Margaret Naylor

Who Am I?: Creating the Narrator in Dungeons & Dragons

Veileder: Siv Gøril Brantzæg

Bacheloroppgave i ALIT2900

Juni 2020

3. Introduction: What is a TTRPG?

5. Relationship to Narrative Games

7. Who Am I? Personal Identity, Intimacy, and Risk: Inhabiting Character

9. The Importance of Tropes

10. A Brief Aside: Fantasy Worlds and Narrative Worlds

11. Who Are We? Genre

14. Who Are We? Spotting the Villain

16. Who Are We? Playing the Tiefling

18. Parodic Evil

19. Levels of Narrativity in D&D

23. Another Level of Play?

24. Conclusion: The Story That Could Not Be

25. Bibliography

Introduction: **What is D&D?**

'Tabletop Roleplaying Games' is a family of related games that Daniel Mackay (2001, 11) describes as:

"an *episodic* and *participatory* story-creation *system* that includes a set of quantified *rules* that assist a group of *players* and a *gamemaster* in determining how their fictional *characters'* spontaneous interactions are resolved"

Or, as I described it to my grandmother,

"My friends and I sit around a table and pretend to be wizards. They tell me what they want their characters to do, and I tell them what happens and whether or not they need to roll dice to see to what degree things happen."

Mackay's taxonomy of what compromises a roleplaying game serves as a solid basis from which one can understand the structure of a tabletop roleplaying game.

My Grandmother's taxonomy of what compromises a roleplaying game captures the importance of the social sphere to the game experience, the dynamics between the players and the gamemaster, and the lived relationship (a changeable, malleable thing) between the ludic (the rolling of the dice) and the narrative (what things happen).

All of these blocks make up the experience of what it is to communally build a narrative through a TTRPG, specifically, the TTRPG 'Dungeons & Dragons' (D&D).

Mackay's use of 'episodic' refers to the serialized nature of long-running games, whose participants will often meet regularly to progress the narrative. Participatory refers to the interactive nature of the system; one that necessitates input. The 'system' of 'rules' refer to the framework of the game-element: it is multiple, interactive, codified rules of play. The 'players' are the participants who are involved in the storytelling, and the 'gamemaster' is the narrative referee that decides which actions further plot and which do not. 'Characters' are the dramatic personae controlled by the players.

While this description is comprehensive, there are always exceptions to the rule:

For instance, sessions (instances of play) need not be episodic: gameplay can be restricted to a single session, in the same way that an literary short story need not be a chapter of a larger narrative. The existence and degree of investment of the gamemaster as well is

increasingly optional: 'GM-less' play; rules systems that either spread the powers/duties of the gamemaster amongst the players equally or eliminate it altogether; have achieved cult success.[1]

Despite these possible variations, the forms of Dungeons & Dragons that we will be examining herein suit Mackay's description.

The great advantage of Mackay's taxonomy overall is its focus on TTRPGs as a 'story-creation system'.

While other games do enable story-creation – Janet Murray (1998, cited in Cover 2010, 74) describes them as 'machines for generating stories' – the creation of the story is secondary and even needless. For instance, while one could argue that Monopoly creates a narrative of the experience of capitalist economy as a zero-sum game (and Murray does), one might be hard-pressed to argue that the drama there is the primary function of the game. In TTRPGs, the rules are subservient to the narrative being produced. Imagine, if you would, the system for Monopoly declaring that the players are now to add a second board to the first because 'it would be cool'. This is the sort of unstructured ambivalence towards the rules that is not only common but expected.

Not only it is written into the rules themselves that the rules may be overridden (Player's Handbook 2014, 6), but more importantly, the rules take a secondary position in respect to the unfolding of the narrative.

In a machine that generates a story, you make a decision with respect to the rules and invent a story that explains the events. In a TTRPG, you make a decision with respect to the story and then must stop and apply rules to it.

The family of games known at the TTRPG are a unique form of cybertext, or interactive story, characterized by their reflexive, interactive nature.

Storytelling in these settings is absolutely core to the 'ludic' nature of play, and differs from classical fantasy narratives in some striking ways. For instance, it is impossible to separate the experience of telling the story from the story that is told; all players are at all times hyper-aware of genre-conventions and their archetypal 'roles' in said production. Storytelling in Dungeons & Dragons is unavoidably a meta-textual process.

[1] An example of this is the Fiasco system.

It is also unavoidably communal – while one *claims* an ultimate authority in the form of the 'Dungeon Master' or 'narrative referee', the narrative is impossible to progress without participation of all (or at least most) of the author-players present. Due to the kaleidoscopic method of narration inherent in the system, the role of the narrator is shared between all participants in the game.

It is this: the complex relationship between the world of the player, the player themselves, the characters, the fantasy-world, and the narrative-world, that makes the act of story-creation through the medium of D&D a uniquely powerful tool for communal storytelling.

The narrative ultimately produced by a D&D game is one that is actively, consciously shaped by its context: as a genre-based work of fantasy constructed by a community.

Relationship to Narrative Games

Previous research on 'narrative games' has been focused on video games in the past – prewritten blocks of text that are 'discovered' or given to the players as a reaction to which pre-determined input command is given to the machine. Aarseth calls this type of medium a 'cybertext', a literary form that makes the reader an active, interactive agent. (1997, 1) Understanding how 'narrative games' function can offer us a starting point for understanding TTRPGs in practice, but as they will always operate on a bounded set of possible texts and story beats, they cannot capture some of the unique features of this format.

The collaborative elements of the narrative game – the given collaborators, the producer, the game, and the player – are central, as is the concept of co-creation. The producer is the author of the game, the writer or writers that created the 'source text' that would become the game. The game itself is the system, the structure: it could the computer game. The rules of the game sequence the events that are triggered by the player, the primary actor.

These elements, working together, offer us our constitutual elements of a narrative: the actor, the sequence of events, and a mode of presentation. (Bal, 2017, 7)

In the TTRPG, the role of the 'producer' is more absent, replaced, in part, by the 'gamemaster'.

The gamemaster is the conduit through which the players are able to experience the game world, and so therefore, the 'narrative' role of the producer is diminished, important only insofar as the rules themselves are directly concerned. The rules themselves are only triggered when the gamemaster declares them so.

This said, TTRPGs can and often do involve prewritten text to be discovered, like in video games. Unlike pure improv experiences, the TTRPG does contain 'hidden' 'facts', elements of worldbuilding or potential plot beats that exist in a premeditated sense and can be considered 'true', but for the purposes of the narrative only in the hypothetical until they are interacted with.

These can take the form of published, purchased works or personal writing. Personal writing, or planning, is an accepted norm. Pure improv pieces exist, but are understood to be a minority. (Cover, 129)

These pieces of personal writing often pull from preestablished worlds – within the Dungeons and Dragons system, there are books dedicated to the workings of the fantasy realms implicitly (and explicitly) described within the rules systems.

Published works, with their networks of distributors and centralized support, can easily accumulate a fan-following or community. Extensive community support and material are available, with little to no access barrier, via the internet.

Published written materials for TTRPGS fall into three main categories: 'game supplements', which elaborate on game rules or invent new rules; 'campaign guides', which describe a setting; and 'modules', prewritten adventures comparable to choose-your-own-adventure books or, even, a video game plotline that individual player groups can modify or simply play-through, inserting their own characters as the new protagonists.

As modules contain complete stories in of themselves, occasionally left ambiguous such that player-character action plays a meaningful role in the eventual resolution of the story, they map most closely to other forms of literature.

These adventures contain details about the setting, NPCs (non-player characters, what Bowman calls a 'stock character' (25)) to populate this world, and story beats to follow. What they lack is a concrete central narrator or protagonist – this being the role the player-characters are intended to adopt when they enter the narrative and begin altering it through interaction.

Prewritten texts for the purposes of reading aloud (as opposed to using as a framework), called 'box text', found these books are largely setting descriptions, meant to be read aloud in single chunks of text.

These non-interactive setpieces return the role – and the voice – of the 'producer' to the TTRPG player-group. While reading aloud someone else's words, the gamemaster's role becomes that of a player again; the gamemaster's interpretative powers are temporarily diminished.

Now, one might (rightly) comment that parroting phrases and using even specific language remembered from other sources is not, in fact, a reduction of agency. Mimicry is also a choice, and in choosing to 'play the game' as 'intended'.

The difference between reading aloud 'box text' and using an, albeit unusually long, remembered sentence or three is that utterances derived from previous experiences occur spontaneously. Box text, conversely, is triggered by a concrete action, and signals a total shift in a scene or a pivotal plot beat; in a module, it becomes the job of the gamemaster to navigate from one pre-scripted story beat to the next. Thankfully, though, the addition of the 'producer' is comparable to the addition of another player – and a point of view shared by a larger community than those present at the table alone.

Aarseth writes that 'to claim that there is no difference between games and narratives is to ignore essential qualities of both categories.' And this is so. A masterpiece of a narrative game will not become 'as good as' a masterpiece of a literary work – this is, indeed, a question wrongly asked. We would not ask a film to function like a novel, and nor should we ask an RPG to. The game, unplayed, is not a narrative; the process of playing it builds one.

Identity, Intimacy, and Risk: Inhabiting Character

At the core of both narrative theory and D&D is the concept of the narrator.

It begins with a simple question: 'who is telling this story?'

Bal suggests that our simple 'narrator' is the result of layered perceptions: the narrator, the focalizer, and the actor all exist independently and separately filter and form tellings of events. (12)

The narrator is not, mind, the same as the author. They can be correlated ideas, and certainly the author's presence will be visible throughout the text, but for our purposes, the narrator is the narrative agent; the holder of the perspective, the central point of view through which we see the story. If the narrator is a character in the story, then it is a character-bound narrator; an actor in the events. The character-bound narrator makes I-statements, and it is clear whose perspective the fabula or story is bound by. If the narrator is not a character in the story – if the text lacks I-statements that directly identify a speaking voice – it is an external narrator.

The focalizer (133) is the point of view from which the *fabula*, the series of events caused or experienced by actors, is portrayed. The actor is who or what is being described.

With this groundwork laid, from the point of view of the RPG, who are these narrator-actors? Player characters, shortened to PCs, are singular avatars or dramatic personae belonging to and interacting with the game world, controlled by a single player. While PCs can be avatars or self-inserts – and are frequently used as tools of self-expression – they are more commonly constructed as characters or actors meant to interact with a larger storyline and the rest of the cast.

The player-character is in simple terms the player's mode of interaction with the story-world and vehicle for narrative exploration and expression, and in complex terms, the primary way the player-author constructs both plot and story.

While for the purposes of narrative theory, the author is a secondary force, in the D&D game, the author and the character are difficult to distinguish.

The act of roleplay, taking on another persona, is an exercise in selfhood. (Bowman, 127) It is trying on new identities in 'safe spaces', areas where consequences are bounded to the play-space.

Bowman calls the lived persona the Primary Self, to distinguish from the other Selves adopted throughout the roleplaying process, and they can be deeply intimate choices. In play, the barrier between the self and the PC is often and intentionally blurred. Names of players and names of PCs are used interchangeably. As Cover (2001, 93) points out, the way participants speak about their game worlds 'erase the linguistic signs' that the world is a fiction.

"The roles that the players adopt allow them to delve into their emotional depths, their affective selves, and to express their feelings and ideas, but they do so through the creative distance the role provides." (Mackay, 122)

Professional gamemaster Brennan Lee Mulligan describes the player-character as a 'stained glass window', and the player as the light behind the window. While we are able to shine, to share, particular shapes and colors, the light shining through will keep the character essentially the same. (2019a)

Thus, while the character and the player are different Selves, it is challenging to meaningfully excise the presence of the player-author from the player-character.

Players strictly – and uniquely – identify with their characters, but do not speak for them alone.

What makes the D&D game interesting is how the role of the narrator is shared by two or more narrative agents simultaneously, both in the character-bound and external sense.

The gamemaster, in their role as the narrative referee, acts as an external narrator. When the gamemaster speaks, they narrate as the world, an external narrator; but when they do so, they adopt the role of the character witnessing the events. This 'unique' persona, in fact, is also communal.

The Importance of Tropes

Art critic Michael Baxandall writes that to think of texts in terms of the influence and the outcome, as an active original and a passive retelling, is 'wrong-headed'. If one suggests, Baxandall claims, that X influenced Y, it is the natural reaction of the reader to assume that X has done something to or for Y. One assigns, however unconsciously, a higher status, a higher priority, to X – X is, after all, the original; Y is but a copy. But to do this is to discourage curiosity – by treating X as the actor. It is far more interesting and meaningful to observe what Y is doing with X. (Baxandall, cited from Attebery, 3)

To ape an example from Brian Attebery himself (2014, 3), we might note that it is 'mildly interesting' that Shakespeare borrowed plots from Ovid – from this knowledge we learn which texts had currency at the time. But it is far more interesting and telling to ask what Shakespeare did with Ovid's texts: ask instead how Shakespeare used these stories to comment on contemporary events, challenge his fellows, and explore new philosophical ideas and variants on form and character.

In the same way, thus, I argue, the instinct of TTRPGs to mimic, recreate, and occasionally parody previous texts is telling as to what sort of themes and stories constitute the player-author's unconscious story-world and conscious context.

The instinctual or seemingly-'mindless' repetition of phrases, story beats, and archetypes does not reduce the value of the texts – indeed, it is the very mindlessness of these repetitions that gives us our currency. As mentioned before, mimicry is a choice, but it is not our choice alone – we mimic what we are exposed to.

Roleplaying is performance without a script, and so it is up to the players to discover which scripts they can follow to behave and speak in ways appropriate to the character and the world.

This makes sense. Narrators in a TTRPG do not have the luxury of leaving elements of the world to mystery – if a narrator is not explicit in the world they describe or there is a miscommunication, this is a disruption to the other authors.

Consider a situation where a gamemaster gives a vague description of a space, and two player-authors, working from the same material, produce different interpretations of the setting. Therefore, they interact with it differently. This is a breach of immersion that will take time and rhythm to repair, and often in practice leads to more player-authors getting involved and sharing their interpretations of the space until a communal agreement as to the layout of the story-world/narrative-world can be reached.

To avoid situations like this, player-authors need to communicate clearly and directly. Therefore, it stands to reason that players default to shorthand – tropes, clichés, and genre staples that convey packets of meaning with little effort.

When you are performing without a script, it is vital that your co-actors understand at least which mask it is you wear.

A Brief Aside: Fantasy Worlds and Narrative Worlds

We may benefit from one more distinction made: Mackay (2001, 120) suggests that fantasy worlds and narrative worlds are different.

Fantasy worlds are the fictional reality in which a story unfolds. It is the setting, and all the rules that the setting abides by. For our purposes, this includes both diegetic facts about the world (i.e. 'the sky is blue today' or 'the kingdom is ruled by a hereditary monarchy') and ludic structures (i.e. 'your Strength score governs your physical aptitude' or 'the spell Mage Hand can lift up to five pounds').

Fantasy worlds, or story-worlds, exist independently of the narrative that takes place within it. In the context of the RPG, fantasy worlds can be richly developed, labored over – and never matter at all. The simple reality of gameplay means that some parts of the world may be left unexplored.

Narrative worlds are the worlds where the story takes place. These are the elements of setting that come into play; the world-as-seen.

A fantasy-world may be fully developed wherein, for instance, dragons live within the mountains, but if this is never mentioned, then for the purposes of the narrative world, it does not exist.

Who Are We? Genre

The most obvious genre that D&D draws from is high fantasy.

The Dungeon Master's Guide cites specific influences from Robert E. Howard, L. Sprague de Camp, Fletcher Pratt, Fritz Leiber, Poul Anderson, A. Merritt, and H. P. Lovecraft (all of whom were English-language fantasy or science-fiction authors), and one cannot travel three steps into contemporary fantasy of almost any stripe without noting the long shadow of the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. (Wizards of the Coast, 2014b)

But what, then, is the 'genre' of high fantasy'? We have an intuitive understanding of this term; genre and category are how we group and describe narratives, literary or otherwise. But any close-reading of the concept of genre unveils frustrating complication after frustrating complication.

Attebery proposes we treat genre classifications in fiction as 'fuzzy sets', which he compares to Ludvig Wittenstein's 'family resemblances.' By this theory, membership of a genre is a matter of degrees, based on similarities to previous members (a handful of or a singular ur-text, or core example).

Consider, for instance, the niche fantastic subgenre of 'cosmic horror'. There are traits which a text is expected to have to fall into this grouping: an oppressive tone, themes of madness and forbidden knowledge, the aim to unsettle. Lacking one of these traits altogether would throw the classification of a text as 'eldritch horror' into doubt, but a lessened presence of one of the features might not.

Alternatively, if we use the ur-text theory, the reason that a text would be classified as 'cosmic horror' is due to its connection to the writings of H.P. Lovecraft. While a lay reader might struggle to express why a story suits the genre given in abstracted terms, the

explanation 'it reminded me of Lovecraft' is suitable. Resemblance, however superficial, to a foundational text is a trait of its own.[2][3]

In practice, traits that mark a text as a member of a genre are not restricted to the content of the narrative, but also, the context of it. Stories originating from the same era might form a genre of their own. Consider Susanna Clarke's alternate history Johnathan Strange & Mr. Norrell. Clarke's novel is written in a pastiche of Romantic literary traditions, but critics would not call it a Romantic novel. In fuzzy set theory, Johnathan Strange & Mr. Norrell might be considered 'akin to' a Romantic novel due to family resemblance, but would not have full membership.

Consider also poetry, scripts, 'foreign language' texts, graphic novels, commercials, or any other structural deviation from a 'standard' form are grouped by their medium or structure before their content.

Structure, then, we understand to be inseparable from content.

The same can be applied to a study of TTRPGs. Stories told through the course of a TTRPG are first and foremost defined by their origin and nature – a TTRPG narrative. Further literary genres can be applied afterwards to orient play and narrative construction – largely fantasy and the subgenres thereof, but not exclusively – but our first and foremost lens for understanding what the story means.

Attebery (38) suggests that the use of a genre to the experiencer is as a lens through which one can understand a work. When we treat a work of fiction as 'fantasy' or as 'a teen drama', certain elements are highlighted or downplayed in accordance with that. Themes and motifs, character motivations and plot beats. If we understand a story as a member of one grouping, we will seek out the markers that define that grouping. We will compare it to other texts we perceive as relevant.

If narratives produced by RPGs are products of their context and their context alone, then the played RPG's genre isn't merely a useful way of sorting narratives, it is the narrative.

[2] Arguably, the use of H.P. Lovecraft and cosmic horror as examples here is grabbing at low-hanging fruit, as cosmic horror and the underlying philosophy of 'cosmicism' is also known as Lovecraftian horror. That said, the singular works of H.P. Lovecraft do not alone make up the central prototypes for a work of cosmic horror.

[3] Pop-culture saturation of the works of Lovecraft well-prove the opposite, as well. Parodic use of 'Cthulhu', a character considered a staple of the genre, has become so commonplace that it often does not bear mention of as 'parodic' anymore.

In treating an RPG as a RPG first, then we are examining questions of style and structure. We're asking questions about the social dynamics of the table, about interpersonal connection to Other Selves, about ritual, and about games systems and how we derive ordered events (or *fabula*) from theoretical chaos.

To look at an example of genre and framing in practice, we can observe Dimension 20's live play game Fantasy High. Fantasy High differs from our 'stereotypical' Dungeons & Dragons high fantasy setting in how openly it professes lineage from other genre: most notably, the teen coming of age dramas of John Hughes. (Mulligan, 2018)

Plot points and settings (the house party, the prom, the lunch-room, detention), themes (parental relationships, coming of age), and character archetypes (the troubled rocker, the upper-class preppy nerd) are slotted into a world run on D&D mechanics.

The narrative, then, that grows is an expression of both the fantastic background boilerplate and the teen drama elements; a world in which genies make ice cream and the hallowed halls of dwarves are skate rinks are spaces where our heroes defeat a dragon in a climactic battle and struggle with the recent divorce of parents.

The disparate genres are not played for parody but for pastiche; a celebratory re-tread of stock characters and stock plots.

By making the story a D&D game, we ask questions about systems and mechanics. We ask what levels and classes the player-characters have, and we focus on how their mechanical powers interact with each other, and how the players relate to and inhabit the other Selves constructed for the game.

By making the story a fantasy, we ask questions about possible worlds, relationships to previously existing fantasy stories, and speculate on the nature of moral responsibility.

By making the story a teen drama, we ask questions about responsibility, relationships, and where a young person is meant to fit into a preexisting world.

By making the story all of the above, we ask all those questions at once. The coming of age or teen drama, while not traditionally a form that involves dragons, is as much a 'fantasy' as any other. The teen drama involves a constructed narrative world that, while not meant to be understood as literally impossible, is made fantastic. (Attebery, 96) This is Attebery's fantasy romance, constructed in opposition to realism: If realism serves to tell truths about the ordinary world, then romance serves to supplement it. (95)

Our two dissimilar genres work together to tell one singular fantastic narrative: or is it three?

Who Are We? Heroes and Villains

"A familiar character provides a recurrent, simplified package of intentions and capacities that we expect to find together; our imaginations fuse cognitive understandings, moral judgments, emotional responses, and expectations for behavior." (Bergstrand, 2018)

What's in a hero?

What's in a villain?

We know what they are on a seemingly-innate level, having grown up on a steady cultural diet of narrative: the heroes are who we identify with and want to win, and the villains are menacing threats.

Emerging character theory (hereafter called CT) sees basic characters as extensions embodiments, attacks, or mockery of a society's basic values. This model of CT centers narrative around the moral qualities of the characters involved, partly as a critique of previous theories' focus on plots to the exclusion of character. (Bergstrand, 2018) As player-characters in a TTRPG can and do exist independently of their narrative, in-world context, as ludic game-pieces, and are constructed by the players before they know what the plot beats will be, this character-first focus serves our purposes.

CT describes a central triad of archetypes constructed in media: the hero, the villain, and the victim. Heroes are strong and well-intentioned, villains are strong and malevolent, and victims are too weak to help themselves.

In general, one might expect the heroes to be good – and, yes, heroes do tend to be, but think of the antihero or the trope of the reluctant hero. Power and goodness do not need to go hand-in-hand; strength does not make one virtuous. But it does help. While power helps you succeed, you don't need it to try to help or protect. This is reflected in the RPG as well. To be the hero, you don't need to be 'good' or display traits associated with 'goodness', but you do need a sense of intentionality and motivation that allows the players to feel connected.

Lynch identified that the power that a character has over an audience is emotional (Lynch 1998, cited in Bergstrand 2018).

Villains and heroes both, broadly, pull their power from the same sources; intelligence/wily cunning, physical strength/brutishness, virility/lack of respect for women; the abilities that make principal characters interesting actors are shared by friend and foe. To

differentiate, villains and heroes are constructed in CT by associations with previously established identities. (Bergstrand)

Which is well: there may be no character archetype more familiar – and necessary – than that of the villain.

'Villain-coding' is a long-standing practice of imbuing characters or situations with certain aesthetic elements to convey their 'villainous' status.

For instance, physical deformity (whether by being a non-human entity, or being a human that has 'gone wrong'), dark color palettes, and resemblance to other villainous icons can be used to signify that a character is 'evil' or otherwise morally opposed to the protagonists. We may also note a significant overlap between signifiers of evil and signifiers of queer identities.

While the exact traits that signify a villain and why are worthy of discussion in their own right – and even worth challenging – for the purposes of the TTRPG player, what is immediately important is that they are recognizable.

Oftentimes, TTRPGs such as Dungeons & Dragons thrive on combat. The ludic elements of the game as, unescapably, tied to violence: the lion's share of the rules are dedicated to explaining and deepening the ways violence can be done.
Combat and conflict necessitates someone to do violence to, and so in order to interact with the rules of the TTRPG in their entirety, the players become primed to identify figures that can be fought. This can be through long investigations to uncover who the secret or hidden antagonist could be or through direct fights with ugly monsters.

It is worth noting here that violence is not the only way to progress the plot in TTRPGs. But it is the expected way to progress the plot, to the point that non-violent solutions are considered 'radical' or 'jokes'; a subversive type of interaction with players' meta-knowledge of the narrative-world.

Genre in Subversion: Playing the Tiefling

«To be greeted with stares and whispers, to suffer violence and insult on the street, to see mistrust and fear in every eye: this is the lot of the tiefling..”

- Player’s Handbook (2014a, 43)

The archetype-seeped, cliché-ridden narrative and story-world of D&D does not – and cannot – exist without a level of self-awareness. Collectively, the players are aware of what traits ‘feel’ villainous.

There are many reasons why a player might seek to adopt elements of villain-coding for their own character. It might offer interesting conflict, either between the character and the world or the character and the self. It might be a chance to explore new tropes and archetypes that were previously locked-off from exploration. Or perhaps it is as simple as ‘evil powers are cool’. Whatever the motivation, characters with ambiguous or even darker coding are popular – and actively encouraged by the source rules.

One of the most common methods of villain-coding is the aspect of physical deformity; the adoption almost-human or ‘monstrous’ appearance is highly visible and easy to understand.

D&D allows the players to select from a roster of ‘races’ that can be selected for the dramatic personae, fantasy whose powers exhibit different mechanical effects on the world.

These ‘races’ are commonly subjected to stereotyping. This is partly a natural extension of the mechanics and rules: a race such as an ‘orc’ than gets a bonus to their ‘Strength’ score will be better, innately, at abilities that rely on that, and so the player making an orc will be more likely to choose to use abilities based on Strength. This feedback loop leads to orcs being stereotyped not only as ‘strong’, but also as ‘probably a Barbarian’.[4] This goes on top of previously existing associations with given fantasy ‘races’ from other mediums, and then from ‘lore’ and information local to the story-world.

[4] Herein referring to the ‘class’ barbarian, a mechanical feature of the games-system. The barbarian class is a warrior focused on Strength. The depiction of fictional creatures described as ‘orcs’ as ‘barbaric’ is an association that dates back to Tolkien himself.

One of these races is the ‘tiefling’, a humanoid with ‘infernal’ or demonic heritage. Tieflings are intentionally villain-coded, with traits such as horns, fangs, and tails meant to invoke imagery of demons or devils.

This coding works both within and outside the bounds of the story-world. Fantasy worlds can be created that don’t express this prejudice against tieflings, and narrative worlds that choose not to address it, but no matter what, it is expected that the external player-authors understand the significance of the imagery.

Tieflings were made playable for the first time in AD&D (Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, the second formalized rule set) in 1977, not long after the initial release of the game itself, but well into the life of high fantasy as a genre. Their popularity has held up to the modern day, up to the most recent version of D&D, 5th edition.

Playing the outsider was not a new concept to these early progenitors of Dungeons and Dragons – not only were some of their favorite heroes outsiders (think of Robert E. Howard’s uncivilized Conan the Barbarian) or the rough & tumble man of action fronting *Amazing Stories*/science fiction-fantasy publishing in the 1970s – but there was also a self-identified counter-culture streak to the experience of the ‘nerd’ or the science-fiction ‘geek’. Societal norms of hero and villain have always favored the powerful and the status quo, and people who feel marginalized have historically found a level of refuge in play and narrative. Escapist fantasy especially has been cited as a haven.

The tiefling, along with other ‘Othered’ races, offered a chance to explore ideas of racism and marginalization within the confines of the safe, RPG experience - as well as letting players have fun exploring darker themes and elements themselves.

Where we began as a workable metaphor for othering or marginalization, especially along racial lines, has remained so. However, in the modern day, the tiefling has come to represent a new marginalized demographic: the queer outsider.

Much has been written about the portrayal of queer aesthetics in media as short-hand for ‘villainous’, and much can be said for how the demonic symbolism as used in D&D could be ‘relatable’ for its own sake: note, for instance, how demons and gays are both posed in opposition to Judeo-Christian majority faiths; how tieflings find their demonic heritage expressing at puberty.

Their innate villainous coding and subsequent cultural marginalization has led to queer individuals seeking to explore their experiences through playing a character stereotyped as evil.

"*Media creators tried to make their antagonists seem especially menacing and strange by giving them queer traits, but queer people in turn learned to embrace their identities and flout society's conventions by coating ourselves in villainy*," said queer psychologist Devon Price on the phenomenon. (2020)

When you see yourself in characters that are coded as evil, it is natural to feel drawn to adopt that coding yourself.

But, that said, that is not the only way queer individuals draw power and meaning from the 'evil';

"*Your neighbour talks to the thunder god and has horns and if that's normal then so are all the things about you that society has forced you to push down,*" said one activist (Stronach, 2019).

In a world where everything is weird, there is no normal to deviate from; there is a quiet defiance in creating a world where there is no 'normal' to defy. Queerness is a way of playing with identities, and playing with identities is a process that D&D and the RPG not only enable but encourage. (Codeaga, 2020)

Here, then, we see the myths and iconography being reinterpreted once again to serve a new cultural purpose. Whether the purpose is to become a source of power for the radical outsider, or to be ritually stripped of meaning

The demon becomes the sympathetic outsider tiefling, which in turn becomes the queer outsider; ready to be rejected or accepted according to the whims of the players.

Parodic Evil

One could even, if one wished to, turn the self-awareness that causes participants to want to 'test drive' more morally ambiguous imagery or personas, and make a game out of it.

Parody oscillates between closeness and distance. Simple to say though it is, to parody a subject, one must be familiar with it. (Tosca, 2009) One must attain and maintain an ironic

distance from this subject matter, but the subject matter must also be close enough to be recognizable.

In Dimension 20's Escape from the Bloodkeep live play series, the player-authors inhabit a thinly veiled version of J.R.R. Tolkein's Lord of the Rings fantasy novels, though with a twist – our protagonists are self-made 'lieutenants of Sauron'; explicitly villainous characters.

The player-characters are each individually coded as evil. Some play variants on the source material: the inhuman Witch-King of Angmar becomes 'Kraz'thun' Leiland, monstrous, mythic Ungoliant becomes Lilith, Queen of Spiders. Others choose to use more source-neutral coding: the beast-ranger Sokhbarr is marked as villainous due to his monstrous, chimeric appearance than any other trait.

In this game, these villainous archetypes and imagery form the basis for how the characters and the world interact. Conscious knowledge of evil or villainous tropes guide the players and the gamemaster in their collective understanding of the rules of the narrative-world: time and time again, we see, when players doubt, they fall back on the central idea of 'I'm evil'.

The model of evil they adopt is aesthetic as much as moral, however; when the protagonist is attempting to play 'the villain', they must be well-motivated; even put up against 'worse villains' to justify our continued investment in characters we might otherwise struggle to root for.

The setting of the Lord of the Rings is not criticized by their use in a parodic context, they are canonized. Knowledge of these texts – their cultural (if not their textual) context, their meaning – is mandatory in order to use them in a manner. (Tosca, 2009)

Levels of Narrativity in D&D

Now that we have seen the theory behind what makes a TTRPG's narrator tick, we can move to the question of what this concretely looks like.

As play is an intertextual experience, the sum of the whole is a kaleidoscope of different producer-observer experiences and lens. The understanding and actions of the character co-exist with the understanding and actions of the player. Understanding the

relationship between these points of view, or mental spaces, gives us an understanding of what it means to interact with a hybrid medium.

Three levels of play have been theorized by previous research, which here we will be calling the 'ludic', the 'narrative', and the 'character-narrator'. (Cover 2010, 88)

On the ludic level, the game-level, the players are all aware of their position in a game, ruled by mechanics and elements of gameplay. At this level, the 'story' is being generated by an external force: the rules of the game being applied to the situation at hand. At this level, we hear players ask request rolls or extra-narrative information from each other, speculate, plan, roll the dice, and ask questions about the rules.

On the narrative level, the storyteller-level, the players all take on roles as narrator and communal creator of the world and story. They collectively work to tell the story by using their individual responsibility for and narrative control over a smaller element, primarily through exerting control over their player-character. At this level, we hear players describe character actions and to a lesser extent the way the world reacts to said character actions.

On the character-narrator level, the players speak and act by inhabiting the character or characters they are portraying. At this level, we hear players speaking 'in the voices' of the character. This could involve the production of dialogue alone, but often coincidences with the adoption of a spoken voice distinct from the speaking-voice of the player to signal the shift. Visually, we might see players adopt mannerisms and body language appropriate to the character or the situation, not unlike theatre.

Cover (2001, 89) argues that as both the narrative and the character-narrator levels both work to construct the narrative (as opposed to working within the ludic framework), they should both be considered as the same 'narrative frame'. The exact dialogue spoken by the characters, after all, just a form of narrating the actions of the character.

While this is a useful way to frame discussions of what talk matters where, I will be referring to the narrative and character-narrator levels as distinct. While the exact dialogue spoken by a character within the bounds of a narrative world is yet another action taken by the character, the relationship between the player-character and the player is at its blurriest and most personal then. This is the only time when a player-character is the exclusive property of the player.

The dialogue spoken by the character is not 'the dialogue as it is experienced by the others' as an action might be. The dialogue is a bare recitation of 'facts'. There is no other interpretation of what words were spoken – of what the text of the narrative is – outside of a verbal miscommunication.

While the player does not magically become the character when speaking as them, they do yet speak as them. A player does not pick up and swing a sword to hit a real goblin, but they do speak real words. The currency of literature and storytelling is in these words, and in giving specific, deliberate, personal voice to the character, the storyteller invokes and inhabits the mental space in a way that is meaningfully distinct from the external narrative-level.

In order to demonstrate our levels of play in action, let's look at a theoretical exchange:

Gamemaster: You enter through the door. The room beyond is a neatly furnished, tidy sitting room. There are two overstuffed chairs by a roaring fire.
Player: I'd like to cautiously step through the doorway and check for any signs of danger.
Gamemaster: Roll me a Perception check.
Player: That's an 11.
Gamemaster: Seems safe. The fire is still roaring; a fair indication of other activity recently.
Player: Okay. Sir Conrad looks back over her shoulder and calls, "No sign of any vampire – or the Countess."

Here, we're seeing all three levels of play interacting.

First, we hear a description of the physical setting of the play-world. This happens on the narrative level – the gamemaster, as the stand-in for the world the players are collectively experiencing, is describing a setting. The exploration of the special element is a part of the ongoing narrative. We also see the gamemaster briefly take over the role of the character of Sir Conrad in describing her actions and perceptions before returning that narrative control to the player.

Secondly, in response to an action taken by the character in the game-world, the gamemaster makes a request for a 'Perception check', pulling in an element of the codified rules-system through which the story is being constructed. This occurs at the ludic level.

Thirdly, in response to the roll, the gamemaster returns to the narrative level and supplies more information, once again by implicitly taking control of Sir Conrad. The player narrates a reaction to the additional information.

In the final line, the player fully inhabits the character of Sir Conrad and adopts her voice. This happens at the deepest level; the level of the character-narrator.

The participants react to each other and the rules, and the character's actions – both individual and communal – come from the sum of the above parts.

Even when nothing seems to be going on, the player react to the game systems: an '11' is a notoriously middle-of-the-road sort of roll – Sir Conrad could have failed to notice something here. In fact, if Sir Conrad is a savvy or paranoid type, or feeling on-edge right now – which seems likely enough, given that she was described searching for danger previously – she may be aware of this fact as well.

You'll notice as well that play takes place in the present-tense: this is a story in the process of unfolding.

Descriptions cannot be lengthy, unmotivated, or purely decorative. Self-indulgent or long-winded breaks are possible, but they are few, far between, and done with intentionality. This is due to practical considerations: the 'audience' is not passive, they are active.

It is not simply that objects or factors are assumed to be important/relevant if they are described (- the act of describing this object or factor makes it implicitly important -), it is that the addition of this factor to the game world makes it an interactive element. If a painting is described, it can be moved or vandalized. If there is a smell in the air, it can be overridden.

If settings in a traditional novel are oil paintings, settings in a roleplaying game are Lego bricks; put simply, in D&D, there is no distinction between unmotivated and motivated description; no divide between action and description.

While the Dungeon Master, the world, strives for a sense of objectivity in their descriptions of the world – what Bal would deem a 'character-witness' (2017, 38) – this is fundamentally impossible. The world that is experienced by the characters is framed by the DM's choices of what to include – or not to include. Implicitly, the DM decides what is important to the characters in the story through framing of the scenes. In this sense also, then, the characters – nominally under control of the individual –are also a collective element of the storytelling process.

While each player is primarily reacting from a bounded, limited perspective, their experience of the game is the sum part of every player's actions: as narrator, focaliser, and actor.

When the players describe their character actions, despite things being nominally about the subjective experiences of these figures, they are seizing control of the whole narrative. Their character is merely the actor. When the player focalizes their character as an actor, they invite all the other participants to share in their communal role as witness.

Another Level of Play?

While the three levels above explain the narrative process, it also bears mention one more type of communication that occurs at the table.

The extra-ludic, what is known in the community as 'table talk' or 'cross-talk', is conversation which occurs during the progression of the game that is not directly involved in the narrative in the moment. Cover (2001) calls this the 'social frame' of the experience. In practice, this includes banter, arguments, extraneous or 'real life' concerns, and out-of-character discussion of plot events.

Furthermore, the tone of the table-talk is also, in practice, as inseparable from the process of story-creation as the player is from the character. It sets the immediate physical context in which the game is played. An environment where table-talk is hostile or unfriendly will lead to hostile gameplay, and topics of conversation brought up in this social frame will sneak their way into the narrative.

Conclusion

"I want this text to tell my story; the story that could not be without me." (Aarseth 1997, 3)

The relative total freedom afforded to TTRPGs is in comparison is almost overwhelmingly vast. It is nigh-impossible to experience the same game twice, by strict transcription rules – even if a selection of the exact same players playing the same characters in the same scenario made the same choices, the subtle variations in human experience and expression would force variance.

It is this – the inescapable variance that the human element adds – that makes oral storytelling, and its bastard child, the TTRPG, such a fluid, communal experience.

The interplay between previous fantasy works, the participants, and the producers/larger community externally; and the players, the characters, and the gamemaster internally.

Aarseth suggests that the intimacy of the relationship between the player and their persona is a direct result of the risk incurred by stepping into an interactive story. (1997, 3)

While beholders of art and consumers of literature can arguably 'impact the narrative' of the stories they behold or consume by choosing to interpret the text one way or another, ultimately, their interpretations are powerless.

One can become deeply invested in a text, but a reader cannot change the literal text. The physical words on the paper will not change, no matter what the reader decides they would like them to mean. The reader, here, is ultimately impotent – but ultimately safe.

Giving agency to the reader is emotionally dangerous for the reader. The consumer of the cybertext is not safe, as it puts the reader at risk: the risk of rejection, of failure. When the reader is not merely observing the protagonist of a story, but is rather taking on the identity of the protagonist - or sharing their own with their character, the emotional stakes are, intimately, the reader's.

Aarseth says that telling a story within a cybertext is seeking the story that cannot be told without 'me'. Within the cybertext of D&D, we seek – and we find – the story that could not be told without 'us'.

Bibliography

Aarseth, E. (1997) *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature.* Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Attebery, B. (2014) *Stories about Stories.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Bal, M. (2017) *Narratology, Introduction to the Theory of Narrative.* 4th edition. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Bergstrand, K. and Jaspar, J. (2018) *Villains, Victims, and Heroes in Character Theory and Affect Control Theory* (online). *Social Psychology Quarterly*. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0190272518781050 (Accessed 9 May 2021)

Bowman, S.L. (2010) *The Functions of Role-Playing Games.* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

Codega, L.. (2020) *The Power of Queer Play in Dungeons & Dragons* (online). *Tor.com.* Available from: https://www.tor.com/2020/02/03/the-power-of-queer-play-in-dungeons-dragons/ (Accessed 2 May 2021)

Cover, J. G. (2010) *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games.* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

Mackay, Daniel. (2001) *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art.* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.

Mulligan, B.L. and Ray, M. (2019a) *Giving Yourself Permission to Feel (with Marisha Ray). Adventuring Academy* (Podcast). Available via Spotify. (Accessed May 25)

Mulligan, B.L. et al. (2019b) *Escape from Bloodkeep. Dimension 20.* Available from: https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-

1vTssVCXjsb6SxVQofdVi5lXrcnM0Ut9oBvJPYDHRBwWy7luRqge1BVMJwB6HCvM8Ij
nRJk9l-ejNd9M/pub (Accessed May 2, 2021)

Mulligan, B.L. et al. (2018) *Fantasy High. Dimension 20.* Available from:
https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vRKR-9o5d1OLxAseP3qu4g-OlJ0sBEHWsG2_4ytUZpuGQM1bwSn1G3vAmDXIHALZ9X74ULJIVK-2c5x/pub
(Accessed February 28, 2021)

Price, D. (2020) *I'm a Villain-Coded Queer* (online). *Devon Price* (weblog). Available from:
https://devonprice.medium.com/im-a-villain-coded-queer-5b98e01dd6c8 (Accessed 9 May 2021)

Stonach, A. (2019) *Tieflings are gay and gay is valid: dungeons, dragons, and the art of the radically normal* (online). *4th Floor Literary Journal.*
Available from: https://4thfloorjournal.co.nz/tieflings-are-gay-and-gay-is-valid-dungeons-dragons-and-the-art-of-the-radically-normal/ (Accessed 2 May 2021)

Tosca, S. (2009) *More than a Private Joke: Cross-Media Parody in Roleplaying Games* (online.) *Cinema Journal, Vol. 48, No. 3*. Available from:
http://www.jstor.org/stable/20484484 (Accessed March 10 2021)

Wizards of the Coast. (2014a) *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook.* United States: Wizards of the Coast.

Wizards of the Coast. (2014b) *Dungeons & Dragons Dungeon Master's Guide.*. United States: Wizards of the Coast.