Concealed Conscientization:
A Case Study of a Commercial *Dungeons & Dragons* Adventure

Abstract: This study presents a case study of a *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* adventure that embeds key concepts from Karl Marx and Franz Fanon with the goal of provoking conscientization, the critical awakening advocated by Paolo Freire, for those who play it. The adventure was written under a pseudonym and has been accepted and published by a commercial publisher. Results from a playtest group provide empirical evidence that players received and made sense of the adventure in line with the intent of the author to critique contemporary religious fundamentalism and prompt reflection on colonialism. This research indicates that commercial publication of critical game design specifically within the context of the hegemonic *D&D* rules system has the potential to reach a significant audience.

Keywords: *Dungeons & Dragons*, reception theory, Franz Fanon, Paolo Freire, conscientization, game design

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1. INTRODUCTION

Role-playing games (RPGs), and *D&D* specifically, are potentially transformative, pivotal experiences for their players (Sidhu and Carter 2021). Content, design, and experience are at the heart of transformative play. Yet despite decades of research and gaming, the path from game design to impact, from theory to practice, remains difficult both to map and travel. How can we design game content that is impactful and transformative? How do we know if we are successful? Most importantly, if we achieve transformative game design, how can we make it broadly relevant? This article presents a case study of game design research through game design practice (A. Hook and Coulton 2017) using a *D&D* adventure written under a pseudonym by one of the authors and accepted for commercial publication. The adventure is inspired by and embeds Fanonian and Marxist critiques of colonialism and religion with the aim of achieving Paolo Freire's goal of "conscientization" of players. Our empirical research based on a playtest group for the adventure confirms that *D&D* is a potentially transformative game, and we show that a commercial *D&D* publication can prompt players to critically reflect on important social issues; yet our research also shows that *D&D*'s core feature of a small group of violent adventurers may teach lessons that are incompatible with Freire's ultimate goals for conscientization.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The research on the potential of RPGs as persuasive and transformative is rich and varied across disciplines and methodologies. However, two axes of research dominate. One is the psychological, personal, and inter-personal benefits of playing RPGs; the other is the ability of RPGs to influence players, and similarly, how players use and make sense of RPGs in the context of their own beliefs and values. A large and growing body of research attests to the social-psychological benefits of playing RPGs. A scoping review in the field of psy-

chology concluded that RPGs were a "complementary tool" for psychotherapy (Arenas, Viduani, and Araujo 2022, 304). Another recent study showed that playing *D&D* for one hour per week over eight weeks had significant benefits to players' wellbeing by reducing depression, stress, and anxiety while increasing self-esteem and self-efficacy (Merrick, Li, and Miller 2024). The authors of another study summarize expansive benefits associated with playing *D&D*: "[it] can aid in friendship and relationship maintenance, mitigation of social anxiety, improved social skills, reducing stress, alleviation from mental health challenges, and providing a connection with others" (Baker, Turner, and Kotera 2022, 3906). The benefits from playing RPGs are thus empirically established, and significant (Sidhu 2024; Walsh and Linehan 2024).

The other axis of research is related but distinct. Researchers here are less interested in the social-psychological benefits of RPGs (or games in general) to the individual, and more interested in the ability of games to influence players' beliefs and values. Ian Bogost's *Persuasive Games* (Bogost 2010) is arguably the most impactful work in this area in the last two decades, but his focus is video games. Numerous publications in this area focus on tabletop, card, and board games while offering insight into game design generally (Flanagan 2009; Kaufman and Flanagan 2015; Flanagan 2021; Kaufman, Flanagan, and Seidman 2016; Freedman et al. 2018; Flanagan and Jakobsson 2023). Researchers also consider how players make use of games. Rather than a game's influence on players, Mark Hines's research examines how players use a *D&D* adventure, *The Tomb of Annihilation*, to "co-construct" orientalist beliefs (Hines 2023).

An interesting aspect of this avenue of research is the variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches. Some research that critiques *D&D* for racist, colonial, and misogynistic tropes (Stang and Trammell 2020; Garcia 2017) or an emphasis on violence (Albom 2021) is based on textual analysis of rules and game mechanics. In contrast, research that seeks to show the utility of games to shape values positively or as a pivotal experience is often empirical (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020; Sidhu and Carter 2021). This variety in approach speaks to the richness of the game studies field, but also the difficulty of assessing impact, positive or negative, and designing impactful games—a challenge made clear in Bogost's self-critique of *Persuasive Games* (Bogost 2021).

The research on games' ability to influence, as distinct from their benefits, is equally concerned with conscientization broadly construed and game design. The utility of games to promote conscientization was apparent almost immediately after the original publication of Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In 1972, William A. Smith advocated using simulation games for conscientization (Smith 1972). Freire advocated an approach to education that would empower learners. "In problem-posing education," he explains, "people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire 1993, 56). Conscientization, according to Freire, empowers people to view their circumstances "as an historical reality susceptible of transformation" (Freire 1993, 58). The ability of games to model social structures combined with the power of the experience of play make them a natural, compelling site for conscientization. Smith's emphasis on mechanics to achieve conscientization foreshadows Bogost's "procedural rhetoric."

The research group Homo Ludens at the Université du Québec à Montréal recently published a list of criteria to assess a game's ability, not limited to RPGs, to contribute to Freireian conscientization or consciousness raising (Homo Ludens 2023). "A conscientization game," they explain, "Is a game that through its ludic, narrative, and aesthetic elements explicitly aims to stimulate a critical consciousness in individuals in situations of oppression and to equip them with tools to facilitate the implementation of communal processes aimed at systemic social change" (Homo Ludens 2023, 6). In addition to offering examples of game design that meet their criteria, Homo Ludens advocates game jams as a form of consciousness-raising activity where individuals can create games, explore solutions, and share experiences. Other researchers also recommend

game jams as a Freireian activity (Myers, Piccolo, and Collins 2019). The application of Freire to game design, particularly as articulated by Homo Ludens, is ambitious and political.

Nevertheless, the reach of games designed for either avenue of research, benefits or influence, tends to be limited. Such games are usually niche and bespoke, designed for a specific audience, indeed sometimes limited to the test subject group itself. For example, two important studies that demonstrate the utility of *D&D* to teach moral reasoning (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020) and as an efficacious activity for improving mental health (Merrick, Li, and Miller 2024) both make use of homebrew adventures. We argue for a different approach, one that embraces commercial publication to reach, and hopefully impact, a large audience.

There is clear empirical evidence for the efficacy of RPGs in general and *D&D* specifically as a site of transformative play. We agree with Dimitra Nikolaidou that the unique, immersive experience of *D&D* game sessions, of co-creating narratives, "influence participants at an even more fundamental level than other storytelling media" (Nikolaidou 2024, 163). In addition, *D&D* holds a hegemonic position in the industry and in its raw number of players (Griepp 2024; Given and Polkinghorne 2024). Yet the game and its players are surprisingly accessible to independent designers. In January 2023, Wizards of the Coast (WotC) released its System Reference Document (SRD 5.1), a collection of rules for *D&D*, under a CC-BY 4.0 license. In April 2025, WotC released an updated SRD 5.2, also under CC-BY 4.0, that includes material from the new *Player's Handbook*. The SRD serves as the basis for many commercial so-called third-party publishers to produce RPG content for *D&D*. The SRD, combined with two self-publishing platforms, DriveThruRPG and DM's Guild, offers opportunities for independent designers to reach a vast audience of gamers. Success on these platforms can serve as an entrée to the realm of commercial publishers, as was the case with the author, under a pseudonym, of the adventure for this research. In addition, several independent systems use the *D&D* rules system in a different setting or game because of the ubiquity of players familiar with its rules. This article takes a "research through design" approach to argue that commercial *D&D* publications afford critical game designers the opportunity to maximize their potential audience and thus the impact of their games.

3. STEALTH DESIGN

Our work is informed by the "stealth interventions" and "embedded design" approach articulated by Geoff Kaufman, Mary Flanagan, and Max Seidman (Kaufman, Flanagan, and Seidman 2021; Flanagan 2021). Their approach makes use of three strategies: intermixing, obfuscating, and distancing. For the purposes of writing a *D&D* adventure, the latter two strategies are most applicable. Obfuscating hides the persuasive intent of the game and its designers. A key strategy here is to use a genre, as they explain, "whose associated goals or expectations do not include the aim to change players' attitudes, beliefs, or behaviors" (Kaufman, Flanagan, and Seidman 2021, 79). *D&D* players have an expectation that their play experience will be inclusive and allow for diversity. WotC's "Commitment to Diversity" states, "One of the explicit design goals of 5th edition *D&D* is to depict humanity in all its beautiful diversity by depicting characters who represent an array of ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and beliefs" (D&D Official 2020). However, it is unlikely that players would expect a *D&D* adventure to introduce concepts such as false consciousness, organic intellectuals, structural inequality, or other socio-political ideas. That is, WotC supports inclusivity but that does not mean *D&D* adventures encourage players to explore the causes or consequences of intolerance. More research is needed on player expectations about fantasy worlds. Recent WotC adventures consist of depoliticized fantasy realism—dragons but not slaves, despots but not fascists. As Mason argues, WotC articulates "a conservative status quo, with a thin veneer of diversity, equity, and inclusion" (Mason 2024, 174). The *D&D* adventure is thus a suitable genre for obfuscation.

Distancing is the other embedded design strategy that is felicitous for writing critical *D&D* adventures. This refers to the psychological distance, a "safe space," between players and any sensitive topics. "By sep-

arating players from their real-life identities and prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences," explain Kaufman, Flanagan, and Seidman, "Persuasive games can effectively circumvent players' reticence or reluctance and enhance the game's transformative potential" (Kaufman, Flanagan, and Seidman 2021, 83). Indeed, distancing is at the heart of RPGs though the "player-character" (PC), the fictional character the players roleplay. PCs are an opportunity for players to explore identities; PCs allow both distancing from and experimentation with a player's own conception of self, values, and orientation (Bowman and Schrier 2018). They further recommend two mechanisms to achieve distancing: hypotheticality and fictionalizing. Both clearly are ideal for RPGs. RPG settings and adventures are a form of speculative fiction that can be used to test hypotheticals, e.g., what are the consequences for a society if magic is common? RPG settings and adventures also fictionalize—depict metaphorically or fantastically—real issues and events. For example, the Chernobyl disaster could be modelled as a magical vortex collapse or interplanar energy leak in a fantasy realm.

Related to the idea of embedded design is the concept of "reskinning" or remixing. This refers to the process whereby a designer or Game Master (GM) translates or imports a compelling character or situation from another setting into a game (Shea 2018). In homebrew games a character might be taken into a game whole cloth. As a game master, one author has, on more than one occasion, reskinned Colonel Walter Kurtz from *Apocalypse Now* and used some quotes verbatim. For example, when in a recent game the final boss told the PCs, "You have a right to kill me. You have a right to do that. But you have no right to judge me" (Coppola 1979). Crucially, reskinning can extend, and commonly does, to narrative and plot structure. For example, a GM for a science fiction RPG could reskin the classic movie *The Blues Brothers* as an adventure that finds the PCs in a desperate race to save a foundling hospital for exoplanet orphans from foreclosure. Reskinning allows the importation of famous works of fiction, historical events, moral parables, and much more, in a disguised, "fantasized," way. The official *D&D* adventure *Storm King's Thunder* is a remix of *King Lear*.

An example that illustrates a missed opportunity for reskinning is Premeet Sidhu's use of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (Sidhu 2023). Rather than reskinning the book, Sidhu gamified it. She re-created the book with close fidelity to its original content as a RPG adventure using the *D&D* rules system. The characters, setting, and the plot approximates the book. In other words, the players know they are playing the book. Sidhu was interested in using a game to investigate player agency, transgression, and death, and her playtest results indicate the game was successful in this respect (Sidhu 2023). Of course, *Animal Farm* itself is an exercise in fantasizing and reskinning. Yet, imagine *Animal Farm* reskinned with embedded design as a fantasy *D&D* adventure with the same themes but also with the intent of engaging PCs with the broader critical ideas raised by the book: Weberian institutionalized charismatic authority and Tocquevillian continuity. We can reimagine the character Napoleon reskinned as a Lawful Evil paladin non-player-character (NPC) while Snowball is a Neutral Good NPC. The farm can be reskinned as a remote underground city and we could change the Windmill to a lift apparatus to the surface. The designer who reskins *Animal Farm* in this way would follow plots and events, and write the same NPCs, but they would be distanced and fictionalized.

Flanagan's empirical research provides evidence of the effectiveness of these strategies. For example, she shows that fictionalizing or "activating fantasy' creates psychological distance for players. This distance leads to abstraction and helps players "see the big picture" rather than make a judgement in response to objects and ideas recognized from their everyday experience (Flanagan 2021, 286). A fantasy game developed by Flanagan, *The Enchanter*, successfully increased self-confidence in women scientists (Flanagan 2021).

4. RECEPTION THEORY

Central to our research is the question of how adventure writing converts to play, to player experience, and to player meaning-making. We are interested in the nature of transmission, the conversion of author intent to a *D&D* adventure to player understanding. This is, of course, the crux of persuasive gaming and critical

game design. As Flanagan explains, "While it is true that messages are a part of a game's story, messages that a designer thinks are in the game may not actually be there, or may not be read/experienced as intended" (Flanagan 2021, 284). There is a strong structuralist component in the field of persuasive gaming influenced by classic theories of communication such as Jakobson's model of linguistic functions (Jakobson 1960). The Big Model developed by Ron Edwards at The Forge sought to organize and understand the experience and nature of tabletop role-playing games using a variation of frame theory as a means of designing better games (White 2020). Bogost's influential concept of "procedural rhetoric" was an attempt to convert game mechanics into persuasive outcomes, although he subsequently acknowledged its limitations (Bogost 2010; 2021). Structural theories are important, particularly for highlighting material conditions of play, but more recent research has focused more closely on player subjectivity and experience.

We are interested in using embedded design to shift the attitudes of players, but we are also interested in recognition. Do the players recognize the intended meanings, "the moral of the story", and tropes embedded in a *D&D* adventure? Recognition and identification of themes and tropes is a common strategy of scholars who criticize racist, misogynistic, or colonial tropes and themes in games. Why not turn this on its head? Why not use recognizable tropes as a component of critical design? We can then better understand if the players recognize the proxies and themes in the adventure and how the game play session itself affords an opportunity for conscientization. Here we are following the work of Stuart Hall who argues that messages coded in the "dominant cultural order" will likely be decoded as such (Hall 1973).

The question of authorial intent, reader reception, and the nature of texts is central to literary theory. The "postmodern turn" in the 1980s landed several "critical hits" on classical reception theory. Stanley Fish's 1980 book *Is There a Text in This Class?* argued against the existence of any determinate meaning for language (Fish 1980). Language, according to Claude Lévi-Strauss, consists of "floating signifiers"—words with indeterminate meaning (Mehlman 1972). Readers are agentic and subjective, and words are indeterminate. To make matters worse, according to Barthes, the author is dead: their intentions are inscrutable and cannot be inferred from context or biography (Barthes 1984). Postmodern theory elevated the ontological status of a text. "The artwork," explains the theorist Brenkman, "Exceeds its source as the expression of its creator and its destination as an expression for its recipient" (Brenkman 2020, 111).

The nature of a text is also central to scholars who study RPGs. The game studies scholar, like the literary or art critic, confronts the complex relationship between author, audience, and text. One perspective is to consider the game session itself as a text. This creates complex methodological and theoretical issues. "The actual text of a [tabletop role-playing game] session is ephemeral," explains Cover, "It exists in the moment of face-to-face interaction and then vanishes" (Cover 2010, 175). If we treat a RPG session as a text then as Harviainen explains, "The base text is not truly accessible and the interpretations will be subjective and incomplete if and when they are explicated to a researcher" (Harviainen 2008, 75). Solipsism, however, is a risk here, and numerous critics highlight this tendency in postmodern thought (Kien 2021). Nevertheless, contemporary literary theory—even the context of postmodern theory—offers rich analyses, tools, and theories for game studies (Jara and Torner 2018). Close readings of adventures (Hines 2023), hermeneutical analysis of game sessions (Harviainen 2008), and genre analysis (Cover 2010), are just a few examples of how researchers have deployed the full range of literary theory to the study of RPGs.

Symbolic interactionism offers an important theoretical perspective for the study of role-playing games reception (Williams et al. 2018). This theory complements the move in media studies to thread a path between semiotic relativism and reception determinism (Ang 2013). As Fine explains, "central to this approach is the assertion that human beings reside in finite worlds of meaning, and that individuals are skilled in juggling these worlds" (Fine 1983, 181). Interactionism holds that individuals make *practical sense* of the media they use (Eichner 2020). Audiences recognize "action-guiding themes" in media that correspond to their *lifeworld*, a concept from phenomenology that holds that common beliefs and meanings operate inter-

subjectively, and also across and between societies (Beyer 2003; Eichner 2020). Recognizable, relatable themes rather than similarities or proximity in culture allow for the use and consumption of media, and explain their appeal, globally and locally. As Eichner explains, "When the topic depicted is not a central theme in the viewers' lifeworlds, it will be disregarded or rejected during the reception process" (Eichner 2020, 117). Different audiences may focus on or be interested in different themes, but the themes themselves have cross-cultural appeal (Eichner 2020). The benefit of this perspective is that it affords epistemological and empirical grounds for researchers to speak to the fidelity of the intended meaning in an author's work and its corresponding reception by an audience (Bryman 1999).

The implications of symbolic interactionism for game design in the context of global late-stage capitalism can be pessimistic. Baeza-González offers a bleak assessment of video game production in Chile. "Chilean games are not unique," he concludes, "nor do they present authentic traits that characterize their games" (Baeza-González 2021, 51). Rather, Chilean game designers make games based on global cultural tropes to satisfy the core markets of the Global North. The strength of the Chilean video game design industry resides in its ability to satisfy consumers' love of dominant game franchises (Baeza-González 2021). *D&D* not only represents the core market of the Global North, it is a hegemonic rules system, released under a CC-BY 4.0 license, for tabletop role-playing games. The challenge thus becomes whether game designers can work within this dominant system subversively, capitalizing on global cultural tropes to embed critical ideas.

5. ADVENTURE DESIGN

The *D&D* adventure that is the subject of this study embeds key ideas from Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*. The author is specifically interested in Fanon's argument for the necessity of violence, the role of religion in abetting colonial oppression, and the idea that colonial subjects must liberate themselves rather than rely on typically white anti-colonial allies originating in the colonial powers. The adventure seeks to subvert the *D&D* binary between heroic, "civilizing" PCs and savages, some in need of uplifting, others in need of killing (Justice 2024). Roland Barthes's explanation of the Exotic was key in how the author framed the NPC factions. Western culture, argues Barthes, creates "…an Orient which is exotic in form, while being in reality profoundly similar to the Occident…" (Barthes 1972, 94). For Barthes, exoticism is a means of stripping colonial subjects of their histories and making them a "pure reflection of the West" (Barthes 1972, 96). In practical terms for game design, carefully crafted factions can serve as vectors to introduce critical concepts and narratives into an adventure. An "exotic" faction possesses "authenticity" and is recognizable by players while at the same time psychologically distanced in line with "stealth" strategies.

The main faction in this adventure is based on a well-known mythological European creature. They are written as multi-layered signs: primitives, savages, and religious fundamentalist. Their religious fundamentalism results in them being duped by imposters posing as prophets of their deity. This imposter faction is inspired by *rudos* from the Luchaverse. In the good/evil dichotomy of the Luchaverse, *rudos* are the bad guys. Although a *rudo* may be a complicated, transgressive figure, their morality is transparent. *Rudos* rely on deception and brute force; from a performance perspective the *rudo* strives to make the audience angry and incite their disapproval (Levi 2008). This faction marks the religious faction as victims—they have been deceived by the *rudos* and are clearly victims. The presence of a faction in the role of *rudos* reinforces the PCs' identities as heroes (*técnicos* in the Luchaverse).

Prompted by reports of raids on "civilized" lands by "savages," the PCs travel to the location at the behest of a powerful ruler. En route there is an encounter in a village designed to subvert the concept of "civilized" and instead depict the "advanced" society as one of servile dependence. The denizens of the "advanced" society are more primitive in outlook than the factions encountered later. Upon arrival at the main location of the adventure, a number of encounters introduce the factions. The interaction between the factions is key

to the adventure plot. It is clear to the PCs that the religious fundamentalism of the main faction allows them to be taken advantage of by the imposters. A small group of the religious faction proclaims them as imposters and breaks away to begin an asymmetrical campaign to eliminate the imposters and the members of the religious faction who follow them. The PCs either ally with the separatists or work independently pursuing the same goal, the elimination of the imposters. Ultimately the separatist faction will attempt to kill the PCs. While the imposters and their followers are heretical, the PCs represent colonizers, an equal threat. The betrayal, if allied, or attempted murder, if working independently, occurs after the defeat of the imposters and concludes the adventure.

The design of the adventure relies on five elements to embed the critical ideas: plot (including encounters), read-aloud text, player handouts, instructions to the Dungeon Master (DM), and NPC dialogue. The adventure author used these elements conscious of the contested authority of adventure writers which falls between the agency and autonomy of players and DMs and the canonical authority of the system (Hammer 2007).

The creation of the adventure for this study thus comprises three strands: reception theory, critical social theory, and game design. The ultimate goal was to produce an adventure that would critique the influence of religion and challenge player assumptions about the status of "heroic liberators." Freireian consciousness raising requires that individuals apprehend and understand the conditions of their own oppression. In other words, rather than seeing the impact of religion on an NPC faction, for consciousness raising to occur, the adventure would need to prompt players to see the impact of religious fundamentalism in their own societies. In addition, the subversion of the civilized/savage and liberator/victim dichotomies present in the adventure would also prompt players to reflect on their own assumptions.

6. PLAY SESSIONS AND DATA COLLECTION

In addition to the above elements of game design and theorization, our research builds upon a consideration of tabletop role-playing games—and *D&D* in particular—as transformative experiences (Sidhu and Carter, 2021). In order to better understand the effects of a commercialized adventure focused around Fanonian and Marxist themes, we facilitated and observed players as they interacted with this material in *D&D* play sessions. We employed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2017) in the development of our research, understanding the primary body of inquiry would be co-created through the participant observation of gameplay, and this stage of the project was guided by three questions:

- How do players recognize or fail to recognize critiques of colonialism and religion when exposed to embedded Fanonian and Marxist ideologies?
- To what extent would this recognition or lack of recognition influence the choices made by players within the space of the game?
- Does ideological game content convert to meaning-making beyond the gaming table (Sidhu and Carter, 2021)?

Since we were interested in the effects of ideological content on players engaging with commercialized *D&D* adventures, it was important to locate individuals with prior experience playing *D&D*. The Games Society at Maynooth University is one of the largest student-operated organizations on campus and regularly facilitates *D&D* campaigns. Upon receiving ethical approval, we sent invitations to the members of the Games Society, and over the next two months, we interviewed and observed five participants. These individuals took part in a pre-game interview, game sessions that were observed by the researchers, and a post-adventure focus group.

The adventure itself was divided into three play sessions that took place over a month. Players had all previously had experience playing in fifth edition campaign settings, though their individual levels of experience differed. During the game sessions, one author DMed the adventure while another took notes and monitored audio recording equipment.

Observations from throughout the three game sessions were used to inform a focus group interview with the players after the conclusion of the adventure. In this focus group, we asked participants to reflect upon their experiences over the course of the three play sessions and later used this session to identify places in the adventure that seemed particularly impactful for the participants. Once the data collection process was complete, transcriptions of interviews and play sessions were read alongside recorded notes and observations. Of particular interest were player reflections on in-game moments where they encountered Fanonian and Marxist themed content, the results of which are shared in the following sections.

7. RESULTS AND LIMITATIONS

As *D&D* is mediated entirely through language, both written and spoken, it becomes imperative to approach the study of the game through the lens of language. At the same time, materialist considerations must be taken into account, recognizing the situated space within which the game is taking place. And it is true that "qualitative research is heavily invested in language practices: interviews, fieldnotes, focus groups…But conventional forms of analysis frequently find the bodily entanglements of language troublesome or trivial" (MacLure 2013, 664). Future research might pay more attention to the physical, bodily interactions of participants in this style of game, and a future project may benefit from video recording to better capture participant reactions that otherwise might go unnoticed. After all, "transcripts seldom record what eyebrows, hands, shoulders or crossed legs are doing" (MacLure 2013, 664).

Additionally, careful attention was given in the game to avoid overt prompting on the part of the DM. Analysis of the transcripts of play sessions confirmed that the DM offered no cues or prompts to promote recognition of the tropes and factions. Our intentions were to give students a chance to naturally react to the content of the campaign without overtly signaling any specific political or ideological undertones within the campaign itself. However, a future study may benefit from having an outside DM run the material to further ensure that participants are responding as naturally as possible. Building on Hammer's research, it is also worth considering the role that the DM plays in rearticulating adventure content since *D&D* is ultimately a participatory activity (Hammer 2007). In some ways, the DM of a commercial adventure functions much as a technical communicator, taking material presented through game books and rearticulating it for a new audience. As Shanmugaraj et al. note (Shanmugaraj, Wolfe, and Wodzak 2020), any time an individual paraphrases or interprets texts, they are engaging in a knowledge transforming act. As such, the interaction of the DM with the game material is another promising site of future inquiry when considering games as transformative experiences.

The research of Guttorm et al. on the participatory nature of dance also applied to *D&D*, in which "encounters…consist of movement, talking, and writing in various combinations and ways emerging/(im)materializing/(resulting) in scattered words, scattered papers, scattered thoughts…and lots of uninhibited utterances, laughter, fooling around, and jokes" (Guttorm et al. 2016, 417). The players knew each other from the Games Society but had not played together previously. One difficulty this presented was that play style and expectations, the creative agenda of the players, differed. One player was often adversarial to other players and the DM. Only experienced DMing prevented player-vs-player (PVP) combat during some play sessions.

In using *D&D* as a site for critical design, an author faces two key constraints. The first is that combat is a key expectation for players of this game. An adventure that downplays this pillar of the game would likely fail to meet player expectations. Another constraint is the importance of the PCs as heroes. Adventures give

the PCs the opportunity to be heroes and do heroic things. The adventure for this game subverted this role when the NPC faction refused to view the PCs as liberating heroes, viewing them as dangerous colonizers to be killed instead. Subverting this expectation without creating an unsatisfactory adventure was difficult. In the case of the playtest group, the players accepted the betrayal as an element of this faction's religious fundamentalism. In addition, the PCs defeat the imposter faction, and this provides the heroic achievement in clear terms, as when the *técnicos* defeat the *rudos*.

The empirical results are encouraging. In particular, they confirm the validity of the interactions framework of reception. The results show that authorial intent can convert to player reception at the table. Discussing the main factions, a player from Spain made this comparison: "The way the [imposter faction] treated the [NPC faction] was kind of like, well, how the Spanish treated Latin America in colonization." When discussing the NPC faction's views of the PCs, another player who is involved in student government explained that the NPC faction was correct to be skeptical; the PCs were not, in fact, helping for selfless reasons. This player compared the role of the PCs to university administrators who act, in their view, for personal gain and "to look less bad," rather than from ethical principles or to serve the best interests of the students. The adventure author's intent with the village encounter was to present its inhabitants as poverty-stricken but also wholly lacking in class consciousness. Two players compared the village inhabitants to "nice Americans" who were attached to an abstract concept of "freedom" while living in squalor and ignorance.

Regarding the specific targets for critical reflection, the adventure did prompt reflections on religion:

Author 1: Did the [NPC faction] remind you of anyone?

Sorcerer 2 PC: Republicans.

Author 1: Republicans?

Wizard PC: Yes.

Sorcerer PC: They're crutching on their religion as an excuse to cause harm to others. And if they don't like them, they just make up something like "God's told me you suck therefore you must die."

Wizard PC: Yeah.

Fighter PC: Using God as an excuse.

Fighter PC: Very xenophobic and hyper religious. They use their religion as a crutch.
Before you were a fascist you were a bully and an arsehole.

Author 1: Did the religion of the [NPC faction] hurt them or help them in their struggle?

Sorcerer 1 PC: So yeah, for the [NPC faction] it's good to have something to cling to when they're in the prison—their Christ or something that makes them stick together. But once we get past that step, taking actions for the good-being of a religion instead of people, it's plain stupid.

Wizard PC: It hurt them. They believed [the Imposters] solely because they said they were from their gods. It's like if they weren't that strong into religion, 90% of them would have been rebels.

For conscientization to occur, an individual must come to grips and be aware of the source or cause of their oppression. In Ireland, 94.6% of public primary schools are governed by a religious ethos (88.4% Catholic, 6.2% Protestant and other religious ethos) (Department of Education 2024). In the United States, the Supreme Court under Roberts has found in favor of religious organizations 83% of the time, compared to 50% since 1953 (Epstein and Posner 2022). As religiosity declines in many European countries (Nadeem 2022), the religious elite nevertheless remain a powerful oppressive force in the lives of billions. Our playtest showed that the religious fundamentalism of the NPC faction was read as intended, as analogues to contemporary fundamentalists.

8. COMMERCIAL CONSCIENTIZATION?

Commercially published games are an underappreciated medium for this type of research. It might be thought that the dictates of commercial publishing, in which creations are created or subsumed within relations of global capital accumulation, could preclude them from offering moments of genuine critical experience. Also, given the constraints inherent to the use of a popular commercial game system or adventure, which comes with its own discourses, lore, mechanics, and expectations of social behavior, it might be thought researchers should use a bespoke game tailored to the audience, or at the least something underground. Yet across media, examples of effective critique being offered by commercial publications abound. Moreover, Fanonian and Marxist critique, whose transmission is under study, itself suggests that it is important to rely on the media terrain–both technical and discursive–provided by the very structures they critique. Commercial games, therefore, both can and should be explored as a site of conscientization.

The 2023 film *Barbie* offers a salient case study. The film has patriarchy as a central theme, but given Barbie's longstanding role as an archetype of capitalist patriarchy, its reception was predictably contested both popularly and academically. One student journalist aptly summed up the debate: "Barbie: Feminist Masterpiece or Capitalistic Greed?" (Boskovic 2023). Robert Luke Naylor lauded the film's "verve" and "nuance", comparing it to the anarchist exploration of utopia in Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, and noting

> one character describes, like Karl Marx, how Ken's new exploitative society has 'sown the seeds of its own destruction'…. Of course, feminist critiques such as these exist in all sorts of different forms of big-screen fiction, but Barbie shows a system of oppression being systematically dismantled. It is dynamic and full of hope. (Naylor 2023, 1)

Naylor suggests that the critical storytelling of this film gives it a realism (in spite of its fantastic premise) that makes it a powerful tool for not only teaching and research, but also social change.

Amy La Porte and Lena Cavusoglu, on the other hand, situate *Barbie* in light of Mattel's other recent attempts to rehabilitate Barbie by representing a greater degree of diversity in their toy lineup. While acknowledging the benefits of such representation, they note that it occurs within a framework of conventional beauty standards, displaying "a clear preference for thinness" (La Porte and Cavusoglu 2023, 5). Similarly, they suggest that despite *Barbie's* feminist themes, it fails to fundamentally challenge patriarchy. The film's conclusion, in which Barbie visits a gynecologist, could be interpreted as "underscore[ing] the significance of reproductive health and broach[ing] a typically taboo topic," but they note the potential problems with reducing women's identity to genitalia (La Porte and Cavusoglu 2023, 7). "At its core, *Barbie* is undisputedly an advertisement for a socially problematic doll," a cynical money-grab from an audience willing to pay for its themes (La Porte and Cavusoglu 2023, 9).

However, the question of whether conscientization occurs is a different one than whether its instigating context–whether it be a film, game, or workshop–can be classified as radical or cynical. A context does not

need to be purified of all problematic elements to still have subversive potential. It might take a long time for a critical consensus to form on *Barbie*, if indeed this ever occurs, but it is not necessary to wait until the question is settled to look for conscientization. Since conscientization involves a transformation of consciousness that empowers people to understand how their reality can be transformed, it also leads to changes in behavior and is therefore subject to empirical study. In the case of *Barbie*, Senechel et al. note the established relationship between health behaviors and popular media, finding that "In the week following *Barbie*'s release, there were large increases in the national online search volume for terms referring to gynecologists (51.3%; 95% CI, 31.8%-72.1%; $P < .001$) and gynecologist definition (154.1%; 95% CI, 68.2%-304.5%; adjusted $P = .03$)" (Senechal et al. 2024, 2), while noting that there was no other apparent reason to explain such an increase. This suggests that *Barbie's* gynecology scene might have led to an increased interest in and awareness of gynecological care. While the authors caution that this evidence does not of itself demonstrate an improvement in health access or outcomes, it is worth noting that the conscious act of seeking out further information is itself a change in behavior. Regardless of the film's commercial nature, or its potentially compromised narrative, it therefore seems to have facilitated a notable moment of conscientization.

If potentially compromised sites of mass culture can lead to conscientization, there are also explicit reasons why they ought to be exploited. In his 1959 study on the Algerian revolution, in which he was an active participant, Fanon noted that "Radio-Alger, the French broadcasting station which has been established in Algeria for decades... is essentially the instrument of colonial society and values," (Fanon 1965a, 69). While the cost of radio sets meant that their ownership was heavily concentrated among European settlers, he notes that out of a passive opposition to the proliferation of colonial cultural norms, even those Algerians who could have afforded to acquire one often did not. Meanwhile, he argues, the French cultural content discouraged settlers from "'go[ing] native,'" (Fanon 1965a, 71). In sum, the radio in Algeria played an important dichotomizing function in colonialism's cultural structure, keeping the French French and (via their abstention) Algerians Algerian. In other words, it served as a bulwark against conscientization. It also played an important role in the dissemination of information to Europeans about threats to their rule, thereby further preventing social change (Fanon 1965a).

Revolutionary Algerians naturally developed their own information networks with older technologies like word of mouth and newspapers, but these were subject to technical limitations such as censorship, excessive localism, and surveillance. The revolutionaries created a counterpart to Radio-Algiers, The Voice of Fighting Algeria (*La voix de l'Algérie combattante*), and facilitated rapid and widespread dissemination of radio sets among an increasingly interested populace (Fanon 1965a). This not only had the effect of transforming the radio into an instrument of liberation, but as Algerians began to broadcast not only in Arabic but in French they "created confusion and disorder in [the occupier's] defense system," (Fanon 1965a, 91). The revolutionaries authored the content of their messages, but their dissemination was dependent on the technical and discursive medium of the colonists. For Fanon, The Voice of Fighting Algeria was therefore a crucial step forward in the transformation of consciousness and society on a national and international scale.

The scale of our study of conscientization is clearly much smaller than the cases of either *Barbie* or The Voice of Fighting Algeria, but the principles are the same. The fact that mass media can be subject to political and commercial constraints does not preclude conscientization. Indeed, mass media provides a speed and range of dissemination which cannot be paralleled by other media. Thus, it has a significance for conscientization which other media do not. Authors and activists who wish to facilitate conscientization will surely pursue commercial publication, even as they will also use other means. Furthermore, since audiences inevitably bring their own meanings to texts, appropriating and making use of them in their own way, the possibility for conscientization remains open even where it might not be intended by authors. In the realm of game studies, the clear analogue to the juggernaut of Hollywood is indisputably *D&D*, which in addition to official content, has a thriving and variegated market of third-party publishers who employ the discourses

of the game system for their own ends. Exclusive analysis of systems or texts that are independent, noncommercial, private, or homebrew—in other words, that have limited distribution—overlooks a crucial site of conscientization.

9. CONCLUSION

This study offers *prima facie* evidence that critical game designers can successfully publish commercial, mass distributed works that embed social theory and are impactful. The implications for this research suggest that more attention be given to working within established game systems with broad player bases. There are other lessons. Designing and writing a *D&D* adventure with critical intent and getting it accepted by a commercial publisher is challenging. Specifically, the strategies outlined by Flanagan, Kaufman, and Seidman (Kaufman, Flanagan, and Seidman 2021; Flanagan 2009; Kaufman and Flanagan 2015; Flanagan 2021) proved essential not only for the adventure's impact on players but also for acceptance by a commercial publisher. By deploying these strategies we avoided the fate of Graeme Barber's adventure in the official book Candlekeep Mysteries where WotC removed and edited content that sought to subvert racial and colonial tropes (Carter 2021). Our adventure was published as written. The designer must write a *D&D* adventure that meets the expectations of commercial publishers and the player base itself. The adventure must be fun, novel, challenging, and composed with absolute fluency in the rules system.

In one key respect our research shows that *D&D* is incompatible with the Freireian approach to consciousness raising. The key goal of education and liberation for Freire is to transcend the dialectic so that the oppressed does not become the new oppressor. Awareness of the systems that perpetuate oppression is the key goal of conscientization, and how the dialectic can be broken (Homo Ludens 2023). Violence, for Freire, is the primary tool of the oppressor, not the oppressed. The oppressed may respond violently, but the goal is different: "Consciously or unconsciously, the act of rebellion (an act which is always, or nearly always, as violent as the initial violence of the oppressors) can initiate love" (Freire 1993, 30). Community, solidarity, unity, cooperation, and empathy underlie the actions of the oppressed. Without these animating the oppressed they are "mere objects of the revolutionary activity…" (Freire 1993, 144). For Fanon too, violence is an essential early feature of revolutionary praxis. The emphasis on violence in *D&D* generally and in this adventure specifically which sees an NPC faction embrace Fanon's observation that "For the native, this violence represents the absolute line of action," risks neglecting the longer-term visions of revolutionary praxis he and Freire articulated (Fanon 1965b, 85).

Consider the typical *D&D* adventuring party. It consists of a small vanguard of outsiders who use violence to overthrow a regime. This model of praxis is Blanquist rather than Freireian (Blanqui 2009). A Gramscian organic intellectual is a rare background for a *D&D* PC. One avenue of further research would be to design a low-level adventure with "session zero" guidance (an introductory meeting where the players and DM make characters and agree on goals) to model the PCs as emergent organic intellectuals. This adventure showed evidence of achieving conscientization in the players, but there was an unresolved tension between Fanon's emphasis on the necessity of violence and Freire's emphasis on community and solidarity. This tension is possibly resolvable. Fanon, for example, tells us, "Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them" (Fanon 1965b, 147). However, in our case, the adventurers were, from the outset, outsiders with no connection to "the people." This was a conscious design decision to problematize the white savior-as-adventurer trope. However, another adventure could be written that more closely invests and relates the PCs to an oppressed group. This single *D&D* adventure does not align with all the criteria for a Freireian game proposed by the Homo Ludens research group, in particular the importance of community (Homo Ludens 2023). However, we are confident that another adventure or, more easily, a campaign (a series of linked adventures), could achieve this goal.

In addition, the question remains whether the players in the test group were oppressed in the classic Freireian sense. "The oppressed," he contends, "having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom" (Freire 1993, 21). Conscientization in this case means apprehending not only the source of oppression but also one's own agency and reflexivity. The author specifically wrote the adventure in the hopes that it would be played by religious players. The strategy of using the exotic to embed the critique of religion is central to its design. However, we were unable to control for religiosity in the test group and there was very little. Thus, the players recognized the oppressive role of religion but the praxis was Fanonian and Blanquist not Freireian. A playtest with a group of religious players would be required to test for a more Freireian impact: *bleed-out*, rather than *bleed-in* (Bowman, Diakolambrianou, and Brind eds. 2024).

A RPG adventure without critical theory and intent is a missed opportunity. Tabletop role-playing games are an amazing site for theoretical experimentation. Whether it is the nature of morality (Mussett 2014; Hummel 2014) or, as in the case of this adventure, questions relating to colonialism, TTRPGs are a unique site to explore, model, enact, and speculate about history, social theory, and philosophy. The Creative Commons SRD offers a powerful opportunity for critical designers to work within the hegemonic *D&D* landscape. We hope this study encourages more critical designers to embrace commercial publication.

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