

Role-Playing World-Making: Tabletop Role Playing Games as Utopian Practice  
(For the “Designing Counter-narratives in Games and Gaming Culture” Panel)

By Cameron Irby

Tabletop Role Playing Games (TRPGs) have come a long way from the darkest days of the Satanic Panic and now enjoy a treasured spot in the social calendars of players new and old around the world. In addition to renewed interest following the release of Netflix’s *Stranger Things* (which continues to draw from the mythos of *Dungeons & Dragons* aka *D&D*) as well as the popularity of Actual Play podcasts like *Critical Role*, *The Adventure Zone*, and *Rivals of Waterdeep*, TRPGs saw a noticeable player boost during the COVID lockdowns of 2020 and the pandemic restrictions of 2021. As other entertainment venues were shut down or became inaccessible monetarily, fans of this storytelling mode only had to convince a couple of friends and acquaintances to gather around a table if they were lucky or in a chatroom or Discord server if not; from there, they could roll some dice and craft stories about saving the world in epic style once a week or so. What had remained an acknowledged but otherwise niche segment of gaming culture for nearly forty years quickly became a method by which people kept time and stayed connected throughout the pandemic. As TRPGs become more mainstream, however, many players and game designers question the status quo set by *Dungeons & Dragons* and its siblings and challenged the ingrained biases within this storytelling mode.

Tying into this panel’s overall theme of designing counter-narratives, this paper will elaborate on the ways that TRPGs can generate new perspectives and help players ideate possible worlds through the act of collaborative world-building. I will discuss how world-building can contribute to what José Esteban Muñoz calls a “queer utopian hermeneutic,” a practice of constantly “asking and looking beyond the here and now” to imagine and then create a better

world in the present.<sup>1</sup> Although world-building can occur through traditional arts like writing and painting or popular media forms like film and comics, I argue that TRPGs are unique in this respect because of their low barrier of entry to new players and their primary goal of telling a personalized, emotionally inflected story. As a result, a game session can operate as an object to orient oneself around, as Sara Ahmed suggests in *Queer Phenomenology*—that is, as players are “turned toward” the fictional worlds they create, these worlds “make an impression upon us” and thus shape what we reach towards and how we move about the world.<sup>2</sup> Because these worlds can shape us in small yet noticeable ways, it is vital to make even fictional worlds ones that strive for a more livable, just, and concrete future. This research stems from my ongoing dissertation project, which examines the ways we have sought escapes through fiction during the COVID crisis. The chapter that this essay is based on originally centered on the implementation of disability-focused tools and stories crafted by *Dungeons & Dragons* players such as Sara Thompson’s “Combat Wheelchair” supplement. However, recent events concerning players’ ability to create new materials for *Dungeons & Dragons* and whether its developer Wizards of the Coast would revoke its Open Gaming License—thereby retroactively laying claim to any published fan materials using said license—spurred a renewed interest in exploring other TRPGs and the fictional worlds that could be crafted using them. To this end, I conclude this paper with a few examples of this style of world-making, spearheaded by independent developers that desire to make TRPGs a hobby for everyone while imagining how players and their characters can work to create a better future.

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<sup>1</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th Anniversary (NYU Press, 2019), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 27.

I am under no illusions that TRPGs will be the singular instrument by which we can achieve social justice and peace in our time. Many of these games propagate hateful ideologies and/or seek to perpetuate the status quo by claiming to be merely for cheap entertainment and nothing more. Rather than stoke the imagination and explore the possibilities of existence, they continuously recycle tales of bootstraps-based self-improvement, climbing the economic ladder through fair effort, and solving the problems of the world today through magic spells or cybernetics that only cover up the symptoms of overarching societal ills. The mechanics of these games—the very rules that help players (re)construct these worlds at home—also reflect this lack of imagination. *Dungeons & Dragons* expects all players to desire to slay monsters and seek them out to the ends of the earth. They are awarded experience points for doing so, allowing player characters to level up, gain new abilities, and thereby take on stronger foes. But all creatures from rats to civilians grant experience. One player did the math and found that you can reach *D&D*'s maximum level of 20 by simply killing six rats a day for sixteen years.<sup>3</sup> While this is a somewhat facetious solution, it highlights both how arbitrary the leveling system is and how it reinforces the expectation that players should seek out opponents that could grant them more experience in less time.

This doubly applies to the cultural aspects embedded within TRPGs. For several players, the information about fictional settings like *D&D*'s Faerun or *Cyberpunk*'s Night City operate purely as building blocks that they can take apart, rebuild, or discard as it suits their narrative. Alternatively, they can create wholly new pieces or borrow elements from other players and game designers to make their table's storyworld a bit more personal or to better represent their

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<sup>3</sup> Wreckedtums, "RAW, an Adventurer Can Reach Level 20 Killing 6 Rats per Day after 16 Years.," Reddit Post, *R/Dndnext*, July 24, 2020, [www.reddit.com/r/dndnext/comments/hx9jml/raw\\_an\\_adventurer\\_can\\_reach\\_level\\_20\\_killing\\_6/](https://www.reddit.com/r/dndnext/comments/hx9jml/raw_an_adventurer_can_reach_level_20_killing_6/).

individual aesthetic preferences. Although it would be easy to state that all one needs to do to fix a TRPG's lore would be to rip out all its problematic aspects, they are often replaced with comparably awkward or thorny solutions. The *Cyberpunk* TRPG by R. Talsorian Games, for instance, introduces the mental condition of "cyberpsychosis," an advanced form of psychopathy augmented by the installation of cybernetic implants. Outside of the lore, this mechanic discourages player characters from greedily replacing their body parts with the latest and greatest tech, as they gamble their character's humanity with every upgrade. Beyond the demonization of mental illness, cyberpsychosis could occur with any cybernetic for any reason, meaning a trans-masculine character would lose humanity for bottom surgery and a character who lost an arm in combat could go berserk if they got a replacement. The developers of *Cyberpunk* attempted to correct this oversight with the publication of *Cyberpunk RED*, which now explicitly states that cosmetics like LED hair strands or essential services like gender confirmation surgeries and prosthetics do not provoke cyberpsychosis. Though cyberpsychosis can still affect characters, *RED* also introduces therapy as an in-universe salve for characters who suffer from it.<sup>4</sup> These changes introduce new complications. If a character requires cybernetic modifications for employment or labor, are they performing a "voluntary removal of a functioning body part to replace it with a machine" and thus lose a portion of their humanity score?<sup>5</sup> Are characters unable to afford the therapy sessions therefore less human? Although these revisions to the cyberpsychosis system are rooted in a trans- and disability-inclusive motive, they nevertheless still operate on presumptions of physical and mental purity, presumptions that resist attempts to root them out.

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<sup>4</sup> R. Talsorian Games. *Cyberpunk RED Core Rulebook*. V. 1.25. 109

<sup>5</sup> *Cyberpunk RED*, 231.

One can view these critiques with skepticism. *Dungeons & Dragons* plays to the epic fantasy tropes found in works like *Lord of the Rings* and *World of Warcraft*, and *Cyberpunk RED* is supposed to reflect a dark future wherein hyper-capitalism can reduce people to monsters. The mechanics and lore reinforce those genre narratives and act as a resource for players to create their own stories. From this point of view, the burden of creation is no longer on the game developer but on the players who can use these tools and their imaginations to craft the worlds they would like to explore. The problem with this conception of individualistic imagination, as activist and writer adrienne maree brown remarks, is that imagination “is shaped by our entire life experience, our socialization, the concepts we are exposed to, where we fall in the global hierarchies of society.”<sup>6</sup> Thus the imagination is limited by what we know and believe.

Alongside Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 and continued instances of racial violence in the US, players called on *Dungeons & Dragons* to address racist stereotypes in their fiction and how a character’s race would essentially determine their class and (therefore) their status in society. While optional rules were released in a supplementary rulebook that nix some of the more pronounced bioessentialism and the upcoming One D&D release promises to change the term to “species,” these changes still consider a character’s genetics as something worth committing to paper.<sup>7</sup> *Dungeons & Dragons* cannot imagine a fantasy world without race, and as a result, it invites its players to use racial difference as a game mechanic and as a storytelling tool.

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<sup>6</sup> adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico: AK Press, 2017), 17

<sup>7</sup> J. R. Zambrano, “D&D: New Racial Ability Score Rules Revealed In Online Guide,” *Bell of Lost Souls* (blog), September 16, 2020, <https://www.belloflostsouls.net/2020/09/dd-new-racial-ability-score-rules-revealed-in-online-guide.html>; Owen S. Good, “D&D Rule Change Replaces ‘Race’ with ‘Species,’” *Polygon* (blog), December 1, 2022, <https://www.polygon.com/23488097/dungeons-dragons-race-species-rule-change-announcement-wotc-unearthed-arcana>.

Put another way, players are invited to orient themselves around the ideas, imaginative spaces, and creations of a TRPG. This concept of orientations, as Sara Ahmed notes, “shape not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as ‘who’ or ‘what’ we direct our energy and attention toward.”<sup>8</sup> People can become oriented around other people, places, things, jobs, and stories in which they find comfort and strength. This explains how players find hope or better themselves and their communities through TRPGs with less-than-ideal aspects. *Dungeons & Dragons* has been used as a therapy aid for over a decade as researchers find that role-playing games can enkindle creativity and empathy, help players create and sustain relationships, and help players deal with difficult issues they may not normally feel comfortable sharing.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, queer folk have reveled in the openness of *D&D*’s character creation and role-play, trying out pronouns and appearances in a space that allows for experimentation.<sup>10</sup> Yet what we bring into our orbits “orients the body in some ways rather than others,” bringing certain actions and beliefs within reach while distancing the self from others.<sup>11</sup> This could be something as harmless as believing, however faintly, in superstitions about lucky and unlucky dice to as harmful as reproducing racist stereotypes. Players can regularly find themselves the odd one out at the table for going against the grain, as one player describes: “There was always pressure from the outside for me to make my characters conform to narrow boxes.”<sup>12</sup> If players cannot imagine the possibility, then the idea may simply be out of reach.

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<sup>8</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Sören Henrich and Rachel Worthington, “Let Your Clients Fight Dragons: A Rapid Evidence Assessment Regarding the Therapeutic Utility of ‘Dungeons & Dragons,’” *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* 0, no. 0 (December 4, 2021): 1–19, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15401383.2021.1987367>.

<sup>10</sup> Alex Viney, “Playing Only Trans Characters in Tabletop RPGs Helped Me Understand Myself,” *Dicebreaker*, November 3, 2021, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/categories/roleplaying-game/opinion/trans-characters-tabletop-rpgs-help-understand-myself>; Linda H. Codega, “The Power of Queer Play in Dungeons & Dragons,” *Tor.com*, February 3, 2020, <https://www.tor.com/2020/02/03/the-power-of-queer-play-in-dungeons-dragons/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Cecilia D’Anastasio, “D&D Must Grapple With the Racism in Fantasy,” *Wired*, accessed February 7, 2023, <https://www.wired.com/story/dandd-must-grapple-with-the-racism-in-fantasy/>.

How, then, do we bring more open ideas of inclusion and being to the table? Put another way, how can TRPGs advance us to Muñoz's queer utopian horizon? Muñoz writes in *Cruising Utopia* that conceiving of queerness as “an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” allows us a way to “see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present”.<sup>13</sup> Building on the work of the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, Muñoz remarks that by allowing for a concrete imagination of utopia—utopia as an evermoving destination one can strive towards—we can create “a critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, the imagination provides escape *routes* rather than an escape: paths that we can follow to create a better reality. To create those escape routes, we must be capable of imagining them. Trans artist Felix Kawitzky sees TRPGs as capable tools for expanding players' imaginations through play, and they add: “TRPGs offer up a space where no revolutionary project is too bold – one that can playfully and ambitiously provide resistance to, relief from and insight into, real-world dominant, oppressive socio-political institutions. ...It is by virtue of this playfulness – by virtue of the ways in which it allows an interfacing between reality and potentiality – that these utopian seeds of hope may begin to grow.”<sup>15</sup> Another pair of researchers—Scott Storm and Karis Jones—applied Muñoz's utopian framework to help high school students practice critical literacy beyond deconstruction and found that the students “engaged in deconstructive critique, disidentifications and queer futurity in powerful enactments of critical literacies that involved simultaneous resistance, subversion, imagination and hope as youth envisioned queer utopian world-building through their fantasy storytelling.”<sup>16</sup> I am

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<sup>13</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 35, original emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Felix Rose Kawitzky, “Magic Circles: Tabletop Role-Playing Games as Queer Utopian Method,” *Performance Research* 25, no. 8 (November 16, 2020), 132.

<sup>16</sup> Scott Storm and Karis Jones, “Queering Critical Literacies: Disidentifications and Queer Futurity in an Afterschool Storytelling and Roleplaying Game,” *English Teaching: Practice & Critique* 20, no. 4 (January 1, 2021): 534–48, <https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-10-2020-0131>.

encouraged by their efforts, and I hope to share and further the work of envisioning utopia through TRPGs.

As optimistic as this conception of using TRPGs to make the world a better place is, there remains the work of getting people to step outside of their comfort zones and imagine possibilities beyond raiding dungeons and slaying dragons. Despite the thousands of TRPGs available today, players have lamented for years about a “GM” or gamemaster crisis, generally stated as one of two issues. The first is that *Dungeons & Dragons* is so popular that there are not enough people willing to play as the gamemaster—the player responsible for enforcing the game’s rules, adjudicating disagreements between players, creating the setting and non-player characters, and often hosting the game in their home (or if online, setting up the virtual tabletop with images and resources). Journalist Henry Solotaroff-Webber recently reported that this labor disparity between the GM and other players has resulted in a shortage of GMs in New York City caused by pandemic restrictions and GMs increasingly moving to professionalize the role to compensate for the time spent building campaigns for players.<sup>17</sup> Others lament that “most other games have GMs desperate to find players,” as players accustomed to *D&D* would rather stick with the system they know how to play or find the prospect of learning a new system too daunting.<sup>18</sup> Both takes have the core issue that *D&D* has become the TRPG that players have, using Ahmed’s framework, oriented themselves around. As “the world’s greatest roleplaying game,” *Dungeons & Dragons* has become something for players to identify themselves with and to inspire others to create vibrant worlds and tell beautiful and incredibly personal narratives.

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<sup>17</sup> Henry Solotaroff-Webber, “It’s Not Just You: NYC Has a Serious Dungeon Master Shortage,” Hell Gate, November 10, 2022, <https://hellgatenyc.com/no-on-wants-to-dungeon-master-any-more>.

<sup>18</sup> u/PorterPirate, “5e DnD Has a DM Crisis,” Reddit Post, *R/Rpg*, December 6, 2022, [https://www.reddit.com/r/rpg/comments/zedy31/comment/iz5uw2w/?utm\\_source=share&utm\\_medium=web2x&context=3](https://www.reddit.com/r/rpg/comments/zedy31/comment/iz5uw2w/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3).



In the eyes of *Dungeons & Dragons*' developer Wizards of the Coast and its corporate owner Hasbro, this attachment could be utilized for extreme profit. Not long after comments by Wizards of the Coast CEO Cynthia Williams that “the brand is really under monetized,”<sup>19</sup> journalist Linda Codega obtained and subsequently leaked a draft revision of the Open Gaming License (OGL), a document that allowed *Dungeons & Dragons*' core rules to be utilized for personal projects and commercial products without royalties or copyright infringement.<sup>19</sup> The original OGL allowed game designers like Paizo to create *Pathfinder* and *Starfinder* based on the third-edition rules and granted hobbyists and third-party publishers like Kobold Press nearly unrestricted creative freedom. This leaked revision would have not only deauthorized anything published under the old license but also would prevent anyone from selling or making a living from the *Dungeons & Dragons* intellectual property without also reporting their income to Wizards of the Coast and paying royalties.<sup>20</sup> Although there were numerous further revisions in an attempt to stem the sheer outrage from the TRPG community—including releasing the fifth-edition rules under a Creative Commons license—there are no guarantees that the upcoming One D&D/sixth-edition will not simply create a new, exclusive license that would lock the imaginative potential of *Dungeons & Dragons* players within a walled garden accessible only through an online subscription service. This has led some developers to create their own open licenses for their TRPGs such as Paizo's Open RPG Creative (ORC) License, which has already accrued more than 1,500 publishers and designers.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Chase Carter, “Dungeons & Dragons Executives Think ‘the Brand Is Really under Monetised,’” Dicebreaker, December 9, 2022, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/categories/roleplaying-game/news/dungeons-and-dragons-under-monetised-says-executives>; Linda H. Codega, “Dungeons & Dragons’ New License Tightens Its Grip on Competition,” Gizmodo, January 5, 2023, <https://gizmodo.com/dnd-wizards-of-the-coast-ogl-1-1-open-gaming-license-1849950634>.

<sup>20</sup> Codega, “Dungeons & Dragons’ New License.”

<sup>21</sup> Paizo Blog, “The ORC Alliance Grows,” Paizo, January 19, 2023, <https://paizo.com/community/blog/v5748dvo6si7y?The-ORC-Alliance-Grows>.

The OGL controversy has revealed to many players both how much of the TRPG environment relied on the presumed goodwill of Wizards of the Coast and the wide range of TRPGs available to play without dancing around corporate restrictions or adhering to what was only possible within the *Dungeons & Dragons* rule set. Many developers and players have worked to use *D&D* for liberatory practices and transformational storytelling, including the anti-capitalist *Eat the Rich* adventure collection, the *Uncaged* anthologies retelling classical mythology and folklore through a feminist lens, and the *Limitless Heroics* compendium for creating more true-to-life and empowering depictions of disabled and neurodivergent bodies.<sup>22</sup> This work is commendable and highlights how TRPGs can be used to tell diverse stories regardless of the rules framework as well as what could have been lost had the OGL changes gone forward. The uncertain future of *Dungeons & Dragons* has led many diehard fans to question how much of their lives were oriented around this one TRPG and have begun trying out new systems and feeling out new imaginative possibilities. It is with this in mind that I wish to conclude this paper with a selection of TRPGs that can more actively work toward the queer utopian horizon, a “critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*.”<sup>23</sup>

Mainstream media often relegates queer stories to the same emotional tracks and stereotypes: the gay best friend practicing safe femininity away from masculine spaces, the victimized trans body unable to tell their own story, the monstrous or inhuman nonbinary individual, and so on. Queer voices face government-sponsored brutality and taciturn

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<sup>22</sup> “Home | Eat the Rich Anthology,” Eat the Rich Anthology, accessed February 13, 2023, <https://www.eattherichanthology.com>; “Uncaged Anthology,” Uncaged Anthology, accessed February 13, 2023, <https://www.uncagedanthology.com>; “Limitless Heroics: Including Characters with Disabilities, Mental Illness, and Neurodivergence in 5e - Wyrnworks Publishing,” December 15, 2022, <https://wyrnworkspublishing.com/product/limitless-heroics/>.

<sup>23</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 35.

indifference, both designed to silence present discontent and to curtail any concept of a future where queerness survives. April Kit Walsh, a senior staff attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation and transwoman, remarks that TRPGs and fanfiction were among the only places where she could witness true queer representation and thus created *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* “to center and celebrate people who are marginalized on the basis of gender and sexuality and tell authentic, positive stories.”<sup>24</sup> Although players of *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* are not required to be or roleplay as thirsty, lesbians, or swordspeople, the rulebook explicitly lists that everyone at the table must “Support racial liberation, intersectional feminism, and queer liberation,” and that those who oppose such tenets should “fix [their] heart before sharing a table with other people.”<sup>25</sup> Further distancing *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* from the standard TRPG playbook of gold, guts, and glory, the game builds around the emotional ties between the player and non-player characters, represented as “strings” that one can be pulled to “help, hinder, or influence” others or be built up to gain a better understanding of the other person.<sup>26</sup> Players use “playbooks” to guide both character creation and their character’s core conflicts, which are often reflective of issues faced by queer and marginalized folk. For example, the Seeker playbook describes a character who “comes from a toxic society and has found a new community in which to belong and grow” but must first work through internalized oppression and ingrained ideologies.<sup>27</sup> These characters then explore these connections and conflicts within settings both familiar and queer, ranging from racing through a neon-filled cyberpunk city to defending a magical coffee shop from gentrification as well as retellings of popular franchises like *Star Wars*. Although players

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<sup>24</sup> Egg Embry, “Thirsty Sword Lesbians: An Interview With April Kit Walsh (Evil Hat Productions),” EN World | Dungeons & Dragons | Tabletop Roleplaying Games, November 5, 2020, <https://www.enworld.org/threads/thirsty-sword-lesbians-an-interview-with-april-kit-walsh-evil-hat-productions.675825/>.

<sup>25</sup> April Kit Walsh, *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* (Silver Spring: Evil Hat Productions, 2021), 11.

<sup>26</sup> Walsh, *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, 20.

<sup>27</sup> Walsh, *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, 72.

may take whatever direction they feel inspired to follow, each of the storyworlds presented and the rules themselves instill upon players the directive to “Change the world for the better by acting with integrity and compassion.”<sup>28</sup>

Regrettably, not every conflict can be resolved through emotional appeals and kind-hearted discussions, doubly true if one side of that conflict is predicated on the eradication of the opposition. As the gamebook for the mech-combat TRPG *Lancer* acknowledges, real-world suffering and events such as “slavery, exploitation, racism, directed hate, genocide, [and] the stealing of indigenous land...are real phenomena, are ongoing acts of injustice and cruelty, and are not simply ‘fantasy’ or ‘interesting devices’ to use in a roleplaying game.”<sup>29</sup> Produced by Massif Press and co-written by sci-fi writer Miguel Lopez and by Tom Parkinson-Morgan, the creator of the webcomic *Kill 6 Billion Demons*, *Lancer* was developed as an alternative to “cynical sci-fi,” instead building a setting where “the fight that you’re gonna have is to be a righteous one and it is in defence of something rather than for gain.”<sup>30</sup> In fact, the world of *Lancer* is “at once in a state of utopia and working to affect it” as a collectivist coalition of worlds called Union struggles to ensure a life of peace and prosperity for those under its banner.<sup>31</sup> This utopia is one that the player characters wrestle with as they test its limits, its beliefs, and its believers. Perhaps in one campaign, they play as humanitarian aid workers struggling to defend a refugee convoy from raiders; in another, they may choose to raid the ships of corpo-states that seek to use Union’s resources for profit. To lean into these moral quandaries, the setting features “no easy aliens” to use as villains. As Lopez and Parkinson-Morgan note,

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<sup>28</sup> Walsh, *Thirsty Sword Lesbians*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Miguel Lopez and Tom Parkinson-Morgan, *Lancer* (China: Massif Press, 2019), 337.

<sup>30</sup> Luke Shaw, “Lancer: Inside the Cockpit of the Mech RPG Looking to a Positive Future for Roleplaying - and the Universe,” Dicebreaker, September 21, 2020, <https://www.dicebreaker.com/games/lancer/interview/lancer-rpg-interview-future-roleplaying>.

<sup>31</sup> Lopez and Parkinson-Morgan, *Lancer*, 337.

“humanity alone are the architects of terrible cruelties, but we can also be the architects of better, more just futures—and presents.”<sup>32</sup> With this philosophy in mind, *Lancer* encourages players to engage in difficult and generative world-building questions while using its fiction and rules to create evocative scenarios in which to practice utopia.

Yet the problem central to most science fiction is that it can seem too far flung from the ails of the average person. The image of an anthropomorphic mechanized calvary unit can be awe-inspiring in theory but do little to assuage the spirit of someone who can barely imagine how they can get through to tomorrow when rent is due today. *Hard Wired Island* by Weird Age Games brings its retrofuturist cyberpunk world to life by not only basing the technological marvel of the Grand Cross space station on mostly present-day or recent past technologies but also by focusing on the lived experiences of those capital exploits: the working class, the homeless, the single parent, the queer, the marginalized, and so on. Player characters “pay rent, they buy groceries, and they hang out with their friends” in between the game’s missions, which revolve around improving the lives of those within their communities and on Grand Cross itself.<sup>33</sup> While cyberpunk as a genre continues to be mined for corporate benefit, *Hard Wired Island* encourages players to use political action, protest, and direct action to stop a conglomerate of corporations and capitalist nations like the USA from privatizing the station’s public services, manipulating its democratic elections, and exploiting labor through gig work apps. One way the TRPG does this is through the burden system, which represents a character’s economic difficulties. Nearly all player characters’ burdens range from “getting by” to destitute and are encouraged to share this burden by sharing housing, a common solution in the real world and

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<sup>32</sup> Lopez and Parkinson-Morgan, *Lancer*, 337.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Matijevic, Freyja Erlingsdóttir, and Minerva McJanda, *Hard Wired Island: Retrofuture Cyberpunk* (UFO Press, 2021), 8.

indicative of the game's overall push for players to work together.<sup>34</sup> The burden system also tracks the welfare of the various communities and neighborhoods the player characters interact with, which if neglected can result in its residents moving out or other hard choices. This system also provides a more holistic approach to cybernetic augmentation than *Cyberpunk RED*, treating these "upgrades" as technologies that must be maintained and paid for and thus more reflective on the experiences of disabled people and of workers who are often stuck with the hidden costs of their professions.<sup>35</sup> The world of *Hard Wired Island* may not be a utopia, but the game uses the framing of a more tangible sci-fi world to give its players the tools to push for change.

These TRPGs are only a sample of the vibrant storyworlds that are working to reorient the hobby away from its chauvinist, racist, and toxic roots towards an imaginative space that players can take hold of, dream of, and seek to make real in their fiction and in their communities. The project of utopia can never truly be completed, Muñoz reminds us, because utopia always exists on the horizon; although it should "mobilize us, push us forward," it "renders potential blueprints of a world not quite here, a horizon of possibility, not a fixed schema."<sup>36</sup> The act of improving the lives of those around us will eventually alert us to new pains and remind us of old wounds that still need to be healed. We must continue to look forward to the horizon to remind us what still needs to be done, and we can only do that by dreaming of worlds we wish to travel to and by working together to figure out how to make those fantasies a reality.

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<sup>34</sup> Matijevic, Erlingsdóttir, and McJanda, *Hard Wired Island*, 53.

<sup>35</sup> Matijevic, Erlingsdóttir, and McJanda, *Hard Wired Island*, 98.

<sup>36</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 97.