Character Creation Diversity in Gaming Art

Popular abstract: The artwork for a role-playing game can be one of the most important aspects of the gaming experience. Artwork helps to give role-players an idea of what the world looks like in that game. It helps to inspire the kinds of characters players might want to create. Finally, art can serve as a method for determining what is and is not normal for a setting. *Dungeons & Dragons* was the first tabletop roleplaying game (RPG) created and as such serves as the foundation of the gaming hobby (Fine 1983; Tresca 2011; Peterson 2012). Is the artwork in *Dungeons & Dragons* racially imbalanced? How has the artwork changed since the beginning of the hobby? Wizards of the Coast is praised for the diversity of their new 5th Edition line, but is it truly diverse? This project seeks to find out by examining the artwork in the *Players Handbook* for each edition of the game. By using the theory of symbolic annihilation, I explore whether or not racial minorities are adequately represented in the artwork.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The artwork for a role playing game can be one of the most important aspects of the gaming experience. Artwork helps to give role-players an idea of what the world looks like in that game. It helps to inspire the kinds of characters players might want to create. Finally, art can serve as a method for determining what is and is not normal for a setting. *Dungeons & Dragons* was the first tabletop roleplaying game (RPG) created and as such serves as the foundation of the gaming hobby (Fine 1983; Tresca 2011; Peterson 2012). Is the artwork in *Dungeons & Dragons* racially imbalanced? How has the artwork changed since the beginning of the hobby? Wizards of the Coast is praised for the diversity of their new 5th Edition line, but is it truly diverse? This project seeks to find out by examining the artwork in the *Players Handbook* for each edition of the game. By using the theory of symbolic annihilation, I explore whether or not racial minorities are adequately represented in the artwork. *Dungeons & Dragons* was chosen not only because it is the first role-playing game, but because it has experienced the most exposure to non-gamers. In addition to having produced a gaming line, *Dungeons & Dragons* has also appeared in novels, video games, TV shows, and movies. During the 1980s, it even made media headlines when conservative Christians feared that the game may introduce vulnerable kids to the occult (Schnoebelen 1989).[1] This research thus seeks to fill a gap in the literature by using the theory of symbolic annihilation and applying it to role-playing games in order to answer the question: is the artwork of *Dungeons & Dragons* racially imbalanced? It will also serve as a starting point for initiating a conversation on whether or not role-playing game books show equal representation for minorities. This research will help inform other scholars who seek to have discussions on race representation in role-playing games. By creating a foundation from which future research can be done, it will also be possible to theorize about what representation in other games and settings might look like and thus be able to provide suggestions for game developers on how to increase diversity and representation within their own gaming products.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mass media is the way in which many people learn their values and are socialized (Tuchman 78). Because of this socializing power, mass media can play a big role in the way people are influenced (Dubin 1987; Mou and Peng 2009). It is due to the mass media's influence on the way people think and interpret their world that stereotypes within mass media can become dangerous and harmful (Mou and Peng 2009; Glascock and Schreck 2004). Negative portrayals have been linked to lower self-esteem in blacks (Glascock and Schreck 2004) and women (Glascock and Schreck 2004; McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, and Tope 2011; Tuchman 1978), but can also lock targeted groups into stereotyped roles and stigmas (Tuchman 1978).

[1] See "Character Creation: The Symbolic Annihilation of Race in *Dungeons & Dragons*," in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2015*, 129-144 (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con) for an earlier and more extensive version of this study.

These negative portrayals and the overall lack of representation were termed symbolic annihilation by Gaye Tuchman (1978). Tuchman used symbolic annihilation to explain how exclusion of women in media portrayals can lead to damaging effects both for women and men. Thus, under symbolic annihilation, the use of media can also influence the way we perceive racial minority groups, oftentimes influencing how we think and feel about non-dominant groups (Klein and Shiffman 2009). This overall process can also be dehumanizing, as Merskin (1998) states when discussing the portrayal of Native Americans in media. This dehumanizing effect can reduce minorities to a collection of tropes and stereotypes, which furthers harms how people receive and interact with them.

Role-playing games are a unique form of mass media in that in they are a group experience and are co-created between the players and the game master (Tresca 2011). The fictional worlds created in gaming can serve as cultural representations (Fuist 2012) projecting the stereotypes, tropes, and expectations of those who play the game into them. While gaming may serve as a means to escape reality (Fine 1983; Nephew 2006) it can also serve as a space for alternate identity construction (Bowman 2010). These alternate identities can be a path for exploring different ideas, points of views, and experiences. Because of this, adequate racial minority representation becomes crucial in giving players a chance to explore and encounter ideas, concepts, and people that they may not have previously considered or encountered on their own.

3. METHODOLOGY

Dungeons & Dragons has been published by two gaming companies: first by TSR, where the game was created, then in 1997 by Wizards of the Coast, who are the current owners. For this study, I will be reviewing the artwork in the *Players Handbook* throughout the various editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Under TSR, the game had many reprints that would sometimes result in new artwork being commissioned. Only one book was chosen from each edition (see Table 1). In the case of the Wizards of the Coast run with *Dungeons & Dragons*, the artwork in the core books remains the same throughout the life of that edition. TSR was a different case, however, with reprints within an edition sometimes receiving a new set of artwork. Due to the difficulties of tracking down all variants from TSR's run with *Dungeons & Dragons*, I opted to select one book from each edition that they published to code.

Table 1: Number of Images and Characters

	Number of Images	Number of Characters
Basic Dungeons & Dragons	26	53
1st Edition AD&D	56	155
2nd Edition AD&D	47	111
Rules Cyclopedia	53	130
3rd Edition D&D	47	80
4th Edition D&D	63	144
5th Edition D&D	81	171
Total	375	644

I only used the artwork that depicted human or demi-human characters. Demi-humans were the fantasy character races -- such as dwarves, elves, and halflings -- that resembled humans, but were based in fantasy literature or mythos. Artwork was excluded that was mostly landscape pictures or pictures in which the humanoid characters were non-descript and thus part of a bigger picture. In addition, artwork that depicted only the monster races was excluded, since monsters were not the focus of this study. The demi-human races were included due to their close ties and resemblance to baseline humans, including at times displaying the same level of racial diversity and, in some cases, the possibility of cross breeding, such as with half-orcs and half-elves. While there are racial overtones and concerns involved with the monster races, an examination of them is deserving of its own study and thus beyond the scope of this current article.

The characters were coded along five variables; sex, race, stereotype, heroics, and edition. The edition variable coded as the edition of the game from which the artwork in question came. Sex was broken down into four categories: male, female, unknown, and non-applicable. For the purpose of this study, sex is to be understood as the apparent biological differences between individuals. Unknown was used in instances where the character's biological sex could not be determined; it is unknown if the artist purposely created sexually ambiguous characters.[2] Non-applicable only applied to monster races that appeared in the artwork alongside humans and demi-humans.

Race was broken down into a total of 24 categories ranging from human races (black, white, Arabic, Native American, and East Asian) to fantasy demi-humans (elves, dwarves, or halflings) to demi humans of color (such as black elves and dwarves). The stereotype variable measured whether the characters depicted were done so using tropes and stereotypes associated with their race. For example, the Asian

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[2] See the 5th Edition PHB page 9 for example: the armored dwarf leading the charge towards the dragon.

human on page 140 of the 5th Edition book was drawn wearing samurai armor as opposed to more European fantasy based armor that most other characters wore. Thus, the Asian human was counted as a racial stereotype.[3] Heroics were used to determine if the role of the character was heroic or villainous based on the context of the artwork, as player-characters are meant to be the heroes. Instances without an obvious villain character were coded as neutral.

Finally, each edition was compared to census data from the year closest to its publication. Symbolic annihilation was determined using a method similar to Klein and Shiffman (2009) in which they "consider a group to be underrepresented if its prevalence is less than half of that observed in the population at large, and we will consider it to be an example of symbolic annihilation if its prevalence is less than one quarter of that found in the society at large." Thus, each edition was compared to the population census to the closest year of publication (see Table 2).

Table 2: Edition and Census Data

	Year of Publication	Census Data
Basic Dungeons & Dragons	1974	1970
1st Edition AD&D	1977	1980
2nd Edition AD&D	1989	1990
Rules Cyclopedia	1991	1990
3rd Edition D&D	2000	2000
4th Edition D&D	2008	2010
5th Edition D&D	2015	2010

4. RESULTS

Over the lifetime of *Dungeons & Dragons*, people of color were depicted 4% of the time. By race, white humans appeared 38% of the time, while blacks, Asians, Native Americans, and Arabs were depicted 2%, 1%, .4% and .4% respectively. For comparison, elves represented 7% of the characters depicted while dwarves composed 6% and halflings 4%. Some of the demi-humans were able to gain parity and prominence equal to minorities in a much shorter time span. For example, tieflings, who were introduced as a playable race in 4th Edition, were depicted 2% of the time, comparable to blacks who were also depicted 2% of the time. Minorities were depicted in stereotyped fashion 43% of the time that they appeared in the artwork. Men of color were depicted more often than women of color.

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[3] For additional examples, see the two black characters depicted on page 215 of the *Rules Cyclopedia* or the Native American depicted on page 248 of the *Rules Cyclopedia*.

Table 3: Race of Artwork

	Total Sample
Human: Black	2.1%
Human: Asian	1.5%
Human: Arab	3%
Human: Native American	.4%
Human: White	38.4%
Human: Unknown	1.2%
Elf	6.8%
Elf: Black Non Drow	.2%
Elf: Drow	.9%
Elf: Other	1.1%
Dwarf	5.8%
Dwarf: Black	.4%
Dragon	1.4%
Monster	18.2%
Halfling	4.5%
Unknown	8.5%
Half Orc	1.2%
Half Elf	1.2%
Gnome	1.2%
Dragonborn	1.8%
Tiefling	2%
Eladrin	.7%
Halfling: Black	.1%

Finally, minorities were depicted as heroic 7.6% of time, neutral 5% of the time, and as villains .5% of the time.

Table 4: Heroic Depiction

	Heroic	Villainous	Neutral
Characters (All)	17%	21%	61%
Minorities (All)	7.6%	.5%	5%
Human (All)	55%	6%	52%
Black	27%	5%	66%
Asian	23%	0%	77%
Native American	66%	0%	33%
Arab	33%	0%	66%
White	21%	3%	76%

In *Basic*, all racial minorities were symbolically annihilated. In *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* 1st Edition and 2nd Edition, blacks and Arabs were symbolically annihilated while Asians were not. No census data were available for Native Americans. In the *Rules Cyclopedia*, no minority groups were symbolically annihilated. In 3rd Edition, blacks, Arabs, and Native Americans were symbolically annihilated. For 4th Edition blacks, Arabs, Native Americans and whites were all symbolically annihilated. Symbolic annihilation for whites can be attributed to a large increase in the use of demi-humans, who made up 50% of the artwork. Finally, for 5th Edition, Asians and Native Americans were symbolically annihilated (see Appendix A for all tables).

5. DISCUSSION

This study helps to illustrate how *Dungeons & Dragons* has struggled with the representation of racial minority groups throughout the life of the

game, although the levels to which various racial minority groups were represented shifted between editions. In some editions of the game, Asians struggled to be represented, while in others, Asians were depicted at a rate on par with their population in the United States. Shifting art directions created shifting trends in the artwork presented by *Dungeons & Dragons*. An example is 4th Edition's attempt to be a more diverse game (Tresca 2011), resulting in the symbolic annihilation of even whites when the art direction attempted to diversify the game by including more demi-humans. In addition to symbolic annihilation, minorities in the artwork also received stereotyped portrayals. 43% of the time a minority was depicted, they were shown in a stereotyped fashion.

The depiction of demi-human races is also worth discussing. For the majority of *Dungeon & Dragons*' run, the fantasy races displayed in the artwork were from Eurocentric sources, owing to the games roots in feudal fantasy and the works of Tolkien (Fine 1983; Van Dyke 2008; Tresca 2011; Peterson 2012). Elves, dwarves, and halflings that have Eurocentric/white features are prominently depicted alongside their white human counterparts. Demi-humans of color are not featured as often as the whiter demi-humans, like elves and dwarves. Half-orcs make their first appearance in 1st Edition *AD&D* and then are sparsely used. When used, they are portrayed as less civilized and more barbaric than the whiter demi-human races, often embodying many racial tropes used to degenerate blacks (Van Dyke 2008).

Many of the non-white demi-humans, such as tieflings and dragonborn, lack the same level of culture and civilization that are oftentimes found in the white demi-human races such as elves and dwarves. Furthermore, as of 5th Edition, the non-white demi-humans were designated as an uncommon races, making them less numerous than the whiter demi-human races, the notable exception being the Drow who, despite being dark-skinned, have a culture and civilization all their own. The major difficulty with this singular representation of a demi-human race of color with a civilization all its own is that the Drow civilization is one based on slavery, subjugation, and matriarchally-based misandry. Thus, the Drow represent many evils against which white gamers games would feel compelled to fight wrapped up in the skin tone of a person of color. A full analysis of the Drow and their problematic depiction is deserving of its own separate study. Still, they are a notable exception that are, in the very least, worth mentioning.

The use of minorities and demi-humans supports what Hudson (2004) calls multicultural whiteness, a concept in which racial, cultural, and ethnic differences are moved into the general fabric of what it means to be white and, thus, American while obfuscating a history of racial and ethnic discrimination. In the same way various European ethnicities such as Jews and Irish were incorporated into the American culture and absorbed into whiteness while ignoring the history of racial discrimination that they experienced, minorities in fantasy settings are absorbed into white culture to represent human diversity while ignoring a history of racial discrimination, division, and separation. Additionally, demi-humans are incorporated into human kingdoms in the same way as a method to show how open and accepting humans -- and thus whiteness -- is.

This normalization of whiteness extends beyond fantasy settings and *Dungeons & Dragons*. White Wolf's World of Darkness, as an example, incorporates a similar pattern as well. While vampires, werewolves, and mages -- among their many supernatural groups -- can come from any ethnicity, many of the games' various supernatural organizations and mythos are based on American or European conceptions of horror elements. *Vampire: the Masquerade* is based on Western concepts of the vampire mythos. Many of the clans are European in origin and structure. While some may hail from minority groups, they tend to help support the idea of diversity as opposed to providing a unique perspective born from the experience of a minority group. In *Werewolf: the Apocalypse*, the mythos of the setting is based on Western concepts of earth and spirit worship. While the game features tribes that are non-European in nature and origin, they too are normalized into the behavior and institutions of the European/American counterparts who were mostly white. While *Mage: the Ascension* featured many magical traditions that were non-European in origin, the prevailing structure of the game and setting's magical understanding were based on European understandings of magic. This does not remove diversity per se, but it does normalize it against a more universal whiteness.

6. CONCLUSION

Diversity is a difficult topic. When considering what elements we add to games, we must also make sure that we do not fall prey to tokenism and cultural appropriation. As Shawl (2004) points out, portraying other cultures and minority group it is important to pay attention to things like the "setting, dialogue, action, and a host of other elements above and

beyond character." Furthermore, Shawl (2009) explains how research into different minority and ethnic groups is required to create a more diverse and inclusive set of games: not limited to just books, but also including interviewing, experiencing different cultures, and immersing oneself in these different cultures to gain deeper insights into their practices. It is important to move beyond just simply placing people of color into gaming settings. Publishers should strive to incorporate them into the gaming world itself, allowing their unique cultural contributions to be felt within the setting as opposed to being just window dressing. Furthermore, care must be given so that non-white representations are not relegated to inferior status within the setting. This is true even among fantasy settings that feature non-white demi-humans, who often lack the same cultural advancements and contributions that the white humans and demi-humans bring to their settings.

However, this article is not to say that no progress has been made in diversity in gaming. 5th Edition *Dungeon and Dragons* showed positive signs of growth in the realm of diversity (see Appendix). Paizo, the makers of *Pathfinder*, regularly hold discussions about diversity within their setting and solicit feedback from their players about how they are progressing with their goal of providing a diverse gaming experience. Furthermore, while the World of Darkness has made missteps in reinforcing multicultural whiteness and cultural appropriation, the game still strives to provide a diverse array of characters within their settings and games.

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BIO

TiMar Long has gamed since the age of 16, starting in the world of *Rifts* before moving onto other games such as White Wolf's *Mage: the Ascension*. TiMar earned his Bachelor's in Sociology at the University of Texas at Arlington, where he was a McNair scholar. Long is currently completing his Masters at the University of Houston. His areas of study include religion; Middle East studies; political sociology; and race and culture. Upon completing his Masters, Long intends to pursue a PhD degree. His Master's thesis studies black rpg gamers and whether or not they construct identities as black individuals. Long's thesis also explores whether or not gaming serves as a way for player's to explore their identities as black individuals.

APPENDIX A

Table 5: Basic *Dungeons & Dragons*	1970 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Population
Black	5.5%	3%	0%	11%
Asian	.35%	.17%	0%	.7%
Arab	-	-	0%	-
Native American	.2%	.1%	0%	.04%
White	43%	22%	60%	87%
Demi Human	-	-	21%	-

Table 6: *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* 1st Edition	1980 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Population
Black	5.5%	3%	.6%	11%
Asian	.8%	.4%	1.3%	1.6%
Arab	.15%	.07%	0%	.3%
Native American	-	-	.6%	-
White	41%	20%	50%	83%
Demi Human	-	-	13%	-
Table: 5				

Table 7: *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* 2nd Edition	1990 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Population
Black	6%	3%	0%	12%
Asian	1.5%	.75%	2%	3%
Arab	.2%	.1%	0%	.4%
Native American	-	-	0%	-
White	40%	20%	43%	80%
Demi Human	-	-	9%	-

Table 8: *Rules Cyclopedia*	1990 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Population
Black	6%	3%	6%	12%
Asian	1.5%	.75%	3%	3%
Arab	.2%	.1%	7%	.4%
Native American	-	-	1.5%	-
White	40%	20%	50%	80%
Demi Human	-	-	9%	-

Table 9: *Dungeons & Dragons* 3rd Edition	2000 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Population
Black	6%	3%	1.2%	12%
Asian	1.8%	.9%	1.2%	3.6%
Arab	.2%	.1%	0%	.4%
Native American	.7%	.35%	0%	1.4%
White	34%	17%	25%	69%
Demi Human	-	-	53%	-

Table 10: *Dungeons & Dragons* 4th Edition	2010 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Population
Black	6.5%	3.25%	.7% (4.1%)	13%
Asian	2.5%	1.25%	1.3%	5%
Arab	.25%	.1%	0%	.5%
Native American	.85%	.4%	0%	1.7%
White	36%	18%	14%	72%
Demi Humans	-	-	50%	-

Table 11: *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th Edition	2010 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Population
Black	6.5%	3.25%	4% (4.6%)	13%
Asian	2.5%	1.25%	1.1%	5%
Arab	.25%	1.1%	1.1%	.5%
Native American	.85%	.4%	0%	1.7%
White	36%	18%	26%	72%
Demi Humans	-	-	38%	-