



(ROLE)PLAYING WITH POWER?: ESTABLISHING THE BOUNDARIES OF POWER FANTASY IN LOCKDOWN

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Abstract

Power fantasy, or media that are described as such, has been generally attributed to harmful or anti-social behaviors, typically those associated with toxic masculinity. After the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, power fantasy grew in demand with many new players giving tabletop role-playing games a chance, albeit through numerous virtual interfaces. Many of these players attributed TTRPG play with an empowering quality, one that helped support them emotionally, socially, and mentally through the 2020 lockdowns. Yet, discourses within and around the tabletop role-playing community also challenged the foundations of fantasy role-playing games, questioning game elements like “race” and creating alternative rules and entire TTRPGs in response. This article questions the extent that TTRPGs can “empower” players by looking to how discussions of racial justice in tabletop role-playing spaces trouble traditional depictions of power fantasy, exploring how the use of power fantasy in tabletop role playing games can be instruments for imagining more vibrant possible worlds.

Keywords

power fantasy, TTRPG, COVID-19, virtual tabletop, VTT, empowerment, racial justice

Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic showed little sign of fading before the summer of 2020 and popular forms of entertainment hurried to adapt themselves to a long-term, online-only environment, tabletop role-playing games became one of the fastest growing alternatives for people stuck in lockdown. As technical limitations, pandemic restrictions, and global supply line disruptions rendered many entertainment avenues inert, TTRPG makers and publishers across the industry saw record profits and an excess of positive press extolling the virtues of play. Virtual tabletop services like Roll20 and D&D Beyond helped to replicate the pen-and-paper, dice-on-tabletop experience that many were unable to partake in, and voice chats such as Discord helped connect players and GMs across time zones, borders, and lockdown orders.



Figure 1: Photo of dice by Carlos Felipe Ramírez Mesa. Free to use on Unsplash.

Although role-playing games have existed in gaming spaces for roughly fifty years (with role-playing in general reaching back millennia), this style of play is often regarded by both detractors and players as “power fantasy,” a moniker commonly referring to a style of play wherein the player is granted a significant level of agency over both how the game is played and how the narrative takes shape. Discussions around power fantasy, in the case of TTRPGs, center on the abilities of player characters to perform larger-than-life feats of daring, to participate in acts of violence that can be simultaneously comedic and gratuitous, and to charm non-player characters through charisma or force them via strength to abide by their will. Popular conceptions of power fantasies liken them to being “The Chosen One, a Super Hero, or just badass with a cool longcoat” where “everyone who ever pissed you off will have to pay.”¹ Power fantasies in gaming cultures are similarly derided, as critics argue that games “try their damndest to make sure that the gamer can forget whatever sense of impotency they might feel in their normal lives.”² These analyses begin with the assumption that the player has little to no power to affect change in their day-to-day and end by positioning games as mere illusions of control. Since many felt powerless in the wake of a globe-spanning virus,

¹ “Power Fantasy,” TV Tropes, accessed May 25, 2023, <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/PowerFantasy>.

² Wayne Santos, “Gaming’s Power Fantasy: The Hero Complex,” *CGMagazine* (blog), October 20, 2010, <https://www.cgmagonline.com/articles/editorials/hero-complex/>.

such a view of gaming can seem intuitive, allowing those unable to change their material circumstances to pretend otherwise.

Players, in contrast, have directly associated tabletop role-playing games and the escapist fantasies they created within them as a source of inspiration and strength before and during the COVID era. For longtime players and newfound fans, role-playing games provided both a way to pass time and a method to imagine new ways of being during lockdown. I thus challenge the belief that games are merely fantasies of power by showcasing how TTRPG players navigated the pandemic as a community struggling with social distancing and connection. To this end, this article begins with a breakdown of the cultural understanding of “power fantasies” and empowerment in gaming. Then I examine how players used TTRPG play to navigate the turmoil of lockdown in 2020, highlighting key narratives around the empowering potential of play. I follow this with a look to how TTRPG players and designers participated in wider discussions of racial justice that grew in prominence during the pandemic, testing the limits of power fantasies. I conclude by analyzing the discourse around power fantasy, empowerment, and agency through the lenses of queer theory, activism, and social justice.

Power Fantasy and TTRPGs

Prior to COVID, tabletop-role playing games and the fantasies created through them were depicted as childish entertainment at best and potentially dangerous pastimes at worst. Joseph Laycock’s account of the Satanic Panic recalls how fictional works like TTRPGs were criticized for being simultaneously so realistic that they can act as a “corrupting influence” and so unimportant as to be “a waste of time and energy,” a two-pronged attack that lambasted role-playing as both too dangerous for people to play yet so meaningless as to be beneath critical discussion.³ The very idea that role-playing as an elf for a few hours could be a good and moral activity led some early researchers (and many concerned parents and moral entrepreneurs) to assume that these games “must be associated with socially unacceptable and/or stigmatized behaviors, such as criminality.”⁴

Paranoia of media’s “empowering” capabilities extend beyond games. Though empowerment in contemporary discourse can be traced to feminist thought and marginalized communities recognizing their *disempowerment* by societal pressures and systems of governance, Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès also notes that the concept of “empowerment” in popular culture lacks a concrete description, allowing it to “become a vague goal, a fashionable term that is impossible to implement in the field” and that “has become synonymous with individual capacity, realization, and status.”⁵ As a result, empowerment has been used by the managerial class to improve morale and increase productivity, and at times this strategy of empowerment can be a thinly veiled excuse to “provide employees with additional responsibility and challenges at work” which can result in workers feeling more stressed and burdened by the workload.⁶ This rebranding of empowerment as a nebulous positive feeling

³ Joseph Laycock, *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (University of California Press, 2015), 226-230.

⁴ Sören Henrich and Rachel Worthington, “Let Your Clients Fight Dragons: A Rapid Evidence Assessment Regarding the Therapeutic Utility of ‘Dungeons & Dragons,’” *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 18, no. 3 (2021): 12, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2021.1987367>.

⁵ Anne-Emmanuèle Calvès, “Empowerment: The History of a Key Concept in Contemporary Development Discourse,” *Revue Tiers Monde* 200, no. 4 (2009): 9-10.

⁶ Allan Lee, Sara Willis, and Amy Wei Tian, “When Empowering Employees Works, and When It Doesn’t,” *Harvard Business Review*, March 2, 2018, <https://hbr.org/2018/03/when-empowering-employees-works-and-when-it-doesnt>.

continued into the pandemic, as workplaces sought to “empower their employees with new tools as COVID has decentralized the workforce.”⁷

The nebulousness of power fantasies and empowerment also raises the question of who should be empowered. Conceptions of the “male power fantasy” denote the positionality of a presumed heterosexual masculine audience, wherein male characters represent a “more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal ego” while female characters are relegated to “pin-ups and striptease.”⁸ In contrast, fandom studies identifies the trope of the “Mary Sue” as both “a popular genre of fan writing in which (typically) female authors insert themselves as primary characters into the universe of a beloved media text” and a character that is simultaneously idealized, hyper-competent, and beloved by all, a trope often criticized for overshadowing other characters for the benefit of the author’s all-powerful avatar.⁹ In both cases, the power fantasized is often that of success, beauty, and proficiency.

However, most scholarly discussion about power fantasy ends once the individual or group imagining power has been identified. Even game studies lacks discussions of power fantasies beyond this threshold, often honing in on how games could propagate in-game and real world violence or reinforce hegemonic depictions of masculinity and race, though Chad Habel notes that such one-to-one attributions presume “an unproblematic and simple expression of male power” that may “not always [be] successfully performed via the avatar.”¹⁰ Yet, even unsuccessful power fantasies, considered through these lenses, are presumed to only supplement an audience’s regular life with “illusions that render the helplessness of one’s everyday circumstances more salient.”¹¹

If power fantasies just remind us of what we lack or elevate a specific perspective to the detriment of others, one might conclude that games are “just” power fantasies. Jessica Hammer and Meguey Baker in “Problematizing Power Fantasy” assert otherwise, describing games as “spaces in which the player *gets to make a choice*” while granting players the ability to “control over their fate, to experience authority, and to enact power in a safe environment.”¹² Hammer and Baker, drawing from the work of theorist M. P. Follett, view the popular conception of power fantasy as one that perceives a player’s agency in a game as “power-over, or power in the form of dominance and control,” which often “implies escapism and meaninglessness, evoking outside explosions and equally outsized displays of dominance” that encourage violence above all else.¹³

However, many games—including many TTRPGs—feature few or none of these qualities. Hammer and Baker thus further Follett’s work by claiming that games “also encompass ‘power-to’...[which] allow players to have control over their fate, to experience authority, and to enact power in a safe environment.”¹⁴ Power-to describes TTRPG players rather aptly as while they can affect change in the world of the game, they are not “in control” of it. The gamemaster, on the other hand, “gets to

⁷ Carsten Lund Pedersen, “Empower Your Employees Through the Pandemic With These 4 Ts,” *California Management Review Insights*, September 30, 2020, <https://cmr.berkeley.edu/2020/09/empower-your-employees/>.

⁸ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *The Norton Anthology of Theory & Criticism*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 2089.

⁹ Beth E. Bonnsetter and Brian L. Ott, “(Re)Writing Mary Sue: Ecriture Feminine and the Performance of Subjectivity,” *Text & Performance Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (October 2011), 342, 349.

¹⁰ Chad Sean Habel, “Doom Guy Comes of Age: Mediating Masculinities in Power Fantasy Video Games,” *M/C Journal* 21, no. 2 (April 25, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.1383>.

¹¹ Aaron Taylor, “Playing Peter Parker: Spider-Man and Superhero Film Performance,” in *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe*, ed. Matt Yockey. (New York: University of Texas Press, 2017), 268.

¹² Hammer and Baker, “Problematizing Power Fantasy.” Jessica Hammer and Meguey Baker, “Problematizing Power Fantasy,” *The Enemy*, no. 2 (May 19, 2014), 1. Original emphasis.

¹³ Hammer and Baker, “Problematizing Power Fantasy,” 1.

¹⁴ Hammer and Baker, “Problematizing Power Fantasy,” 1.

wear many hats,” playing simultaneously as the scriptwriter who creates scenarios and plot threads for players to encounter, the storyteller who describes how these encounters play out in a narrative fashion, the actor who takes up the roles of any NPCs like monsters and ordinary citizens, and the referee who is “in charge of the game.”¹⁵ The role of the GM that can allow one to experience power-over, and there is no shortage of horror stories of player characters being held hostage by a power-hungry GM’s desires. But players are also free to walk away from the table (or on virtual tabletops, to log off) and find a different GM. Thus, all players at the table must work together and share responsibility alongside the game system, which itself can be modified through house rules. This dynamic perhaps most accurately embodies what Hammer and Baker call “power-with.”¹⁶ Although Hammer and Baker describe power-with as the collaboration between players and a game’s designer, GMs often engage in game design while crafting adventures and stories for their players. As a result, power-with provides players with fantasies of power, but one that is collectively designed.

These collective fictions are also considered *meaningful* to participants, challenging the supposed meaninglessness of power fantasy. Even Gary Alan Fine’s examination of the then-burgeoning role-playing scene found that through play, players can create “a social world that is...made meaningful by the significance given to it by its participants.”¹⁷ Rather than attributing the power fantasy to the game itself, players instead locate the power of fantasy within the communal narrative space it helps to create. It is through this communal aspect that players could feel empowered through play, even when they felt powerless in lockdown.

Lifelines in Lockdown

Tabletop role-playing games, by the nature of their inception and general practice of play, should not have been as successful as they were throughout the coronavirus pandemic. The classic depiction of playing a TTRPG requires a group of players to travel to a local game store or, ideally for many, the gamemaster’s home, wherein everyone gathers around the table to discuss and debate about the actions of their fictional characters in a scenario of their creation. While some had the fortune to live in the same household or neighborhood, many other potential players were left stranded by the pandemic. As travel and in-person gatherings were either disallowed or outright banned, players increasingly turned to virtual tabletop services (also known as VTTs), which provided digital maps, dice, character sheets, and rulebooks for a variety of popular games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) and *Pathfinder*. Nolan T. Jones—co-founder and managing partner of Roll20—noted that when Italy began lockdowns, new players flooded their servers: “There was a day last week where we had more Italians sign up for the service than we had Americans. We’ve never had that happen before.”¹⁸ This trend continued throughout the pandemic, leading to Roll20 recording over 100 million total hours of TRPGs, social meetings, and other forms of play in the following months logged by more than five million accounts; of those, nearly 60% were logged playing *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition*.¹⁹ This wave of growth was not limited to Roll20 alone, as numerous virtual tabletop services experienced

¹⁵ *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, 5th ed., (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 2014), 4.

¹⁶ Hammer and Baker, “Problematizing Power Fantasy,” 4.

¹⁷ Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*, Paperback ed (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 231.

¹⁸ James Grebey, “Dungeons & Dragons Players Turn to Virtual Tabletops in Record Numbers Due to Coronavirus,” *SYFY WIRE*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.syfy.com/syfy-wire/dungeons-dragons-roll20-fantasy-grounds-virtual-tabletop-online-coronavirus>.

¹⁹ J. R. Zambrano, “D&D Accounts For More Than 60 Percent Of Roll20 Games,” *Bell of Lost Souls* (blog), October 20, 2020, <https://www.belloflostsouls.net/2020/10/dd-accounts-for-more-than-60-percent-of-roll20-games.html>.

increased player counts, but it is indicative of how quickly TTRPGs were positioned as an entertainment option for the pandemic moment.

News media quickly turned their attention to TTRPGs as newcomers scrambled to find playgroups and shared their experiences of play. Zofiya Acosta in *preen.ph* claimed that “Tabletop RPGs are getting me through lockdown,” adding that “it’s a good idea to play a tabletop RPG if you’re already getting a bit sick of the people you’re quarantining with” since “You’re playing different people, and you get to adopt different roles and personalities”; in other words, they offer a chance to meet and socialize with “new” people.²⁰ Justin Stabley, writing for *PBS News Hour*, relates how someone who might not have ever considered role-playing might decide to do so: “You’re at home. You’ve already binge-watched everything, reorganized your furniture, fiddled with your dusty guitar or finally finished ‘War and Peace.’ You’re yearning for a new creative outlet or at least find a new way to connect with family and friends. Why not give the world of tabletop games a closer look?”²¹ Stabley’s article presents the hobby as a healthy and underappreciated alternative or read more pessimistically, a last resort after literally trying everything else.

Although VTTs were pitched as a solution to the lack of in-person games, gaming news outlets allowed established players to air their grievances about playing virtually. Board game news outlet *Dicebreaker* reported that players who turned to online spaces were suffering from “a greater sense of dissonance and fatigue” caused by the shift from tabletop to virtual tabletop.²² One player interviewed in the article recalled how “People were enthusiastic in the first month of quarantine, but it waned and by the third month, people kept saying on the day of the event, ‘Something just came up and I can’t make it today,’ over text. ... If this happens a couple weeks in a row, the group dies.”²³ *TheGamer* likewise remarks that war-game based TTRPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder* “often rely on outside elements, like maps and minis,” elements that can be replicated through digital means but are “never quite as satisfying as the real thing.”²⁴ Nevertheless, players and game makers expressed how the hobby brought them a sense of “comfort, connection, and control in a world that’s taken them away.”²⁵ Game designer Chloe Mashiter argues that because “It feels very much like we don’t have agency over how the country is being run, or over the pandemic,” role-playing games can act as “an arena where you feel like you have some control over the stories that are told.”²⁶ TTRPG developer momatoes describes how their work in creating the roleplaying game *Tiny Stories* was “my tiny attempt at making things a little better. A little game, for friends who want to spend a little time together, in these complex and trying times.”²⁷

²⁰ Zofiya Acosta, “Tabletop RPGs Are Getting Me through the Lockdown,” *Preen.Ph* (blog), March 25, 2020, <https://preen.ph/107614/tabletop-rpgs-to-get-through-the-lockdown>.

²¹ Justin Stabley, “10 Games to Help You Escape Stay-at-Home Boredom,” *PBS NewsHour* (blog), April 14, 2020, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/10-games-to-help-you-escape-stay-at-home-boredom>.

²² Khee Hoon Chan, “The Fatigue and Loneliness of Playing Tabletop RPGs Online in a Pandemic,” *Dicebreaker* (blog), September 8, 2020, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/categories/roleplaying-game/feature/playing-tabletop-rpgs-online-fatigue-loneliness>.

²³ Chan, “The Fatigue and Loneliness of Playing Tabletop RPGs Online in a Pandemic.”

²⁴ Scott Baird, “How Tabletop RPGs Broke Away From The Table And Brought People Together,” *TheGamer* (blog), December 31, 2020, <https://www.thegamer.com/tabletop-rpgs-online-2020-dnd-vampire/>.

²⁵ Peter Ray Allison, “Tabletop Roleplaying Has Given Players Comfort, Connection and Control in a World That’s Taken Them Away,” *Dicebreaker* (blog), April 21, 2021, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/categories/roleplaying-game/feature/tabletop-roleplaying-comfort-connection-control-covid-19>.

²⁶ Allison, “Tabletop Role Playing Has Given Players Comfort.”

²⁷ maruya, “All My Stress and Panic over the Lockdown Just Made Me Want to Play Make-Believe with Friends. So I Made a Tiny Game: *Tiny Stories*,” Reddit Post, *R/Rpg*, March 17, 2020, www.reddit.com/r/rpg/comments/fk93qv/all_my_stress_and_panic_over_the_lockdown_just/.

This newfound spotlight on TTRPGs occasionally led to some contradictory coverage. One article by Alexis Soloski for *The New York Times*—“Escape Your Reality With Role-Playing Games”—exemplifies this dichotomy. Published as the pandemic continued to shape social interaction in early 2021, the article does relay the potential benefits of role-playing relayed by other reports—the ability to play virtually, the connections to fantasy and sci-fi communities, and the digital tools available that can enhance a play session through music, visuals, and sound effects, among others—arguing that these games are “pandemic-friendly escapism that allows your friends to escape with you.”²⁸ However, Soloski’s article includes many popular cultural assumptions about nerd culture, such as how the hobby is “Not your nerdy teenager’s *Dungeons & Dragons*” and how games have moved “From the basement to Zoom,” referencing both the game’s juvenile associations and the stereotype of the basement-dwelling gamer.²⁹ Even though the article approaches role-playing games in a somewhat positive manner, TTRPGs were still being depicted as “pandemic-friendly escapism,” believing these power fantasies only to be temporary distractions.

Yet for many players, tabletop role-playing games became lifelines. The *Los Angeles Times* reported in early January 2021 that players were “Turning to *Dungeons & Dragons* to escape a real-life monster—COVID-19,” with one player recorded as saying, “I can have a measure of control over the world, at a time when we have no control in the world.”³⁰ Another player remarked to the *BBC* that because many of his friends were isolated during lockdown, playing *D&D* was “the only interaction” he had with other people and that playing together helped him to work through his COVID-incited anxieties: “That’s one of the greatest things we’ve done as a group, we’ve been able to express our worries, our stresses, as well as the joy that we’ve had all playing together.”³¹ Playing as a gamemaster gave one player a push to keep going through the day, adding that “Finding the motivation to do anything other than go through the motions can be excruciating in a COVID-19 world, but when you’re the [GM], the game doesn’t happen without you... I’ve come to find that there’s no greater motivator than hearing someone say, ‘Thank you. This was fun. I can’t wait to see what happens next

The New York Times

Escape Your Reality With Role-Playing Games

Let the good times roll, as old-school tabletop R.P.G.s have taken off online.

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Figure 2: Author’s screenshot of Alexis Soloski’s article “Escape Your Reality With Role-Playing Games,” depicting a person in an elf costume rolling dice in front of a computer. Notably, a box of cereal sits on the table next to a bowl of milk next to it, underlining the presumed childishness of TTRPG play. Illustration by Andrea Chronopoulos. Used for analysis purposes.

²⁸ Alexis Soloski, “Escape Your Reality with Role-Playing Games,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 2021, sec. At Home, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/06/at-home/role-playing-games-online.html>.

²⁹ Soloski, “Escape Your Reality.”

³⁰ Sarah Parvini, “Turning to *Dungeons & Dragons* to Escape a Real-Life Monster — COVID-19,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 13, 2021, sec. California, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2021-01-13/online-d-d-provides-relief-covid-19-pandemic>.

³¹ Gwyndaf Hughes, “Covid-19: ‘*Dungeons and Dragons* Got Us through Lockdown,’” *BBC News*, July 2, 2021, sec. Wales, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-57636378>.

week."³² These feelings of connectedness and forward progress in a period of prolonged stagnation and anxiety were frequently cited results of these online gatherings and highlight how role-playing was not only important for these players, but empowering.

Problematic Power

Following Mary Flanagan, if role playing games can be or should be empowering, "exactly *who is to be empowered?*"³³ As illustrated above, tabletop role-playing games provided a way for people to occupy their lives and maintain social ties. The lockdown was instigated by the spread of a virus, but it was not the only change in the social fabric. Calls for racial justice grew in political prominence following the death of George Floyd in May 2020, with protests breaking out around the world. Discourse around depictions of race in news media soon reached TTRPG playgroups as players, game makers, and activists questioned how to make the fantasies presented through role-play more equitable and accessible.

Role-playing games have historically been made by and for a straight, white, male audience. Aaron Trammell notes that because the development teams for many early role-playing games were so homogenous they would "develop homogeneous games and are often blind to the racial, ethnic, or gender stereotypes they reproduce in them."³⁴ Such depictions attracted a sympathetic audience, which created a community that could "reproduce their stereotypes and police their notions and norms of 'normal' identity."³⁵ Stefan Huddleston also recounts how, as TTRPGs were growing in early popularity, they lagged behind other "nerdy" media in their representations: "Comic books by this time featured several BIPOC characters, yet, TTRPGs rarely incorporated people of color who were not from other media and original or converted white characters remained the norm."³⁶ In addition, the *Dungeon Master's Guide for Dungeons & Dragons 5e* is constructed with a default setting within a medieval European fantasy world by way of J.R.R. Tolkien or George R.R. Martin. Although the book does promote the use of alternative non-medieval-European settings, they are presented briefly, leaving players to figure out on their own, for example, how to convert all the Eurocentric systems of *D&D* to fit a wuxia setting.³⁷

Perhaps the most notable way that TTRPGs—and *Dungeons & Dragons 5e*—lagged behind other media is in their depiction of race. In *D&D 5e*, the first step to making a character is to "Choose a Race" from a list of options inspired by Tolkien-esque fantasy or European folklore, including dwarves, elves, halflings (i.e., hobbits), gnomes, and humans. Each of these is featured alongside details that describe how each race relates to one another and range from tolerated ("It's not wise to depend on the elves.") to mistrust and hatred ("People tend to be suspicious of tieflings...").³⁸ Unlike race in the real world—a concept increasingly understood to be a social construct—race in role-playing games is largely used to emphasize a character's narrative arc or to obtain a number of bonuses to one's abilities. Antero Garcia comments that although the *Player's Handbook* "is clear that racial strife and differences function as playful affordances" wherein race is used to provide

³² Stewart Shearer, "Pandemic Play: How COVID-19 Changed Tabletop RPGs for Then and (Maybe) Forever," *Side Quest*, February 22, 2022, <https://side-quest.ghost.io/pandemic-play-how-covid-19-changed-tabletop-rpgs-for-then-and-forever/>.

³³ Mary Flanagan, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2009), 205.

³⁴ Aaron Trammell, "Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games," in *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*, ed. José Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (Routledge, 2018), 443.

³⁵ Trammell, "Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games," 443.

³⁶ Stefan Huddleston, "When Worlds Collaborate: The Style of Early Tabletop Role-Playing Games," *Analog Game Studies* 10, no. 1 (December 18, 2022), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2022/12/when-worlds-collaborate-the-style-of-early-tabletop-role-playing-games/>.

³⁷ *Dungeon Master's Guide*, 38-41.

³⁸ *Player's Handbook*, 19, 43

gameplay advantages to players or to explore these dynamics through storytelling, “Understanding that strife between races exists and not having to know the fictional origins of this strife” allow players to brush aside difficult questions about how race “works” in this power fantasy.³⁹

Race also acts as narrative shorthand that separates “real” humans from non-humans. Tanner Higgin writes that depicting some characters as human and others as not is not a neutral choice: “Fantasy or not, a race is termed *human* with the specific and calculated intent of transplanting cultural understanding of the words *human* and *humanity* so it can be modified in the fantasy world as necessitated by the diegesis of the game while maintaining a needed intelligibility.”⁴⁰ In other words, we are to understand the “humans” in the game as analogous to ourselves to some extent, even if the game’s fiction needs to describe why humans co-exist with dwarves and dragonfolk. Higgin also critiques the use of a (White) human default, adding that “humanity will only be understood within the fantasy world if it is primarily coded White.”⁴¹ While one could argue that this racial coding is often based on the setting or narrative construction and not encoded in the rules of the game, Garcia’s survey finds that “players were enacting racism within D&D *as the game guided them*” thanks to both the mechanical bonuses or disadvantages of their choice of race and their exposure to other popular cultural examples of that fantasy race (i.e., dwarves with Scottish accents).⁴²

These depictions of racism also extend to the cultures and peoples in our world that fictional races tend to refract. In *Curse of Strahd*, for example, the Vistani travel in *vardos*, curse ne’er-do-wells with their “evil eye,” and sell fake potions to adventurers “for as much money as they can get.”⁴³ Many players were quick to point out how closely the Vistani resemble the real-world Roma people and how characters are directed to view Vistani with suspicion and scorn; to be blunt, players are directed to be racist towards them. Meanwhile, orcs in *D&D* and *Pathfinder* hew very closely to Tolkien’s depiction of human-but-not or as author N.K. Jemisin puts it “human beings who can be slaughtered without conscience or apology.”⁴⁴ *D&D* depicts orcs as “motivated by their hatred of the civilized races of the world and their need to satisfy the demands of their deities,” who “breed prodigiously” with other races, and often “subjugated by a powerful and charismatic individual.”⁴⁵ Orcs are also depicted as innately less intelligent than other races, receiving a -2 Intelligence modifier in exchange for increases to Strength and Constitution.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, *Pathfinder* describes orcs as “violent and aggressive, with the strongest ruling the rest through fear and brutality.”⁴⁷ These characterizations of orcs reflect historical and continuously-prevalent racist attitudes toward people of color, disdain for non-Christian religions, and the conspiracy theory of the “Great Replacement” wherein non-whites would overrun white majorities in the United States and Europe.⁴⁸ The Vistani and orcs are far from the only examples of these sorts of depictions, as the drow or dark elves—frequently depicted as dark skinned and cruel—have been shifted over the years from dark

³⁹ Antero Garcia, “Chapter 1: ‘I Piss a Lot of People off When I Play Dwarves like Dwarves’: Race, Gender, and Critical Systems in Tabletop Role-Playing Games,” *Teachers College Record: The Voice of Scholarship in Education* 123, no. 13 (April 2021), 19.

⁴⁰ Tanner Higgin, “Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games,” *Games and Culture* 4, no. 1 (January 1, 2009), 11. Original emphasis.

⁴¹ Higgin, “Blackless Fantasy,” 11.

⁴² Garcia, “Dwarves,” 11.

⁴³ *Curse of Strahd* (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 2016), 26-28.

⁴⁴ N.K. Jemisin, “From the Mailbag: The Unbearable Baggage of Orcing,” *Epiphany* 2.0, February 13, 2013, <https://nkjemisin.com/2013/02/from-the-mailbag-the-unbearable-baggage-of-orcing/>.

⁴⁵ *Volo’s Guide to Monsters* (Renton, Washington: Wizards of the Coast, 2016), 82-90.

⁴⁶ *Volo’s Guide to Monsters*, 120.

⁴⁷ *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game: Bestiary* (Paizo Inc., 2009), 222.

⁴⁸ National Immigration Forum, “The ‘Great Replacement’ Theory, Explained,” December 1, 2021, <https://immigrationforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Replacement-Theory-Explainer-1122.pdf>.

brown or obsidian black skin tones to a less-realistic purple hue to further distance them from racist depictions of black and brown populations in the real world.⁴⁹ Rather than creating unproblematic villains for heroes to slay, these portrayals replicate hurtful rhetoric about marginalized communities within these fictional worlds and at the tables of their players by positioning entire groups of people as irredeemable or inherently evil.

Reframing Power Fantasy

While discussions concerning race in TTRPGs have carried on for decades, these conversations gained traction during the pandemic following the killing of George Floyd. On May 28, 2020, Black Lives Matter protesters and allies “took to the streets in cities across Latin America, Europe, Australia and Canada to demonstrate against racial injustice” while wearing masks and distributing supplies to those in need.⁵⁰ This call for racial justice also resounded in the role-playing community, such as how Green Ronin Publishing, producer of *Mutants & Masterminds* and licensed tie-ins for games in the *Dragon Age* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* settings, called for “Justice for all” while encouraging players to “tell stories about the fight for justice and heroism in the face of oppression.”⁵¹ In addition, multiple fundraisers allowed those who wanted to support the movement but were unable to due health concerns or restricted budgets a way to affordably access role-playing games while benefiting Black Lives Matter, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and the National Police Accountability Project.⁵²

Amid these larger calls for racial justice, players also sought to change the rules and lore of *Dungeons & Dragons* to move away from a bio-determinist depiction of race. Wizards of the Coast responded with a statement detailing how these depictions would be altered to better reflect *D&D*'s players. Though they note that one of their goals with the Fifth Edition of *D&D* was “to depict humanity in all its beautiful diversity by depicting characters who represent an array of ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and beliefs,” they acknowledge that “some of the peoples in the game...have been characterized as monstrous and evil, using descriptions that are painfully reminiscent of how real-world ethnic groups have been and continue to be denigrated.”⁵³ To rectify this, Wizards of the Coast pledged, among other things, to depict orcs and drow “as morally and culturally complex as other peoples,” to change the ways the Vistani are depicted in *Curse of Strahd* while “working with a Romani consultant,” and to offer “a way for a player to customize their character’s origin, including the option to change the ability score increases” associated with one’s race.⁵⁴ These changes came in the form of a new sourcebook—*Tasha’s Cauldron of Everything*—and a reprint of the *Curse of Strahd* adventure with a number of changes to not only the Vistani but to other problematic depictions.

However, these changes were haphazardly applied at best. Even though the *Curse of Strahd Revamped* re-release did remove some of the more glaring comparisons, “the Vistani remain much

⁴⁹ Cecilia D’Anastasio, “D&D Must Grapple With the Racism in Fantasy,” *Wired*, January 24, 2021, <https://www.wired.com/story/dandd-must-grapple-with-the-racism-in-fantasy/>.

⁵⁰ Laurin-Whitney Gottbrath, “In 2020, the Black Lives Matter Movement Shook the World,” *Aljazeera*, December 31, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/12/31/2020-the-year-black-lives-matter-shook-the-world>.

⁵¹ Chris Pramas, “Justice for All. Black Lives Matter.,” *Green Ronin Publishing* (blog), June 11, 2020, <https://greenronin.com/blog/2020/06/11/justice-for-all-black-lives-matter/>.

⁵² Matt Jarvis, “DriveThruRPG Black Lives Matter Bundles Include *Cyberpunk*, *Zweihander*, *Spire* and Dozens of RPGs for \$10,” *Dicebreaker*, June 12, 2020, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/companies/drivethrurpg/deal/drivethrurpg-black-lives-matter-bundles>.

⁵³ Wizards of the Coast, “Diversity and *Dungeons & Dragons*,” *D&D Official | Dungeons & Dragons* (blog), June 17, 2020, <https://dnd.wizards.com/news/diversity-and-dnd>.

⁵⁴ Wizards of the Coast, “Diversity and *Dungeons & Dragons*.”

as they were—a thinly veiled Romani stereotype.⁵⁵ The *Tasha's* sourcebook gives players the *option* to change how their character's stats are distributed, but as the option is within a sourcebook sold separately from the *Player's Handbook* and *Dungeon Master's Guide*, players could miss its inclusion or ignore it entirely. Game designer and critic Graeme Barber further highlights how the "optional" aspect of this rule change makes it difficult to integrate into the Adventurers League, Wizards of the Coasts' efforts to provide structured play at local game stores with pre-written adventures and limited customization options, adding, "If it wasn't a full shift,...it was just a pointless exercise of literal virtue signaling."⁵⁶ Even though the newly revised *Dungeons & Dragons 5e* sourcebooks have replaced mentions of "race" with "species," the game's designers seemingly cannot imagine a fantasy world without genetic determinism, let alone one that does so with a nuanced understanding of how race is performed and constructed.⁵⁷

As a result, players and designers have opted to create and share their own ideas for how race, ethnicity, and culture can be depicted in *D&D*. Dr. Gwendolyn Marshall—a transgender game designer, writer, and professor of philosophy—wrote and published *Ancestry & Culture: An Alternative to Race in 5e*, a zine that attempts to "acknowledge that gnomes and elves and humans and dwarves might in general have certain biological markers that distinguish them, such as height and lifespan and darkvision, without also ascribing intelligence or weapon mastery or good and evil to their biology."⁵⁸ By separating the two, players can create characters of mixed heritage or characters raised in a multicultural household, possibilities that are otherwise mechanically impossible in *D&D 5e*. Another area where *D&D* falls flat—its lack of description of non-European fantasy settings—is addressed by *The Islands of Sina Una*, a sourcebook created in collaboration with Filipino researchers, writers, and artists that seeks to introduce players to "pre-colonial Philippine mythology" through "gorgeous art, well-researched characters, and background stories."⁵⁹

Others opted to make entirely new TTRPGs. The Afro-futurist *Into the Mother Lands*, led by Tanya DePass, founder and director of the non-profit I Need Diverse Games, offers players the chance to "Journey into a brighter, Blacker future" and was fully funded in 90 minutes.⁶⁰ Likewise, *Coyote & Crow*, a science-fantasy game crafted by an all Native American team and set in a world where the colonization of the Americas never occurs, was funded in only 45 minutes and raised over \$1 million in funds.⁶¹ The speed and veracity of these campaigns indicate how readily prospective players were eager to step out of *D&D's* shadow and to engage in discussions and play around race.

"Real" Power

There is, unfortunately, little evidence to support the notion that these new role-playing games, supplemental materials, or calls for action impacted wider discussions on real-world issues like police brutality or racial discrimination in a significant way. Because the actual measurable effects of these

⁵⁵ Matthew Gault, "Dungeons & Dragons' Racial Reckoning is Long Overdue," *Wired*, December 31, 2020, <https://www.wired.com/story/dungeons-dragons-diversity/>.

⁵⁶ Graeme Barber, "Tasha's Cauldron of No Change," *POCGamer* (blog), November 20, 2020, <https://pocgamer.com/archives/1276>.

⁵⁷ *Dungeons & Dragons - Player's Handbook* (Renton: Wizards of the Coast LLC, 2024).

⁵⁸ Arcanist Press, *Ancestry & Culture: An Alternative to Race in 5e* (2020), 6.

⁵⁹ Noela Camille Bonilla Tumesa, "Play in Mythical Pre-Colonial Philippines with The Islands of Sina Una," *The Philippine Star*, August 27, 2020, <https://philstarlife.com/geeky/925863-play-in-mythical-pre-colonial-philippines-with-the-islands-of-sina-una>.

⁶⁰ "Into the Mother Lands - An Original Afrofuturist TTRPG," *Kickstarter*, May 19, 2021, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/cypheroftyr/into-the-mother-lands-rpg>.

⁶¹ "Coyote & Crow the Role Playing Game," *Kickstarter*, March 2, 2021, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/connoralexander/coyote-and-crow>.

actions are either too difficult or too limited to surmise, it is possible to view these efforts by the role-playing community as a form of slacktivism, a moniker granted to “low-risk, low-cost activity via social media whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity.”⁶² Often, slacktivism refers to scenarios where participants are only asked to engage with an issue in minute fashion, such as by purchasing a charity bundle of role playing games or sharing posts online to advertise a particular movement. Slacktivism thus can be considered a form of power fantasy, evoking the illusion of empowerment for a very small cost.

And at first glance, the push for racial parity in TTRPG spaces can appear to be another instance of slacktivism. Rather than actively pushing for protests, joining activist groups, or partaking in any other form of direct action, the discourse largely centers on how racial minorities are depicted within the narratives of their respective games—such as the Orcs or Drow in *D&D*—and how real-world racial coding can be reflected by a game’s mechanics (e.g., racial bonuses). While some publishers and players participated or contributed to fundraisers to support Black Lives Matter and other racial justice activists—itch.io’s “Bundle for Racial Justice and Equality,” which included hundreds of TTRPGs, raised over \$8 million for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the Community Bail Fund—this did not appear to translate into larger protests or more successful campaigns to any noticeable degree.⁶³ One might even call this discourse a distraction as emphasizing the potential representation in abstract fantasy worlds belies the noticeable gap in representation for Black and Brown communities in film, television, and other cultural industries. Instead of directly helping marginalized creators within the community, players and designers seem inclined to improve the lives of their fictional characters, an act of slacktivism that would completely ignore reality for a superficially cleaner power fantasy.

Yet, it is important to remember that these protests, social media movements, and discussions were all occurring within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many would-be activists sought ways to contribute to causes they cared about in a way that would not endanger their own health or the wellbeing of their loved ones. As social media was and remains an accessible and readily available outlet for communication and knowledge sharing, “slacktivism” became a way for people to participate while being watchful of their health, their safety, and their communities. Social media also collapses space, allowing for rural populations or those whose protesting might put them in harm’s way to join in solidarity with large in-person events.

Instead of viewing the discourse of the TTRPG community concerning how important play was to their lives during the pandemic and the debates over depictions of race as irrelevant because they did not directly lead to the passing of any legislation, we can read them as indicative of a desire by players to change the narrative of power fantasy from one of impotence to one of empowerment, especially when lived reality was marked by the ever-present reminder that human action can, and will, ripple to affect the world. This desire to change the story of what power fantasies can be and what they mean connects to Dill-Shackleford and Vinney’s exploration of how fictional narratives can influence “the stories we tell about ourselves,” which “connects our past to our current self and our current self to our imagined future self”.⁶⁴ Likewise, Stephen Duncombe notes that lofty aspirations depicted in fantasy—such as worlds without racial disparity or one where COVID-19 is managed in a

⁶² Dana Rotman et al., “From Slacktivism to Activism: Participatory Culture in the Age of Social Media,” in *CHI ’11 Extended Abstracts on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, CHI EA ’11 (New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery, 2011), 821.

⁶³ “Bundle for Racial Justice and Equality by Itch.io and 1391 Others,” itch.io, accessed August 3, 2023, <https://itch.io/b/520/bundle-for-racial-justice-and-equality>.

⁶⁴ Karen Dill-Shackleford and Cynthia Vinney, *Finding Truth in Fiction: What Fan Culture Gets Right - and Why It’s Good to Get Lost in a Story* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 173.

controlled and humane manner—can “become an ephemeral focal point around which to build identity, community, and solidarity,” providing “inspiration and direction” to their dreamers.⁶⁵ This too can connect back to Hammer and Baker’s concept of power-to, as even the smallest of attempts to make a change can reflect one’s desire “to have control over their fate, to experience authority, and to enact power...”⁶⁶ Gaining a bit more control over how one presents themselves in their favorite game may not be as awe-inspiring as a march down Main Street, but it can nevertheless inspire awe in a player who felt incapable of seeing themselves there.



Figure 3: A D&D themed guide to protesting posted by the podcast Sweet Tea and DnD on Facebook. Screenshot by the author. From: <https://www.facebook.com/sweetteaanddnd/posts/choose-your-character-protest-class-character-chooseyourcharacter-dungeonsanddra/7369121804143>.

Power fantasies like role-playing games can also be used to *orient* those who use them. This concept of orientation, as Sara Ahmed notes, “shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward.”⁶⁷ As one aligns themselves with a particular object (for Ahmed, a writing desk; for a role-player, their character), we can become familiar with it to the point where the body “feels a certain way” with or around it, such as how one can become saddened by a character’s loss or ecstatic when their favorite twenty-sided die rolls a 20.⁶⁸ A player orienting themselves around TTRPGs could explain how they would later find hope or better themselves and their communities through those same games. Others have pointed to research that indicates that role-playing games can enkindle

⁶⁵ Stephen Duncombe, *Dream: Re-Imagining Progressive Politics in an Age of Fantasy* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 169.

⁶⁶ Hammer and Baker, “Problematizing Power Fantasy,” 1.

⁶⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

⁶⁸ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 57.

creativity and empathy, help players create and sustain relationships, and help players deal with difficult issues they may not normally feel comfortable sharing.⁶⁹ Similarly, queer folx have reveled in the openness of *D&D*'s character creation and role-play, trying out pronouns and appearances in a space that allows for experimentation.⁷⁰

If what players bring into their orbits "orients the body in some ways rather than others," bringing certain actions and beliefs within reach will necessarily cause friction with others who share opposing beliefs while also providing an inroad to other, related beliefs.⁷¹ This could be something as harmless as believing, however faintly, in superstitions about lucky and unlucky dice to as harmful as reproducing racist stereotypes. This is not to say that someone playing as a terrible person will become terrible, as gamemasters regularly oscillate between playing "good" and "evil" characters within a single session without compromising their *moral* character, but it can lead to players who have aligned their conception of role-playing in a certain way finding difficulty in shaking out of harmful styles of play. Those who want to create characters that look and act more like their ideal selves (or wildly differ) can regularly find themselves the odd one out at the table, experiencing what one player describes a "pressure from the outside for me to make my characters conform to narrow boxes."⁷² This pressure can come from gameplay choices like ensuring a character has plenty of hit points to narrative conventions like adhering *D&D*'s construction of race relations. Ahmed's concept of orientation applies here, too, as a person's orientation causes some things to "become reachable and others [to] remain or even become out of reach."⁷³ If someone is accustomed to only playing games that use race in a superficial manner and do not deal with racism in their own lives, they may never grasp how orcs and Vistani carry racial and ethnic overtones from real-world communities or may even actively refute the assertion.

This difficulty to imagine possibilities outside one's reach speaks to what adrienne maree brown calls an "imagination battle."⁷⁴ Far from considering the imagination pure fiction, brown notes that imaginations shape the world and that power fantasies like those seen in science fiction works or role-playing games are "simply a way to practice the future together."⁷⁵ Notably, brown calls for "Collaborative Ideation," or "to collaborate on the process of dreaming and visioning and implementing that world" in our lifetimes.⁷⁶ TTRPGs can allow for this style of creative thought, especially when a work invites participants to work toward "Imagining a world that is *possible*" regardless of the logistics or realism.⁷⁷ Queer artist and game designer Felix Kawitzky sees role-playing as a vital tool for expanding players' imaginations through play:

"[TTRPGs] offer up a space where no revolutionary project is too bold – one that can playfully and ambitiously provide resistance to, relief from and insight into, real-world dominant, oppressive socio-

⁶⁹ Henrich and Worthington, "Let Your Clients Fight Dragons," 1-19.

⁷⁰ Alex Viney, "Playing Only Trans Characters in Tabletop RPGs Helped Me Understand Myself," *Dicebreaker*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/categories/roleplaying-game/opinion/trans-characters-tabletop-rpgs-help-understand-myself>; Lin H. Codega, "The Power of Queer Play in Dungeons & Dragons," *Tor.com*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.tor.com/2020/02/03/the-power-of-queer-play-in-dungeons-dragons/>.

⁷¹ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 57.

⁷² D'Anastasio, "D&D Must Grapple With the Racism in Fantasy."

⁷³ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 14.

⁷⁴ adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico: AK Press, 2017), 18.

⁷⁵ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 19.

⁷⁶ brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 158.

⁷⁷ Amanda Leduc, *Disfigured: On Fairy Tales, Disability, and Making Space*, First edition, Exploded Views (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2020), 38. Original emphasis.

political institutions. ...It is by virtue of this playfulness – by virtue of the ways in which it allows an interfacing between reality and potentiality – that these utopian seeds of hope may begin to grow.”⁷⁸

Put another way, supplements like *Ancestry & Culture* and games like *Coyote & Crow* imagine worlds where one’s heritage and upbringing can be multifaceted and where the culture and traditions of Indigenous peoples continue well into the future. Players can then work to connect these concepts in the space of play, testing out new orientations of their worldviews and themselves. These works may not radically alter how we engage with TTRPGs or be capable of changing the hearts and minds of every person who plays with them, but by continuously exploring new concepts (even if they are only new to some), one can experience many possible imagined futures, some of which may offer ways to live a better life in reality.

Conclusion

While it remains unclear what effects the discourses around role-playing during COVID will have in the community going forward, this counter-discourse of power fantasy could shift public perception away from the belief that these practices are harmful or isolated purely within the realm of the imagination, embolden creatives to use role-playing games as tools for establishing a praxis of community building, and create worlds that players want to make real. Tabletop role-playing games can allow players to explore new ideas and cultures, to create worlds that are not solely reflections of our own but windows of what the world could be, and to foster a kind of agency that can be brought into our world in order to make that future vision possible. The medium’s burst of popularity during the pandemic can be read as a desire by disenfranchised players to obtain a sense of community, control, and continuity during a period of extended stay-at-home orders, social distancing, and continued uncertainty. While it remains to be seen if the pandemic boom will carry into a post-pandemic (or, rather, COVID-endemic) world, the continued effort to diversify the stories told within TTRPG spaces and other industries indicates that people desire to be empowered, both in their waking lives and their fantasy adventures.



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⁷⁸ Felix Rose Kawitzky, “Magic Circles: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Queer Utopian Method,” *Performance Research* 25, no. 8 (November 16, 2020), 132.