Becoming Halfling: Racial Permeability as Ludonarrative Architecture in the Critical Role Web Series

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Abstract

Livestreamed play of tabletop games affords a new medium for analysis of racialization for game studies. For *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th edition (Multiple authors, 2014) actual plays, audiences can engage with racialized narratives in underappreciated ways. The actual play *Critical Role* (Critical Role, 2012-present) employs players' knowledge of the genre of high fantasy to create collaborative, improvisational narratives which delve into themes of racism and bigotry. This dynamic often leads players to draw on real world political narratives and discourses in order to engage audiences' prior knowledge and examine pertinent themes. This paper analyses one such example in the case of Nott the Brave, a character in Critical Role's popular second campaign. Nott's narrative arc, taking place over several hundred hours of gameplay, is a site of racialized play, problematizing simple narratives of representation and identity. This article employs textual analysis and semiotics in examining Nott's racialization as a Goblin character. I draw heavily on Jenkins's (2004) notion of gameplay as narrative architecture in considering the limits that racialized play allows the cast of Critical Role. In doing so, I offer insights into how tabletop roleplaying games actual plays might add nuance to debates surrounding narrative and gameplay in roleplaying games, especially as it relates to narratives of White supremacy and domination.

Keywords

Introduction

> If the enemy has a face, it is only a *veiled face, the simulacrum of a face*. And if the enemy has a name, this might be only a borrowed name, a false name whose primary function is dissimulation. (Mbembe, 2019, p. 49, emphasis in the original)

As surging interest in tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) coincides with broad societal questions of representation and White supremacy in virtual worlds and their corresponding fan communities, examining popular media related to this phenomenon reveals potential areas of scholarly concern. This burgeoning dynamic holds relevance for *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D* hereafter), the most widely played version of this relatively new form of storytelling (Meehan, 2020). In these worlds of monstrous enemies and heroic characters, creators and players reflect contemporary notions about racial permeability and personality. The predominantly high fantasy setting of *D&D* allows players to comfortably explore, reify, and challenge the racial attitudes of their own world. Indeed, by creating a racialized character who interacts with other racialized characters in a world that strives for a particular sort of realism, players, knowingly or unknowingly, play with their own underlying assumptions and beliefs about race. In examining how our social construct of race is imagined in fantastic worlds through particular examples, we can begin to understand how the "(re)presentation of self . . . occurs in the experiential space of performance" (Stephens, 2014, p. 4). As stated by Antero Garcia (2020), "participating in a complex role-playing game mean[s] managing sets of rules alongside relationships with other players, all within a lasting legacy of primarily Eurocentric and male-centered fantasy tropes" (p. 10).

This paper demonstrates the scholarly value of actual play TTRPGs by reading one compellingly represented character—Nott the Brave of Critical Role (Critical Role, 2012-present). In analyzing this narrative, this paper indicates a growing need for decolonizing ludic elements present in roleplaying games. Essential to my intervention is Henry Jenkins's (2004) concept of "narrative architecture," wherein game mechanics and narratives work together to create a synthesized player experience. Employing this notion assists me in concurring with Adrienne Shaw (2015) and Antero Garcia (2017) in advocating for changes to gaming beyond representation alone. Rather, creators should redefine and restructure the mechanical bases of such games. I also draw inspiration from Ebony Elizabeth Thomas's (2019) *The Dark Fantastic,* a powerful tool in elucidating the threats faced by Black characters in worlds targeted towards White audiences. In short, I argue that better physical or narrative representation of individual races is not enough, but that games should also strive to replace gameplay or mechanical elements that inherently guide players to recreate White supremacist racial logic.

As one of the first and most popular live streams of *D&D* during a massive resurgence in the game's fan base (Sidhu & Carter, 2020), Critical Role presents ample opportunities for scholarly analysis. Streaming three to five hours weekly since March of 2015, the show has an overwhelming amount of narrative content, featuring dozens of primary characters and story arcs across both long-form campaigns and short "one-shots." *Campaign Two: The Mighty Nein (2018-2021)*, which most of this paper will focus on, features over "100 hours of battle, 440 slain villains, and 530 total hours of dice-roll-driven adventuring" (Bubp, 2021, para. 2). While the show occasionally features guest stars or accounts for absent players, the primary performers and Dungeon Masters (DMs) have remained consistent over the last six years. The result of this consistency is an immense amount of character development across years of real-world time, all of which is driven by the underlying racial logic of a traditional, high fantasy setting (Yow, 2022). While Ryan Vu (2017) rightly points out that generic fantasy games "provide a modular system for producing fictions that can be adapted to a variety of desires" (para. 19), I argue that these desires are mechanically predisposed towards creating narratives of racial intolerance and racial impermeability. As Critical Role's story spans multiple real-world years and garners millions of views, the story of Nott is both popular and extensive, and it is also one which should be helpful in elucidating the limits of racial permeability in fantastic worlds and roleplaying games. Following an introduction to Nott and the narrative of *Campaign Two* of Critical Role, I will examine her character in the context of Black, critical scholarship. My analysis will demonstrate the tensions between seemingly progressive narrative arcs, as represented by Nott's racial transformation and challenging of racism in the game world, and regressive gameplay elements, as evidenced by *D&D*'s issues with racial essentialism. Such a tension, I argue, generates discord between the gameplay and the narrative, resulting in a Black-coded character's symbolic death at the hands of White creators.

This narrative problematizes a vital conversation in game scholarship, with scholars often concerned by the tensions between the power of gameplay and narrative, and postcolonial studies, which have a great deal to offer this medium of storytelling. Indeed, the locus of race, fantasy, and gaming has been a fruitful one for recent scholarship. Samuel Heine and Antoine Prémont (2021) have deftly argued that *D&D* perpetuates essentialist understandings of race which, despite a plurality of races in the world, always centers expansionist, colonialist humans. Joshua Goldfond (2021) has examined the enduring legacy of H.P. Lovecraft's work in the worlds of *D&D*, including his thematization of fearing the Other and the threat of miscegenation. Kristian Bjørkelo (2020) has approached these issues from a player-analysis perspective, using White Nationalist forums as a means of exploring how race is viewed in fantasy worlds. My work incorporates the ideas of these works and pushes further, arguing that the mechanics of *D&D* serve as

guardrails to reign in progressive or antiracist storytelling. This dynamic is most easily evidenced in actual play.

The Story of Nott

Before we delve into the dynamics of this paradigm and its repercussions, I will briefly describe Nott and the story arc of Critical Role's second campaign. Critical Role involves eight cast members including the DM, Matthew Mercer. The remaining seven cast members portray a variety of characters, though all journey together as part of the Mighty Nein. Notably, all eight members are White actors in an industry that is also overwhelmingly White, though this is a point the cast has addressed. Between January, 2018 and June, 2021, the players regularly broadcast the various adventures of the team: saving a small town from Gnolls, becoming pirates to stop the summoning of an evil god, hosting a festival to celebrate one of the character's favored deities, and so on. Eventually, the team travels far to the North, where they encounter an old friend-turned-foe, Lucien, who is attempting to fuse his consciousness with an ancient city and destroy the gods. Defeating Lucien, the characters say their farewells, and the cast narrates the epilogues that they envision their characters living.

Nott, portrayed by voice actor and director Sam Riegel, experiences most of her character development through the middle of the campaign. Though Riegel reveals parts of Nott's past through subtle roleplaying, much of Nott's backstory unfolds in Episode 48 and 49. Nott discloses that she is actually a Halfling named Veth Brenatto, an anagram of Nott the Brave. Some time ago, Nott protected her family from a band of Goblins which kidnapped her as a result. In punishment, the Goblins drowned Veth and brought her to a witch named Isharnai, who, in turn, reincarnated Veth into a Goblin body. Nott also reveals that Veth/Nott has a husband and a son, both of whom Nott has avoided since her transformation. Since then, Nott has lived as an outlaw and thief, eventually meeting up with Caleb. Goblins are immutably evil in many worlds of *D&D*, and Nott often fears that her transformation is corrupting her personality and values. Caleb, as a burgeoning transmutation wizard, offers Nott the magical means to reverse the curse and become a Halfling. After the group journeys to Isharnai's hut and bargains with the witch in Episode 93, Caleb performs a spell that transforms Nott into Veth. The time difference between the introduction of this plot point and its resolution is about a year of real time, meaning that a massive amount of characterization and tension was built up to this moment. As a part of the massive payoff that this moment gave the series, though, I argue that Nott was more than merely transformed into Veth: she was symbolically killed. This slaying is part of a common process in representations of the Black woman in fantastic worlds, as evidenced by Thomas's (2019) *The Dark Fantastic*. Before exploring this dynamic and its repercussions for the improvisational, communal

storytelling of *D&D*, I will further elucidate Nott's position amongst the racist caricatures of high fantasy's generic history.

Nott as Physically and Socially "Other"

I posit two claims that lead to ludonarrative dissonance (i.e., a discord or conflict between the ludic elements of the game and the story which is being told; see Clint Hocking, 2009) for progressive storytelling in common depictions of generic high fantasy, and specifically in the medium of TTRPGs. The first claim is that Sam Riegel's character, Nott the Brave, is coded as racially non-White. This coding is achieved by tapping into the long and problematic signifying of Black and Indigenous cultures as those of the Orc, Goblin, Troll, etc. in speculative worlds. This claim is also supported by the explicit characterization of Nott by Riegel and the rest of the cast in a world created by Matt Mercer, the DM. The second, vital claim is that the cast is aware of this characterization, and this awareness leads to problems for Nott's representation after her transformation into Veth. Importantly, I do not intend to misrepresent the cast as racist or ignorant of the history of Black and Indigenous people in the United States and fantastic worlds. Rather, I hope to show that the game of *D&D*, alongside many other roleplaying games that employ problematic gameplay elements, inherently prohibits the telling of progressive stories that challenge White supremacy and patriarchy. In short, through *D&D*'s gameplay, its generic history, and the cultural narratives it draws from, it is likely that games of *D&D* perpetuate racist language and ideals. This is an especially important topic, as Critical Role and *D&D* often lack the first-hand voices of BIPOC actors and creators from the TTRPG community (Gault, 2020).

Nott the Brave allows us a convenient entry into this problem, and I will first bring in scholarship concerning the historic portrayals of racialized bodies in roleplaying games. I argue that it is quite difficult to disentangle portrayals of fantastic monsters from the versions of those monsters an audience has encountered in the past, especially in a game that primarily relies upon imagination and "theater of the mind" elements in representing its protagonists. The contemporary, fantasy Goblin shares much with the fantasy Orc, as both were introduced to modern audiences by J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* (1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* series (1954–1955), and Tolkien used the two terms interchangeably. Further uniting the two is their reliance on racist ideas about physiognomy. In a private letter to a friend, Tolkien (1958) described the Orcs and Goblins of his world as "squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types" (as cited in Carpenter, 1981, p. 274). This troublesome portrayal delves deeper than skin, as Tolkien portrays the Orcs as perpetrating an innately evil, Manichean opposition to the complicated goodness of the Men of the West (Shippey, 2002). These two pieces—a decidedly non-

White, non-European appearance and an intrinsically evil moral system—become inseparable from the Orc and Goblin in modern, fantastic worlds.

However, these ideas do not remain fixed from Tolkien's work to the debut of Critical Role. The film adaptations of Tolkien's work and popular video games such as *World of Warcraft* and its several expansions (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) and The Elder Scrolls series (Bethesda, 1994-present) have only reinforced and elaborated on this monolithic depiction of the races. Peter Jackson's (2001–2003) adaptations of Tolkien's work in particular present an image of an Orc that is, in Sue Kim's (2004) words, "tall, black, and muscular with long, coarse hair that resembles dreadlocks" (para. 4). In addition, Goblins find their lasting characterizations here: They are "blunt-nosed, short, stooping, and yellow-and-slant eyed" (Kim, 2004, para. 4). This characterization is in line with Stephens's (2014) work on racialized physiognomy: "Racial difference essentially replaces gender differences as the structuring division understood to define man, and this substitution accompanies an even deeper epistemic shift in understanding the human body in terms of physiognomy rather than anatomy" (p. 12). While writers and performers have steadily increased the degree of inherent wildness, evilness, aggressiveness, and masculinity present in Orc and Goblin bodies, they also key audiences into the anti-Black sentiments behind their caricatures by employing racist, animalistic, and dehumanizing language alongside these creations (Young, 2016). For example, "black-hearted," "primitive," and "savage" are used in the *D&D Monster Manual* (Wizards of the Coast, 2014, pp. 165, 237, 244). Sarah Stang and Aaron Trammel (2020) have also deftly pointed out how racist portrayals of monsters in *D&D* may also intersect with misogynistic or ageist stereotypes, creating monsters that often play upon corruptions of White, heteropatriarchal definitions of motherhood and femininity. This dynamic may be a contributing factor in Nott's loss of family and infantilization within the party. Importantly, the cast of Critical Role is at least latently aware of this history of characterization, as many of them have worked on video games, animated series, and *D&D* products in their capacities as voice actors, directors, and writers. When asked about his penchant for creating characters that hate Goblins, Riegel said: "They're gross, and little, and gross, and mean" (Critical Role, 2019, 51:05). The degree to which Riegel actually finds Goblins reprehensible or inherently evil is not pertinent, though, as I bring this point up mostly to show that he and the cast are aware and knowledgeable about the portrayal of the monstrous Other in their medium.

Finally, allow me to delineate my own uses for the term "race" in my argument and how I read racial analogues in Mercer's world. Race as it exists in *D&D* and race in scholarly circles are not the same. Though race has serious consequences in our world, it is a social construct, as

opposed to in *D&D*, where race historically connotes not only social and historical meaning, but undeniable biological and generic meaning as well. I have previously argued for examining racial mechanics in fantasy games as similar to the racial worldview of White supremacist groups, wherein race serves as rhetorical shorthand for morality, history, culture, homeland, and likelihood of encountering supposedly justifiable violence (Hines, 2022). Although the relationship between Orc, Goblin, and the real-world Other is seldom exact, the discourses, narratives, and worldbuilding involving Orcs and Goblins echo the racism and colonialism of our own world. Orcs and Goblins are the most disposable, the most harmfully stereotyped, and are very often justifiably killed based solely on their race. Most importantly, such races often have little degree of choice or free will throughout fantasy worlds, being inherently evil or chaotic.

It is interesting and expected, then, that Riegel's introduction to Nott chiefly emphasizes her physical traits. Nott enters this narrative in the very first scene of the live play, as Riegel introduces her as "a little Goblin girl" (Critical Role, 2018a, 21:20). The cast laughs at the physical dissonance between Riegel and his character before he continues, saying: "I am a Goblin. So, you know, the green skin, the green hair, the yellow eyes . . . she kinda hides in the shadows a lot because she knows Goblins aren't welcome in this part" (Critical Role, 2018a, 21:28). As Riegel initially speaks in a high-pitched, Cockney accent for Nott, the cast, again, laughs. Nott often plays the role of comic relief, a role which is surely buoyed by Riegel playing across gender. Vitally, my reading of Nott relies as much on Riegel's description of Nott's physical appearance as on his description of her social status. As the majority of *Campaign Two* takes place in the Human-led Dwendalian Empire, Nott and the rest of Goblinkind are seen as "marauding animals" (Mercer, 2020, p. 173). Even outside the Empire, the player is told in Mercer's sourcebook that "people consider goblins to be nothing more than monsters—and in many ways, they're right" (Mercer, 2020, p. 173). Even when the party journeys to Xhorhas, an empire of outcast and monstrous races, Nott is without place, as she was born in the Empire as a Halfling. As such, for most of her civil life, Nott is forced to wear a porcelain mask and bandages to hide her facial features and cloak her skin as White/Human. In numerous episodes, she gives a false name in establishments and must pretend to be another character's child. Unable to secure employment, she resorts to a life of criminality, "adventuring," and mercenary work, further creating a sense of precarity in her social interactions. Prior to the beginning of the liveplay, Nott met Caleb in prison, as she had been caught stealing wine. According to Nott, she was lucky to be left alive, as she says "the people who arrested [her] are not incorrect. If you see a Goblin, you should kill it on sight" (Critical Role, 2018c, 3:35:40).

In this sense, I argue that Nott experiences a very real sense of social death, with her skin and facial features justifying destruction with or without legal authority. Here, I borrow from Lisa Marie Cacho's (2012) work, which weaves notions of criminality into the experience of social death: "The criminal, the illegal alien, and the terrorist suspect are treated as obvious, self-inflicted, and necessary outcomes of law-breaking rather than as effects of the law or as produced by the law" (p. 4). As the party becomes employed by the Empire, Nott finds herself performing deadly, occasionally extrajudicial work for the same entity that would not provide her legal protection. Disguising herself through magical and nonmagical means are merely temporary fixes to a recurring problem for the party. Nott must literally present her skin color as whitened in order to pass in many of the towns and cities the party visits or deal with violence from the town guards. The perpetual fear within the party of Nott's inherent criminality lends itself to tropes in *D&D* which simultaneously characterize women as "deceptive, manipulative, and predatory *femmes fatales* while also dehumanizing them as evil monstrous creatures" (Stang, 2021, para. 3). Nott, however, does not display the characteristic sexuality and charm of femme fatales, and it is only when she becomes Halfling that she is able to reunite with her family and engage in a relationship with her husband. This is perhaps due to Nott's expressed disgust with her appearance and Riegel's attempts at playing Nott's low charisma score.

A brief moment in Episode 16 of *Campaign Two* elucidates Nott's characterization both in regards of how she is raced and gendered. Nott magically disguises herself as a Halfling girl so that she may merely, "spend an hour at a café . . . being a normal person" (Critical Role, 2018b, 3:23:03). This moment is brief, but quite revelatory. While the rest of the party navigates errands throughout the city, Nott has one of only a few moments in which we see her alone. The moment foreshadows Nott's eventual reveal as Veth, and her decision to use magic rather than her usual mask and bandages suggests a deeper desire to blend in. Magic is a precious resource for characters in *D&D*, so using a spell to forget the concern of being outed as a monstrous race is significant. Riegel speaks this moment as Nott, indicating that Nott sees herself as either not normal, not a person, or both. She then sends her family a package containing a large amount of gold and some items that she has clearly stolen, which indicates her role as a protector from afar. Being unwilling or unable to face her family in this form, her only ability to provide or assume her role as a mother is both remote and criminalized. I reiterate that such gameplay, allowing White players to empathize with an Othered being in an imagined setting is not intrinsically harmful, but I want to draw attention to the limits of such empathy when they are put into conflict with verisimilitude and a desire for realism in a setting with a harmful racial logic. Though the worlds of *D&D* are magical and fantastic, players desire for them to operate based

on predictable and consistent rules, and this is often true of racial mechanics.

Vitally, the party is aware that Nott exists as a racialized person at the margins of society, the consequences of which are felt by audience and players alike when Nott transforms into Veth. However, the characters are not always supportive of Nott and her idiosyncrasies, especially as they relate to her marginalization. While Nott's criminality and deviance are often played for laughs, the party subverts Nott's autonomy when the stakes are high. In a tense fight in an aquatic environment, Caleb casts a spell in order to force Nott to overcome her fears and assist the party. Up to this point, Nott has not revealed to the party that her fear of water is the result of her tragic backstory, and the party is growing impatient with her unwillingness to swim through a grotto in pursuit of an enemy. Caleb casts "Suggestion" on Nott, which temporarily magically persuades a creature or individual into pursuing a course of action outlined by the caster. Nott, failing to resist the spell, takes a swig of whiskey and follows along (Critical Role, 2018d). Though the party will eventually apologize to Nott, she tells Caleb that she understands his reasoning and merely asks that he warn her in the future if he intends to manipulate her will. Here, we begin to see the cast of Critical Role, even Riegel, envisioning Nott in the manner that consumers of fantastic worlds have been conditioned to envision the Orc and Goblin: as impulsive, violent, untrustworthy, and ultimately different in a fundamental, irreconcilable way. Though the party often magically abuses and coerces non-player characters and monsters, I assert that acting in such a way in this context indicates a shift in how the party treats Nott. As the cast and party travel with the Goblinoid, Nott regresses to stereotype, and the party obliges in treating her as such. The moral compunctions that might have held the party from manipulating a Human-coded character do not apply to the Other who has been characterized as immoral, inconvenient, and lacking in agency.

Nott, then, is stuck inside what Achille Mbembe (2003) calls the "slave condition," i.e., an ontological state in which one experiences "a triple loss: loss of a 'home,' loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status" (pp. 74-75). As I have shown, this condition is the result of a long history of racially mapping Black and Brown bodies into fantastic worlds, and it is a condition with which the cast of Critical Role is doubtlessly familiar. For much of *Campaign Two*, Nott is characterized by moments of intense emotion, criminality, and racial terror. Such a condition in the medium of a TTRPG represents underexamined potential for game and critical race scholars, and the repercussions of this realization are beyond the scope of this article. However, it is vital that we hold on to Nott's social position in the party, especially as Nott is magically transformed into Veth.

Transmogrifying Race

After the party tricks Isharnai the Hag into releasing her curse on Nott, Caleb learns a spell that allows him to alter a being's race. Casting the spell on Nott, he magically returns her to her Halfling form, allowing her to return to her husband and child. Riegel plays Veth differently than he plays Nott, and many of the characteristics that defined her until this moment are now muted or absent in his portrayal. In place of the cowardly, alcoholic, kleptomaniac Goblin, Veth is a kind, motherly, and courageous Halfling. This narrative runs counter to other predominant narratives of racial passing and transformation. While stories that detail racial passing and transformation often satirize or complicate the idea of a color line or scientific racism (Nerad, 2014, p.9), such narratives in *D&D* are undone by the fact that the racial logic of this fantastic world does not mirror our own.

Here, I wish to frame my own position as a game scholar, as I am broaching the grounds of past debates between ludologists and narratologists. I consider my own approach to the game of *D&D* as Jenkins (2004) does, envisioning designers as "narrative architects," making "choices about the design and organization of game spaces [which] have narratological consequences" (para. 23). In this case, the designers of *Dungeons and Dragons* 5th edition (Multiple authors, 2014) made conscious choices about how monstrous races would be constructed in their games and, by including gameplay and lore elements like racial ability scores, racial moral alignment, and inherent racial traits, the designers encourage narratives that are resistant to progressive ideas about the socially constructed nature of race. This paradigm is buoyed by the creation of supplemental *D&D* materials, such as the blog-turned-book *The Monsters Know What They Are Doing* (Ammann, 2019), which details intricate battle strategies and ways of life based merely on individual monsters' statistics. Even though Keith Ammann's text is noncanonical, it proves useful to players and DMs by extrapolating gameplay and roleplaying elements from monsters' mechanical values, a practice which I argue underlies Riegel's portrayal of Nott. While magic that allows one to disguise oneself as another race is relatively common (though also quite weak), magic that allows one to permanently change their race is exceedingly rare, such that Mercer had to write a spell into *Campaign Two* to allow it. While the introduction of supplemental materials in recent *D&D* manuals has lessened the degree to which race is tied to character statistics, many of the same narratives remain. Even as *Wizards of the Coast* espouses supposedly progressive racial changes in a revised system, known as One D&D, they have been criticized for recent racist, minstrel depictions of the Hadozee (a race of seafaring, ape-like humanoids), representing the ongoing issues that the company has with its racial politics (Carter, 2022). The example of Nott the Brave therefore makes a compelling argument for this scholarly approach to ludology, narratology, and TTRPGs.

For example, when Nott the Brave was transformed into Veth Brenatto, her ability scores changed because each race excels in certain gameplay attributes (e.g., strength, intelligence, and wisdom). While Nott had a higher constitution, meaning that she had more hit points and could drink more alcohol, Veth has a higher charisma score. In *D&D*, a character's charisma score is linked to their personality, attractiveness, and ability to manipulate others. This means that Veth, whenever the DM asks Riegel to roll a charisma ability, is more statistically likely to persuade someone, be welcomed by strangers, or gain an enemy's trust. Additionally, Halflings are naturally resistant to being frightened. Riegel would frequently roll against becoming frightened as Nott, but Veth, for reasons solely related to her racial makeup, is more likely to succeed in such rolls.

Naturally, such statistical changes also encourage changes in roleplaying. In discussing Nott's reasons for her excessive drinking and kleptomania, Riegel says:

> In Goblin form, it [antisocial behavior] is all super heightened. So, where she enjoyed a nice nip of sherry wine every once in a while, now she is a fucking maniac when it comes to drinking. When she used to collect baubles, now she compulsively needs to steal them. . . . She's a little nervous nelly back in Halfling land, but as Nott she is just terrified of everything around her. So it's just everything is heightened a bit. (Talks, 2019, 37:10)

Though Riegel also states that a part of Nott's behavior may be a coping mechanism, it is unsurprising that he also attributes these behaviors to the mere experience of being a Goblin; the logic of fantastic worlds necessitates that Nott's racial makeup has tainted her personality. In *D&D* game logic, Goblins are natural rogues, gaining bonuses to skills relevant to thieves and abilities that make it easy to move in and out of combat. Combined with Riegel's logic, it is easy to narratively justify Veth's increased bravery and charisma, as those are qualities that we should mechanically expect from this transformation—irrespective of other personality traits. Such developments lend credence to Jenkins's (2004) conceptualization: even with progressive narrative intentions, the mechanical and gameplay bases for Goblins in *D&D* makes telling such stories difficult. We tend to play into the narratives we think that other players and the game world desire of us. Though the cast is not prevented from creating narratives that challenge dominant understandings of race, the guidelines of the rules of the game will always bring them back towards the status quo of anti-Blackness and violence.

So What? It's Just a Game!

Several scholars have found links between certain behaviors present in games and those demonstrated in the "real" world (Taylor, 2002; Thomas & Johansen, 2012; Wood & Szymanski, 2020; Wolfendale,

2007). These linkages are heightened by the relation of the player to an avatar, who is a representation of themselves in the game world. Video games often employ avatars just as we see them in *D&D*, and I employ research on video game avatars as indicative of the sort of sensation players experience when playing *D&D*. Because *D&D* occurs in a communal, imagined, "theater of the mind," and because *D&D* often asks players to create their own representations in the world, the relationship between player and avatar may be slightly different from one player to another (Shaw, 2014, p. 7). Here, examining how players often relate to their avatars will allow me to further problematize the relationship between Riegel, the rest of the cast, the viewer, and Nott the Brave/Veth. By showing the various ways in which Riegel portrays Nott and Veth, I will then demonstrate how the "monstrous" Nott must be symbolically slain for the greater development of her humanized counterpart.

For one, as Jessica Wolfendale notes, players care deeply about their in-game representations, such that players can experience real feelings of attachment and distress when their avatar is hurt, killed, or has their social standing altered (Wolfendale, 2007). Jessica Wolfendale's study of distress in gaming is buoyed by Critical Role's own work, in which players are often found saddened and weeping during particularly tense or troublesome moments. Moreover, players often use their avatar to explore their own identity, the idea of identity as a social construct, and idealized forms of certain identities (Taylor, 2002; Thomas & Johansen, 2012; Wood & Szymanski, 2020; Shaw, 2014). Clearly, players develop a personal connection to the avatars they create. This affords such games powerful opportunities to generate empathy for individuals in traditionally marginalized groups.

However, players do not leave the real world at the door when they enter the game world, including problematic racist and sexist stereotypes. Researchers have also found that players are more likely to roleplay their character as violent and aggressive when they use a Black avatar or Black character (Yang et al., 2014a). The same dynamic holds true for players when they play a male avatar versus a female avatar (Yang et al., 2014b). In addition, players are more likely to objectify themselves after playing an avatar that they deem sexualized (Vandenbosch et al., 2017). This is all to say that players often roleplay in a manner that they feel the game world expects them to as a result of their role in the game world and their personal experiences in the "real" world. This expectation would certainly reinforce Riegel's rationale for roleplaying Nott as a cowardly, alcoholic criminal. While Riegel and the rest of the cast likely found Nott an interesting character through which they could explore and empathize with the monstrous Other, the mechanical parameters of *D&D* gameplay intrude on such an experience. Even beyond the racist and sexist gameplay elements that suffuse many roleplaying games and encourage problematic gameplay,

players may find themselves unconsciously reinforcing the roles of the "real" world in the imagined world.

The complicated nature of roleplay with regards to race, violence, and empathy is indicative of the primary means through which the cast of Critical Role can both empathize with Nott and optimistically represent her symbolic death for a character arc. This dynamic is only buoyed by the improvisational and comedic nature of actual plays, meaning that players might slip into stereotype and satire to maximize entertainment and clarity. Riegel might ironically use Nott's voice for comedic effect, engendering her through various speech acts. In the same way, Riegel's management of speech as Nott transforms into Veth may indicate how Nott is distilled into caricatures of her core personality traits as our ability to empathize with her ceases. By performing Nott as a racialized stereotype beholden to her intrinsic, racial traits, Riegel may also subtly give his peers permission to engage in unpunished racism or sexism in the imagined world.

Into the Dark Fantastic

In mechanically constraining Nott the Brave from challenging the bioessentialism of *D&D*, the narrative of *Campaign Two* relegates Nott to the "monster" of the campaign. This position is nicely explored by Thomas (2019) in her work examining Black women in fantasy literature. Thomas's work allows for a synthesis of the narrative position of Nott and places Nott in the recent history of monstrous women in fantasy works. Thomas's response to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's (1996) *Monster Theory* gives an excellent summary of the qualities that define monstrosity in fantasy literature. Two of these qualities are of particular importance, and it is with these in mind that we can finally lay Nott to rest.

The first is that "the monster is the harbinger of category crisis" (Cohen, 1996, p. 6). The monster, according to Thomas (2019) and Cohen (1996), resists categorization, appearing as a hybrid or assemblage of beings. In short, the monster innately challenges our understanding of humanness and humanity. Moreover, the monster shows that this simple binary is not tenable. This might seem counterintuitive as *D&D* creates clear designations where one race ends and another begins with massive amounts of statistical information; however, it is the introduction of characters such as Nott which problematize even these speculative notions of race as impermeable. In *D&D,* race is usually difficult to transgress. There are few, if any, offspring of different races, and all of them are at least half Human. However, Thomas clarifies that this problem is from the perspective of the "gallant hero and the fair maiden, *not* the monster" (2019, p. 21, emphasis in the original). Veth is a being that challenges the absolute, statistically calculated physiology and ontology of each race. As Veth has her Human-coded body transformed into a traditionally monstrous body, she transgresses

the racial order. Nott threatens to "smash distinctions" between the races (Cohen, 1996, p. 6). It is clear to the players and audience that her personality and body are incongruent, and they must be brought into harmony. Either the bioessentialism of the *D&D* world will assimilate Veth into a fully realized Goblin, or the magic of the party will restore Veth to her Halfling form. The second key delineation is Thomas's reading of Cohen's argument that "the monster polices the borders of the possible" (Cohen, 1996 p. 12). According to Thomas (2019), this recurring motif of fantastic settings is from the perspective of the stereotypical hero. Essentially, there are clear punishments for the Human entering the liminal, monstrous space, just as there must be consequences for the monstrous being entering the White, Human space.

This fantastic world designates some races as more Human than others, and because of this, it is impossible for characters to exist between the Human and the monstrous. Some races are statistically more intelligent, wise, charismatic, strong, aggressive, and so on, and many of these traits correlate to how the races are designated as inherently evil, good, lawful, chaotic, etc. Personal characteristics in the worlds of *D&D* and Critical Role are unambiguous. Therefore, Nott the Brave must either survive by allowing her Goblin tendencies to destroy her Human-like qualities, or die by relinquishing her Goblin form. As Riegel and the rest of the cast hint that Nott is increasingly losing her Humanity to her Goblinness, Nott devolves into a caricature of herself. On the same day that Nott is transformed into her Halfling form, Nott and the party debate having her eat a cat as a final send-off for her Goblinness. These moments become more frequent as the anticipation of her character arc's climax builds. Veth, emerging from the magical spell that has returned her Humanity, begins to regain her self-control, family, and moderation.

I argue that this predictable development forces Nott into the company of other Black women in fantasy literature, and we can infer the power of ludic elements over narrative through examining how this dynamic functions. In short, Nott's character exists only to further Veth's character development. Though the characters inhabit the same body and are performed by the same actor, I argue that their archetypes represent traditional conflicts between the valiant, White hero and the monstrous, criminal, Black villain. As such, due to the way the game world codes statistical, positional, and performance-based differences between the two, Nott must symbolically die for Veth to live. In fact, Nott gives each member of the party a parting message before the transformation. In symbolically dying, Nott falls prey to a common, troubling narrative trope for Black women in fantastic literature while at the same time pushing this trope further than its counterparts.

Again, drawing on Thomas (2019), we see a four-step cycle in which Black characters of fantastic worlds (1) exist as spectacle, thus (2)

interrupting the "waking dream of the fantastic," which then (3) requires violence to resolve the tension of feeling associated with their presence, finally (4) resulting in a sensation of "haunting" in which the "Dark Other *must* die, but she *cannot* die" (pp. 26-27, emphasis in the original). Though Thomas includes a fifth stage (emancipation; p. 28), I will not be discussing this stage. In fact, Nott will not be emancipated by this narrative nor the rules of the game world. Thomas notes that emancipatory narratives are not popular, as audiences tend to find them "unbelievable" with characters that are not "likable" (p. 28). In a still developing medium and platform, consistency and likability are quite important, consigning Nott to stereotypical representation. The medium, lore, gameplay, and performance all dovetail to create Nott as the racialized Other, but the cast and company's need for popular, likable characters means that this representation of the Other is fraught. This work characterizes Blackness and Otherness as something to be escaped, even and especially through intra and interpersonal violence.

As such, Nott does not "haunt" the narrative in the same manner as many of the other heroines analyzed by Thomas (2019). In these other narratives, the lack of a racialized Other prevents the creation of "playgrounds of the imagination," thus requiring another racialized Other to begin another cycle of storytelling (Thomas, 2019, p. 28). Through having Nott transform rather than truly die, the cast and characters can keep her in the narrative while assuring us of her complicity in her removal. In fact, this particular performance lends itself to a far more malicious model with regards to TTRPGs and interracial performance. As a result of the violence enacted against Nott not being an immediately violent act, the racialized Other is not removed from the narrative in a way with which audiences are familiar. As such, characters and observers are free to interpret Nott's symbolic death as character development for Veth. Nott's death does not stymie the narrative or prevent it from progressing; rather, her death resolves the tension of the Dark Other in a way that both slays the Other and allows for her continued, fragmented presence. In removing the character of the Goblin, one who does not contain the full autonomy or moral capacity of the Human to consent to this act, the narrative both destroys the Other while assuaging guilt for the necessity of her destruction.

I do not mean to say that Nott was against being transformed into a Halfling, or that she was manipulated by her compatriots. Rather, I assert that Nott is spoken for through people who cannot know what she wants, due to the constraints the game world and game mechanics place on the narrative. We cannot separate Nott from Riegel's portrayal of her, and Riegel is undoubtedly considering the racist logic of the game world as he represents her thoughts and actions. Riegel portrays a character that, according to its historical representation, lore, and the mechanics of the medium, is cursed to be without full autonomy or

strong moral compunctions. So, when the game world needs to resolve the inherent tension of the Dark Other in its narrative, the tools to do so already exist, even allowing the White cast and characters to justify their violent decision.

Conclusion

I have demonstrated the lasting power of gameplay mechanics and game world lore in shaping the sorts of narratives that are possible in fantastic worlds. Even in TTRPGs, which allow for an unprecedented amount of individual freedom in crafting character arcs and establishing meaning, the rules and discursive formations that accompany them form the architecture through which we attempt to weave stories. For games that occur in the fantastic worlds of science fiction, horror, and fantasy, these elements often take on forms that implicitly support the problematic logic of White supremacy. Some examples of these concepts were examined in *D&D* and Critical Role, and I have shown how narratives of racial permeability and transformation may take on surprisingly regressive themes. In a game like *D&D*, with a loose demarcation between the game world and reality, exploring other identities and racial Otherness may be a powerful way to safely engage with horrifying themes and generate empathy. Though I do not want to dismiss the narrative, creative, and affective power of this sort of gameplay and the worlds in which they occur, our conversations about representation in these worlds must move past just representation. Rather, I argue that such games must be broken down and built back up with explicitly antiracist gameplay elements in mind.

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