

An Analysis of the Literature Surrounding the Intersection of Role-Playing Games, Race, and Identity

Abstract: Some of the most popular role-playing games (RPGs) limit the potential for diversity among player characters, link character abilities with their racial backgrounds, and provide platforms for real-life racism. This critical literature review examines a body of multidisciplinary scholarship and popular sources discussing race in fantasy RPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *World of Warcraft*. Integrating interdisciplinary literature on the topic of race in RPGs provides an opportunity for exploring race, games, and identity discourse from a critical perspective. This article's analysis engages with power dynamics in games and provides a framework for positioning future scholarship. While progress toward correcting racial misrepresentation and under-representation in existing RPGs are slow, that progress is meaningful and it can pave the way for more significant changes in new RPGs. Fantasy games have a great potential to step outside the issues of real life and engage with topics such as race in a way that undermines stereotypes and encourages nuanced representations. Though there is not always a clear parallel between a real-world race and a fantasy race, the notion of "otherness" connects the two ideas.

RPGs are one of the most popular genres of game and fantasy RPGs impact real-world discourse. It is vital that scholars continue the work of the authors discussed in this paper by encouraging nuanced diversity of representation in games and advocating for "own voices" game designers. Only then can the positive potential of fantasy RPGs be more fully realized. As existing RPGs and new games work to reduce and correct racial stereotypes in digital and tabletop RPGs, scholars, designers, and players can work together to move toward more nuanced, diverse representations and discourse surrounding RPGs.

Keywords: role-playing games, race, media representation, *Dungeons & Dragons*, *World of Warcraft*, discourse analysis, literature review

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1. INTRODUCTION

In June 2020, Wizards of the Coast released a statement regarding diversity in their tabletop role-playing game (RPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). As part of the design team's goal to show "humanity in all its beautiful diversity by depicting characters who represent an array of ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and beliefs," they announced a new book that offers alternate rules for handling the topic of race in *D&D* 5th edition (Wizards 2020, para. 2). *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* (released November 17, 2020) offers players and game masters the option to decouple in-game race from ability scores and character traits (Whitbrook 2020).

As the first fantasy RPG, *D&D* laid the foundation for all the tabletop and digital RPGs that followed (Meadows 2016). *D&D* also has a history of racism and representational issues that still influence tabletop and digital RPGs. In this paper, I review and examine a body of multidisciplinary scholarship on race in fantasy RPGs such as *D&D* and *World of Warcraft*. This critical literature review analyzes discourse surrounding power dynamics in games and provides a framework for positioning future scholarship. While progress toward correcting racial misrepresentation and under-representation in existing RPGs is slow, that progress is meaningful and it can pave the way for more significant changes in new RPGs.

2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Articulating the researcher's standpoint is key to critical discourse analysis (Mullet 2018) and to providing the transparency needed for a rigorous literature review (Snyder 2019). I am a new scholar in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, a professional writer, and an experienced *D&D* player and Dungeon Master (the game master responsible for hosting and running a *D&D* game). While there has not been much racial diversity among my own play groups, modern conversations about race in real-life culture and the publication of *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* turned my attention to the subject of race in fantasy RPGs. In these games, players can (typically) choose how they portray race within the game world. Fantasy games have a great potential to step outside the issues of real life and engage with topics like race in a way that undermines stereotypes and encourages nuanced representations. However, that potential is not yet fully realized.

As I approach this topic from a multidisciplinary perspective, definition of key terms is necessary to clarify my perspective on the topics of race, identity, and RPGs. In this article, *identity* refers to the player's self-conception in real and in-game worlds. I use the words *character* and *avatar* interchangeably to refer to a player's representation of their in-game persona, echoing a choice made by other scholars cited in this article. *Role-playing games* refer to tabletop and digital games in which players have the option to customize characters and take on the role of that character within a game world, typically a fantasy world.

Race refers both to real-world concepts of race based on skin tone as well as in-game concepts of race as a character's species (e.g. human, dwarf, elf). In his book *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Ben Isaac (in Goldenberg 2009) defines racism as "an attitude toward individuals and groups of people which posits a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities" (3). Goldenberg (2009) builds on that definition to make a distinction between racism based on cultural prejudices (e.g. an ethnicity-based assumption about someone's personality traits and morality) and color-based racism (e.g. an association of "blackness" with negative traits). Furthermore, Goldberg (2009) identifies visible "otherness" as "a crucial element" to hostility toward dark-skinned races in the real world (3). Observable differences between racial groups are something that fantasy engages with explicitly; there is no mistaking a hulking Orc for an agile elf or a purple-skinned Draenei for a diminutive gnome. Though there is not always a clear parallel between a real-world race and a fantasy race, this notion of "otherness" connects the two ideas.

3. METHODOLOGY AND ORGANIZATION

This article uses literature review as a methodology and analyzes the included articles through a critical discourse lens. When conducting the literature review, search keywords included various combinations of "race in role-playing games," "racism in RPGs," and "diversity and identity in RPGs." I excluded results published earlier than the year 2000. I take a multidisciplinary perspective and include articles from a variety of scholars in media studies and the social sciences, as well as popular sources which comment on racial representation in gaming. While the focus of this paper is on race, I also cite articles that examine identity in role-playing games to provide broader context for the discussion of racial identity (e.g. Nielsen 2015 and Filiciak 2003). To ensure that my discourse analysis includes a diverse perspective on racial representation in gaming, I also include select articles that address race and gaming in general rather than in RPGs specifically (e.g. Jansen 2018 and Beer 2020).

As a research methodology, literature reviews are useful for crafting an overview of interdisciplinary scholarship on a specific issue (Snyder 2019, 333-34). Integrating interdisciplinary literature on the topic of race in RPGs provides an opportunity for exploring race, games, and identity discourse from a critical perspective. When analyzing and integrating the literature on race in RPGs, critical discourse analysis provides a guiding methodology for examining expressions of language which perpetuate power imbalances. Critical discourse analysis is a framework which “emphasizes transdisciplinary work” and holds that “expressions of language are never neutral” (Mullet 2018, 117, 118). By using a mixed methodology, my discourse analysis grounds the literature review in critical engagement with power dynamics inherent in a discussion of race in RPGs. Finally, as a critical literature review, this article provides readers with a comprehensive framework to draw on when positioning their arguments in future scholarship.

Within the collected scholarly and popular sources, I have identified four core themes that lend themselves to critical discourse analysis. I begin with the topic of how “Game Developer Choices May Limit or Promote Character Diversity.” While RPGs often allow for a wide range of diverse characters, options provided by developers have a significant impact on the racial makeup of an in-game world. In addition, the fantasy setting of games like *D&D* means that “Grappling with Racism in RPGs’ History” is an essential step in understanding the discourse employed by game studies scholars. With those points established, it becomes possible to examine how “Options for Presenting the Self In-Game Relate to the Real World.” Finally, I explore research related to “The Positive Potential of Self-Created Identity in a Virtual World” and consider how recent changes in the ways certain RPGs handle race may influence the genre.

4. GAME DEVELOPER CHOICES MAY LIMIT OR PROMOTE CHARACTER DIVERSITY

The choices RPG developers make determine what type of in-game world the characters inhabit and how players can interact with that world. In relation to race, developer choices determine the racial makeup of non-player characters in the game as well as the options players have for creating their characters. This is particularly true of digital RPGs. David R. Dietrich’s “Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expression in Video Game Characters” (2013) revealed the limitations built into 65 massively multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPGs) released between 2000 and 2010. His study found that “only four. . . had the ability to create a ‘black’ character” (95). The visual rhetoric of a virtual world where non-white people cannot exist has profound implications for how players conceptualize their own real worlds (Higgin 2009, 12). When only four games passed Dietrich’s (2013) test, he expanded his criteria to include games that allow for non-white skin, but not the “darkest skin tones” (95). This change increased his list to eight games, though *EVE Online* and *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes* “restrict black-looking characters to specific in-game races” and for *EVE Online*, that race is one “of former slaves” (Dietrich 2013, 95, 90). As of ten years ago, limits built-in to player character creation options effectively created MMORPG worlds where “non-whites simply do not exist” (Dietrich 2013, 95). If players wanted their characters to live in a diverse virtual society, their gaming options were extremely limited.

Perhaps most significantly, this lack of diversity was found among even the most popular RPGs. Of the 10 million people playing *World of Warcraft* (WoW) in 2012, none had “the capability to make a racially non-white character” (Dietrich 2013, 95). This necessarily

meant the in-game world was one that could not promote character diversity that mimicked the real world. Lack of diversity in *WoW* is finally changing with the addition of “Asian and Black facial options” in the *Shadowlands* expansion (Williams 2019), but for most of the game’s history the only representation of dark-skinned characters came from the Horde races such as Tauren and Trolls (Higgin 2009, 9). That does not, however, mean such representation is wholly negative. For Indigenous game designers and scholars Elizabeth LaPensée and Maize Longboat, playing an orc in *Ultima Online* and a Tauren in *WoW* marked the first times they were able to play a character they could recognize as Indigenous (Beer 2020). Though the “trope-y” representations in these games are deeply flawed, fantasy MMORPGs were the only games where young LaPensée and Longboat found game designers who had made some effort to present players with diverse character options.

WoW’s portrayal of dark-skinned Horde races can be seen as deconstructing colonial narratives rather than perpetuating vilification of dark-skinned peoples. However, some argue that the question of representation distracts from the larger issue that “there is no existence of non-European humanity in Warcraft lore whatsoever” (Lastowka 2006, qtd. in Higgin 2009, 9). Other races might be identifiable as corresponding to real-world non-white peoples, but the fantasy version of a *human* race is still whitewashed. Despite ongoing conversations regarding this issue, players creating a human character in *WoW* were restricted to light-skin options until the end of 2020. Players who raised the issue of darker skin tones on Blizzard’s public *WoW* forums (Tsaifeng 2020) were mocked for bringing “that insanity” into the game (Kyriè 2020). This example illustrates that resistance to more diverse character options comes through player-to-player discourse as well as from the developers. While Dietrich (2013) found no evidence of “explicit racist intent” on the part of the game developers (98), the lack of diversity, particularly among the characters coded as “human,” is still a direct result of designers’ choices. Those choices influence not only the visual rhetoric of in-game worlds, but also the discourse used by players toward other players who want more diverse character options.

Even in tabletop RPGs, where players are not constrained by the limits of available computer graphics and customization options, designer choices still place limits on diversity. Instead of choosing the visual appearance of a character based on presets programed into the game, players of tabletop RPGs fill-out character sheets with information such as character race, background, and physical appearance. In an article on characterology in tabletop RPGs, Lars Konzack (2013) states that these “character sheets are not neutral, but allow for a certain range of player behavior,” and the space that designers allot each aspect of character creation highlights what the designers deem most important (86). Players are free to fill-out these sheets however they want, but only within the limits allowed by the game design and agreements between game masters and players. There is room for customization, but none of the academic or popular sources I located during my literature review examined the extent to which players and game masters in RPGs alter the existing framework for dealing with race and identity in-game. Critical discourse analysis of real-life conversations between game masters and players regarding race would be an intriguing subject for future research on tabletop RPGs.

Another game developer choice that affects the amount of diversity encouraged in tabletop RPGs is the artwork used in rulebooks. In “Character Creation Diversity in Gaming Art,” TiMar Long (2016) examines artwork depicting humans and demi-humans in various editions of the *Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook*. This study reveals that *D&D* struggles to represent racial minorities. Similarly, Mylie Brennan’s (2020) “A Visual Rhetorical Critique” of the first edition of *The Dungeon Master’s Guide* points out that the artwork borrows from

“old caricatures of the ‘negroid’ race” when portraying a monster, but uses classical white masculinity tropes when portraying heroes (231). Despite that problematic history, Long (2016) notes positive changes in more recent editions of *D&D*. By comparing representation of characters in artwork with U.S. census data from the year closest to each handbook’s publication date, Long (2016) determines that *D&D* symbolically annihilated “all racial minorities” in the 1st edition. There is improved representation in artwork for the current 5th edition, where “Asians and Native Americans” are the only groups “symbolically annihilated” (Long 2016, 25). While the issue has not yet been solved, the change is significant. Similar to Dietrich’s (2013) observations when discussing the visual rhetoric of white-dominated spaces in digital games, Long (2016) notes that “art can serve as a method for determining what is and is not normal for a setting” (23). Artwork in core rule books such as the *D&D Players Handbook* influences how players conceptualize characters. Representations of dark-skinned characters in *D&D* 5th edition challenges player conceptions of a whitewashed fantasy world. However, increased representation in character artwork has not solved all the problems highlighted by authors such as Higgin (2009) and Trammell (2016).

As visual representation increases, scholarly discourse shifts from the lack of representation to quality and effects of representation. In “Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games,” media studies scholar Tanner Higgin (2009) suggests that offering black character options is not enough. Game designers also ought to provide “a default Black race,” which “structurally encourages a Black presence” and may help counter the disappearance of blackness in RPG spaces (16). Presenting a playable default-black race could also help move players away from linking “black” with “evil”—an association deeply rooted in cultures around the world (Goldenberg 2009, 4). Including a dark-skinned race almost happens in modern *D&D*, but the concept is not fully realized. In the 5th edition *Player’s Handbook* (2014), the human race is represented by artwork of a black woman (29) and several ethnicities are described as having “brown skin,” “dusky skin,” or “dark mahogany skin” (30-31). By linking darker skin tone with specific ethnic groups that have their own cultures, the *Player’s Handbook* (2014) encourages players to create more nuanced, meaningful representations rather than presenting blackness as an “exterior painting of the body equivalent to an aesthetic choice” (Higgin 2009, 18). However, the one race that is described as having brown skin by default, dwarves, is represented by artwork of a pale-skinned female with red hair (*Player’s Handbook* 2014, 18). The text encourages players to create dwarves with skin tones ranging from deep brown, to earth tones, to “a paler hue tinged with red” (*Player’s Handbook* 2014, 18). However, the artwork showing what is “normal” (Long 2016, 23) for dwarves in the *D&D* setting depicts a near-white character, putting the textual and visual rhetoric of the *Player’s Handbook* at odds. Though representation in official *D&D* artwork is improving, the symbolic annihilation of certain racial minorities and artwork that lightens characters described as having darker skin results in a visual rhetoric of the in-game world that does not match the level of diversity in the real world and perpetuates ideas that “heroic” figures are rarely dark-skinned.

Whether or not game developers choose to promote in-game diversity is not a neutral issue; it is a rhetorical choice that directly affects players and their discourse. Real people are constructing identities within these virtual and imaginary spaces and engaging in real conversations. Being directly involved in character creation makes it easy for players to see their online “hyperidentities” as very real (Filiciak 2003, 91), which also means that “the racialized structuring of virtual worlds” is very real (Dietrich 2013, 85). Player characters in RPGs are not just computer code or paper character sheets; there are real people behind each

avatar and they are affected by the design choices of game developers and other players. The flexibility and customization opportunities inherent in tabletop games such as *D&D*—which allows players and game master to change rules or customize their own character artwork in a way that digital games cannot—come close to allowing players freedom to create diverse characters, but even for tabletop games constraints of time, rules “and the fantasy genre limit players” (Nielsen 2015, 48). Games need structure, which necessitates a certain level of constraint. How and why those constraints resist or encourage diversity hints at racial power dynamics at play in RPGs and lends itself to critical academic scrutiny.

Danielle Nielsen (2015) offers one example of scrutiny from a rhetoric scholar’s perspective when she notes that RPGs make use of “feminist game design strategies” to offer options for those who want to play characters that model identities outside of the “straight, white, male” gamer stereotype (47). While she does not claim that RPGs have achieved a perfect level of diversity, she is more optimistic than Dietrich (2013). Compared to many other types of video games, she suggests, “In MMORPGs players generally have more choices. For example, players begin the game by choosing a race ... clothing, accessories, hair, and skin tone” (Nielsen 2015, 49). It is important to clarify here, as Nielsen does, that “race” in the context of fantasy RPGs does not have the same meaning most people ascribe to it in the real world. Instead, “it means a different species, leaving the player to determine the specific physical appearance of their character outside of (or within) the confines of race or ethnicity” (Nielsen 2015, 49). This does not, however, mean real-world races are never layered onto player characters nor that racism cannot become a problem in-game (as Lisa Nakamura [2009] notes in “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in *World of Warcraft*”). Part of the racism in RPGs arises from choices made by game developers regarding how to present non-white character options (if there are any at all), and part comes from the players themselves as they interact with the game and bring their real-world perspectives and discourse into the fictional world. Both designer and player perspectives on race are also deeply influenced by the history of RPGs, particularly games in the fantasy genre.

5. GRAPPLING WITH RACISM IN RPG’S HISTORY

Fantasy RPGs exist within a larger genre of literature which intersects with our culture in a variety of ways that multidisciplinary scholars are only beginning to explore. This history plays a key role in how modern RPGs engage with the issue of race. In a paper presented at an Authors & Digital Games Research Association conference, English literature lecturer Christopher Warnes (2005) argues that scholars must look to the novels and history informing the fantasy genre if we want to understand race in RPGs. Warnes (2005) shows that the “insistence on race as determinant of character” within fantasy games is connected to a long history of fantasy literature (5). From romantic literature to J.R.R. Tolkien to *Baldur’s Gate*, both race and setting are presented “as innocently escapist, harmlessly entertaining” (Warnes 2005, 5). However, when we put these fantasy races like “elves, dark elves, gnolls, dwarves, halflings and gnomes” within their historical context, Warnes (2005) argues that their existence depends on “colonial encounters with otherness” (5). The idea that fantasy races are directly connected to colonialism and “the other” is a tantalizing possibility that could have profound implications for how scholars conceptualize the way games engage with race. Scholarship on this topic is sparse (Vorhees 2009), but independent game designers are beginning to undercut the colonial fantasy narrative with texts such as the upcoming *Coyote & Crow* game, which exists in “an uncolonized North America” (Hall 2021). Perhaps this movement among indie

game developers will spark increased popular and scholarly discourse on nuanced racial representation in games.

Though scholarship confronting “ways that MMORPG rules and culture intersect to structure the representation [of] racial and ethnic identity” is rare, Higgin’s (2009) “Blackless Fantasy” offers one example (Vorhees 2009, para. 6). Higgin argues that because “blackness” is not seen as part of Eurocentric heroic fantasy, portrayals of black characters in MMORPGs are either non-existent or heavily influenced by harmful stereotypes. These stereotypes may be masked as fantasy “archetypes,” which is the word that *Tasha’s Cauldron of Everything* (2020) uses when referring to in-game “cultural assumptions” (such as “dwarf heroes in *D&D* are often exceptionally tough”) (7). The new rule system allows players to ignore these archetypes to develop more diverse characters not constrained by fantasy genre assumptions (*Tasha’s* 2020, 7). This change attempts to correct historic issues in fantasy archetypes (such as the ones Higgin [2009] points out) but does little to disrupt the established fantasy world or encourage change in racial representation. Any real changes that emerge will have to come from players and game masters using the alternate rules to disrupt stereotypes and create more nuanced characters.

Fantasy games create a new world, but that world is inextricably tied to our own. This link can have both positive and negative implications for how fantasy RPGs discuss racism. Dennis Jansen (2018), a media studies scholar, points out that because fantasy games often include “race-based societies” (para. 2), the games could allow for a nuanced discussion of race in our own world. However, Jansen (2018) also argues that fantasy RPGs are likely to handle race so indirectly that players can “avoid confronting the actual racism behind” prejudices and stereotypes (para. 3). *The Elder Scrolls*, for example, contains racist language against players who choose to play as Dunmer, but there are no in-game consequences for playing as that race. By not engaging directly with the implications of in-game racism, “*Skyrim* runs the risk of turning its depiction of racism into little more than narrative window dressing” (Jansen 2018, para. 9). It also encourages players to gloss-over racism as normal and thus inconsequential to the structure of society or character experience in-game. In this case, the game side-steps discourse about the impact of living as a racial minority.

When fantasy games treat racism as a normal part of the world that has no implications for how player characters live in the game, that game encourages players to ignore racism in the real world as well. Games can also encourage players to see race as something that is no more than an aesthetic choice, typically one made within a world that’s mostly white by default. While game designers may intend for skin tone options within one otherwise homogenous human race to “communicate the constructed and biologically dubious nature of racial distinction,” in many cases European fantasy is presented as default and characters with darker skin tones as exotic variations rather than as a “nuanced, meaningful representation of blackness” that is “supported by proper contextual game environments” (Higgin 2009, 16, 18, 20). For positive change in representations of all races within RPGs and fantasy games to occur, games must provide options to create nuanced representations of non-white and non-European characters. A fantasy setting can support such nuanced representation so long as designers purposefully engage with issues of race and power in their games and create culturally rich worlds.

Though a more culturally rich setting is ideal, some researchers point out that attempts at multiculturalism in tabletop RPGs can unintentionally introduce stereotypes and exploitation of minority groups. One example of this scholarly perspective is Aaron Trammell’s “How *Dungeons & Dragons* Appropriated the Orient” (2016), which observes that *D&D*’s history

with Asian culture is problematically connected to Orientalism. Focusing on the 1985 and 2001 *D&D* supplements titled *Oriental Adventures*, Trammell (2016) argues that although the mechanics introduced in this supplement “are presented with an earnest multiculturalist ethic of appreciation, this ethic often surreptitiously produces a problematic and fictitious exotic, Oriental figure” (para. 4). Though 4th and 5th editions of *D&D* do not include *Oriental Adventures* supplements, Trammell (2016) contends that these problematic representations persist into 5th edition *Dungeons & Dragons* (2014) with pervasive “overtones of orientalism” including illustrations of “an East Asian warlock, a female samurai, an Arabian princess, an Arab warrior, and a Moor in battle” (para. 4). Not only are *D&D*’s portrayals of Asians affected by the game’s problematic history of Orientalism, but the inclusion of such illustrations still does not provide enough representation of Asians in *D&D* 5th edition to prevent the symbolic annihilation of this racial minority (Long 2016). The game needs more multicultural artwork as well as better-executed representation. Multiculturalism is not itself the issue—*D&D* is far richer and more accessible to diverse players for the inclusion of non-white character art in the *Player’s Handbook* (2014). However, the inclusion of racist stereotypes does not contribute to nuanced representation and must not be accepted as a “good enough” attempt at creating a multicultural fantasy setting.

In “Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games,” Trammell (2018) expands his criticism of *D&D* beyond Orientalism. He notes, “the *D&D* rules model race as a fixed biological species with fundamental bodily differences” that “reproduces an essentialist understanding of race found in eugenics” (444). The choice to compare *D&D*’s presentation of race to eugenics pushes Trammell’s audience to identify race in RPGs as highly problematic. While Trammell (2018) acknowledges that the physical distinctions between races in *D&D* come from the game’s roots in the works of writers like J.R.R. Tolkien and the rules mechanics of wargames, he also maintains that *D&D*’s presentation of racial fantasy tropes as “‘meaningful choice’ in character creation overlooks how these rules reinforce outmoded notions of race” (444). For Trammell (2016; 2018), racism in RPG’s history cannot be decoupled from “race” as a fantasy concept. This perspective hints that it may be impossible for discourse surrounding fantasy races not to also include elements of racism.

Though other scholars acknowledge racist influences in RPGs like *D&D*, not all are as harsh as Trammell (2018). Rather than seeing fantasy portrayals of race as inherently problematic, some scholars highlight the potential for fantasy to start more nuanced conversations about race and push-back against racism (Dennis 2018; Higgin 2009; Nielsen 2015). Antero Garcia (2017) also interrogates the history of *D&D* by tracing how the system of play has changed over 40 years in relation to race, gender, and power. Even though “Racism is built into the *D&D* system,” Garcia (2017) argues that “Race, racism, and the cultural lessons that *D&D* teaches about innate feelings of distrust for individuals different from oneself are complicated” (240) and they have changed since *D&D*’s first publication in 1974. Early in *D&D*’s history, criticism that the game system reinforced superiority of one race (humans) was valid—other races were far more limited in what the game mechanics allowed them to do and become (Garcia 2017). Now, though, the most recent edition of *D&D* encourages ethnic and cultural diversity within the human race (Garcia 2017, 241). In 5th edition, all playable races have equal opportunity to level up, choose any character class, and develop useful abilities (*Player’s Handbook* 2014). With the release of *Tasha’s Cauldron of Everything* (2020), players also have the option to say that their characters’ abilities are not determined by race at all. Players are no longer forced to conform to fantasy stereotypes which might reinforce ideas of racial superiority or racial limitations. The stereotypes have not disappeared, but they are no longer

enforced and the game encourages more nuanced portrayals of character race.

Trammell (2016; 2018), Long (2016), Higgin (2009), and Garcia (2017) demonstrate a tension inherent to scholarly discourse surrounding race in games. On the one hand, these authors agree that a whitewashed game space where racial minorities and non-Western cultures cannot exist is undesirable. If game scholars, designers, and players wish games to be an inclusive space where people of all races, backgrounds, and identities can be represented and celebrated, then games must include options for players to create characters with diverse races and ethnicities. On the other hand, scholars, designers, and players must also beware of inadvertently perpetuating harmful tropes. As Bowman and Schrier (2018) point out, “racial diversity still remains problematic in many role-playing spaces,” partly because so many are “overwhelmingly white” and partly because in many games “character enactment and representation are connected to cultural appropriation or stereotyping” (407). It is not enough to add non-white options for character creation. Games also ought to push-back against the proliferation of stereotypes and build nuanced representation into the structure of the games.

Given the potential pitfalls, the question of increasing diversity must be balanced with the realization that “these representations require a certain degree of sensitivity and research” (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 407). In other words, *how* a game chooses to include and represent non-white characters is just as important as whether such characters are included in the first place. Game designers must go beyond putting people of color in games and “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” (Long 2016, 27). Learning from the problematic history of RPGs and then revising such games can help create nuanced racial representation in these games. As Garcia (2017) states, *D&D* does have a racist history, but “it is also a promising reminder that like people, cultural constructions, and systems change” (242).

6. OPTIONS FOR PRESENTING THE SELF IN-GAME RELATE TO THE REAL WORLD

Available character choices, including race, do not simply affect fantasy RPG players during the moment of character creation; they affect the entire game experience. The presence or absence of characters of color determines the visual rhetoric of the game world. Options (or lack thereof) for creating diverse characters also change the way players interact with the game. In many cases, in-game diversity also reflects developers’ and players’ perspectives on real world diversity.

In his article “The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric, and Roleplaying Games,” Gerald Voorhees (2009) argues that representation in RPGs is rhetorical and that character creation options deeply affect player experience. He uses *Final Fantasy*’s shift from diversity to homogenization to illustrate this point. Rather than encouraging players to work with diverse parties of characters (as earlier *Final Fantasy* games do), *Final Fantasy X* and *Final Fantasy XII* cast “the differences that initially distinguish characters” as “an obstacle to be overcome” (paras. 51-52). No longer do the games present a “multicultural procedural rhetoric” that encourages players to find strength in diversity (para. 52). Now, the series “incentivizes homogeneity and sameness” (para. 56).

Voorhees’s (2009) observation is also supported by Dietrich’s (2013) research. He found that the skin tone variations offered in *Final Fantasy XI* are so subtle they wouldn’t be noticeable if not for the fact that one color “is attached to a preset that includes a ‘cornrow’ hairstyle and somewhat African facial features” (Dietrich 2013, 89-90). The lack of diversity in

Final Fantasy affects how the game world looks and changes how the game is played. As part of his analysis, Voorhees (2009) states, “When every representation is in some way ideological it is not possible to speak about representation without also considering it rhetorical” (para. 9). The character options that game designers offer players affect the entire game. Voorhees (2009) demonstrates that each new installment of *Final Fantasy* changed how players interacted with cultural diversity and how advantageous it is for players to create a party with diverse traits. When game designers change the way they present diversity, they guide the players (whether by intent or accident) to see diversity as either a detriment or an advantage.

RPGs link character appearance with abilities in a way that is near-impossible to uncouple. As is the case in *Final Fantasy*’s evolution, in-game links between race and ability deeply affect game play. While most games try to offer balanced advantages and disadvantages to choosing any in-game race, character options provided to players contribute to racial and, in some cases, racist discourse. In *EVE Online*, racialization comes from within the game as the only “race with non-white skin colors” is the “Minmatar, a race of former slaves” (Dietrich 2013, 90). In other games racialization may come from player response, as is the case in *WoW* where “the player class of female dwarf was tainted by its association with Chinese gold farmers, and thus became an ‘unplayable’ class” due to hostility toward players characterized as Asian (Nakamura 2009, 138). Whether the players learned to stereotype and vilify certain types of characters from the real world or from in-game discourse and design would be nearly impossible to determine. Unfortunately, both worlds provide examples of racism and racist discourse that players can imitate and perpetuate. We see examples of racism and poor representation in games coming from both an industry perspective and an in-game player perspective.

Character options presented in RPGs carry an implicit visual and narrative rhetoric in relation to race and identity that shapes storytelling, gameplay experience, and the appearance of virtual worlds. Though it is unreasonable to “map” every aspect of fiction to something in our own world, it would be equally unreasonable to assume that fiction does not draw from and inform reality (Voorhees 2009). Indeed, because the players exist both in the real world and within the game as their avatars, “interactions within virtual worlds have the power to shape the lives of players far beyond” the imagined, fictional space (Dietrich 2013, 85). These games shape a large number of real people’s lives. For example, over 117 million people currently subscribe to *WoW* and an estimated 1.1 million subscribers play daily (MMO Populations n.d.). RPGs do not influence a small handful of individuals, but a vast community of diverse players.

In her article “Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity,” communications professor Adrienne Shaw (2012) argues that game developers need to realize their audience is already diverse. As we have seen, non-white characters are underrepresented in digital RPG options for character creation. Though the lack of character diversity in RPGs and video games has attracted scholarly and media attention, Shaw (2012) points out that this has not been enough to sway the bulk of the video game industry. In fact, the industry seems disinterested “in the racial makeup of its audience,” as evidenced by Entertainment Software Association’s statistics, which only track audience demographics related to age and gender (Shaw 2012, 37). Race isn’t something game designers, companies, and trade associations care about in their audience, which results in “a form of ‘symbolic annihilation’ ... that exists beyond game texts themselves” (Gerbner and Gross; Tuchman qtd. in Shaw 2012, 37). Even the long-running Daedalus project, which studied MMO players for

6 years (Yee 2009) did not pay attention to race (Higgin 2009, 22). This “lack of statistical data on race reinforces ... that race continues to be considered a non-issue within cyberspace and gaming” (Higgin 2009, 23). Gamers of color exist, but historically, the game industry does not notice or care (Shaw 2012; Higgin 2009). This lack of interest persists today even though recent studies indicate that African American and Latinx players are more active in gaming communities, play more games, and spend more time playing compared to white gamers (Packwood 2018).

While statistics related to player race are rare, particularly from an industry perspective, there is demographic information available for game developers. The International Game Developers Association’s “Developer Satisfaction Survey 2019 Summary Report” revealed that 81% of the survey respondents selected “white/Caucasian/European” as part of their answers to the Race/Ethnicity/Ancestry question (13). The survey allowed multiple choices in this category, and 69% of respondents selected white/Caucasian/European as their only answer. Only 2% of the developers in this survey identified as Black/African-American/African/Afro-Caribbean. Though these statistics “suggest a large overrepresentation of people identifying as white” (International Game Developers Association 2019, 13), there is very little effort within the industry to promote diversity and inclusion. The “State of the Game Industry 2020” from Game Developers Conference shows that 28% of game studios put no effort at all into inclusion and diversity initiatives (23). Only 22% reported putting “a lot” or “a great deal” of effort into promoting diversity and inclusion, with the remaining studios reporting “a moderate amount” or “a little” effort toward more diverse representation among developers (Game Developers Conference 2020, 23). This lack of diversity and disinterest in promoting inclusivity is particularly significant because scholars and game designers agree that diversity among the people making games must increase for representation within games to improve (Jansen 2018; Beer 2020).

Shaw’s (2012) explanation of the overall disinterest the gaming industry continues to show toward race boils down to this: “In a culture in which games are not taken seriously, representation in games is viewed as inconsequential and fewer people are invested in demanding diversity in the texts” (39). The idea that something is “just” a game results in many players resisting “the idea that video games are morally consequential media” even though scholars have identified them as “powerful vehicles for specific racial discourses, ideologies, and structures of feeling” (Nakamura 2019, 129). Yet despite public and industry resistance to the idea of games’ influence, progress has been made toward more nuanced racial representation since the publication of Shaw’s article in 2012. As Lisa Nakamura (2019) points out in her examination of “Gender and Race in the Gaming World,” highly regarded games including *Journey* (2012), *The Last of Us* (2013), and *Overwatch* (2016) “engage directly with race, gender, sexuality, and emotion” (128, 133). Slowly but surely, discussing games as if they matter and taking that discourse beyond academic journals into a larger cultural conversation is leading to designers and players taking the lack of diversity in games more seriously. This is particularly visible in independent game companies like the creators of *Journey*. However, none of the games that Nakamura identifies as displaying these positive changes are RPGs.

Another discourse situation deserving close academic scrutiny is when racism is brought into RPGs from the real world. One example comes from Eastwick and Gardner’s research, which found that “dark-skinned avatars were treated more negatively in social interactions than light-skinned avatars” on *There.com* (qtd. in Dietrich 2013, 85). Potential for this sort of negative interaction can also be found in tabletop games. For example, the 5th edition of *D&D* designates “non-white demi-humans” such as the dark elf variant Drow as

“uncommon races” (Long 2016, 26). Not only are these races less numerous than the light-skinned default races, but the Drow “civilization is one based on slavery, subjugation, and matriarchally-based misandry” (Long 2016, 26). While Long (2016) does not present examples from gameplay of discrimination against the Drow, he suggests that they “represent many evils against which white gamers ... would feel compelled to fight wrapped up in the skin tone of a person of color” (26). The depiction of Drow as both evil and dark-skinned may also perpetuate historic and modern views of black as the “color of ill omen” (Goldenberg 2009, 5). When games encourage players to associate negative cultural and personal traits with in-game races that are always dark-skinned, it offers opportunities for gaming systems to reinforce real-world racism. It also creates opportunities for players to participate in racist discourse that feels permissible within the game world since it is directed against “evil” characters.

Nakamura (2009) examines another example of discrimination brought into the game world in her article, “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in *World of Warcraft*.” In this article, she examines “anti-Asian racial discourse” (141) that emerges in how certain players talk about unwanted “farmers,” who may be targeted for bullying, racial slurs, and “even virtual death” (133). In this context, the term “farmer” refers to those who play in order to “produce and sell virtual goods” in exchange for real-world money (Nakamura 2009, 130). These farmers are “worker” rather than “leisure” players. Many, though not all, come from “poorer nations such as China and Korea,” and insults aimed at farmers have taken on “a decidedly anti-Asian flavor” to the point that calling someone “Chinese” in-game is an insult (Nakamura 2009, 130). Though this discourse employs the use of racial slurs, the players perpetuating it insist their language is not an indication of real-world racism. However, rather than simply focusing on a critique of the behavior that farmer players engage in (which is often considered cheating [Nakamura 2009]), anti-farmer discourse turns into attacks on gamers of a certain nationality. Whether or not the anti-farmer players view themselves as racist, the language they use to criticize farmers leans heavily on racist discourse.

Remember that *WoW* is one of the games Dietrich (2013) identified as having a whitewashed game world, and that updates bringing Asian and Black characters to *WoW* had not yet gone into effect at the time of Nakamura’s writing (Nakamura 2009; Williams 2019). Asian players could not create characters visually identifiable as Asian. Even if that possibility existed, players are still hidden behind avatars and no one can “detect other players’ races by looking at their physical bodies” (Nakamura 2009, 133). That did not stop certain players from “racializing” avatars, however, nor from sharing strategies for profiling Chinese players based on criteria such as “broken” English or quickly harvesting game prizes (Nakamura 2009, 133, 140). This racialization of characters is not an isolated occurrence. Speaking of RPGs in more general terms, Nielson (2015) says players “may create overtly racialized or even racist identities in the gameworld because the words, images, and actions gamers use to create an identity can be, and are, racialized” (49). RPGs present players with a wide range of possibilities including, unfortunately, the option to bring racism into gameplay. In some cases, designer choices that make characters of color rare, non-existent, or evil may even encourage racist gameplay.

The anti-farmer discourse from certain players in *WoW* is not the only racial narrative connected to the game. Characters in this game come from different fantasy races, and the “background story includes a race war in which players participate” (Nielsen 2015, 54). While Nielsen (2015) suggests that examining themes of racial tension inside games can have a positive effect, Nakamura’s (2009) research indicates that is not always the case. I am not suggesting game developers intend for players to bring racism into the in-game world. However, the

visual rhetoric of whitewashed worlds and the choice to have players participate in race wars may accidentally encourage a lack of tolerance on the part of the players.

Digital and tabletop RPGs often limit the potential for diversity among characters, link character abilities with their racial backgrounds, and provide platforms for real-life racism to emerge. So long as that continues, game studies scholars and socially conscious players must continue to turn a critical eye to the discourse happening within and around games, keeping in mind that “ultimately, on-screen representation is only as helpful as who puts it there” (Beer 2020, para. 48). RPGs are one of the most popular genres of game (Nielsen 2015), and fantasy RPGs impact real-world discourse. It is vital that scholars continue the work of the authors discussed in this paper by encouraging nuanced diversity of representation in games and advocating for “own voices” game designers. Only then can the positive potential of fantasy RPGs be more fully realized.

7. THE POSITIVE POTENTIAL OF SELF-CREATED IDENTITY IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

Thus far, this paper has focused on the negative aspects of racial representation and race-based discourse in RPGs. However, many scholars also speak of a positive effect that can accompany created identity inside virtual worlds like those of digital and tabletop RPGs. In “Hyperidentities: Postmodern Identity Patterns in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games” cultural anthropologist Mirosław Filiciak (2003) suggests that MMORPGs are the “most complete way” to “realize the postulates of postmodern identity creation” (88). Even with the limits placed on character design in certain games, Filiciak (2003) believes that MMORPGs provide a compelling argument against the idea that video games are “a medium that alienates people” and instead argues that they are a “medium in which to communicate” (88). The notion of MMORPGs as a communication medium firmly situates these games within the purview of discourse analysis. Moreover, it suggests that MMORPGs have the potential to connect people rather than alienate them from each other. This fits seamlessly with an observation Dietrich (2013) makes that “interactions within virtual worlds have the power to shape the lives of players far beyond the confines of the online space” (85). Long (2016) also notes that “alternate identities can be a path for exploring different ideas, points of views, and experiences” (24). This is one of the main reasons Long (2016) gives when arguing “adequate racial minority representation” is a crucial topic because it offers “players a chance to explore and encounter ideas, concepts, and people that they may not have previously considered or encountered on their own” (24). The ability for players to create their own chosen identity within a virtual world and then interact with others’ identities opens the possibility for personal identity exploration. It can also prompt deeper thought and discussion about the implications that in-game interactions between diverse people may have for real-world interactions.

Adding to the discourse surrounding identity in RPGs, Sarah Lynne Bowman and Karen Schrier’s “Players and Their Characters in Role-Playing Games” (2018) points out that player-character relationships are both psychological and sociological. Within RPGs, players can adapt and transform their identities and personalities, trying on different perspectives and exploring notions of gender, race, and sexuality (Bowman and Schrier 2018). With imagination and a character sheet, or a few mouse-clicks on a computer, players can “painlessly manipulate. . . identity, to create situations that they could never experience in the real world because of social, sex-, or race-related restrictions” (Filiciak 2003, 90). RPGs where players have the opportunity to generate a wide variety of different characters with backgrounds, appearances, and skills that are not possible in the real world give players new ways to think

about identity as a concept and explore their personal sense of self.

Though some criticize players who spend large amounts of time within RPG worlds, Filiciak (2003) suggests that rather than seeing this sort of game as “escapist” we should view avatars in RPGs as “a longed-for chance of expressing ourselves beyond physical limitations” (100). Indeed, interviews with “intensive role-players in MMORPGs,” many of them from marginalized groups, show that extensive playing “increased their sociability and self-expression” (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 398). At their best, RPGs let players engage in positive social experiences, express themselves, and “enact different races, ethnicities, nationalities, sexualities, and even species, depending on the game” (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 406). On a personal level for individual players, the opportunities that fantasy RPGs present for exploring identity can open doors to try on different perspectives and see what it’s like to play as a character who looks and acts differently from themselves. In keeping with Voorhees’s (2009) observation that representation in RPGs is rhetorical, the possibility of trying on different identities has profound implications for the purpose behind representation built into RPGs. Game designers’ choices can limit or encourage the players’ ability to experience life from a different perspective. When identity exploration is supported with nuanced representation, games also offer players a potentially deeper appreciation for diverse perspectives.

RPGs that provide opportunities for players to create diverse avatars allow for the possibility of interacting with a wide variety of diverse identities. Nielson (2015) points out that “Newer roleplaying games subvert the traditional stereotypes” (51). She also says that games which let players “interact with others who portray a different identity ... [allow] gamers to develop what Alexander (2009) calls ‘multicultural’ and ‘critical literacies,’” which can prompt players to “interrogate assumptions” that create real-world racism (51). When games allow for and encourage diversity, the potential for positive impact on players increases dramatically. Nielson (2015) also sees potential for social improvement in games that seem problematic in their narrative and design. For example, she suggests in-game racial conflicts that allow players to engage with questions of race and diversity offer positive effects. For Nielson (2015), “When players examine the race wars in RPGs. . . gamers may consider why racial tension and racism happens, and what actions must be taken in the offline world to move forward” (55). While in-game race wars can give players a new venue for racist discourse (Nakamura 2009), games that directly engage with interracial conflict may also provide players with a chance to examine biases and conflicts in the real world and ponder solutions. The opportunities for personal identity exploration and for interaction with diverse player groups suggested by Filiciak (2003), Nielsen (2015), and Bowman and Schrier (2018) indicate the possibility of a more hopeful future for RPGs than some of the other sources in this critical literature review might suggest.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Scholars analyzing tabletop and digital RPGs’ presentations of race reveal that RPGs profoundly engage with identity. This engagement has meaningful implications for how players conceptualize race and respond to racism. Fantasy RPGs allow for a vast array of character options and, when they enable diverse representation, they help foster discourse about real-world diversity. Some have a more problematic side, though. When diversity is limited, the visual rhetoric of a virtual world where non-white people cannot exist has the potential to spill-over into the real-world in negative ways. Given these two extremes in the positive and negative potential of RPGs, representation in these games contributes significantly

to discourse surrounding race and racism. There is purpose behind and consequences to the diversity (or lack thereof) which is allowed or encouraged within RPGs, even if the designers did not explicitly embed such purposes and consequences.

Though the history of RPGs and race is problematic, changes such as the *World of Warcraft Shadowlands* expansion and *Dungeons & Dragons'* publication of *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* represent efforts toward removing racism in game design. While there is still progress that needs to be made (as the recent controversy over Wizards of the Coast's portrayal of "primitive frog people" shows [Carter 2021]), these are steps in the right direction. As existing RPGs and new games such as the Native-designed *Coyote & Crow* (Hall 2021) work to reduce and correct racial stereotypes in digital and tabletop RPGs, scholars, designers, and players can work together to move toward more nuanced, diverse representations and discourse surrounding RPGs.

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