It would be reductivist and insulting to say that bell hooks or any individual could
describe “the black experience,” or even “the black American experience in the segregated
South.” History is personal, as are stories, and no one person’s stories can encapsulate what it
was like to be somebody else, even if that someone else happens to share a presumed racial
identity. What hooks’ narrative does reveal, however, is the social, cultural, and economic
conditions that affected people of perceived black racial identity in mid-to-late 20th century
America. hooks didn’t feel unsafe around white men because she was paranoid, it was because
she and people around her had learned that they would be treated a certain way because of the color of their skin. She knew that she could be the victim of violence, sexual or otherwise, and that there was almost no chance that the perpetrators would be punished if they were white. Race is historical, not because everyone of the same race will have the same story, but because being seen as a person who belongs to a certain race imposes a set of prevailing conditions at a given place in time and space. This requires that there is a dominant group with both the interest in treating race as a meaningful identity marker and the power to make that judgement have significant effect. Economics and the interplay of race and class might attempt to explain why those conditions prevail, but people are not motivated solely by economic factors. Moreover, the notion of reducing race to a matter of class conflict is problematic because it risks reducing people to economic actors and commodities, which is part of the attitude that created many of the problems with race in America today.

hooks’ narrative also emphasizes the importance of images, which is to say, the way we think of race and what it means to belong to a particular race is deeply rooted in the way that media presents members of races other than our own. As hooks notes, after the seventies the focus of the black critical gaze shifted to “finding work for black folks in the culture industry” (hooks 5). This change was a direct result of a growing awareness that television wasn’t just entertainment. It helped create people’s opinions about the real world. While the ostensible goal of getting work for black folks in the culture industry was to produce positive images of black folks, hooks notes that the idea that there were only “good” and “bad” representations had a chilling effect on complex cultural analysis and intellectual rigor when it came to examining the way black folks were portrayed (hooks 5). This kind of thinking about race leads to an “us versus them” mentality that serves only to reify the notion that race is an essential difference. The idea
that one could and should create characters who “represent” their race in a positive light served to reinforce the idea that one could create a character who represents an entire race of people. Instead of worrying about whether a character represents a whole and complex human being, critics worry about whether the portrayal “looks good.” People using this mentality try to change the way that the general public looks at black folks, instead of trying to get them to see them as folks. Hooks also notes that “if indeed that work was well paid, then that would override any need to question the politics underlying certain representations” (Yearnings 5). In other words, economic incentives helped existing systems of racial ideology to maintain themselves in the face of potential social change. Encouraging black folks to get jobs in media might have been aimed at rectifying injustices, but the media portrayals that resulted didn’t question the basic notion that race was a fundamental and essential part of a person’s identity. This also shows an important link between hooks and Gilroy, between culture and capital. Economic factors are not the only ones that determine how race is shaped and deployed, but they can certainly be influential in reinforcing existing notions of race and mitigating attempts to change or complicate the story of race. Dungeons & Dragons, too, is complicit in this, since its instructional texts serve to reinforce the idea that race is a biologically determined identity marker, rather than a socially constructed one.

Uncertain Principles: Race and Science

Race is bound up not just in the history of representation and the culture industry, but in the history of science as well. In Black Sexual Politics, Patricia Hill Collins details how “‘scientists’ of the past three centuries were essential in creating the notion of ‘race’ as something that was based on biology, or at least an essential and unalterable part of a person’s
being” (Collins 99). The efforts of colonial-era scientists helped create and enforce the notion that black Africans were different, a group of inferior others who could be exploited by white Europeans and Americans without moral repercussion. These scientists helped propagate the idea that “African people and apes occupied the fluid border zone between humans and animals.” (Collins 99). European science and society were both obsessed with notions of progress and hierarchy, and biological and social sciences of the time used race as a key tool for creating hierarchies among people. From colonial-era pseudoscience to the Tuskegee experiment, Black folks have been the subjects of biological study, and biological studies have been instrumental in making black folks into subjects in an Althusserian sense (Althusser 25).

As Collins also points out, one of the most damning and persistent allegations leveled against black folks by flawed and racist science is that of bestial and uncontrollable promiscuity (Collins 102). Colonial-era science portrayed Africans as rutting animals with irrepressible and unseemly urges. This, in turn, helped to create the still-pervasive stereotypes of black men as rapists and black women as insatiable wantons, concepts which are echoed in D&D in the form of half-orcs, whose existence implies mass rape on the part of marauding orcs.14 But the scientific origins of race are not divorced from the historic or economic factors that I have already discussed. Indeed, they are all bound up with one another. For example, Collins notes that

“Under slavery, having many children enhanced slave owner’s wealth…. But in the global economy of today, large families are expensive because children must be educated… Black women’s promiscuity [has become] recycled and redefined as a problem of the state” (Collins 104).

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14 Half-orcs are the product of human/orc pairings, and since it is the basic assumption of D&D’s instructional texts that the vast majority of orcs are brutal and violent, this scenario is implicit, although D&D’s drama sphere tends to skirt the specifics of this subject (Wizards of the Coast 244-245, Crawford et al. 40-41).
In other words, racist science helped create the stereotype of black women as animals unable to control their own sexual urges. This, in turn, let slave owners justify the rape and sexual subjugation of black women as brood mares for their own economic benefit. And in the modern era, this stereotype, a product of a history defined by science used to justify exploitation for financial gain, has remained because the story it tells (or sells) is still useful to oligarchs and politicians. The only difference is that now the stereotype is used to dehumanize black women in a different way, by saying that their fecundity is a drain on the state and arguing that their subhuman status makes them unworthy of social aid.

This is just one example of how the construction of race as a scientific concept has helped to serve the interest of economically and socially dominant groups. Accepting the notion that Africans occupied an objectively lower place in the hierarchy of life allowed people in positions of power to exploit them and their land for labor and raw materials. The interests of capital were not the only factor contributing to the popularization of these narratives. But among competing narratives of race created by scientific and cultural authorities of the time, those that served the interests of the predominant economic powers were more likely to be celebrated and promulgated. I raise this point not to excuse any of the involved parties, but to point out the complexity of the systems that created and reinforced the idea of race.

This is one of the primary reasons why race is such a slippery subject of study. Economics, history, media representation, and science are often treated as if they operate independently of each other. Different theorists argue for the primacy of one factor or another, or at least focus on particular factors within particular contexts for the sake of making cogent and coherent points. Trying to capture the gestalt of all the influential factors in a single work would be a Herculean task at best, and a Sisyphean one at worst. But all of these factors act upon and
interact with each other simultaneously, and it is the combination of all of them that has served to make race a category of contention and difference in the modern world. The interests of the colonial scientists were not “purely” scientific, but tied to the economic and social environment as well. These scientists were citizens of colonial empires, and they were shaped by prevailing epistemologies as much as they helped to create them. Many of these scientists believed in the idea that history was a progression from savage to civilized and, correspondingly, from bad to good. This is not to say that this belief was universal. Romantics, philosophers, and many anthropologists and producers of popular culture felt that civilization was not salvation, but instead evidence of mankind’s corruption. The popular narrative of civilization being a natural and beneficial upward trend was opposed by the popularization of the “noble savage,” and a belief in the purity of nature and of people who were considered to be closer to it.

Even more important than how race is constructed as a concept is what it does once it exists. One of the reasons I chose to research this topic is because that I believe race directly and strongly affects a person’s day-to-day life. As hooks’ account illustrates, race determines the reality in which a person lives. Not because it makes one person essentially different from another, but because it determines the way that people think about and treat each other (and expect to be treated). The reasons that race is important are as arbitrary as its construction, but that does not lessen their impact on people’s lives.

This is my view of “what race means,” informed by my position as a cultural studies scholar and my life experiences. It is not a universally accepted understanding. What makes the situation even more complicated is that, as Gilroy notes, part of the constant cultural conversation about race is “what does race mean, anyway?” Even in the minuscule sample represented by my survey, I found a wide variety of opinions about what the word “race” means.
While most cultural critics, and most of my informants, accept the notion that race is a set of environmental and social factors rather than something inherent about a person, the agreement on this point is far from universal in larger society. It’s nigh impossible to achieve a coherent definition of what “race” is, let alone agree on how much impact it has. But a game of Dungeons & Dragons is a space where a small group of players create a shared world in which they must come to a communal understanding of what race means.
According to Mackay’s taxonomy, the drama sphere is at the core of any game of D&D. Within this sphere are the instructional texts that establish a common understanding of the game’s setting among the players. However, the drama sphere of D&D is populated by more than just the instructional texts themselves; there’s a whole body of high fantasy works, including literature, video games, and even other RPG’s, that has directly influenced D&D’s portrayal of race, and which continues to influence D&D’s players. And as the interlude in the previous chapter demonstrates, each player comes to the gaming table with a different interpretation of what race means within and without the gameworld. I will first analyze the way that D&D’s sourcebooks have presented race over time, and then proceed to expand the analysis to encompass a selection of works from the fantasy genre which I believe have been especially influential in the development of the epistemology of race among D&D players.

A Long, Strange Trip: The History of Race in D&D

D&D has experienced a number of major changes throughout its existence that have had a major impact on its content and method of production. D&D was originally created by a small group of wargaming enthusiasts, the most famous of whom are E. Gary Gygax and David L. Arneson, widely credited as the “founding fathers” of D&D. While the game was originally published by Gygax and Arneson’s company TSR Incorporated \(^{15}\) in 1973, it has been the property of Hasbro subsidiary Wizards of the Coast since 1997. The change in ownership from

\(^{15}\) TSR is an abbreviation of “Tactical Studies Rules,” but the company is far better known by its shortened name.
TSR to Wizards of the Coast (WOTC) is sometimes cited by fans as the point at which the game became “commercial.” That is to say, the bigger the company publishing D&D’s source material is, the more likely fans are to suspect them of profit-mongering, and of simply publishing books for the sake of profit margins instead of trying to produce a quality product.

D&D has been in production for over 40 years, and is currently early in its fifth edition with each edition marking major changes in the game’s rules. Each time a new edition is released, a new set of “core books” is also released. These core books contain the complete rules for playing the game. This means each edition is a stand-alone game that does not require knowledge of rules or lore from previous editions to play. However, just because a new edition has been issued does not mean that players simply forget about all the old content. The fact that a D&D game can include players who started playing the game in different editions is one more reason D&D’s drama sphere is so complex: Players who picked the game up at first edition may well have a very different idea of what “race” means within the gameworld than a player who was new to the game in fifth edition, and they will almost certainly have different preconceived notions and stereotypes about individual fantasy races. And because the game has been around for so long, there are likely to be broader generational differences between newer and older players.

While modern editions of D&D still portray race in an anachronistic fashion, the earliest editions of D&D were positively archaic in their use of race as a distinguishing factor. In the first edition of D&D, for example, there was no way for players to play as anything outside of the “core” races. Options were limited to humans, halflings,16 gnomes, dwarves, and elves. More

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16 “Halflings” are a race of diminutive humanoids very similar to (but legally distinct from) Hobbits from J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle Earth. While TSR and Wizards of the Coast have made efforts to make them more distinct in recent years, many gamers still stereotype them as “Hobbits.”
significantly, in the first edition of D&D, “race” and “class” were one and the same for non-human characters. “Elf,” for example, was a class as well as a race (TSR, *Men and Monsters* 8). This means that a character’s race defined not just social perception and expectation, but also the sum total of the character’s potential. An elf didn’t get better at anything besides being an elf; all of their options for personal growth lay in becoming more “elfy,” and in tapping into their “natural abilities.” In other words, race in early D&D was not only biological, but mental and metaphysical as well. Where a human could become better at any number of professions, elves and dwarves were relegated to one-note, heavily stereotyped roles. All elves lived in the forest, had magical talent, and were in tune with nature. Dwarves lived underground, were excellent smiths, and had a love of material wealth. Gnomes were cunning, large-nosed inventors who served as tricksters and comic relief. Orcs were slavering, rapacious beasts, and goblins were filthy thieves and backstabbers gifted with a certain low cunning.

The way that D&D’s drama sphere treats race mirrors the pseudoscientific racism of the 19th and 20th centuries discussed by Patricia Hill Collins. It uses race as a biologically determined category that imposes sharp limitations on what a person can be and do. Early editions exemplified this tendency. Instead of treating race as a cultural construction, D&D tends to present nonhuman races as monolithic groups, with each individual simply being a variation on a single consistent theme. Nonhuman races are painted in broad strokes, and the most significant features of these races are the ways that they are fundamentally different from humans. As one of my informants commented, “I see the other races as limited sets of human personalities.” This was not how the informant viewed race in real life, as they made explicitly clear throughout the interview. But D&D’s instructional texts made it clear to the informant that race operated as a limiting factor within the game’s framework, and so my informant, as a player or DM, would
have to consciously work against that racialized mode of thinking if he wanted to play non-human characters who fell outside the stereotypes presented in D&D’s drama sphere. This also shows the paradox of fantasy races – they both are and are not human, since the text claims that they are inhuman, but all players are consciously or unconsciously limited to human examples as bases for creating sentient characters.

The early editions of the game established the racialized modes of thought that still plague D&D. Players found this state of affairs unsatisfying, and subsequent editions of the game moved to rectify the problem. By the game’s second edition (TSR Player’s Handbook 13-33), “race” and “class” were distinct for all the “humanoid” races, so that elves and dwarves could be warriors and wizards as well. However, many classes still had racial restrictions. Paladins, for example, were “human only”. This example is particularly telling because “Paladins” in D&D are holy knights, the ultimate paragons of justice and virtue. According to the player’s handbook, “the paladin is a noble and heroic warrior, the symbol of all that is right and true in the world” (TSR Player’s Handbook 22). Thus, non-human races were implicitly incapable of representing virtue and righteousness in the same way that humans could. Several of my informants identified a definite anthropocentric bias in D&D, and these early editions are both the origin and best examples of it.

It’s Still Broken: Race in D&D Today

D&D’s problems with race have not been solved by the game’s most recent iterations. D&D’s tendency towards absolutism is characteristic not only of the way it portrays race, but endemic to the system. Intimately tied to the game’s absolutist portrayal of race is its absolutist handling of ethics and morality. The game uses a nine-axis “alignment chart” to classify both
players characters and creatures into moral and ethical categories. The axis runs from “Good” to “Evil” for morality and from “Lawful” to “Chaotic” for ethics, with “neutral” spaces on the axis between each ethos. In most editions of the game, these alignments serve as a shorthand for the way that a particular creature or character will think and behave. “Evil” creatures are selfish and cruel, while “Good” creatures are altruistic. “Chaotic” creatures behave erratically, while “Lawful” creatures follow consistent codes or patterns (Crawford, et al. 122).

While the concept of absolute morality is enough to give most thoughtful people pause, even more alarming is the conflation of race and morality. Humanoid races other than human have often been described in the game as “favoring” certain alignments. For example, dwarves are “often” lawful good, or at least lawful. Even more worrisome, many “monstrous” species are “always” one alignment or the other. Ogres and orcs, for example, have been described in many editions as “always chaotic evil,” while goblins are “always lawful evil.” This means that these races, which are also stereotyped as unhygienic, ugly, and otherwise unattractive by the common standards of modern society, are assumed to be inherently wicked. This is unsurprising, given that D&D is heavily influenced by both fantasy and fairy tales, genres in which beauty is correlated with goodness, and ugliness with evil.

This attitude towards morality and race highlights several of the core problems with the way D&D represents race. First, as previously indicated, the game makes very few efforts to distinguish between “race,” “species,” and “culture.” Most of what the game calls “races” are in fact distinct species. Orcs are not elves with a different level of melanin in their skin, goblins are not an offshoot of gnomes, etc. Despite this, the game persists in calling these classifications “races,” using the term in its outmoded and troubling form as a biological, rather than socially

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17 The morality system was briefly changed in the 4th edition, but after considerable player backlash, the nine-axis alignment chart returned in the 5th edition.
constructed category. More fraught than this, however, is the way that culture, morality and race are blended together and molded into caricatures. Part of the issue is that D&D’s core books, including its monster manuals, are intentionally “setting neutral.” This means that game books are intentionally vague about historical and geographic details, so that the players can easily reshape the material to fit within their gameworld. But what this means is that races of supposedly thinking, feeling, intelligent creatures are depicted as inherently malicious and hostile for no reason beyond plot contrivance. Antipathy and cruelty are inevitably part of their culture, but those traits are described as arising from a natural inclination towards malice (MM5e 244-246), rather than learned behavior. There is a deep tension within D&D’s drama sphere over how players should relate to and regard nonhuman races. These creatures (or, perhaps, people) are human-like, yet inherently separate from humans, with thought processes alien and yet akin to ours. They are able to interbreed with humans to create creatures such as half-elves and half-orcs. This contradiction is not lost on the players, and several of my informants remarked on it during my interviews. One interviewee went so far as to say that “one could very easily argue that due to things like humans and elves being able to breed together, that they are of the same genus, and therefore ARE sub-races of the same species.”

D&D’s construction of race evinces both the static, absolutist issues that Galloway identifies in MMORPG’s, and the sort of ahistorical essentialism criticized by Paul Gilroy in Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack. But one of the most troubling things about D&D’s epistemology of race is how closely it mirrors the way that biological definitions of race have been (mis)understood and deployed in real life as justifications for the atrocities of colonialism and slavery. In Black Sexual Politics Patricia Hill Collins (Collins 99) identifies how nineteenth-century Europeans attempted to formalize race, to make it something inherent, both biologically
determined and determinant. European scientists wanted race to be something that determined the absolute limits of a person’s potential. The idea that Africans were biologically incapable of being anything more than semi-animals was used to justify the systematic exploitation and enslavement of Africa and its inhabitants, with science lending these atrocities the veneer of legitimacy. Racial difference in D&D is marked even more strongly by biological difference, with different races having obvious physiological differences far greater than those between any groups of humans. These differences are emphasized in both the narrative elements of the drama sphere, and within the rules of the game – some races are simply more gifted than others in certain mental or physical areas. Moreover, the deployment of race in D&D mirrors what Hill Collins describes as nineteenth century science’s “need to classify and rank objects, places, living things, and people” (Collins 99). Classifying African peoples as creatures somewhere between apes and men gave Europeans an excuse to treat people as something other than people. And because the scientists of the time deluded themselves into believing that their methods were based on pure reason, that justification held the false promise of objective truth. Just so with D&D, which categorizes sentient races as “humanoids” and “monstrous humanoids,” much in the way that European scientists categorized people into hierarchical lists. In both cases, the distinctions are and were used to justify butchery and exploitation by the people making the categories of those being categorized. In D&D’s instructional texts these “monstrous” races have elaborately detailed sets of statistics that cover everything from their natural habitat to their moral outlook to what sort of loot the players can expect to receive upon slaughtering them. Reading the entry for an “orc” or “goblin” in D&D’s rulebooks turns these creatures into challenges to be overcome and threats to be vanquished, just as categorizing Africans as subhuman allowed European colonialists to justify using them as chattel.
While the biological categorization of race employed by D&D is disturbing enough on its own, the way that categorization is used in conjunction with D&D’s absolutist notions of morality is even more troubling. The default assumption of the game is that players will be “good,” which is to say, altruistic and selfless. “Good” characters are supposed to avoid causing unnecessary suffering. Yet “good” characters are allowed unrestricted license to murder, as long as the targets belong to acceptable races. Because creatures like orcs and goblins are “always” evil, they are acceptable targets for the player characters to slaughter *en masse*. The game admits that these are sentient creatures, yet it also assumes that they are incapable of being anything other than repugnant, morally reprehensible monsters whose only purpose is to oppose and be butchered by the players. And because D&D’s mechanics reward killing and looting, the game encourages the players to consider so-called “monstrous” humanoids as little more than targets. Many players, especially those more interested in the game as opposed to the roleplaying, refer to such creatures as “fodder” or “XP chunks.” Since “XP” or “experience points” are an numerical representation of how powerful a character has become and are one of the most valuable resources in the game, this makes violence a popular solution, and one of the most well rewarded. While many Dungeon Masters choose to provide rewards for non-violent or clever solutions to problems, the rules as they are written reward players far more richly for solving problems with brute force. Within the context of the game, D&D encourages its players to use racial stereotypes as justification for genocide, and to profit from ethnic cleansing.

*It’s Orcs All The Way Down: Layered Canonicity in D&D*

The game’s attitudes towards race can easily be traced to its roots in the fantasy genre. Indeed, I would argue that the drama sphere of D&D incorporates not only the instructional texts of D&D itself, but a nebulous mélange of fantasy and sci-fi novels, video games, and movies.
The most indisputable candidate for inclusion is the work of J.R.R. Tolkien. While Gygax claimed that D&D borrowed less from Tolkien than it seemed ("On the Influence of Tolkien" 12-13), it's difficult to dispute the influence that Tolkien has had on D&D and its players. Whatever Gygax might have claimed, the resemblance between D&D’s races and Tolkien’s are unmistakable. In D&D, elves are stereotypically tall, willowy, in-tune with nature, and magically adept. Dwarves, on the other hand, are stocky smiths and lords of the mountain-halls, bearers of grudges and honorable to a fault. “Halflings” were essentially copyright-safe versions of Hobbits in earlier editions of D&D (Gygax, Player’s Handbook 17). Tolkien’s villainous orcs are present in D&D, too. They are brutish, barbaric, and cruel, a “savage” people whose only law is the domination of the strong over the weak. But it’s worth remembering that even Tolkien, who portrayed orcs as unfailingly cruel, had a certain cultural justification for this portrayal. Orcs were the victims of unspeakable torture and culturally-instilled hatred (The Silmarillion). D&D uses many of Tolkien’s creatures, but assumes that their “evil” is simply an inherent property of the species, rather than the result of uncounted years of abuse and malice.

The plight of D&D’s orcs is not unique. Most of D&D’s monsters are lifted from other sources, whether mythology, folklore, or thinly-veiled references to other works. But in order to make the creatures easy to use in as many settings as possible, D&D’s creators removed them from the context that made them “evil” in the first place. Tolkien’s world is undoubtedly a racist construction. Whether Tolkien himself was given to prejudice is irrelevant, despite the protests of many Tolkien scholars, because Middle Earth is a world of absolute segregation. But even Middle Earth, which has its own absolutist morality, had a complex history and reason why the orcs fell from grace. D&D, on the other hand, inherited the orc, but not the fall. Taken at face
value, race in D&D seems to be an ahistorical construct, an absolute division inextricably tied to morality.

But while many of D&D’s conventions on the relationship between race and morality can be traced to Tolkien, the intellectual genealogy of the game is far murkier. While there are sources, like Tolkien, that many gaming groups have in common, no two groups draw on the exact same sources for inspiration. Even the sources that influenced the creation of D&D’s drama sphere are more disparate than they first appear. Tolkien is obvious and the most frequently credited but just as important are Jack Vance, Michael Moorcock, Robert E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft, and Lord Dunsany. Several of my informants were quick to connect the game’s absolutist presentations of race and morality to D&D’s literary forebears. One of the most eloquent among my respondents said that the limited portrayals of non-human characters was

An artifact of the pulp stories that D&D took its inspiration from, btw, written in a time when Darwinism was all the rage and Eurocentric cultures applied personality traits rather aggressively to whole cultures.

Robert E. Howard and his steely-thewed barbarian Conan constitute the most obvious example of this trend. Howard’s stories remain powerful influences on Dungeons & Dragons, and Wizards of the Coast even lists “The Coming of Conan the Cimmerian and the rest of the Conan series” (Crawford et al. 312) as suggested reading material to provide inspiration for a game of D&D. Howard’s stories are replete with exactly the sort of broad and “aggressive” application of personality traits to whole cultures and races that my informant criticizes above. Having read most of Howard’s literary corpus, I cannot think of a single story that does not use race as the defining characteristic of most or all of its characters (Howard). In “Beyond the Black River,” for example, the antagonists are the “savage” Picts, a clear pastiche of Native American peoples
characterized by racially-inherited evil and an inborn hatred for “white men.” With influences like this, it’s not surprising that D&D is rife with problematic representations of race.

But Dungeons & Dragons is not just a melting pot of fantasy clichés. Instead, it has a relationship of reciprocal influence with the genre that spawned it. Many authors who write fantasy are D&D players themselves, such as R.A. Salvatore and Steven Erikson. The game itself is often as much of an influence on them as the fantasy literature that spawned it. Moreover, Wizards of the Coast has a number of licensed fantasy series that take place within specific gameworlds featured in the instructional texts, and which further shape players’ understanding of how those worlds operate. While these works are not explicitly part of the drama sphere in the same way that the instructional texts are, they still have tremendous influence on the way that the players think about the imaginary worlds in which they play. In the gaming narrative from chapter one, for example, some of the players made reference to R.A. Salvatore’s Drizzt Do’Urden novels, which focus on the adventures of the eponymous renegade dark elf. Drizzt is a “renegade” because he lacks the characteristic ruthlessness and viciousness of his fellow Drow, and is instead a romantic loner who fights for good and for his found family of racially diverse18 friends. On one level, the Drizzt novels reaffirm the idea that “evil” behaviors are somehow inherent to the Drow, and thus support the idea that D&D is essentially racist. Drizzt’s difference is treated as a lack of the inherent malice that his people share, not a learned difference. But at the same time, the novels repeatedly question the notion that Drow are inherently evil, since Drizzt himself is a living counterexample. In its roundabout way, the Drizzt series questions both the alignment system of D&D and the way it portrays race by introducing a spectrum of personality types and viewpoints to a previously minimized and stereotyped nonhuman race.

18 I use “racially diverse” in the fantasy sense, in that Salvatore’s cast of characters consists of humans, halflings, dwarves, and elves.
Salvatore’s *Dark Elf Trilogy* is an especially pointed example of how Salvatore questions D&D’s assumptions about nature versus nurture. This trilogy is a subset of much longer series of novels, and focuses on Drizzt’s childhood, and details the systematic torture and brainwashing that young Drow are put through in order to turn them into ruthless killers and sadistic monsters (Salvatore). It presents the idea that Drow are not simply born evil, as D&D’s instructional texts imply, but are instead forced into monstrousness as a way of surviving in a brutal, alienating, and profoundly twisted culture.

R.A. Salvatore’s Drizzt Do’Urden novels are a prototypical example of the reciprocal influence between the fantasy genre as a whole and D&D in particular. Salvatore’s novels aren’t just in the same genre as D&D, but are published as official D&D products, although they are stand-alone works of fiction rather than materials intended to help players tell their own stories. The novels themselves are set in Faerun, one of D&D’s most popular published settings, meaning that players familiar with the D&D setting have an instant familiarity with the novel’s world, and vice-versa. Wizards of the Coast has even published statistics for Drizzt and the other main characters in the series, so that players can interact and have adventures with them. The Drizzt novels could easily represent the dramatized perspective of a gaming group’s characters, and it is a vision which at once supports and complicates the “official” understanding of race.

While not every game is set in Faerun, and not every game that does use that setting involves players who have read the Drizzt novels, they are widely-read enough among D&D players that the ideas introduced in the series have acquired a currency that extends beyond R.A. Salvatore’s readership. D&D subculture is dense and heavily packed with references, so that even players who haven’t read the novels will often recognize the name and be familiar with Drizzt. In fact, the Drizzt Do’Urden novels are often cited by players as responsible for the
popularity of creating renegade “good” Drow characters, so much so that it’s a joke in some circles that “every Drow is a renegade from their oppressive evil regime.”

19 The Drizzt novels are so popular and influential that they have become an unofficial part of the drama sphere for many gamers. Their understanding of “what dark elves are” in D&D has been influenced by R.A. Salvatore’s work in a way similar to how modern representations of Hell have been shaped as much by Dante and Milton as by biblical texts. This is what I call “layered canonicity.” The potential influences on a particular group or game are so numerous and diverse that it’s impossible to point at any particular work and say “this is canon for everyone.” When I asked my informants what sources were most influential on their game, the answers ranged from Aztec mythology to Clint Eastwood movies to *Watership Down*. Yet there are some works which, if one were to ask most D&D players, would be generally agreed to be more canonical than others. Tolkien and several of the authors mentioned above were featured in most or all of my informants’ answers. But within the structure of layered canonicity, deeper layers give shape and contour to those that form atop them, but sometimes in strange or unexpected ways. Many authors are defined more by the conventions they flout than by those they follow.

The sprawling *Malazan Book of the Fallen* series and its numerous side novels and short stories is set in a world that was originally created for a D&D campaign (Erikson), and these books and short stories are exemplary of how layered canonicity forms and operates. On one hand, readers can still see traces of D&D conventions in the various races which populate the setting, parts of its system of magic, and other essential elements. Erikson’s “Jaghut” species are tall, green-skinned creatures with tusked, porcine features, clearly reminiscent of D&D’s orcs. His Tiste Andii have the long lifespans, unearthly beauty, and racial sense of ennui often

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19 For example, the webcomic “Order of the Stick” #44 parodies this trope (Burlew).
attributed to elves, as well as the night-black skin and silver or white hair that typifies D&D’s Drow. But in both cases, the races are radically and deliberately divergent from their D&D ancestors. Rather than being savage marauders, the Jaghut are a peace-loving and intellectually advanced species with a civilization that flourished hundreds of thousands of years before humanity’s rise. But while Erikson and co-authors deliberately flouted many of D&D’s conventions, the stories they tell are still dependent on the audience’s familiarity with them. As Erikson himself put it,

> Intense gaming sears the tropes into the brain, even when you’re working against them. The patterns of recognition are set: one can either slide right in and do nothing new, or one can take the whole mess by the throat and give it a shake. (Erikson)

In other words, D&D defined many of Erikson’s base assumptions about the way that a fantasy world “should work.” D&D’s instructional texts are not only rooted in the fantasy genre, they help define its expectations about magic, social structures, character archetypes, and, most importantly for my purposes, race. Erikson wrote with the expectation that his readers would be familiar with fantasy tropes defined not just by fantasy as a literary genre, but as a genre of roleplaying games. And at the same time, there are now gamers playing D&D whose understanding of fantasy genre conventions are wholly or partially defined by the *Malazan* series. Some players even play D&D or other roleplaying games in their own versions of Erikson’s universe, although no official sourcebooks for the *Malazan* setting exist as of this writing. D&D both defines and is defined by the fantasy genre, and it’s impossible to extricate one from the other.
The following vignette exemplifies layered canonicity functions in a gaming session, particularly with regards to race.

The group is once again meeting in Alex and Tanisha’s apartment. At this point, the characters have been playing the campaign for several sessions, and are in the middle of an adventure. Scene opens with Alex summarizing the group’s last adventure and setting the stage for this week’s session.

Alex: All right. So, last time, you were getting ready to descend into the Underdark in pursuit of the Drow who stole the eggs of Arda the Silver Dragon. Arda told you that they’ve reached their home city by now and that there’s no chance of catching them, so you took the time to rest and gear up before setting out from Arda’s lair. Incanta, Godfried, and Biddle all have their spells back.

Phyllis: Did Gordon manage to talk the dragon into giving us those disguises I asked about?


Kevin: Dude, she’s a giant fire-breathing lizard who could probably eat you whole. And not in the fun way.

Tanisha: Eh, actually, good dragons can shape-shift into humanoids. And Arda’s preferred alternate form is an elf, so Godfried might be her type.

Gordon: Right. And with my racial bonus to dexterity and my ultra-bishie prettiness, I should get a bonus to my seduction check, right?

Alex: Are you seriously going through with this?

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20 In D&D, an “adventure” generally refers to a single plot arc focused on resolving a particular challenge or set of challenges. Length can vary, but an adventure generally lasts several sessions, and multiple adventures are joined together to form a “campaign.”

21 D&D’s magic system is partially based on the “Dying Earth” stories of Jack Vance, and in D&D, casters can only cast a certain number of spells per day.

22 Slang for “Bishōnen,” a Japanese term often applied to Manga or Anime characters who are male but possess androgynous or feminine attractiveness.
Gordon: Why not? It’s what Godfried would do, since he’s a huge Lothario. Plus, if he makes her happy, he might come out of it with some extra treasure. And there’s the possibility of producing offspring with all those awesome half-dragon racial bonuses. Like Walder Frey,24 I shall field an army from my loins!

Kevin: You’ve thought about this a lot, haven’t you?

Gordon: I made a spreadsheet!

Alex: (Bemused) All right. Give me Charisma, Dexterity, and Constitution checks.

Gordon: (Rolling dice) Seventeen for Charisma, eighteen for dexterity, and…

Phyllis: (With malicious glee) Nat one25 for constitution. That’s what you get for rolling an elf!

Alex: (faux-aside to Tanisha) Seems about right. (To Gordon and the rest) Okay, let’s see. You passed Charisma and Dexterity but failed constitution. So the spirit was willing, but the flesh proved… wanting. Arda takes you aside, giving you a pitying look. She tells you privately that there is a rare fungus that grows in the Underdark. The Drow call it Matron’s Malice. If you can find some of it, she can brew a potion that can cure your… affliction.

This set of interactions between the players illustrates a number of the points I have articulated earlier in this thesis. Even this short and tangential part of the game demonstrates the way players slip rapidly through the different spheres of interaction, and the complex and sometimes tense negotiation of how “race” is interpreted by different members of the group. Gordon’s characterization of Godfried as effeminate or androgynous, for example, is a classic example of a gamer stereotype. While Tolkien originally described his elves as simply superhuman, D&D elves have been consistently characterized as lean, lithe, and graceful, but lacking in physical stamina. This characterization extends to both the narrative realm and the game mechanics, since elves are both described as fey and graceful and have bonuses to their

24 A character from the series of fantasy novels A Song of Ice and Fire, more commonly called Game of Thrones (the latter also being the name of the HBO television adaptation). Walder Frey is a man noted for his fertility (Martin Chapter 59, CatelynIX).

25 “Natural 1.” This means that the player’s die rolled a 1, without any external modifiers being applied to the check. This usually means an automatic failure, often with added negative consequences as a result of the player’s poor luck.
Dexterity statistic and penalties to their Constitution statistic. Hence, Phyllis’ comment about Gordon “deserving it” for playing an elf. This is a clear example of how D&D trains players to make essentialist assumptions about race, in this case, the assumption that elves are thin and pretty and lacking in “endurance.” This stereotype is also an example of informal canon layered atop the more enduring and permanent conception of a Tolkienian elf.

As this example illustrates, stereotypes about different in-game peoples function similarly to stereotypes in real life. Most players are aware of broad stereotypes about each fantasy race, but each player comes to the table with different perspectives on how useful or “true” those stereotypes are. Although players are aware that the subjects of these stereotypes are fictional, they still have power because they represent established symbols and help to create the shared drama sphere that makes the game possible.

**Tanisha:** Now that we’ve dealt with Godfried’s inadequacy issues, Shagga approaches the dragoness. “Mighty Arda, haste is of the essence. Bestow your magic upon us so we can reclaim your eggs from the foul Drow, before they carry out the nefarious purpose for which they stole them.”

**Alex:** Arda nods gravely and responds. She makes a single grand gesture, and a palpable wave of darkness rolls over the party. When it passes, you look at each other, and see strangers. You now appear as Drow! You retain all your stats and equipment, since this spell is an Illusion, not a transmutation.

**Phyllis:** Do we have to worry about *true sight* or *dispel magic*? A lot of those Drow are going to be high-level clerics, and some of the males will probably bewizards.

**Alex:** Are you asking that in-character?

**Phyllis:** Oh, yeah, I guess so. “Arda, will the Drow be able to pierce this illusion with their spells?”

**Kevin:** Biddle cringes at Incanta’s suggestion. “That would be ghastly! My cousin Biffle was enslaved by the Drow for many years, and he never was quite right after that. He used to have nightmares about their terrible tentacle rods!”

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26 The details of these penalties and bonuses change from edition to edition, but have remained fairly consistent throughout D&D’s history.
Tanisha: Kevin, the only way one of your relatives could have been a slave is if your great-grandma got busy with one of the “field hands” down on the ol’ plantation.

Kevin: Fair enough. Drow slavery is sort of different, though…

Alex: Yes and no. Drow slavery is based on race, because the Drow basically think that they’re the master race by virtue of being stronger than everyone else, and that they therefore have the right to subjugate everyone else.

Gordon: So… we’re wearing blackface so we can pretend to be elf Nazis? Is that like hate crime bingo or something?

Phyllis: Well, they think they’re the “master race,” but almost every race in the Underdark thinks that. Beholders, Mind Flayers, Aboleths, they’re all convinced they’re the best. More importantly, there’s no Germany in this universe.

Alex: Not to mention that dark elves are a matriarchal oligarchic theocracy, not a fascist state.

Kevin: And if you believe the War of the Spider Queen Series, all the ladies are pretty much into lesbian D/s relationships.

Tanisha: Are you serious? And I though the Drizzt novels were full of fanboy pandering.

Alex: Remember, this game isn’t set in Faerun, so not all of those assumptions apply here.

Gordon: Okay, but all the races that Phyllis mentioned besides the Drow are Aberrations, right? So they’re basically Lovecraftian horrors. They’re not supposed to think like people. But Drow are still humanoids. Isn’t that kind of an apples and oranges comparison?

Phyllis: Yeah. But there are also Duregar, and they’re pretty racist. Basically the only non-evil Underdark dwellers are the Deep Gnomes.

Tanisha: That’s a fair point. But as much as I think that the Drizzt novels are overrated, they still prove the point that not all Drow are evil female-supremacist caricatures. Of course, I think it’s pretty telling that Wizards of the Coast decided that the black-skinned, matriarchal, goddess-worshipping race was also going to be the evil one.

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27 A (frequently) sexual relationship where one partner is dominant and the other submissive. The capitalization is intentional and reflects the power dynamic within the relationship.

28 The adjective “Lovecraftian” refers to the works of horror author H.P. Lovecraft. He had a penchant for monsters and cosmic horrors so utterly alien that they defied human comprehension. As mentioned in the preceding chapter, Lovecraft is a major influence on D&D, and early editions of “Deities and Demigods,” D&D’s compendium of various divine powers, even included statistics for some of Lovecraft’s “abhuman” gods, before they were removed for copyright reasons.

29 Drow live in a repressive matriarchy.
Phyllis: Well, in the lore it’s because Aurunshee – that was Lolth\(^{30}\) before she turned evil – betrayed the rest of the elven pantheon, and the Drow were burned black when they followed their goddess.

Tanisha: Isn’t that suspiciously similar to some of the reasons that religious “scholars” used to come up with for why Africans were black?\(^{31}\)

Alex: Either way, that’s Forgotten Realms\(^{32}\) lore, too, so it’s not valid here.

In this part of the narrative, we see the players’ different understandings of race come into conflict in a complicated example of bleed and layered canonicity. While it’s easy to talk about in- and out-of-game epistemologies, the division is rarely clear in practice. Seriously or not, Tanisha “takes issue” with the idea that Kevin (or his character) could understand the conditions of slavery. Judging by her references, Tanisha seems to be conflating slavery as it exists in the gameworld with slavery as practiced in the New World, and specifically the American South. Whether she makes this comparison in jest or not, the idea of “slavery” is rooted in her understanding of a real-world institution, so this is the model she applies to the practice in game. Her fellow players have different understandings, and each of them focuses on different elements of the comparison in their discussion. Some players openly admit that in-game race is intrinsically linked to race as a real-world social construct, and they incorporate this into their play. Some gaming groups use the game as a way to imagine encounters between their characters and racist antagonists, or to try and explore how and why racism occurs in the fantasy environment. Some players, on the other hand, see “race” in the theater sphere as something completely separate from race as a real-world construct, and take it as a given that the way that the texts in the drama sphere define the term “race” is something meaningfully distinct from race as a real-world construct. To further complicate matters, sometimes this distinction is based on

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30 A fictional goddess, the chief deity of the Drow in most published D&D settings.
31 For example, the views of the early Mormon church regarding the so-called “Curse of Ham”(Smith).
32 One of D&D’s most popular published settings.
the recognition that the drama sphere’s “race” would more accurately be called “species,” while other players draw the distinction along lines of “fantasy” versus “reality,” and acknowledge very little bleed between the two.

In addition to showing how the construction of race happens during a roleplaying game, there’s another, more specific example of theory in action. Near the end of this vignette, Phyllis and Tanisha seem to be “talking past” each other. Tanisha seems to be more interested in treating the facts of gameworld as a manifestation of real-world prejudices, while Phyllis seems to place more importance on understanding the cosmology and background of the universe as a self-contained unit. This illustrates a primary axis along which player understandings of race in RPG differ. Some players make clear connections between identity markers and social factors in the gameworld and their real-world equivalent, while other players are more interested in understanding the game’s various settings as closed systems unto themselves. No players with whom I’ve discussed the issue believe that race in the game represents race in the real world; where they differ is in how much importance they place on analyzing the links between the two.

This example shows the complexity of how players negotiate the concept of race within a roleplaying game. But it also illustrates is how broad the range of influence is in terms of what sources players use to understand “race” within the D&D gameworld. Players aren’t coming to D&D as blank slates. They have complicated understandings of race based on many different sources both real and fictional, and the process of sharing those epistemologies with other players often makes them even more complex.
CHAPTER THREE: FRAMING THE GAME

The previous chapters explain my understanding of what race means in a scholarly context, within D&D’s instructional texts, and in the nebulous milieu of the fantasy genre’s layered canonicity. But explaining how race is understood by D&D players during play is even more complex than this, not least because there’s very little critical theory to work with. While the scholarship on critical race theory is vast, there’s been little work on how it applies to tabletop RPG’s. However, there has been a significant amount of research on how race operates in the context of MMORPG’s. MMORPG’s are computer or console games played via the internet, with hundreds or thousands of players inhabiting the same digital world, sometimes cooperating to accomplish goals such as defeating computer-controlled enemies, and sometimes competing directly or indirectly on an individual or team basis. MMORPG scholarship is useful to my project because it gives a template for how critical race theory can be applied to RPG’s, and how to analyze the way that ideas of race in- and out-of-game bleed into one another (Stark 39). In dissecting the way race is implemented in MMORPG’s, Alexander R. Galloway argues that MMORPG designers handle race within the gameworld by treating it as an absolute and natural identifier of individuals.

The worrisome conclusion is that this view on race is typically what we would call, in the offline context, racism, in that the game assigns from without certain identifiable traits to distinct classes of entities and then builds complex machineries for explaining and maintaining the natural imperviousness of it all (Galloway 118).

This is not merely an issue that MMORPG’s share with tabletop games. MMORPG’s inherited this issue from games like D&D, which were the source material for the first MMORPG’s.
Tabletop RPG’s pioneered the idea of assigning different mechanical benefits and penalties to different races, codifying the idea of racial difference not only within the lore of the gameworlds, but into the very mechanics that make up the games themselves.

As Tanner Higgin observes in his study of erasure in MMORPG’s (Higgin 6), most MMORPG universes offer a veneer of inclusivity, but inevitably focus on white pseudo-European cultures to the exclusion or marginalization of others. Non-white ethnicities receive only token representation, if they are represented at all. While non-white player avatars are available, they are differences of appearance only, ignoring the underlying cultural and historical differences that serve to construct race in the real world. For example, a player in “World of Warcraft” can select from a wide range of skin tones, facial features, and other physical characteristics that denote race, but regardless of these choices, their character is always from the same pseudo-European kingdom. For many fantasy MMORP settings, Western European culture is the norm, and players have little opportunity to meaningfully represent any other culture with their character’s choices. Whatever the visual image of their character, the presumed cultural background is strictly defined by the choices of the game designers, not by the will of the player. Moreover, similar to how some D&D players will insist that “race” in D&D is entirely distinct from race in the real world, MMORPG’s often foster the notion that the characters within them have no race because, after all, they’re “only pixels” (Higgin 8). Yet, by borrowing the physical signs of blackness from the real world but detaching them from their historical and cultural context, fantasy worlds offer the illusion of diversity without allowing players the opportunity to express any of its substance. And, as Lisa Nakamura’s work on cybertypes has made clear, while many of the supposedly beneficial or equalizing effects of the digital environment are illusory, negative stereotypes and racist attitudes are both pervasive and pernicious in the MMORPG
environment. Not only do players evince racist attitudes in how they view character avatars, they also perpetuate racist attitudes towards other players based on perceived ethnicity. For example, Chinese players in “World of Warcraft” are assumed by the game’s American and European players to be “gold farmers,” the underpaid migrant labor of the MMORPG community, and are frequently subject to harassment (Nakamura 131). Supporting this argument, Nakamura points to Constance Steinkuehler’s *The Mangle of Play*, which found in a survey of *Lineage II* players that a majority of the gamers surveyed on one of the game’s North American servers said it was acceptable either to hate Chinese players (32.5%) or “what they stood for in *Lineage II*” (39.7%) (Steinkuehler 210). Even when interacting in a digital fantasy world, players continue to reproduce familiar feelings of antipathy based on real-world race.

Speaking to the issue of fantasy representation, Galloway notes that, “the more one seems to extricate oneself from the mire of terrestrial stereotyping, the more free and flexible the bigotry machine becomes” (Galloway 119). No matter how players or game creators might argue that fantasy races are disconnected from race as it operates in the real world, fantasy races are inevitably influenced by race as it exists in the real world. In fact, as Galloway points out, the excuse of “fantasy” often serves as a cover for the deployment of thinly-veiled racist stereotypes. I myself have encountered situations where players have in one breath denied the idea that fantasy races are at all related to race in the “real world,” and with the next made racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic jokes where “elf” or “gnome” stood in for a real-world slur. The fact that the jokes still “worked” is proof enough that the archetypes and stereotypes that gamers build up around fantasy races directly correlate to real-world stereotypes. One notable example of this correlation comes from the television series *Community*. In one episode the characters

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33 An MMORPG popular in 2006, when the survey was published.
play Dungeons & Dragons, and one of the characters comes to the game in blackface, claiming that his behavior is not offensive because his character is a Drow – a black-skinned elf (“Advanced Dungeons & Dragons”). While the character in question is not intentionally invoking the cultural connotations of blackface as it exists in our world, those connotations are still clearly recognized by the show’s other characters. While this scenario takes place in a fictional game of D&D, it’s an accurate representation of the kinds of conflicts that happen around a gaming table. One of my informants described a similar situation, in which “The character based off of Ben King from Saints Row in Ports and Patricians is a Drow, because well...Ben King in Saints Row was black. Not really any more complex than that.” In the example from Community, it was the other players who made the connection between Drow in the game and black bodies in the real world. In this example it was the player of the Drow character herself. But both cases demonstrate how epistemologies of race bleed between real life and D&D’s performative spheres. And in both cases, the connection is based on nothing more than a common skin color, since Drow have few to no obvious cultural or historical similarities to African Americans, at least in D&D’s instructional texts. Players made these connections because the most obvious markers of race in the real world are so indelibly inscribed that they retain their significance even when considering a theoretically separate fantasy universe.

Going Old School: Where D&D Differs from MMORPG’s

There are a number of critical differences between MMORPG’s and tabletop RPG’s, and this is where I make my critical intervention. The first and most obvious key difference is the social

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34 Saint’s Row is a video game franchise.
35 The name of the campaign the informant was playing in at the time.
environment. While MMORPG’s are large enough for the other players on one’s server to constitute a faceless mass, the other gamers around the table in a tabletop RPG are a small enough group that players don’t have the shield of anonymity. While this might make for a less diverse group than MMORPG’s, it also means that the sort of casual contempt and antisocial behavior that frequently occur in MMORPG’s is heavily discouraged. After all, it’s much more difficult to casually spout racial epithets or intentionally ruin other player’s gaming experience when they’re directly across the table from you. Besides, even if a player was inclined to that sort of behavior, very few tabletop groups would put up with the sort of borderline sociopathy that’s commonplace in MMORPG environments. It also means that players in a tabletop group often know each other, and are more likely to be comfortable having serious conversations about complex topics such as “what does race mean?” Furthermore, when players talk about race in D&D, they are not talking about assumptions based on the presumed race of someone behind a computer screen thousands of miles away. Players know the other people around the table, and thus if they’re making assumptions about other players based on race, they have to personally confront the individual about whom they are making those assumptions.

An even more profound difference is the nature of the games themselves. As Galloway notes, MMORPG’s assign “identifiable traits to distinct classes of entities” (Galloway 118). MMORPG players always have a limited number of visual and auditory options to select from when creating their digital avatar. The range of possibilities for character’s physical features, accent, and other “racial traits” is determined by the programmers, artists, and game designers, not the players. Moreover, since all of the non-player characters who make up the world are hard-coded into the game, the characterization of each in-game race is almost entirely in the hands of the game’s creators. For example, World of Warcraft players cannot suddenly decide
that their trolls will not speak with an exaggerated pseudo-Jamaican accent. That decision is made by the game’s designers. At best, players can attempt to modify the game files located on their computers. But this process would be difficult, time-consuming, risky, and most importantly would affect only the players themselves, not the other players they interacted with, because other players would not have access to the altered game files. No matter how players modify their characters, the range of potential representations is still controlled by the game’s designers.

D&D is fundamentally different from MMORPG’s because as a group, the players and the Dungeon Master have the ability to shape their gameworld. This is, in fact “rule zero” of Dungeons & Dragons. Dungeon Masters are always right, at least in the sense that a Dungeon Master is empowered to make any rule changes he or she wishes in the name of keeping the game fun for all involved. Rule zero has been phrased differently throughout different iterations of the game and is, like everything else in D&D, a negotiation of trust and understanding between players and DM (“Rule Zero Over the Years”). While the game presents suggestions and default options of what “race” is and the way certain races will act, look, and behave, players and Dungeon Masters are not only allowed to come up with their own worlds and game settings, they are often encouraged to do so. While not all DMs are willing or able to do this, and many players and Dungeon Masters choose to use existing settings and scenarios because it’s easier, there are no hard-coded limitations to the way that players can represent themselves or their characters.

36 The player in question could run the risk of disciplinary action from Blizzard Entertainment, the company that publishes World of Warcraft and maintains its servers. While some modifications, such as altering the user interface, are considered acceptable, many modifications violate Blizzard’s terms of service, since they might be linked to an attempt at cheating.
And some players are very much aware of the relationship between race in the game and race in real life, and are quite self-reflexive when it comes to both. Speaking on the subject of what race means in D&D, one of my informants said

I think that also reflects how we look at in-groups and out-groups in the real world, though. In-groups, the groups we're part of, have all the nuance. With out-groups we generalize the actions or traits of a few to all. Christian American shooter vs. Muslim immigrant shooter, for example. For something less dramatic, expats/immigrants like me in Korea are always fighting the urge to see what some Korean person or a few Korean people do as an expression of the culture.

This player sees race in D&D as a reflection of race in the real world, and clearly acknowledges that both are artificial constructions. While the instructional texts on which the games are based have an undeniable influence on the way that race is experienced by the players, it is the attitudes that the players bring with them that ultimately determine whether a game of D&D is used to reinforce or question racist attitudes and essentialist understandings of race. The following example further explores this sort of reflection through play in D&D.

Interlude: How Race is Made Through Play

This sample gaming session demonstrates the complexities of how a group translates each individual player’s understanding of genre tropes and game concepts into a shared, cohesive setting. While the previous example focused on how layered canonicity operates, this example shows the additional complications that arise when players try to synthesize not only what they think “race” means in the fantasy genre, but their epistemologies of race in the real world as well. As this example also shows, much of the complexity comes from the fact that players have widely varying opinions on what relationship race in the real world and “race” in D&D have to each other, and whether they are separate concepts at all. While this complexity is also presentin
previous vignettes, the analysis for this one will focus on drawing out the specifics of where and how it happens.

The game is, as usual, being played in Alex and Tanisha’s apartment. This session takes place two meetings after the previous example. Disguised as Drow, the group has infiltrated the dark elves’ subterranean city in an effort to rescue the eggs of the silver dragon Arda. However, the group is having some difficulty adjusting to the fact that Alex has apparently made a number of changes to the commonly accepted portrayal of how Drow society operates, making much of the other player’s knowledge of D&D’s drama sphere useless or even actively harmful in their attempts to navigate the gameworld.

**Alex:** So, last time you guys arrived at the Drow city of Thesh after braving the perils of the Underdark, and managed to talk your way through the gates. You’ve taken quarters in an inn in one of the city’s poorer districts.

**Gordon:** Godfried is going to make a gather information check to see if any of the houses have been making power plays recently. Basically, he wants to start narrowing down who the culprits might be.

**Alex:** Where are you going to try and find this information out?

**Phyllis:** I’m going to use my Knowledge (Underdark) to figure out where the best places to look for that info would be within Thesh.

**Tanisha:** You took Knowledge (Underdark) as a skill?

**Phyllis:** I took pretty much every knowledge skill. I figured nobody else would, and it helps to diversify our skillset.

**Gordon:** You know I have Bardic Knowledge, right?

**Phyllis:** Yeah, but bards suck.

**Kevin:** That’s a fair point. I’m also going to cast the *guidance* spell to see if Biddle’s deity has any relevant information.

The players roll their respective checks, and Alex begins describing the results of their actions.

**Alex:** Okay. Phyllis, your check was pretty low, but because your Intelligence stat is ridiculous, you succeed anyway. Incanta helps Godfried figure out that the best place to try to dig up information is the Grand Bazaar. Here you meet an elf merchant who tells you-

**Phyllis:** Wait, elf – as in, a surface elf?

**Alex:** That is correct. A wood or “green” elf, specifically.
Kevin: How is a surface elf down here and not being, y’know, flayed alive or something?

Alex: That’s an interesting question.

Phyllis: Can I make a knowledge check about Drow culture?

Gordon: I’d like to make a Bardic Knowledge check to learn any relevant tales, legends, etc. as well.

Once again, the players make their respective checks. Alex seems pleased that the players are finally catching on and questioning some of the assumptions they made, and the results of the previous checks are essentially “put on hold” while the group adjusts to the new information. These sorts of tangents, asides, and nested events are quite common while playing D&D.

Alex: Phyllis, your knowledge on the subject proves fairly scanty, for once. You know only that the dark elves are effectively the explorer and merchant caste of the Elven Empire. They are responsible for maintaining the Empire’s outposts in the Underdark. Gordon discovers somewhat more.

Gordon: Who’s useless now?

Phyllis: Sorry, did Godfried just ask Incanta to set him on fire?

Tanisha: Given the way Godfried sleeps around, he’s probably quite familiar with burning sensations.

Alex: Meanwhile, back at the plot… Godfried knows several relevant legends. The short version: According to elven lore, in the beginning, the elven gods created six different types of elves: Stone, Star, Moon, Sun, Wood, and Water. Each of them was given a different duty. The Stone elves rebelled, and were cursed with greed and ugliness, becoming dwarves, leading to the rivalry that exists between them to this day. More relevantly, the Drow are the Star elves, who were tasked with following the stars to new lands. As the elven empire spread across the earth, the Drow looked downward to find new lands to explore, eventually settling in and adapting to the Underdark.

Kevin: So basically, all the stuff we were assuming about how the Drow operate was wrong?

Alex: Well, there are still houses, but they’re more like guilds or merchant clans. Other than that… pretty much, yeah.

Phyllis: Well, that sucks.

This vignette is a dramatization of how different definitions of racial characteristics are negotiated within a game of D&D. It starts off with the players trying to reconcile their
understandings of layered canonicity, similar to examples from the last interlude. All of the
players have come to the gaming table with certain preconceptions about what Drow or dark
elves are and how their society operates. But not all of the participants in the game have an equal
say over what is “true” within the setting. Because Alex is the Dungeon Master, he has the final
say in how the world operates, and the other players are expected to respect the DM’s rulings on
these matters. Some DM’s prefer to stick to established convention, while many take pleasure in
flouting them, just to keep players “on their toes,” as it were. This is far from a universal truth,
however. Gaming groups are social units, and different groups will have widely different
standards when it comes to the relationship between player and DM. Some groups welcome
“lively debate” and outright argument, while others are far less tolerant of attempts to gainsay the
DM’s word. In this case, while Phyllis seems displeased by the extensive modifications Alex has
made to the base material contained in the drama sphere, she does not appear to be outright
rejecting it, or trying to convince Alex to change it.

While Alex has made significant changes to how Drow operate within the campaign
setting, it’s important to understand how these changes fit within the larger context of fantasy
and gaming conventions. First, it’s important to note that Alex’s changes don’t alter the game’s
fundamental approach to race. There’s no indication that Alex has altered the idea that “race”
defines a being’s essential character. Instead, Alex has just changed the parameters of one
particular racial category. By defining the Drow as part of the “normal” elven society instead of
the “evil twin” position they usually occupy, Alex has shifted them from a “monster race” to a
“PC race.” “PC races,” or “Player/Character” races, are allowed a wider variation among
individuals – while humans, elves, dwarves, etc. usually fulfill certain stereotypes, individual
members can demonstrate a wider range of moral and ethical outlooks. They are, in effect,
allowed to be more complete and individualized as characters than the “monstrous” races, who are usually relegated to more broadly stereotyped roles. Alex’s changes have not altered this dynamic, they have simply made minor modifications to the specific characteristics of certain racial categories. Moreover, even the changes that Alex has introduced to the lore are couched within very familiar and “traditional” fantasy archetypes, such as the rivalry between elves and dwarves that clearly references the same idea popularized and codified by J.R.R. Tolkien. So far, while Alex has changed the specific details of a particular race, the epistemology of race within the gameworld has not changed noticeably from the standard set by D&D’s drama sphere. Alex has added another layer to the canon, but the underlying contours of the existing material are still clearly visible, providing a basis for mutual understanding of the setting between the players. However, it is possible for players to express different epistemologies of race within D&D, as the next part of the example demonstrates.

**Tanisha:** I think it’s refreshing, personally.

**Kevin:** Is this why you said that alignment-based spells aren’t as useful in this setting?

**Alex:** Yep. For humanoid and monstrous humanoid, there’s no such thing as an “always” or “usually” alignment settings. The only beings that have their alignments hard-coded are Aberrations and Outsiders. Outsiders are the manifestations of a certain philosophical outlook, while Aberrations are by nature inimical to normal life. I don’t plan on using them too much, though. Lovecraft’s monsters make boring villains.

**Gordon:** Yeah. It’s hard to give interesting motivations to a tentacle monster.

**Kevin:** Your comic collection suggests otherwise.

**Phyllis:** Odd that this hasn’t really come up before. So, how does alignment work in your setting, then?

**Alex:** Well, my view is that alignment is descriptive, not prescriptive. So, “alignment” doesn’t mean “your character will always do x, y, or z.” it’s just a general way to describe your outlook on ethics and morality. So, a Drow or a Goblin is no more inherently likely to be evil than, say, a
human. Now, humans might think that goblins are inherently evil, but there’s no more truth to that than there is to prejudice in real life.

**Tanisha:** What if the goblins tend towards “evil” behavior because their culture is one of systematic abuse? I mean, that’s how it usually seems to work, at least according to the monster manual.

**Alex:** Right, but this setting considers culture as something separate from racial characteristics. It’s a bit anthropocentric to assume that all humanoids and monstrous humanoids have basically human outlooks and emotional spectra, but I think it provides more interesting characters than just assuming that culture automatically equals race.

**Gordon:** Wait a minute… you didn’t include dragons in your list of things that have automatic alignments.

**Alex:** That is correct.

**Kevin:** So that means we can’t assume that Arda was telling the truth about why her eggs were stolen…

**Alex:** See what I mean about this creating more interesting characters?

At first, this conversation might seem a bit contrived to some of my readers. The way that the gamers deliberately address the interface of ethics, morality, and race looks specifically tailored to prove my points about epistemologies of race in D&D. However, this conversation is based on both my informant’s reports and my own D&D sessions with fellow gamers. As one of my informants said of perceptions of race in D&D.

“In-game perceptions are safer, because they’re not real, of course. We can experiment with the in-game groups. We can indulge the idea that they all have traits in common and see where that takes us, or we can subvert it.”

Race, morality, and ethics are deeply and often problematically intertwined in D&D, and establishing a shared understanding of how these factors interact is essential to any game of D&D, except those which focus exclusively on combat simulation. In fact, the most unrealistic aspect of this discussion is how far along the players are in the campaign before they have it.

Because the game is so malleable, DM’s and players almost always have to discuss how these
issues will be addressed within the fantasy world. And these discussions are rarely, if ever, final. The group’s shared understanding of the drama sphere will continue to evolve as new examples and problems arise to complicate their notions of race within the gameworld.

This part of the vignette demonstrates how players can manipulate and articulate the meaning of “race” as a category within D&D. While at its heart D&D treats race as an essentializing category, the players in this example have rejected that notion. While some of them, such as Phyllis, seem more hesitant to accept the modification to the rules as written, it is fully within players’ ability to alter the parameters of the game to better suit their understanding of what race means. While it seems like Alex has the greatest say in this process, the players still have to ratify and accept this new epistemology of race if it is to work. Tanisha, for example, raises the issue of how culture and race interact, and whether the two can be said to be coterminous. Though it appears as if Alex has all the answers, this is not the case. While different DM’s have different approaches, most successful Dungeon Masters rely on a mix of pre-prepared material and adjusting rules and game elements during the process of play. The questions that Tanisha asks could very well be ones that Alex had not previously considered, and in this way the players help to expand and refine the shared understanding of race that Alex has provided the framework for.

This vignette shows two different ways that players can challenge and redefine race within the context of D&D. Not every game, perhaps not even most games, are as extensive in their changes to the game’s epistemologies of race and morality as this one is. Many players are perfectly happy to accept the more essentialist and stereotypical roles of “player character race” and “monster race” established by D&D’s drama sphere. Sometimes a player or a Dungeon Master will change the details of specific races, as shown in the first part of the example, without
ever questioning the overall framework of race, ethics, and morality, as the group does in the second part of the example. Furthermore, sometimes this discussion is not nearly so forthright or articulate. Players and DM’s may operate without a single coherent epistemology of race, and only when conflicts arise do they attempt to reach a consensus. Each group has its own unique way of playing D&D. But the crucial factor is that while epistemologies of race within D&D are rooted in D&D’s drama sphere in particular and the layered canonicity of the fantasy genre, it is the individual gaming groups that determine what “race” means in their game of D&D.

D&D does not magically “fix” the problem of race, nor are D&D players free to define race without the burden of the centuries of real-world misery caused by race. But historically, race is and has been a tool of conservative political and economic interest that helps to create and maintain an unequal system of relationships between dominant and subject groups. It’s interesting, then, that D&D has been accused of being a “tool of Satan” by some of those same interests, a subversive text that threatens to upset the status quo. Perhaps right-wing fundamentalists inadvertently had a point, though. After all, many parts of the Abrahamic religion portray Satan as a literal “devil’s advocate,” a being who argues a contrary point for the purpose of upsetting dogma and encouraging critical thought. In this sense, roleplaying games are indeed a “tool of Satan,” since they give players a space to play with and rethink real-world concepts, including what race “means,” and whether it ultimately means anything at all.
CONCLUSION: FROM TOME TO TABLETOP

The result of layered canonicity, bleed, and the negotiations between each player’s epistemology of race is that, despite the fact that D&D’s instructional texts are racist, the concept of race in any given game of D&D is created by and for its players and is not necessarily racist. Most of my informants noted that they simply ignored racial restrictions when it suited them, even when playing older editions of the game that did not “officially” permit this. The game’s developers responded to this desire by altering the game’s mechanics. One of the biggest changes to the way D&D related to race came in the game’s second edition, with the 1993 release of the *Complete Book of Humanoids*. Despite the name, the primary focus of the book was on allowing gamers to play as creatures, rather than the standard “humanoid” races. Instead of being limited to elves, dwarves, humans, and a handful of other “normal” race options, this book allowed players to play as minotaurs, pixies, lizard-people and other distinctly nonhuman entities.

The options for players to roleplay as creatures who are distinctly “other” than human has become an increasingly popular feature of Dungeons & Dragons. Starting with the game’s 3rd edition, many of the mechanical restrictions on what a race could “be” in terms of class disappeared. At the same time, new mechanical features of the game37 made it easier for players to create characters from “monstrous” or non-humanoid races. While many players exercise these options only to play with unique or unbalanced powers in order to gain an advantage within the game system, several of my informants reported a consistent fascination with playing “the

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37 Specifically, the introduction of “level adjustment,” and “racial hit die,” game features which allowed players to have fewer character levels in exchange for the mechanical benefits of playing a nonhuman creature.
other.” While this might seem like an indictment of D&D as a system that encourages a belief in absolutist constructions of race, my informants’ reports indicate otherwise. Most players who decide to play emphatically nonhuman characters do so because they want to explore why difference exists. They are unsatisfied with the idea that “race” is explanation enough for difference, and use the game as an opportunity to explore perspectives other than their own. Naturally, some players still come to the game with the assumption that race is something essential, at least within the gameworld, and act accordingly, portraying orcs as more violent and bloodthirsty than humans, for example.

It’s important to state that many players do believe that differences between D&D races often portrayed as “essential” are just that. Several informants noted that they perceived elves as being inherently more “in tune with nature,” or more “magical,” for example, and saw these as inherent characteristics of the race. Sometimes the players I interviewed chose to play nonhuman characters specifically because they wanted to explore the idea that nonhuman characters could have essential differences from humanity, while still being complex, nuanced, and non-stereotypical individuals rather than shallow stereotypes. For example, to some players it would make sense that an elf with a lifespan measured in hundreds or thousands of years would have a fundamentally different outlook on some issues than a relatively short-lived human. For these players, the idea of playing a different fantasy race was not about playing someone from a different culture, but something more on the level of a transhumanist thought experiment. What would I be, they ask, if I were fundamentally other?

I have argued throughout this thesis that race within the game’s instructional texts cannot be separated from race as it exists in the real world, because D&D’s fantasy universe and all the concepts in it originate from our own. But that notion is still subjective, and arises from how I
understand race. Some of my players believe it’s possible to hold two separate concepts of race for D&D and the real world, and while I as a scholar disagree with that, I cannot fairly say that believing in that possibility means that these players are simply in denial about their own racist tendencies. If they believe they have two separate concepts of race, it would be extremely arrogant to simply call them deluded. As one informant answered when I asked whether there was a connection between race in D&D and race in real life, “I don't think there's an intentional line being drawn between real life race and D&D race, but I'm sure for some it exists.” For me, it certainly does, but other players and their characters can and do disagree. As any Dungeon Master will tell you, players complicate everything. They send the plot off the rails, they make you scramble to keep up, and they make you question everything you’ve done and thought about the game as soon as they start mucking about in your perfectly-planned world. This is doubly true when it comes to epistemologies of race, and the experience of trying to apply critical theory of race how it’s experienced in D&D has been a humbling experience.

As complex as the drama sphere is, with its variable configuration and multitude of sources, it is only the innermost layer of a very complex system of interpretation and meaning-making among the players. D&D is a game of shared storytelling, and every player has slightly different tastes when it comes to what kinds of story they want to tell. Broadly speaking, players tend to fall along a spectrum with a preference towards campaigns with an emphasis on one of two core gameplay elements generally called “mechanics” and “fluff.” “Mechanics” are the game rules that arbitrate the resolution of conflict within the game; “roll a twenty-sided die to see whether you succeed at this task.” “Fluff” is the lore of the gameworld; “elves live in the forest kingdom, dwarves in their mountain halls, and to the south are the kingdoms of men.” Mechanics and fluff are uneasy siblings within the drama sphere. Each player places a different level of
importance on them, and constructing the game so that it satisfies the fluff-to-mechanics ratio of each player is one of the biggest challenges any group faces. Some players play D&D because they enjoy the tactical simulation; constructing a character optimized to face the challenges that the DM throws at them. Some players enjoy creating characters who can vastly overpower both those other players and the DM’s challenge, making their character the “star” of the game as they gleefully slaughter imagined foes and render the other characters relatively useless. Tabletop gamers have a plethora of derogatory nicknames for such individuals, such as “munchkin,” since the common conception is that such players are young and immature. Some players, on the other hand, barely pay any attention at all to the mechanical aspects of the game and instead focus on the “fluff.” They focus on the story, on the interactions between characters (both player-and DM-controlled), and the development of their character’s personal stories.

Naturally, most players fall somewhere between the two extremes. But the way that players approach the game is vital to how they understand race within the game. In interviewing my informants, I found that players who found more enjoyment in the game as a tactical simulation were more likely to treat race as what Lisa Nakamura calls “menu-based design.” That is, they regarded race as simply another option with a set of mechanical benefits and deficits, and chose the race of their character based not on what kind of story they wanted to tell, but on how well that race would contribute to their characters’ abilities. The subjects who took this view on race were also more likely to make a sharp distinction between race “in the real world” and race “in-game.” They saw race in-game as a purely biological distinction, divorced from race as the term is applied to humans in real life. They were more likely to see racial differences in-game as natural and sensible biological distinctions between different classes of entity. Interestingly, however, they did not apply this logic to race as a real-life construct. Even
though D&D’s drama sphere uses “race” to describe biologically distinct creatures, my informants who accepted this view of “race” as it exists in D&D were quick to argue that “race” in real life is still a social construction. Conspicuous in their absence were players who performed what Stuart Hall (Hall 101) might call a “dominant reading.” None of the players I interviewed believed that race in the gameworld reflected race as it exists in the real world. The difference was in how they saw race in the gameworld as a reflection of race in the real world, and how much credit they gave to the idea that fantasy settings must, in some way, be related to reality.

I don’t think it’s possible to overstate the importance of this finding. The fantasy genre receives a great deal of well-deserved criticism for the way it handles race. In D&D’s drama sphere, race is an absolute and ahistorical marker of difference. But the power and the pleasure of D&D is that the making of the story and the definition of what is important lies in the hands of the players. One of my informants was particularly eloquent on the subject.

The orcs can really all be awful ravening monsters who want to rape our white women if we make it so, or we can meet a gentle orc who just wants to open a florist's shop, or we can discover that the orcs were right all along and it's we who are responsible for the violence between our peoples. Just like any fiction. With the risks inherent in any fiction, too, to reinforce or dispel whatever preconceptions we brought with us.

I don’t mean to say that every player is as self-aware as this informant. But what makes D&D such a fascinating field of study is that, even though its drama sphere contains texts with extremely anachronistic constructions of race, this seems to have relatively little effect on the way that players themselves construct race. D&D is a “safe” space because it “isn’t real.” All of my informants acknowledged a sharp division between fantasy and reality. At best, D&D can be a place for some
players, like the informant above, to have meaningful conversations about race and what it means in the modern world. But even at worst, my interviews show that most D&D players recognize that the way the game uses race is deeply flawed. Instead of serving as a space to reinforce flawed notions of race, the very obviousness of those flaws helps to reinforce the idea that race is a social construct. And while the game presents these creatures as being “evil” for ahistorical and absolute reasons, the portrayals are not an end, at least for all the players I interviewed. Rather, these grossly problematic portrayals are a way to start a conversation. Some players treat orcs as little more than video game adversaries, a collection of statistics to be defeated for an in-game reward. But other players use this rough sketch as the launching point for a conversation. “Why are the orcs evil? Why must all half-orcs be the product of rape? And what does the attitude towards half-orcs say about the endemic racism within the fantasy culture?” This is not the fantasy (as it were) of an academic seeking to justify the existence of roleplaying games, either. These are the kinds of conversations that happen around a gaming table.

My informants had diverse opinions on what race meant within the context of the game. For many, “race” was only essentializing in the mechanical sense. That is, many of them saw race not as something that defined a person’s inherent personality or moral outlook, but more a set of physiological traits that they picked for maximum mechanical advantage. For example, some informants pick a specific race because they want to play a certain class or fulfill a certain role within the game, and choose a race whose traits within the game system best help fill that role. Other informants saw race as something that implied cultural difference, but only differences that that logically followed from biological characteristics. To these players, for example, elven culture was much more sedate and less likely to change because elves had much longer lifespans, and therefore had more relaxed attitudes towards accomplishing projects. What’s interesting is that
some of my informants noted that this was still an anthropocentric perspective, because they were imagining elves as essentially human, as if humans had suddenly been given longer lifespans and then left to build a society with that outlook. Still other informants picked race in order to help give their characters certain “flavor.” To these informants, what mattered most was playing with the fantasy archetypes that each race represented. One player might choose to play an erudite orc specifically to flout convention, for example,

Lest I give the wrong impression, however, I am not saying that the ability of players to define what race means in their own games excuses the treatment of race in D&D’s instructional texts. As much as I love the hobby, there are serious issues with how uncritically D&D tends to treat race. In some ways, D&D is a prisoner of fantasy conventions, but Wizards of the Coast can and should do more to break down the idea of race as something essential about a person’s character, rather than a social construct. Even simply changing the wording from “race” to “species” or even “peoples” would be a massive improvement. While I am not defending the instructional texts, however, I am defending the hobby and the people who participate in it. What my research and my personal experience have shown is that roleplayers are intelligent, critical-thinking individuals who, by and large, use the hobby as a place for positive and socially responsible games that break down barriers between people, rather than building them up. While it is a problem that D&D continues to promote anachronistic notions of race in its instructional text, and there is room for the creation of more progressive roleplaying games, D&D is still beneficial because it gives people a place and a space to play with difficult concepts and to re-imagine the world for the better.

I want to create a space for a more in-depth dialogue about the place of race in D&D and roleplaying in general. In the next stage of this project, I will expand my examination of raceto
include games beyond D&D, and widen my informant pool to provide more support for the notion of complexity I have presented herein. Like most games of D&D, this project will have no true end. It is the beginning of a conversation that I hope will help my fellow academics realize what a rich opportunity D&D provides for studying popular culture, and which I intend to use to help my fellow gamers continue to play with, critique, and question their views and those of the cultures in which they live.
WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A: HSRB APPROVAL LETTER

DATE: February 11, 2015

TO: Philip Clements
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [671552-2] Roll to save vs. Prejudice: Race in play-by-post Roleplaying Games

SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: February 10, 2015

EXPIRATION DATE: December 17, 2015

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please add the text equivalent of the HSRB IRBNet approval/expiration date stamp to the “footer” area of the electronic consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the HSRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

You have been approved to enroll 50 participants. If you wish to enroll additional participants you must seek approval from the HSRB.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on December 17, 2015. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.
Good luck with your work. If you have any questions, please contact the Office of Research Compliance at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence regarding this project.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.