

“Monstrous Adventurers”: The Racecraft of the *Dungeons and Dragons* Imaginary

This paper examines the use of racial categories within the tabletop roleplaying game 'Dungeons and Dragons' through the lens of racecraft as outlined by Karen and Barbara Fields. Examining D&D as an imaginary, I explore how its mechanics and fiction create categories of race through a process of profiling that produces sumptuary codes, perpetuates a racial hierarchy, invokes racialised accounts of biology, and constitutes a racialised gaze. Through stressing the continuity of this fictional account of race with real world racecraft, I analyse how the fiction of D&D fails to imagine beyond the condition of race. This fiction thereby operates as a mirror that reflects back to us the difficulties of thinking beyond such racial logics, reaffirming the need for continued critique and a reimagining of race.

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First published in 1974, the *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*) tabletop roleplaying game (ttrpg) has been in its fifth edition (5e) since 2014. In August 2022, publisher Wizards of the Coast announced a playtest for 5e's successor edition, currently titled *One D&D* (Wizards of the Coast, 2022), projected for release in 2024. *One D&D* seeks to address several of 5e's shortcomings and, of particular importance for this project, many of these center around the ways in which 5e represents or handles its fictionalized racial categories. Several of the changes proposed within *One D&D*'s playtest materials were first hinted at in 2020, when the designers stated in response to several criticisms of the game's handling of race (and, indeed, overt allegations of racism) that they would be rethinking race within *D&D*. The criticisms of *D&D*, as well as the reactionary responses to the proposed changes, has once again placed the game at the heart of the ongoing culture wars. This position is not entirely new for *D&D*, which already enjoyed the Satanic panic in the '80s, and reflects the enduring prominence of the game within popular cultural imagination. It is in recognition of this enduring prominence that this project analyzes *D&D*'s use of race within its imaginary, exploring *D&D*'s shared imaginative space as a vector of communication for racial logics. This analysis demonstrates how *D&D*'s fictions enable the proliferation of racialising and racist logics through the smuggling in of racial conceptual frameworks. Though *D&D* uses 'race' to refer to a distinction that may be better reflected by terms such as species, the game's 'races' share personhood and sapience (qualities that often, but do not always, distinguish 'races' from 'monsters' or within the wider

category of 'creature'). In this sense, my analysis proceeds with the understanding that the game's use of race is analogous with (if not identical to) the real-world mobilization of the term. Within both contexts, the term produces a system of classification that divides persons into distinct types. This paper argues that the analogous use of race across these contexts construct racial categories in comparable ways, with both constituting examples of racecraft as defined by the Fields (Fields & Fields, 2014).

My analysis of race within *D&D* proceeds in the following three ways. Firstly, I shall explain how race features within the game as a core element of its fictional imaginary and the game mechanics and rules that produce it. Secondly, I shall demonstrate how *D&D*'s treatment of race is best understood as part of process that produces racial categories and their constituent logics, a process formulated by the Fields' as 'racecraft' in their book of the same name. Thirdly, I shall articulate how *D&D* functions as a racial imaginary, demonstrating how *D&D* is both a reflection of real-world racial logics and a vector of proliferation for these logics.

In the following, I shall argue that the game's mobilization of race usefully illustrates the logics of race-thinking: how race is understood as a series of naturalized, and seemingly immutable categories of being that serve as a foundation for who one is and how one relates to others and to the world.¹ We can see from the ongoing public conversations around the representation of fantasy races in *The Rings of Power* that our real world racial politics are attentive to fictionalization, how the pretense to enact a split between real and fictional representations of race is itself a way of wielding racial categories and their constitutive logics (cf. (Young, 2022)). Accordingly, through focusing on a collaborative fiction that encourages those who engage with its imaginary to enact and simulate being within that fiction, I contend that we can better understand how race operates as and within imagination.² This conclusion, in turn, may serve to illustrate how the numerous attempts to address the racist elements within *D&D* are attending only to superficial elements of this racism, which is to say that proposed changes are treating the symptoms rather than attending to the way that *D&D* encodes race at its core. My focus on these racial logics is not to suggest that race can be wholly separated from other vectors of oppression, such as class³ or gender,⁴ but I limit my focus herein to race due to the way that racialising logics are encoded into *D&D* as a game in order to make these appear harmless, or as ready-made and natural. This project makes use of both critical race theory and

¹ For real world corollaries, we can consider the recent formation of Latinx identity, see: (Morales, 2019)

² Analysis of race through fantasy literature is already a widespread phenomenon. See: (Young, 2015)

³ For discussions of these interconnections, see: (Crenshaw, 2004; Haider, 2018; Reed, 2020)

⁴ Other work has highlighted various forms of sexism and misogyny within *D&D*, though this is beyond the focus of this project. See: (Stang & Trammell, 2020)

political philosophy to describe how the racial logics of *D&D* operate, with this description providing a hitherto underexplored consideration of *D&D* as an imaginative exercise that is implicated within, rather than isolated from, conceptions of race as these are embedded socio-politically. Previous research (Ferguson, 2023; Garcia, 2017) has explored *D&D* as a vector for racism, but not for the racial logics that produce racial categories.

Importantly, I am making no claim about whether engaging with *D&D* makes one racist or predisposes one to racist ways of thinking and acting. What little research has been conducted on this front suggests that there is a slight negative correlation between playing *D&D* and holding ethnocentric beliefs (Ferguson, 2023); my focus is on *D&D* as an imaginary that can serve as a site for the replication of racial logics. I regard *D&D* as an important cultural vector for the communication of these logics precisely due to the explosive popularity the game has recently enjoyed in contemporary pop culture, from actual play podcasts such as *Critical Role* (Mercer, 2023)⁵ to the recent *Dungeons and Dragons: Honour Amongst Thieves* (Goldstein & Daley, 2023) cinematic release. The growing popularity of *D&D* and *D&D*-derived media speaks to the ongoing cultural influence of the game, as well as those ideas embedded within.

Choose Your ~~Fighter~~ Race

Dungeons and Dragons is a trpg played by a group with each member creating a fictional persona whose role they play in a collectively produced fiction. Though there are many genres and styles of game, the archetype sees the *D&D* player take up the role as an adventuring hero who then engages in quests, fights monsters, and explores dangerous dungeons. This fiction is mediated through one of the players, the Dungeon Master, who acts as the world and all the other characters and creatures the party find within it. My reading of *D&D* centers around the process of creating a character and the way that different characters and creatures appear as raced within the canonical fiction of the game.⁶ Through examining these elements, I contend that *D&D* is best understood as the production of a shared imaginary space that is mediated through its rules system, and that the standard rules encode this imaginary as fundamentally raced. Critically, I contend that an examination of these fantasy fictions can reveal something

⁵ The recent popularity of critical role has garnered several points of academic interest. For examples, see: (Sidhu & Carter, 2020a, 2020b; van Os, 2021)

⁶ It is worth noting that *D&D* is not a unified fiction, which is to suggest that there are numerous different fictional worlds within which one can play and it is a common practice to 'homebrew' one's own creation. Much of 5e has focused on the 'Forgotten Realms' setting, so I have taken this as the primary focus of my commentary.

about these racial logics, precisely because such fictional spaces are predicated on a degree of distance from our lived realities. By attending to what elements of race are carried over, across this supposed distance between fiction and reality, by attending to what elements are then taken up by the game's practice of racecraft, we are able to attend to the structural logics of race that persist despite efforts to escape them, or to imagine ourselves beyond them.

Each character within *D&D*'s fiction is comprised of two distinct elements: the roleplaying or flavor elements that are determined by how the character is described or the choices that character makes, and the mechanical elements that reflect how the skills, abilities, and aptitudes of a particular entity are statistically encoded by the rules of the game (the 'roll-play' elements). The options for creating characters are many and diverse, but can be summarized as the selection of a class, a race, and a background. In each case, these are a series of rules that govern what kinds of statistics your character has and what kinds of abilities they have access to. Class is perhaps the most impactful decision, inviting players to select from one a series of fantasy archetypes (such as cleric, fighter, rogue, wizard, etc.). Race is reflective of the kind of being that one's character is, again drawing on fantasy archetypes (with the original *Player's Handbook* for 5e giving a series of options including dwarf, elf, human, etc.) (Mearls & Crawford, 2014). Without exception, each and every character, being, and entity that appears within *D&D*'s imaginary is mediated in their appearance through these racial categories. Though these operate slightly differently for those races understood to be persons and those types of being that are considered as monsters (or those in between, as I shall explore slightly later), race remains a stable foundation upon which the fiction is built. Race thereby constitutes a foundational ontology within the shared fiction, producing types of being as stable, racial categories. This is to say that race is an inextricable component of *D&D*; racial categories mediate one's ability to play the game. As Antero Garcia puts it, any analysis of race within this kind of system "must begin with an understanding of the implicit biases of these systems" (Garcia, 2017, p. 223), which are "consciously and unconsciously embedded" (Garcia, 2017, p. 224) within them. As such a fundamental building block, race is written into the heart of *D&D* and the implications of this racial logic are inextricable across the game more broadly.

It is, however, not enough to simply claim that *D&D* proceeds with race built into its foundational ontology. My analysis must consider how this ontology is expressed within the game itself, exploring how the game constructs racial categories and what impact such categories have within its imaginaries. Race straddles the divide between roleplaying and mechanical elements of a character. This is to say that race is both constructed from mechanical

rules that govern what it means to ‘roll-play’ as a particular race and from particular flavor or lore that inform what it means to roleplay as that race.

When examining the presentation of playable races across 5e’s source materials (most notably the *Player’s Handbook* and *Volo’s Guide to Monsters*) we can note how racial categories are consistently presented as distinct categories of being comprised from a pastiche of distinct elements. Examining the presentation of race within the core sourcebooks, each race is given an evocative description, a profile, that explains their place within the fiction, disclosing to the player the typical culture that race lives in, before the mechanical elements are elaborated. Such mechanics will include the ways a particular race influences the character’s ability scores,⁷ the typical moral alignment of the race, the languages this race speaks, and any other traits that a member of that race possesses.⁸ As Garcia puts it, the game suggests “a genetic determinism of what individuals can be and their capacity to excel at various aspects of D&D gameplay” (Garcia, 2017, p. 240). Despite the disparate traits and elements that combine to produce particular races, racial categories remain absolute. One cannot pick and choose one’s racial features, one must select a racial category and abide by the limits its profile.

In particular, we can note how these racial categories combine socio-cultural elements with those of fantasy biology, conflating these in their mechanical presentation of race. For example, the High Elves possess a series of traits, two of which are ‘Fey Ancestry’ and ‘Elf Weapon Training’. The first of these makes elves difficult to charm and makes them immune to sleep. The second grants elves proficiency with a series of different weapons. In the first instance, the notion of ‘ancestry’ references some kind of heredity or genetic source for this ability, grounding it in the biological. The second instance is explicitly referred to as ‘training’ as that which is acquired through practice, practice that is presumably an important element of High Elven culture. From this example, we can see how *D&D* grounds the ontology of its racial categories in an admixture of biological and sociocultural elements, with *D&D*’s racial logic combining and conflating these elements together in its production of racial categories.

The racial logics expressed in the composition of these fixed, ontological categories further extends to the disparate treatment of different races within the fiction. There is a further

⁷ Additional rules presented in *Tasha’s Cauldron of Everything* (see: (Crawford, 2020)) and the playtest materials for *One D&D* ((Wizards of the Coast, 2022)) have attempted to break the link between prescriptive ability score increases and race.

⁸ Notably, some changes to this formula have been made in *Mordenkainen Presents Monsters of the Multiverse*, a sourcebook that collects together races from various other source materials. *Mordenkainen’s* does not maintain the monstrous/non-monstrous divide, and does not present moral alignment or language as part of the particular races. See: (Crawford, 2021)

distinction made between those characters roleplayed by players (playable characters or PCs) and those that are roleplayed by the Dungeon Master (often referred to as non-playable characters or NPCs). NPCs can serve a variety of functions within the game's narrative, but antagonists are nearly always NPCs rather than PCs. The distinction between PC and NPC is a raced line, with certain races most often featuring as hostile opponents that must be defeated and killed through combat. This distinction is most clear within *Volo's Guide to Monsters*, a rules supplement that contains many new creatures for the players to fight, as well as several new race options for PCs. Notably, *Volo's* divides these new racial options into "Character Races" and "Monstrous Adventurers", with the second category consisting of creatures such as goblinoids, orcs, and other creatures⁹ the text explicitly understands as "creatures normally cast as villains" (Mearls & Crawford, 2016, p. 118). Though many of the races within *D&D* are close to human beings,¹⁰ the boundary of the category of monster is not as simple as a line between the perceived human and the perceived beast. Monstrous races are understood to be so due to the typical behaviors of their members, with the behavior understood to follow from their raced existence itself, with race being a pastiche of culture and biology. We might suggest that the boundaries of the monstrous is linked to the boundaries of civility, with the monstrous cast as a form of barbarism that echoes the racist logics present within colonial projects of 'civilizing' (cf. (Lattas, 1987)). *D&D's* racial categories do not, therefore, simply distinguish between distinct kinds of being that are held to be 'separate yet equal' but the boundary of race is further used to distinguish between hero and villain, between good and bad, and between person and monster.¹¹

Race within *D&D* therefore forms a foundational ontology that must be passed through and incorporated into whatever fictions are produced through the game and the enactment of its players. So, understanding *D&D* and its imaginary as essentially raced, I shall now explore how the composition of the fictionalized races within the game is a form of racecraft.

Racecraft

⁹ At the very least, the composition of these races and their treatment within the fiction rely upon racialised microaggressions (Solórzano & Pérez Huber, 2020).

¹⁰ It is further clear how humans are understood as the baseline within the fiction. They are the most plentiful and dominant race within much of the standard lore. In this sense, we can understand humanity as 'X nominated', to borrow from Patricia Williams, see: (Williams, 1997) Further work by Premont and Heine explore how this operates specifically in the context of *D&D*, see: (Premont & Heine, 2021)

¹¹ Cf. (Garcia, 2017, p. 240)

The term racecraft derives from a book of the same name by Barbara and Karen Fields, which presents a sociological study exploring the logics at work within systems of racial categorization and seeks to analyze how these are crafted by and within social practice. The Fields' project focuses explicitly on providing a critical history of inequality and racial hierarchies within the context of the United States. My deployment of their term within this project widens the focus, applying their conception of a ritualized production of race to the game mechanics that produce the collaborative fiction of *D&D*. This is to use the Fields' work to explore how certain fantasies of race, some of which are racist fantasies, are critical sites wherein the logics of race proliferate. This is to say that I am using the considerations within racecraft in order to articulate a conceptual structure of racial imagination. Across this section, I shall outline the framework of racecraft and explore how its dimensions are directly reflected in the racial categories of *D&D*.

Racecraft models its core concept on that of witchcraft — deliberately invoking the image of a series of practices and cultural rituals that produce and maintain race as a system of belief. This is to say that the categories and logics of race as a system are to be understood as originating from social practices, practices that produce and perpetuate race, and which become ossified into institutions (legal, political, and social). Accordingly, such logics produce a form of race-thinking, a rationality that proceeds with race incorporated into and presumed by its foundations. As such, the Fields provide a framework of exploring the rationality of racecraft, even if their work is partially complicit in an attempt to claim that racism is fundamentally irrational. For them, reason is readily disentangled from race, a position my later use of Castoriadis shall question. Importantly for my use of the Fields' work, I stress the element of social practice that is implicit within the use of -craft as a suffix.¹² I thereby understand racecraft, like witchcraft, as a form of social power, as a framework of belief that shapes the horizons of public thinking, discourse, and judgement.¹³ Their comparison with witchcraft should not be understood as reducing race to mere superstition, but instead stresses the shared reliance with racecraft on a non-scientific and invisible ontology (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 194).

¹² Their treatment of the element of -craft seems to rely upon how it distinguishes these practices from science, with scientific practice forming a counterposed, regulative ideal throughout their discussion, see: (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 203)

¹³ Importantly, this distinguishes this kind of witchcraft from the kind discussed and practiced within contemporary neo-pagan or wiccan religious movements. The Fields consider witchcraft through a sociological lens, and their focus is on the role of witchcraft within Africa, see: (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 199)

Racecraft disambiguates between race, racism, and racecraft whilst understanding that these three dimensions are conflated in our use of race across discourses. In each case, the definitions and distinctions are presented as forms of belief, with race understood as the belief that nature has produced distinct groups of humankind that are defined by innate traits shared by their members and which distinguish them from other groups (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 16). Using race as its foundation, racism refers to the theory and practice of applying a social, civic, or legal double standard based on ancestry, and to the ideology surrounding such a double standard. Racism is therefore first and foremost a social practice which means that it is an action and a rationale for action or both at once (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 17). Racism is what occurs when the objective reality of race is taken for granted. We can argue that racecraft, then, is the work required not only to produce the categories of race that underlie racism, but the work required to continually fit the diversity of human beings into the intelligible racial grid, a process described as calling forth “a busy repertoire of strange maneuvering” (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 16). The terrain of racecraft is not the physical or biological terrain of nature, but the psychic terrain of human imagination and the socio-political terrain of human action. The Fields argue that “racecraft is not a euphemistic substitute for racism. It is a kind of fingerprint evidence that racism has been on the scene.” (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 19). Racecraft deals with ideas, but not mere ideas — instead it deals with social facts constituted as both idea and reality (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 25).

Racecraft understands race as a social construction, but contends that there is nothing “mere” about social constructs (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 193), for the ‘craft’ of producing racial categories not only expresses a fundamental “will to categorization” (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 29) but further “constitute[s] a social world whose inhabitants experience (and act upon) a marrow-deep certainty that racial differences are real and consequential” (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 198). *Racecraft* outlines four dimensions through which racial categories are maintained: sumptuary codes, rituals of deference and dominance, blood, and the gaze — each socio-political in nature. From this list we can note how the components or material of racecraft as a practice spanning codes of practices, social rituals, the appropriation of nature, and the aesthetics of (inter)personal experience in order to produce a phenomenological condition whereby racial categories become integrated into the worldly experience of individuals. Through the practice of racecraft, abstract racial categories of being acquire explanatory status (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 54).

From this explanation, we can readily see how the racial imaginary of *D&D* operates according to several fundamental elements of racecraft. I shall take each of these four elements in turn, exploring how *D&D*'s fictionalized races mirror the ways that real world races are produced through racecraft. In the following subsections, I shall explore the four layers presented within *Racecraft* as these manifest within the game. Each of these dimensions serve to demonstrate how the ontology of race as it operates within *D&D* makes use of the social technologies of gaming in order to enact symbolic violence through the process of racial categorization.

Sumptuary Codes

The analogous game element within *D&D* to the Fields' sumptuary codes are the racial norms that are understood as productive of its races. To be a member of a particular race within *D&D*'s imaginary is, in the first instance, to possess the appropriate game statistics and features that make that race what it is mechanically. But, alongside these mechanical elements is a secondary dimension whereby a series of cultural and racial norms are understood to produce these racial categories in accordance with a particular stereotyped or exemplary standard way of being. These norms constitute the roleplaying dimension of *D&D*'s races. This is to say that each race is codified with respect to a particular orthodoxic and orthopraxic way of being that constitutes a standard with reference to which individual members of the race can be assessed. Through encoding culture at the level of race, *D&D* produces its own kind of sumptuary codes that define what a typical member of a race might do and say, with such cultural markers then denoting the extent to which an individual belongs within their racial category. There is thereby a performative dimension to *D&D*'s racial categories, in the sense that repeated or habitual activity in accordance with the racialized behavioral norms further cement what it means to act as and thereby to be a member of a particular category.¹⁴

This performative dimension is most clearly expressed in the format of the racial profiles used to convey a summary account of what it means to play — in the sense of inhabiting and performing one's role as — a member of a particular race. As mentioned above, such profiles combine mechanical and roleplaying elements, with the latter constituted by racialized norms that define a 'typical' member of the race in question (a typical token of that racial type). Dwarves, for example, are presented in terms of "courage and endurance", as "determined and loyal, true to their word and decisive in action" marked by their "long

¹⁴ See: (Butler, 1990, 2015; Chadderton, 2018; Tate, 2014)

memory” and “long grudges”, defined by the ways they “respect the traditions of their clans” (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 18). Similarly, the dragonborn racial profile defines them as “proud”, as knowing their “station and duties within the clan” with a focus on “maintaining the bounds of that position”, and as possessed of a “continual drive for self-improvement” (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 33). Further examples include gnomes’ “energy and enthusiasm for living” (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 35), elves’ “otherworldly grace” (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 21), and halflings’ being “an affable and cheerful people” (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 26). In each case, the racial profile provides a series of racialized norms that define the ‘essence’ of that race in a series of performative habits.

Of course, an individual player is usually more or less free to discard and embrace these stereotypes as they see fit in the construction and roleplaying of their character. Yet, part of creating a character within *D&D* is enabling players to create exceptional individuals, those who may be marked by a kind of difference from the racial order of the imagined world. More precisely, it is not that these exceptional individuals are different from the racial order, but they mark instances of difference within it (with this design philosophy suggested by *Tasha’s Cauldron of Everything*) (Crawford, 2020, p. 7). This is conveyed mechanically in terms of which ability scores (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 14) are given bonus by a racial profile, which encodes these sumptuary expectations into the rules of the game. Though *Tasha’s Cauldron of Everything* permits more flexibility with this for the creation of player characters, the expectations around the race remain influenced by these stereotypes. Player characters in *D&D* are understood to be exceptional individuals, yet their exceptional nature does not erode the tight normativity that constitutes the game’s races but rather proves it.

Deference and Domination: Racial Hierarchies

That *D&D* so thoroughly binds its racial categories to moral systems, both in the form of moral alignment and in the typical narrative role assigned to members of particular races, demonstrates that there is a hierarchy of value at play within the game’s raced imaginary. To illustrate this hierarchy, I shall explore how both of these elements are at play within the crafting of the orcish race within *D&D*.

The historical equation of race with moral alignment within *D&D*¹⁵ manifests overtly within 5e’s racial profiling, with moral tendency presented as a core component. Though such

¹⁵ More recent publications such as *Mordenkainen Presents Monsters of the Multiverse* and the playtest materials for *One D&D* are attempting to break this link. See: (Crawford, 2021)

rules do not dictate that all members of a race must be of the specified alignment, such races are ritualistically aligned into *D&D*'s moral grid through the invocation of an archetypal member of the racial category in question. Such archetypal representations of a standard or idealized token member of the racial category are produced by the norms explored above.¹⁶

To be, for example, an orc is to have increased strength and constitution, decreased intelligence, to gain traits such as “Aggressive” and “Menacing”, and for one’s moral alignment to be expressed as “Orcs are vicious raiders, who believe that the world should be theirs. They also respect strength above all else and believe the strong must bully the weak to ensure that weakness does not spread like a disease. They are usually chaotic evil.” (Mearls & Crawford, 2016, p. 120). Any one of these traits could be individually taken as a moral evaluation of the racial category, but when combined demonstrate a persistent moralization ongoing at the heart of the category’s very production. It is not merely that orcs trend towards chaotic evil, that alignment is expressed through all the traits that are contained in their racial profile. The result is that moral evaluation cannot be compartmentalized into the game’s internal expression of moral alignment; all aspects of each individual racial profile hierarchically link or contrast those of other races, codifying moral values into the racial categories themselves. This is expressed in the nomenclature of brutality found in the orc’s “Aggressive” and the half-orc’s “Savage Attacks”, as opposed to the inferred nobility of an elf’s “Fey Ancestry” or a dwarf’s “Dwarven Resilience”.¹⁷

This is to say that race within *D&D* is not merely a matter of what Appiah calls *classification as* — whereby a wider category is applied to an individual in both the first and third persons, a label that expresses a particular property of an individual (cf. (Appiah, 1996)). *Classification as* is, definitively, a minimal expression of identity (Mallon, 2017, p. 393), and one that could mark difference in a morally neutral way. Instead, we are dealing with Appiah’s account of *identification as* — wherein the way one identifies oneself and is identified by others makes a difference in how one acts. Following from the preceding discussion of sumptuary codes, we can further note how these racial categories are produced by a series of norms, norms that create a sense of communal identity. Whereas mere classification can remain abstract, identification has the capacity to be life shaping. Through this lens, we can readily note how the moralization of *D&D*'s races operates in a hierarchical mode through the mechanism of

¹⁶ This point links with discussions about the discursive representation of racial categories within real world environments. In particular, we may consider spaces wherein certain archetypes are produced through mechanisms of preservation and remembering, see: (Lee, 2022)

¹⁷ The profiles of the half-orc, elf, and dwarf are all found in the *Player’s Handbook*, see: (Mearls & Crawford, 2014)

identification. Players of *D&D* are invited to identify not only their own characters but every character they encounter within its fiction through the medium of race. Indeed, often one of the first identifying markers disclosed in a description of a character within the game is their race.¹⁸ It is not merely a case of classifying oneself and others, but of identifying and thereby recognizing oneself and others within the matrices of racialization.

The hierarchy of race within *D&D* is a fictionalization of real world racism, both historical and present — with *D&D*'s publisher, Wizards of the Coast, having faced persistent criticism for the ways its racial representations do not only appropriate real world racism but fundamentally sustain it (cf. (D'Anastasio, 2021)). Ron Mallon argues that within our real world context, communal identity is not a strong enough basis for the production of racial norms, with this underpinning his argument as to why such racial norms must be critically unpicked (Mallon, 2017, p. 399). *D&D*'s imaginary, however, projects a fantasy within which such communal identities are definitively much stronger and, in so doing, imagines into being a much stronger base for racial norms and the racial categories with which these are co-productive. Within its imaginary, *D&D* shores up the boundaries of racial categories through encoding these races as *de facto* distinct cultures.

What we are dealing with, then, is a hierarchy that determines the capacity of racialized beings to appear, not only in the sense of (in)visibility, but in terms of what kinds or manner of appearance are available to differently raced subjects. To parse race as a question of the limits of a capacity for appearance is to treat it as the political question *par excellence*, particularly in the sense of the political as a public space of appearance.¹⁹ To ask how race impacts one's capacity to appear before others is to question how race impedes the capacity for co-existence, for sharing the world together. Attending to race as a political question thereby reflects back upon the category of humanity as a whole.²⁰

Specifically, this fantasy reflects us back to the way the category of humanity is lived and contested within our own lives. Racialization is a core component in this contestation of the category of the human, particularly in so far as race can impede the possibility of appearance. In his discussion of Fanon, Lewis Gordon elucidates how racial conflict entails an existential conflict in which an existential ontology (pertaining to human being) is posed against an ontology of being (pertaining to 'Gods'). Accordingly, Fanon argues that racism is

¹⁸ Indeed, race is usually only ever obscured if it serves some particular narrative end, such as concealing a character's identity.

¹⁹ I am herein drawing more or less directly upon the notion of politics as it is presented within the work of Hannah Arendt. See: (Arendt, 1999)

²⁰ Particularly in so far as humanity remains 'x-nominated', see: (Premont & Heine, 2021)

an attack against human being through its attempts to hierarchically establish one racial set as Gods above the merely human other set. Gordon thereby surmises that “Blacks thus face the paradox of existing (standing out) as nonexistence (not standing out). The system of racism renders black appearance illicit.” (Gordon, 2017, p. 296). Gordon suggests that this is to understand the “conundrum of racialized existence” (Gordon, 2017, p. 296) as implicating both ethics and morality in so far as it impacts our ethical relations to one another by imposing a form of ontological segregation between differently raced subjects. Racial struggle is therefore not understood “as a fight against *being others* or *The Other*. It is a fight *against being nonothers*.” (Gordon, 2017, p. 297). Building on Fanon, Sara Ahmed claims that “‘the corporeal schema’ is already racialized; in other words, race does not just interrupt such a schema, but structures its mode of operation.” (Ahmed, 2007, p. 153). This being a nonother, of failing to appear, or only being able to appear as an illegitimate presence is, therefore, a way of not being at home within a space. This exclusion operates through the power of the racial hierarchy that both produces and structures such a space.

The moral hierarchy of *D&D*’s racial imaginary uses the norms that constitute its races to unevenly distribute civilized and barbaric tropes across the aforementioned border of its ‘monstrous races’, producing a framing that values some races as lesser than others. To be a member of a monstrous race (an orc, a goblin, a kobold, etc.) is to be *de facto* an illegitimate presence, a presence that stands out through its failure to belong. There are clear parallels, for example, between the monstrous races and the racialized experience detailed within Afro-pessimism, particularly in so far as to be an illegitimate presence is to experience a form of social death (cf. (Wilderson, 2020)). To exist as raced within this hierarchy is to always already exist in relation not only to one’s own racial category but in relation to (and in relation against) other races; within this relation, the moral hierarchy emerges, with certain races having regressive and dehumanizing tropes encoded into their categorization.

These two elements, normativity and moral valuation, operate in tandem to produce *D&D*’s racial mediation of fantasy biology.

Blood and Admixture

For the Fields, blood represents a crucial dimension wherein racecraft appropriates biological discourses in its practice of producing racial categories. More specifically, racecraft appropriates a metaphor of blood, a metaphor that is able to dispense with the moving parts of natural blood and which has always had everything to do with human groups (Fields & Fields,

2014, p. 51). Blood within *Racecraft* figures in so far as the appropriation of this biological metaphor imbues races with a logic of substance,²¹ understanding races as constituted through substantive biological differences. We can readily note how the frequent use of biological markers in the distinguishing of races within *D&D* partakes in this notion of race as divided biologically. The race/species distinction thereby becomes problematised when we examine how races have been understood to operate, particularly in so far as race persists within scientific discourses whilst lacking scientific underpinnings.²² Yet, it is not only the invocation of biological difference within *D&D* that reflects the real world mobilization of biological metaphors to construct race. Indeed, a further blow to the race/species divide within the context of the game comes from the existence of the “half-“ races, most notably the ‘half-elf’ and the ‘half-orc’.

The existence of “half-“ races demonstrates that reproductive potential exists between these races and that the fiction sustains an understanding of racial admixture. This notion of admixture is explored within *Racecraft* when it discusses how contemporary uses of terms such as ‘biracial’ or ‘multiracial’ are inherited from and often rehabilitate older doctrines of racial purity such as the ‘one drop of black blood’ (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 2). Through invoking a largely metaphorical language of mixture, the very notion of unmixed or ‘pure’ components is reinforced, providing a biological dimension to this essentializing discourse. Through the explicit incorporation of these halfway-between racial categories, by suggesting that the mixture of elven or orc blood with human (for human is always the referent of the unspecified ‘half’)²³ constitutes something wholly distinct from its parent races, *D&D*’s racial imaginary shores up the boundaries around the ‘pure’, ‘unmixed’ races and thereby sustains a doctrine of racial difference.

In comparing the half-elf and half-orc, we can note how each are understood to begin from the baseline of humanity, or the unraced race of *D&D* which constitutes the hegemonic center, the norm from which all other races deviate. To be purely human is to be adaptable, to be general in a world populated by other beings who are othered by their specificity. Then, in each case, that generality is modified by its admixture with typically elven or orcish traits, but such modifications do not operate identically due to the differential moral understanding of elves and orcs.

²¹ We could further explore the logic of substance through the concept of reification as it has been explored in the Marxist tradition, see: (Bewes, 2002; Lukács, 1968)

²² The Fields explore this in an extended discussion about blood banks and the ways that contemporary discourse of genetics inherits from older discourses of blood, see: (Fields & Fields, 2014, pp. 50–70)

²³ See: (Premont & Heine, 2021)

This comparison reveals the implicit practice of *hypodescent* within *D&D*'s racial imaginary, wherein the race of the lower status parent is understood to be the dominant component in these racial admixtures (Zack, 2017, p. 383). We can note how the half-elf, as a product of the non-monstrous human and elven races, is described as “Walking in two worlds but truly belonging to neither” (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 38), though their profile stresses the fluidity, flexibility, and adaptability of this race, which is defined by its “Skill Versatility” (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 39). Half-orcs, however, are notable for their “barbaric customs”, and their profile describes how “their human blood moderates the impact of their orcish heritage”, a heritage defined by a “rage that simmers within them” (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 40). This coalesces into traits such as “Menacing” and “Savage Attacks” (Mearls & Crawford, 2014, p. 41) being codified onto their profile. Though both are half human, half-elves can cross the boundaries of their parent races, with this becoming a dignified strength. Conversely, half-orcs are inevitably understood as tainted by their orc parent, with this aspect of their heritage overtly presented as something corrupting and threatening. Blood is mobilized both as a cause and an expression of the disparate moral valuation of these races, and is presented as a vector along which these racial norms are transmitted and sustained.

We can therefore see how fantasy biology becomes a key site appropriated by this fiction in its perpetuation of race. This treatment of race as biologically substantive enacts a commitment to racial purity, thereby reinvigorating the basic premise of bio-racism.

The Gaze: Racialized Seeing

Through these three dimensions of normativity, moral hierarchy, and the appropriation of biology, we have noted the core mechanisms that constitute *D&D*'s racial categories as ontological states of being. The fourth dimension of racecraft articulated within the Fields' work is that of the gaze where they examine “the intimate yet public practices that organize individual perception of physical appearance, including one's own, as subject” (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 70). Specifically, the Fields' analysis focuses on the “inner horizon” (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 70) of racecraft that produces ways of seeing whereby viewers ascribe particular significance and judgement to the physical appearances of both others and themselves.²⁴ What is thereby produced is a racialized way of seeing, wherein the process of racial categorization — both the production of racial categories and the sorting of oneself and

²⁴ The Fields' central example is that of a pancake box, see: (Fields & Fields, 2014, p. 71)

others into such categories — becomes internalized into the perceptual activity of the individual subject as a way of seeing. As a result, race becomes a way of looking at the world, an aesthetic²⁵ and phenomenal framing of subjects in accordance with the norms, moral valuations, and biological appropriations that constitute our racial categories.

It is with respect to this notion of racism as a perceptual schema that *D&D*'s imaginary perhaps serves as a space wherein everyday race-thinking becomes overtly expressed. This is due to the way in which race is always scribed at the forefront of *D&D*'s imaginative exercise, the way *D&D* does not allow race to sink into the background or to remain unspoken and unaddressed as perhaps it does within our own social contexts. I contend that *D&D*'s concept of race operates through a phenomenological framing that is, as Gordon argues, the case for both Afro-optimism and Afro-pessimism, symptomatic of *a priori* assertions on reality (Gordon, 2017, pp. 297–298). Race is not merely seen in the sense of being a quality that is picked out, but is instead recognized in the sense that the gaze is constructed within a racialized logic, that its acts of seeing are immersed within a racial hierarchy. The logics of race become embedded within and expressed through this framing that upholds a single fundamental racial law: every being within *D&D*'s fiction exists within a racial category, exists as a raced subject. The capacity to appear, to be recognized, becomes fundamentally bound to the racial categories upon which such appearance is predicated.

This racialized gaze, though perhaps more overt, does not operate in a wholly distinct way from the racialized ways of seeing outlined by the Fields — which is to say that, as a fictionalization of race, *D&D* distils race as a way of seeing in such a way that such this aesthetic and phenomenological dimension of race is brought to the foreground. The relevance and persistent power of race cannot be denied within *D&D*'s imaginary precisely because it is encoded into its core. As such, there could be no good faith claim of racial blindness within *D&D*, as there might be within our own racial context (Gast et al., 2022; West et al., 2021). Conversely, *D&D* brings race to the fore in a way that renders it unavoidable. This operates in dual sense whereby race as a system of categorization, domination and oppression cannot be avoided or sidestepped, but also in a secondary sense whereby participation within a racial hierarchy becomes compulsory, even in the context of *D&D* as an imaginative exercise. In this sense, we can note how *D&D*'s racial gaze operates as a kind of conceptual residue that remains

²⁵ Excellent work already explore in depth the racialisation of core aesthetic concepts and practices, see: (Lloyd, 2019; Smith et al., 2021)

within its fictional space despite its constitutive imaginative exercise attempting to produce an imaginary space that breaks from our own real-world context.

Revealing Through Imagination

The purpose of providing this analysis of the racial dynamics within *D&D* is to allow a fiction that attempts to constitute another world to reveal to us the limits of our own imaginary capacity. My investigation has proceeded with an understanding that imaginative exercises reveal something about both the one who imagines and the context within which the imagining takes place. The consequences of this analysis are twofold: firstly, I have demonstrated how fundamental race is to the imaginary spaces created by *D&D*; secondly, I have explored how *D&D*'s function as racecraft is contiguous with race as it operates in our real-world framework. When considering *D&D* through these lenses, I am attending to a cultural product that is therefore able to express an element of our present cultural condition despite its attempt to imagine away from it. That race becomes a residue beyond which we are unable to imagine attests to the persistent grip race thinking and racialised logics have on our real-world imaginary.

Throughout this analysis, I have been using the term imaginary in a dual sense. Firstly, to speak of *D&D* as productive of an imaginary is to call attention to the shared practices of imagining that constitute what it means to play the game. Secondly, and critically, my use of this term draws on its use by Cornelius Castoriadis within *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, whereby he draws upon a Lacanian inspiration to define the imaginary as a final level of meaning (Castoriadis, 2005). According to this, when critiquing the concepts that order our social lives and that render them sensible, we eventually reach a 'final layer' of ideas that do not possess any further, hidden meaning. Conversely, the imaginary consists of those ideas that simply mean what they mean, ideas that are not produced by logics that are external to them, but are instead those concepts that produce our systems of understanding, our logics. These concepts ground and hold other ideas in place, but serve this function by being, strictly speaking, arational in the sense that these ideas found logics that cannot be turned against them. According to Castoriadis: "The social world is, in every instance, constituted and articulated as a function of... a system of significations, and these significations *exist*, once they have been constituted, in the mode of what we called the *actual imaginary* (or the *imagined*)" (Castoriadis, 2005, p. 146). These significations provide the answers to metaphorical (in the sense that these are not, in the core form, formulated linguistically) questions about the identity

of a collective; about how individuals relate within a collective; and what their shared, political space means to them. According to Castoriadis, “Society constitutes itself by producing a *de facto* answer to these questions in its life, in its activity.” (Castoriadis, 2005, p. 147). In the context of race, we are discussing a rationality that produces race-thinking: a logic of racecraft. To consider this an imaginary is to understand how these logics have formed a system of meaning that is both experienced as ready-made (such that it is readily imported into fictional imaginaries) and that remains resilient to critique through appeal to purely ‘rational’ grounds.

My use of the term imaginary draws upon these two elements in a complimentary way, stressing how the collective act of imagining with a shared fantasy partakes in and repeats implicit understandings of identity, personhood, and the political manners in which categories of identity are deployed and used within socially enacted systems of signification. Through reflecting on the ways in which *D&D* as a fictionalized imaginary projects away from our present condition yet fails to think outside of race, we are able to illustrate how race-thinking remains persistent in our present political condition. Race constitutes an imaginative limit. As Andreja Zevnik demonstrates: the notion of a postracial society is itself best understood as a kind of social fantasy that relies upon a disavowal of key psychic structures of racism (Zevnik, 2017). This is to reaffirm that race cannot be simply imagined away or thought beyond, nor can we rely, contrary to the Fields’, upon supplanting its ‘irrational’ standpoint with a more ‘reasoned’ view. The logics underpinning race-thinking require a much more sustained critique of the ways race is harmfully sustained, a practice that cannot be reduced to imagining ourselves beyond race. As *D&D* attests, simply attempting to imagine beyond, readily results in a mere repetition. Instead, we must think through race in order to seek a reimagining of race. Instead, we might suggest that as an imaginative activity we are not called to merely bracket race in order to reach beyond it, but we are instead encouraged to follow Daniel Heath Justice’s imperative “imagine otherwise” (Justice, 2018, p. 156). Though this concept stems from Indigenous studies rather than critical race theory, imagining otherwise is not premised upon the suspension of race but instead works through attempting to recover what racial logics obscure; it is a framework of difference, rather than an extension or repetition of the prevailing imaginary. Through this process of recovery, the wounding inflicted by racism can begin to be healed, unpicking race understood as a consequence of racism.

The work of this critical reimagining or this imagining otherwise, rather than beyond, requires making much more critical and extensive use of critical race scholarship. We can point

to the reification²⁶ of race as this has been critiqued through African phenomenology's (cf. (Gordon, 2000, 2008; Yancy, 2008)) spirit of seriousness, summarized as "attributing a form of materiality to human values that elides the human role in the construction of those values" (Gordon, 2017, p. 298); to work on racial aesthetics as a way of seeing (cf. (Elam, 2011; James, 2013; Sorett, 2016)); and work challenging bio-essentialist racism (cf. (Blum, 2020; Nash, 2003; Smedley & Smedley, 2005)) as starting points for such imagining otherwise. What *D&D* provides, as a cultural product, is a way of measuring the transformative impact of critical work within the realm of the imagination, allowing the fiction of our cultural products to serve as windows into the socio-political imaginary that conditions us as subjects. The game's ongoing commitment to these racial logics, despite attempts both covert and overt to supplant them, demonstrates the enduring influence these ways of thinking exert over popular culture, as evinced by the explosive popularity of *D&D*-derived media. *D&D* serves as a continual site of interest due to its structure as attempting to imagine away from our own socio-political conditions and because of the ways in which its players are able to make the game their own.

The work of this critique is already well underway. What is attested to through my analysis of *D&D*'s expression of race-thinking is the continued necessity of these engagements and critiques. *D&D* thereby provides a fictionalized example that demonstrates the enduring quality of race-thinking and racecraft: it's formulation further attesting to the antiquated nature of popular ideas of race. This analysis therefore illustrates a potent example of how racial logics are communicated through cultural products and communities, and how these products thereby serve as sites of replication for these logics.

²⁶ Reification itself derives from the work of Lukács (cf. (Lukács, 1968)) and has received extensive treatment (cf. (Bewes, 2002))

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