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A Different Kind of Tactics: Subverting *Dungeons & Dragons*

The swiftness of netizens flocking to *Dungeons & Dragons* and other role-playing games during the COVID-19 pandemic is, to some, emblematic of the desires of people stuck in quarantine and self-isolation to escape the troubles of the global crisis. It's hard not to see why, as cases continue to rise while politicians argue over whether citizens' lives should be put in danger in favor of restarting the economic engines of the world. At the same time, millions of people in Italy, the U.S., and elsewhere—stuck in their homes, recently unemployed, and otherwise free of typical time commitments—have swarmed virtual tabletop platforms like Roll20 for the first time or their thirtieth (Rundle, para. 17). Since D&D's release in 1974 and the flurry of attacks on “dangerous” media known as the Satanic Panic, the idea that games provide an escape from reality—an escape that could irreparably blur the lines between the two—has been oft-discussed. Conservatives and other moral entrepreneurs are quick to point to instances where people commit heinous crimes while believing that they are real vampires or other fictional beings; in contrast, players and games studies scholars cite several theories like Johan Huizinga's “magic circle” —“a closed space marked out for [games], either materially or ideally”—to solidify the barrier between the “real” world and the game, assuaging fears that one could affect the other (Laycock 175; qtd. in Flanagan 5). Yet, the experiences of participants in live-action role-playing games and anyone who has had a bad day before taking a seat at the

table attest to the uncomfortable truth that there is no “magic circle,” as the player exists both in and outside the gaming space and feels the pleasure, pain, and weight of both. As such, role-playing game designers today have pivoted to creating adventures with both worlds in mind, allowing players to introduce and play with complex political and social issues in a “fantasy” world to explore hegemonic ideologies and the tactics for their dismantlement in the “real” world.

In this essay, I will explore the exceptional transgressive qualities of role-playing games (RPGs) through the form’s emphasis on personal narratives and worldbuilding projects. Using *Dungeons & Dragons*, I discuss the RPG as a performative act, as an imaginative space, and as a site for tactical media projects. While there exist many examples of RPGs, *Dungeons & Dragons* is frequently considered the genre’s progenitor and has since become synonymous with it. Though other titles may be more effective for examining each facet of the RPG experience and for use in tactical media, here *Dungeons & Dragons* (and its 5th edition in particular) acts as a representative for current mainstream RPG design sensibilities. I conclude with a brief look at three collaborations that seek to harness RPGs as instruments to promote social justice and bring awareness to social crises outside of the “magic circle” of the game table.

Role-playing games describe themselves: games in which players take on a role. This definition is nebulous by design, as the rules of a given RPG are established and enforced by those who play it. This could mean that the rules of the game can change at any time by anyone, a circumstance typically avoided by designating one player as a referee and using some chance-based mechanism of success, be it dice or a deck of playing cards. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, the Dungeon Master (DM) is tasked with the twin roles of an enemy (by creating conflict for the player characters to resolve) and of an impartial judge (by ensuring everyone, including

themselves, adheres to the rulebooks of *Dungeons & Dragons*), with the ultimate goal of helping everyone at the table tell a collectively authored story. Different games facilitate different stories through the creative constraints of their rules; since *Dungeons & Dragons* includes rules for spellcasting but not for space travel, it encourages players and DMs to build better stories with wizards, not astronauts. Ultimately, Ryan Vu remarks in his article “Fantasy After Representation,” “The aim of all the rules, maps, charts, and other assorted paratexts that make up the printed content of RPGs ... is to foster discourse about and through genre” (280). These discussions feel out the limits of a given genre (“Does space flight count as fantasy? Is magic unexplained science fiction?”) as well as the narrative depth within those genres and why we are attracted to those kinds of stories in the first place.

These talks do not reside solely inside the game but also outside of it, acting as a continuous negotiation of it: a metagame. Metagames, as Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux mark them, “are where and when games happen;” as opposed to Huizinga’s “magic circle” where play is demarcated and contained, the authors instead see “a *messy circle* that both constrains games and makes them possible in the first place” (15, original emphasis). The messiness of role-playing games can be seen in how quickly players can switch frames or “interrelated systems of meaning” (Fine 3). Gary Alan Fine describes these frames in *Shared Fantasy* as the “primary framework” or daily life, the “player identity” (as someone aware they are playing a game), and the “character identity” or role they play in the game (186). In six seconds, a player can go from speaking in character to rolling dice to texting a friend, shuffling between all three frames as necessary to participate in them. It is this messiness that “anchors the game in time and space” while simultaneously preventing any one frame from fully dominating the other (Boluk and LeMieux 11).

This messiness also accompanies tactical media. Not indicative of any specific media format or political agenda, tactical media have at their core a unifying theme of “disturbance;” more explicitly, Rita Raley writes in *Tactical Media* that “tactical media signifies the intervention and disruption of a dominant semiotic regime, the temporary creation of a situation in which signs, messages, and narratives are set into play and critical thinking becomes possible” (6). These projects disorient participants and viewers at first glance, but these efforts, like the corporate infiltrations of the Yes Men and the biopolitical interventions and experimentations by Critical Art Ensemble, temporarily blur the line between expert/amateur, citizen/politician, privileged/disenfranchised, and artist/scientist, allowing everyone involved a moment to renegotiate cultural norms and taken-for-granted beliefs about the world. They bring the metagame of life back into the public consciousness for consideration. One common example of tactical media is the “persuasive game,” a genre that “takes care to model causality and consequences” through the player’s actions (4). Molleindustria’s *TuboFlex* or Lucas Pope’s *Papers, Please*, for example, are designed to mimic common practices such as the precarious labor of the modern service industry or the monotony and ever-changing rules for the immigration process, respectively. In addition to exposing the metagames of society, persuasive games embody “critical play,” what Mary Flanagan calls “compelling, complex play environments using the intricacies of critical thinking to offer novel possibilities in games” (6). Inspiring players to “explore what is permissible and what pushes at that boundary between rules and expectations,” persuasive games and tactical media “engage in a micropolitics of disruption, intervention, and education” (Flanagan 13; Raley 1). Rather than try to make a singular media object to win the hearts and minds of the world, tactical media instead reach out to the individual in situated, temporally locked moments.

This ephemerality also applies to RPGs. While their rules can be codified and put into global circulation, the sessions themselves are harder to capture. The players of *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*, for instance, have taken to recording their games via streaming or audio podcasts for the entertainment of others, but the most RPG sessions are created and experienced between small clusters of players with only session notes, empty cans, and eraser marks on a character sheet denoting that anything of value had transpired. Peggy Phelan in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* argues that such experiences are part and parcel of performance, which “cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance” (148, original emphasis). It is near impossible to actually “keep” art, as entropy inevitably consumes all things, but performance is special since “[its] only life is in the present” (148). Once the performance ends, it ends. If an RPG session is recorded, it becomes a film or a podcast, not a performance. Some may argue that this signifies the medium’s lack of cultural value, that nothing is produced from the experience and thus time was wasted rolling dice. Yet, Phelan warns, performance “is the attempt to value that which is *nonreproductive*” and “honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have *an experience of value* which leaves no visible trace behind” (152, 149, emphasis added). The experience alone can be worth the effort, even if only for a moment.

What, then, would make participating in an RPG “an experience of value?” For Sarah Bowman, the experience is like improv theater or stage acting in that both involve the participant taking on roles, but RPGs “offer a far greater degree of personal agency... Because the constraint of an audience is no longer a factor, role-players enact their characters mainly for their own edification and in order to engage with one another” (para. 18). For oneself, role-playing

provides an opportunity to reflect. Joseph Laycock writes in his book *Dangerous Games* that many players use RPGs “to simultaneously articulate and perceive the world” through “an externalized alternate reality,” adding, “One of the experiences that players are often seeking to render comprehensible is their own sense of self. By being someone else, players simultaneously express and discover who they are” (189). It’s not uncommon for players to “feel” what their character feels, just as there are few ways to make a character not sound like their player. And depending on the game played, those experiences may hit harder. Live-action role-play (LARP), especially the Nordic variant, requires players to physically and emotionally perform their characters to become “immersed” in the story being told, and players often begin to feel their character’s pain as their own. Though the community refers to this as “bleed” (again, referring to the magic circle), Simo Järvelä writes:

...while bleed and immersion certainly are real in the sense that something clearly happens that gives us those experiences and you and the players can build your art around them, they are not real in the sense that there would be a process of literally becoming the character and the players’ identities changing to that of a fictive person, or that the character would really have feelings or thoughts, or that they would bleed into the player. *All the feelings, thoughts, and actions are the players’*. (Järvelä 1, emphasis added)

Järvelä does not contradict Fine’s articulation of the “frames” of RPGs, but these frames act more like the “roles” of “person,” “player,” and “character.” There are three frames but one person experiencing all of them, and they may very well have more “roles” than just those three, like “dad,” “partner,” and “friend.”

Even without a magic circle, the prevalence of “bleed” indicates that these performances can generate an intense affective response, making players keenly aware of themselves and creating a moment of self-reflection. Linda Codega, a queer author, recalls how they “played” gender through *Dungeons & Dragons*:

I began experimenting in earnest with my own gender expression through roleplaying games; first by playing as a boy, then a girl, and then playing as a nonbinary character. The way that I found myself becoming more comfortable with blurring these binary lines of identity was because I had space to experiment in a consequence free container, where I could take on and take off genders in order to find the one that fit me. In the game it didn't matter what gender my character was as long as I understood who the character was, what they wanted. I began to understand that a lot of the boundaries I set up for myself in real life were likewise arbitrary, and by extension, not what I wanted. When I allowed myself a space to play with the rules of my identity, I was able to come out with confidence, knowing that I had been able to "come out" through playing Dungeons & Dragons. (Codega, para. 11)

Via play, one finds the space to imagine and feel (im)possible selves and (im)possible worlds. RPGs specifically lay bare the socially constructed reality and metagames constructing daily life. Gender, for Judith Butler, is a series of acts, behaviors, and dress that is "*performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means" (185, original emphasis). "Fabrications" here refers not to the falseness of gender but instead to its constant recreation by public consensus. Like the rules of a game, gender is negotiated by those who perform it, but the policing of gender rules carries real, tangible consequences for breaking them. One possible reason for keeping up the illusion of gender (and many other "rules" of society) is that admitting that gender is a fantasy that is "meaningful despite being invented" may "imply that other meaningful worldviews might be similarly factitious" (Laycock 214-215). Laycock argues that this need to reaffirm the world explains why imaginative spaces are often feared: "It is in the interest of any hegemonic institution, religious or otherwise, to discourage imagination. Hegemony can be resisted only if we can imagine new possibilities" (215). Two key methods that RPGs use to foster imagination are reenchantment and cognitive estrangement.

Magic is a popular narrative trope, implying things and capabilities we do not currently possess. Many authors use magic as a catch-all tool for heroes and villains alike, but magic

frequently acts as part of a literary world's scientific understanding, akin to how alchemy was an accepted science during the Middle Ages. The Enlightenment, however, cast imagination as "delusion," rejecting the awe of magical thinking and replacing it with "a narrow, means-ends instrumentalism" that led to what Max Weber calls the "disenchantment of the world" (Laycock 289, Saler 604, qt. in Saler 602). Marvelous natural phenomena and cultural achievements became coopted by capitalist logic. If water is no longer considered magical or sacred, as an example, then it can be claimed, bottled, and redistributed for profit. Reenchantment, on the other hand, is an attempt to balance the cold rationality of realism and the wondrous fantasies of magical thinking; Michael Saler, referring to the popularity of spiritualism and the rise of novels in *fin de siècle* Europe, writes that the "willing suspension of disbelief...allowed rational readers to become immersed in these fantastic worlds, while at the same time maintaining an ironic distance—to remain rational and enchanted simultaneously" (618). RPGs operate similarly, offering players permission to "believe" in fantastic worlds and magic while acknowledging that such things are not literally true.

But they are "true," to an extent. The human imagination cannot imagine anything that doesn't have some basis in reality. In *Do Metaphors Dream of Literal Sleep?* Seo-Young Chu notes that a common misconception in science fiction is that the worlds represented are "new" or disconnected from the world as we know it; rather, science fiction presents the world through a "cognitively estranging" light, one that "reproduces the wondrous qualities of the object or phenomenon that the work of science fiction mimetically represents" (5). Chu identifies the fantasy genre, typified in *Dungeons & Dragons*, as "a type of science-fictional mimesis whose cognitively estranging referent is the prodigious working of the imagination itself" (5). Though she distances science fiction from realism—the former attempts to render reality strange and the

cognitively estranging knowable, while the latter seeks to minimize estrangement in favor of “flat description”—all acts of representation are “science-fictional because all reality is to some degree cognitively estranging” (7). This cognitive estrangement distills tough subjects into digestible forms and destabilizes the “natural” world to reengage discussions around those subjects. Because reality “is also a provisional and contingent construct,” science fiction engages others to acknowledge that the project of world-making is a public domain and a metagame where “there are always more ways to play” (Saler 622, Boluk and LeMieux 19).

Tactical media-influenced RPGs are evidence of this willingness to play with norms. *Asylsøklarane (The Asylum Seekers)* was a LARP staged by Kristian A. Bjørkelo and Kristine Jørgensen of the University of Bergen. Influenced by Lucas Pope’s *Papers, Please, The Asylum Seekers* recreated the experiences of migrants and border agents in a simulated setting. Volunteers played both roles while referees dressed as security guards to oversee the proceedings. Bjørkelo and Jørgensen stress the need for making players uncomfortable with their roles and the realistic setting. Rather than attempting “pure” realism, the authors looked to create what Bjørkelo dubs “transgressive realism”: “an experience that can be perceived of as reflecting aspects of realism because the emotions it create feel real” (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 3). In other words, the affective responses of participants would “bleed” from the “character” frame into the “person” frame. Central to this was “transgressing the player’s boundaries by forcing them to step out of their emotional comfort zone” such as by asking players, whose characters were Muslim, to pray or by asking the asylum seekers questions that their players did not know the answers to, forcing them to improvise, contradict themselves, and lie about their stories (3). Like many RPGs, the players had an overall goal (for the agents, granting asylum to characters

deemed worthy; for the asylum seekers, to convince the agents why they should be admitted), but much of the conflict and events of the game were improvised.

Although Bjørkelo and Jørgensen do not describe *The Asylum Seekers* as a tactical media project, the virtuosic performances of the players, guided by the authors and fellow referees, did open participants to question their biases and misconceptions about the asylum-seeking process. Raley remarks that virtuosity is a spur-of-the-moment performance that “does not result in an end product,” requiring those present to participate in its construction and remembrance (29). For the players of *The Asylum Seekers*, their experience of the uncomfortable waiting times, the distressing interrogations, and the bureaucratic processes of immigration, even in the “safe” confines of a messy circle, will only be affirmed by their recollection of how it felt.

While *The Asylum Seekers* operated on an ephemeral level, the authors of *Eat the Rich* and *Uncaged*—two anthologies of adventures for *Dungeons & Dragons*—provide frameworks for the average DM to educate players about social justice and upset common expectations about fantasy tropes. *Eat the Rich* is a collection of “anti-tyranny” that breaks down the major cognitively estranging elements of fantasy worlds: “Just like in a lot of zombie and post-apocalyptic media, the problem was never the monsters. The real problem is other people” (*Eat the Rich*, 2). From stopping a logging operation to protect its forest inhabitants to liberating the food stores of a king to feed the starving people during a famine, players face common, everyday problems in new fantastical ways, often with the power (imagined or otherwise) to resolve them for the better. Because *Dungeons & Dragons* includes rules for combat, it isn’t uncommon for players to feel encouraged towards more anarchic solutions. Joe Sullivan’s contribution “Is Dryad Property Theft?” acknowledges that this is a possibility and includes information for the DM to work that into the story, but he also includes information on how players could operate

pacifistically or align themselves with the “tyrant” of the story for profit. *Eat the Rich* doesn’t ask players or DMs to play a different game entirely; regardless of what story is told, everyone at the table will still be playing *Dungeons & Dragons*. That said, this collection argues that there is room for more human and more readily applicable stories to be told.

Conversely, *Uncaged* delights in “inhuman” stories. Like *Eat the Rich*, this anthology wants to expand the kinds of stories *Dungeons & Dragons* can tell, but *Uncaged* focuses on problematic depictions of feminine monsters. Early RPGs, Laycock notes, “are a reflection of the struggles and conflicts experienced by the players, who...were predominately adolescent males” (194). As such, *Dungeons & Dragons* is rife with sexist and racist undertones that go unaddressed and are “just part of the game.” For example, many male villains are given complex backstories for why they are evil, but female monsters merely “are,” a point that Jasmine Bhullar draws out in her foreword to *Uncaged Vol.1*: “I remember the first time I read *Beowulf* as part of a college assignment...The discussions in class seemed to place Grendel and Beowulf front and center. This was unfortunate since...clearly the most fascinating character in the story was Grendel’s mother. She was barely described in the text at all, but her haunting story was all I could think about...” (4). By limiting the realm of intellect to men and physicality to women, writes Dianna Taylor in “Monstrous Women,” the body is therefore devalued and in need of control, which is “interconnected with the devaluation and desire to control women, including one’s own feminine self” (139). By creating feminine monsters with the overt project to give them “names and voices” and “their own stories to tell,” *Uncaged* opts to change the core conceits of *Dungeons & Dragons* and the fantasy genre (*Uncaged Vol.1*).

Although these three examples are working tactically to change the world to be less xenophobic, more open to social justice, and better understanding of gender narratives

(respectively), there is no guarantee they will work. Both *Eat the Rich* and *Uncaged* rely heavily on the DM to provide the context and to help their players learn the “tactics” of the stories. *The Asylum Seekers* leans heavily into “empathy game” narratives, insinuating that making players temporarily uncomfortable will be enough to change the lives of actual asylum seekers down the road. Yet Raley declares, “The right question to ask is not whether tactical media *works* or not, whether it succeeds or fails in spectacular fashion to effect structural transformation; rather, we should be asking to what extent it strengthens social relations and to what extent its activities are virtuosic” (29). Although RPGs would seem the last place to find tactical media, Laycock notes that the games we play can easily slip into reality: “For a culture, the shared meanings constructed in play can become the paradigms through which it understands the world” (286). The question now is what games we should be playing.

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