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Discovery of Racism in the Fantasy Genre. The Dark Elf Motif in *Dungeons & Dragons*

ABSTRACT. The fantasy genre bares some stigmas born from the times of its most formative author, J.R.R. Tolkien. Among them, there is a problem of so-called "fantasy races", imaginary entities like elves, orcs, or goblins, and their real-world implications, rooted deeply in racial stereotypes. In this article, I study this topic on the example of the fictional race of the drow or dark elves and their portraits in the media related to Dungeons & Dragons, a tabletop roleplay game system heavily influenced by classic fantasy motifs. I try to argue that the changes in social and racial sensitivity observed in the young generation of Dungeons & Dragons players are correlated with changes in the portrayal of draws from classic monsters to much more nuanced approaches.

KEYWORDS: tabletop games, *Dungeons & Dragons*, diversity, fantasy

The Orc Problem and Tolkien's Legacy

From time to time, the question of how to approach racial issues contained in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, author of The Lord of The Rings, The Hobbit, and Silmarillion, comes up in the discourse devoted to his novels. Among others, Anderson Rearick explores this issue in his 2004 article "Why Is The Only Good Orc a Dead Orc" (Rearick, 2004). Rearick observes a stark contrast between two fictional races, the dark, savage and brutal orcs and the beautiful and noble elves but ultimately, he concludes that Tolkien can only be accused, at worst, of being a child of his times, a white, privileged Englishman, born in the late nineteenth century, raised and educated in Oxfordian traditions. Social sensibilities have changed considerably in the decades, separating Tolkien's life from the early twenty-first century. What was accepted unquestionably then is viewed today from new angles and with an awareness that had not yet developed in Tolkien's time.

Nevertheless, his work became the springboard for countless successors and epigones. It became the foundation and pillar of an entire subgenre of fantasy, usually called high fantasy—characterized, in the most

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general definition, by the fact that the plot of the story takes place in a fictional, magical world (so-called secondary world), often bearing superficial similarities to medieval Europe, but inhabited not only by humans but also other humanoids, fictional races (elves, dwarves, orcs, hobbits, etc.). The main heroes tend to face adversities on an epic scale, often threatening the entire world. This is the most stereotypical model of a fantasy story and is very clearly a direct inspiration from The Lord of the Rings. Of course, I do not mean to imply that all novels based on this model, all high fantasy novels, are fundamentally derivative and devoid of literary value. However, it is worth noting that, because of the source of their inspiration, they often reproduce, without further reflection, certain elements and themes that were not objectionable to readers in Tolkien's time. In contrast, they are now increasingly met with more resistance for political and ideological reasons.

The contemporary fantasy author Nora K. Jemisin, born a year before Tolkien's death, published on her blog in 2013 an essay entitled "The Unbearable Baggage of Orcing" (Jemisin, 2013), in which she takes a firm stance against the Tolkienian racial paradigm that still prevails in fantasy. To put it euphemistically, she raises the issue of the unpleasant associations in presenting fictional races such as orcs and what they evoke in her.

> "Think about that," she wrote. "Creatures that look like people, but aren't really. Kinda-sorta-people, who aren't worthy of even the most basic moral considerations, like the right to exist. Only way to deal with them is to control them utterly a la slavery, or wipe them all out. Huh. Sounds familiar" (Jemisin, 2013).

Jemisin points out that orcs in fantasy are described and created using rhetoric dangerously close to the all-too-real racist rhetoric—dehumanizing, depersonalizing, and demonizing them.

In this article, I want to focus on a similar issue, but without using orcs as an example—and without focusing strictly on literature. Without straying too far from the worlds and races of post-Tolkien fantasy, I will examine how the role-playing game system Dungeons & Dragons depicts the fictional race of drow, also known as dark elves, how the motifs associated with them are used, and finally, what changes have taken place in these respects over the years and what they say about the broader contexts of cultural change and social sensitivity to specific issues.

I want to stress in advance that by referring to theories and ideas connected with the real world, I do not wish in any way to correlate the

problems affecting living people today and the realm of fiction. However, the way we create stories, even—or perhaps especially—stories of a fantastical nature inevitably reveal much about how we look at the world around us, which serves as a point of reference even in the most imaginative secondary worlds. As Jemisin wrote—orcs are a product of human imagination. However, the way various narratives treat them carries implications about the categories in which we are inclined to think also in the context of the reality around us. Sundar Sarukkai, for example, wrote about the role that fiction could play in academic—in his case anthropological—discourse, reminding us that "fiction stands as the exemplar of subjective construction of the world [...]. Fiction is also a method which allows for subjective orientations in describing the world" (Sarukkai, 1997, p. 1409).

The *Dungeons & Dragons* System and Monster Races

First, a few terms need to be explained.

RPGs (Role Playing Games) are a type of tabletop game that combines strategy, improv, and group storytelling. The players, usually several (there is no specific limit, but the optimal number is considered to be between three to six people), take on the roles of characters they have constructed, that is, their fantasy heroes, play them out, and direct their fates. In addition to the players, one of the participants takes on the role of the Game Master (in the Dungeons & Dragons system, often called the Dungeon Master). The Game Master's task is to coordinate the entire game; to assume the role of the story's narrator, leading the players' characters through adventures invented by themself or based on existing scenarios. They are also responsible for all players' interactions with the presented world. The core manual for the latest edition of Dungeons & Dragons defines the role of the Dungeon Master as "game's lead storyteller and referee. The DM creates adventures for the characters, who navigate its hazards and decide which paths to explore" (Crawford, Mearls & Perkins, 2018).

The game consists of three main elements—roleplaying, combat, and plot intrigue. Depending on the players' preferences, these elements may be equal, or one of them may be given more prominence than the others.

RPGs are played entirely orally (which distinguishes them from their cousins LARPS, Live Action Role-Playing, type of games more akin to improvised theatre spectacle). Most of them use special dice, maps with min-

iature figures of characters and their opponents prepared by the Game Master, and paper character sheets. Online RPGs have become increasingly popular in recent years, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. They are played through communication applications such as Discord or Zoom or through special programs and websites (DnDbeyond, Fantasy Grounds, Roll20, or Foundry Virtual Tabletop).

There are many RPG systems, but to this day the most popular one—and the one that interests me in the context of this article—is the Dungeons & Dragons system. It was created in 1974, designed by Gary Gygax. The author intended it to be a combination of a wargame and a fantasy story. Up to 2021, hundreds of different manuals and compendia of knowledge came out, collected in five official editions. Without going into too much detail, I will mainly be interested in the original first edition (usually referred to as D&D 1e) and the newest, launched in 2014, fifth edition (D&D 5e).

The classic campaigns played in the D&D system take place in a magical world, more or less (often more) similar to Tolkien's Middle-Earth, inhabited by fantastic races. From the very first edition players could choose whether to be a human, elf, dwarf, gnome or halfling (for copyright reasons, D&D could not use the name "hobbit") when creating their characters—and with time, the spectrum of choice has been widened even more, to races such as half-orcs, bird-like aarakocras or fiendish tieflings. During their adventures, the characters encounter many enemies—in the system referred to as monsters.

Monster races, especially humanoid ones, are the perfect Other—something that resembles us in some ways but is completely alien and antagonistic in other ways. They play a role similar to aliens in many science-fiction stories and creatures such as zombies in horror films. As Simone de Beauvoir observed:

> the category of the Other is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one finds the expression of a duality—that of the Self and the Other […]. Thus it is that no group ever sets itself up as the One without at once setting up the Other over against itself […]. In small-town eyes all persons not belonging to the village are 'strangers' and suspect; to the native of a country all who inhabit other countries are 'foreigners'; Jews are 'different' for the anti-Semite, Negroes are 'inferior' for American racists, aborigines are 'natives' for colonists, proletarians are the 'lower class' for the privileged (de Beauvoir, 2015).

In the International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography, published in 2009, Jean-François Staszak puts it this way:

> Placing in opposition notions of Us, Self, Them, and the Other is to choose a criterion that allows humanity to be divided into two groups: one that embodies the norm and whose identity is valued, and another that is defined by its faults, devalued, and susceptible to discrimination. Only dominant groups (such as Westerners in the time of colonization) are in a position to impose their categories in the matter. By stigmatizing certain social groups as Others, Barbarians, Savages, or People of Color, dominant groups relegate the peoples that they can dominate or exterminate to the margin of humanity (Staszak, 2009, p. 43).

There is an inherent and primal instinct in human beings that drives us to define ourselves and the collective with which we identify, and for this we also need to identify what is not our own. Usually, however, it does not end with simple identification—the Other all too often entails negative connotations, leading to xenophobia, discrimination, and dehumanization, often resulting in violent actions.

Fantasy—including classic Tolkienian fantasy, on which the D&D system was built—as I already mentioned, is based on more or less symbolic analogies and references to reality. Even the most phantasmagorical adventures in the most colourfully constructed worlds have a core that resonates in some way with readers who can see something familiar in the psyche of the magical characters and can sympathize with their inner conflicts. Authors build fantasy cultures, civilizations, and societies according to rules, principles, and relationships observed in the real world, so familiar mechanisms are also present. In her essay, Jemisin criticized the unreflective portrayal of orcs as the hostile and inhuman Other. A similar problem exists in D&D games, where the mechanical assumptions imply that some races that inhabit the magical world exist on the meta-level only to attack player characters and be slain by them. If players focus more on the tactical and battle aspects of the game, the advancement of their characters to higher levels depends on how many enemies they kill.

A large part of these monsters who have to be defeated are creatures such as giant rats, dragons, or undead wraiths. On the other hand, there is also the monster, as mentioned earlier, races such as orcs, and goblins, and finally, the dark elves, also known as drows—which I will use as a symptomatic example in this article.

The first full description of the drow as a monster race (aka enemies) appeared in one of the earlier first-edition manuals, The Fiend Folio. According to the brief description, the drow was a depraved subrace of elves. Many centuries ago, a schism divided the good elves and those who were "selfish and cruel" (Turnbull 1981, p. 33). The schism grew into a series of conflicts that forced elves of darker nature into hiding in the Underdark, where for generations they grew in strength, developing martial and magical abilities. The drow despises their surface-dwelling, sun-walking kin, whom they regard as their sworn enemies to this day.

Traditionally, the main characteristics of drow are their appearance, nature, place of residence, social system and religion. They are similar to elves but shorter and slimmer, with skin in shades of black, dark grey, dark blue, white hair, and red or purple eyes, which can see well in the dark. By nature, they are treacherous, evil, and insidious creatures and are referred to as chaotic evil in the D&D system's built-in morality scale. They live in the Underdark, a subterranean realm inhabited by various monsters and dangerous creatures. The drow society is equally cruel and brutal, built on ruthless competition and, it should be noted, is matriarchal. This is primarily due to the last characteristic element, religion. Drow is worshippers of the Lolth, the Spider Queen, one of many deities created for the D&D worlds. Lolth is a malicious, vicious, and overall purely evil being. She requires blind obedience from her followers, and her chosen clerics are only female.

Drizzt Do'Urden—An Exceptional Drow

Many fantasy novels are based on the D&D system and set in so-called Forgotten Realms. Among the names of their authors especially popular is Robert Anthony Salvatore, an American writer born in 1959. One of his most famous works is The Dark Elf Trilogy, and its later continuations. The trilogy includes the books Homeland (published in 1990), Exile (published in 1990) and Sojourn (published in 1991). As the name suggests, their main character is the drow warrior Drizzt Do'Urden. Born in the Underdark, in the drow city of Menzoberranzan as the son of Matron Malice, leader of one of the drow Dens, Drizzt stands apart from the other dark elves. Shortly after his birth, his mother and sisters realize that his eyes are different from those of other drow—they are different in colour and, unlike most, do not react badly to light:

> "Fetch the candle" Matron Malice ordered. "Let us see how these eyes appear in the world of light" [...].
> The clerics hid their eyes and Matron Malice put a prudent hand over the baby's face as Briza lit the sacred candle. It produced only a tiny flame, but to drow eyes it came as a brilliant intrusion.
> "Bring it" said Matron Malice after several moments of adjusting. Briza moved the candle near Drizzt, and Malice gradually slid her hand away.
> "He does not cry" Briza remarked, amazed that the babe could quietly accept such a stinging light. (*Homeland*).

Drizzt grows up, raised first by his older sister, then trained by his biological father, and his many talents soon become apparent—he is exceptionally bright, has a natural gift for magic, and above all, is a skilled and dangerous warrior. As he becomes a young man, he is sent on his first mission to the surface. The mission has one simple task—a drow patrol will hunt down their surface-dwelling elven cousins and shed their blood in the name of the Spider Queen. Indoctrinated since childhood and raised in the cult of Lolth, Drizzt is excited, but something inside him makes him doubt.

> Drizzt was not as openly excited as his brother, unsure of the implications of such a mission. At last he would get to view the surface elves and face the truth of his heart and hopes. Something more real to Drizzt, the disappointment he had known for so many years, tempered his elation, re-minded him that while the truth of the elves might bring an excuse to the dark world of his kin, it might instead take away something more important. He was unsure how to feel. (*Homeland*)

During this first mission, Drizzt experiences a turning point and makes a decision that will determine his entire life and fate. During a massacre of elves, unarmed and unprepared for any battle, he decides to spare a terrified child at the last moment.

> Only a moment later, another elf, this young girl, broke free of the massacre and rushed in Drizzt's direction, screaming a single word over and over. Her cry was in the tongue of the surface elves, a dialect foreign to Drizzt, but when he looked upon her fair face, streaked with tears, he understood what she was saying. Her eyes were on the mutilated corpse at his feet; her anguish outweighed the terror of her impending doom. She could only be crying, "Mother!"

> Rage, horror, anguish, and a dozen other emotions racked Drizzt at that horrible moment. He wanted to escape his feelings, to lose himself in the blind frenzy of his kin and accept the ugly reality. How easy it would have been to throw away the conscience that pained him.
> The elven child rushed up before Drizzt but hardly saw him, her gaze locked upon her dead mother, the back of the child's neck open to a single, clean blow. Drizzt raised his scimitar, unable to distinguish between mercy and murder. […] He almost did it. In his unfocused outrage, Drizzt Do'Urden almost became as his kin. He almost stole the life from that beautiful child's sparkling eyes.
> At the last moment, she looked up at him, her eyes shining as a dark mirror into Drizzt's blackening heart. In that re-flection, that reverse image of the rage that guided his hand, Drizzt Do'Urden found himself.
> He brought the scimitar down in a mighty sweep […]. In the same motion, Drizzt followed with his other hand, catching the girl by the front of her tunic and pulling her face-down to the ground […].
> Drizzt had to work quickly; the battle was almost at its gruesome end. He sliced his scimitars expertly above the huddled child's back, cutting her clothing but not so much as scratching her tender skin. Then he used the blood of the headless corpse to mask the trick, taking grim satisfaction that the elven mother would be pleased to know that, in dying, she had saved her daughter's life.
>
> "Stay down" he whispered in the child's ear. (*Homeland*).

Sparing the child's life does not escape Drizzt without consequences. He draws the attention of Lolth and her priestesses, and his actions may bring the wrath of the Spider Queen down on his entire family. His mother, Matron Malice plans to propitiate the goddess by offering Drizzt as a sacrifice, but in the end his place on the altar is taken by his father. Drizzt is faced with a choice. He can stay in the world he knows and take on the honourable position of the family's weapons master. He refuses, however, and decides to leave Menzoberranzan. Born and raised as a drow, Drizzt rejects his people, their traditions and customs, calling them lies. In the next volumes of the series, he will also leave the Underdark and come to the surface, where, after many hardships, he will finally become a famous adventurer and legendary hero.

Drizzt is not like other drows. His uniqueness became apparent shortly after his birth when his mother and sisters noticed the peculiar characteristics of the newborn's eyes, an early harbinger of what was going to grow from him. Though born in Menzoberranzan, raised according to drow traditions and teachings of Lolth, something made him different from his brethren. A conscience that prevented him from killing an elven child and

that allowed him to look at his society and culture differently, to see its hypocrisy and cruelty, and to ultimately reject it of his own free will. It made him an exception among the drow of the Underdark—it made him a "good drow".

The concept, as mentioned above of the Other sometimes allows for similar exceptions, which, although it may seem like a step in the right direction at first, is in fact a trap that perpetuates stereotypes. In the discourse of feminist thought, Otherness has long been associated with gender. Simone de Beauvoir wrote, "he is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (de Beauvoir, 2015). We live in a world and operate on concepts that have been shaped by a culture directly tied to patriarchal values, from the perspective that women and femininity are secondary to the primary and essential masculinity. However, there have always been exceptions in history—honorary males, starting with the Pharaoh Hatshepsut, women who could function on the same terms and levels as men because of their position, talents, conditions, or merits. Joan Kelly-Gadol mentions the problem of viewing women's history through the prism of such exceptions in her 1976 article The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women's History (Kelly-Gadol, 1976). Also, Allison Heisch, writing about another "exceptional women" in history, Elizabeth I, stated that "right from the start, people working in the area of Women's Studies have recognized that the restoration of women to their place in history could not be accomplished by focusing attention upon exceptional women" (Heisch, 1980). But what exactly is the harm of this phenomenon? Firstly, it perpetuates the status quo according to which "masculinity" is the norm and "femininity" is the exception. It gives women the right to exist in the public consciousness only when they fit into male roles. Secondly, it creates the illusory impression that "equality"—understood as the possibility to enjoy a privileged position—is in fact potentially available to all. If one woman managed to fit into male roles and shatter the proverbial glass ceiling, the others must be to blame for not doing so as well. This shifts the responsibility from the system to individuals—individuals who are victims of the system

Similar phenomena also occur in other spheres and contexts. Practically every system based on segregation and discrimination of some part of the population has adopted comparable exceptions. In the apartheid era in South Africa, there was the concept of honorary whites, while the Nazis had their *Ehrenarier,* honorary Aryans. This privilege did not have to be limited to individuals but extended to a whole minority—the so-called

model minorities, behaved according to the requirements imposed by the majority.

The solution to prejudice and discrimination is not to identify and appreciate distinctive individuals. While superficially this may be positive, it is actually a harmful mechanism that perpetuates negative perceptions of the stereotyped community.

The Fifth Edition

In 2014, the *Player's Handbook* was released, containing the first set of rules for the fifth edition of *D&D.* Following the tradition of its predecessors, it listed nine playable races—humans, dwarves, elves, half-elves, halflings, dragonborn, gnomes, half-orcs and tieflings (Crawford & Mearls, 2014). The choice was extended to other races in the following books, including those traditionally classified as "monsters". *Volo's Guide to Monsters* suggests that players take on the role of an orc or a goblin and that this can "offer up some interesting roleplaying possibilities. Whether played for comedy, as a tragic story of betrayal and loss, or as an antihero, a monstrous character gives a player a chance to take on an unusual challenge in the campaign" (Mearls, 2016). *Mordekainen's Tome of Foes*[1] released in 2018 presents among other things, an updated version of the drow and their history, and offers mechanical rules for building a drow player's character. Most of the elements defining drow in the previous editions remained the same—they were still a race living in the Underdark, worshippers of Lolth, a matriarchal society built on "blood and poison" (Crawford, 2018). However, by allowing players to create their own characters as drow, in a way this race was given over to their imagination. Anyone could become a Drizzt—a good drow, a renegade, who deviates from the wicked ways of their kin. As it turns out, it was not enough. Many players were no longer interested in drows only in the context of unique and distinctive individuals but asked themselves what else could be done with the entire race.

[1] It is worth noting that during the time this article have been writing, with the release of the new book *Monsters of the Multiverse* in May 2022 both *Volo's Guide to Monsters* and *Mordekainen's Tome of Foes* became considered not canonical in the official game lore.

Critical Role and the Kryn Dynasty

The last few years have seen the rise of a new form of RPG content—web series, consisting of livestreamed private role-playing sessions and entire campaigns. One of the precursors of this trend, and still by far the most popular, is the *Critical Role.* Created by a group of American professional voice actors, at first only a private game among friends, it debuted on Twitch and Youtube platforms on the Geek&Sundry channel on March 12, 2015. Over the next two years and one hundred and fifteen episodes the series told the adventures of a group of heroes called Vox Machina. It takes place in the fantasy world of Exandria, created for the campaign by the game's Dungeon Master Matthew Mercer. When the Vox Machina story came to an end, a second season of the series began after a four-month hiatus, this time following the lives and (mis)adventures of another group called the Mighty Nein. Mercer again was the Dungeon Masters, while the other players took on new characters. The Mighty Nein campaign lasted for one hundred and forty-one episodes and ended on June 3, 2021. As this article is being written, the third season, telling a new story with new heroes, has been running for a few months.

Comparing the first two seasons of *Critical Role,* we can observe many differences, both in terms of world-building, narrative construction, and character creation. Although both campaigns are set in Exandria, they take place on two different continents. The one explored in the first campaign—Tal'Dorei—is in many ways a much less complicated and more stereotypical place. Likewise, the plot is similarly straightforward. Vox Machina is a quite standard heroic story, with the heroes facing clear-cut enemies and difficulties that leave little doubt as to who is good and who is evil—whether it is a vampire straight out of a gothic horror movie, a group of greedy and destructive dragons, or an undead wizard trying to ascend godhood.

In comparison, the members of Mighty Nein encounter many more ambiguous choices and moral grey areas along their way. After the first, more stereotypically heroic campaign, Mercer, now knowing his players much better, began to confront them with more complex problems without clear and obvious solutions. One of the manifestations of this deepening of the world and blurring of the black and white divisions inherent in traditional fantasy is also the way Mercer presented in his second campaign the drow.

The Mighty Nein began their adventure on the continent of Wildemount, specifically in the Dwendalian Empire, one of the two dominant political powers there. Early in the first episode players and viewers

learned that the Empire has long been at war with its eastern neighbour, Xhorhas. While a tentative truce is currently in place, there are also circulating rumours of increasing military clashes on the borders (Curious Beginnings, 0:19:01). Xhorhas is described as a hostile land, "overrun with all manner of beasts and terrors, relics from the final battles of the Calamity that ruined that scarred landscape" (Curious Beginnings, 0:17:15). In the following episodes, the heroes, some of whom come from the Dwendalian Empire and others from the Menagerie Coast, an Empire's political and economical ally, learn more about Xhorhas. They learn that a large part of its population is made up of drow and that the drow dynasty, the Kryn, rules it. They learn that in the Dwendalian Empire, the drow of Xhorhas is often called Cricks because of the peculiar chitinous armour worn by Kryn soldiers (Zemnian Nights, 2:11:35).

It is not long before the heroes directly contact the Kryn Dynasty soldier. Their adventures are abruptly interrupted by a terrorist attack in which two Xhorhasian spies blow up part of one of the towers in one of the biggest imperial cities. The heroes, themselves in the middle of some not-so-legal activity, decide to hide in the city's sewers in the general chaos—and there they stumble upon one of the spies. At first, there is an aggressive confrontation, but later they try to talk to him. The spy is carrying a mysterious, evidently magical object in the shape of a dodecahedron and as it turns out, this object is the real goal of his mission. It was originally the property of the Kryn Dynasty, stolen by imperial agents. Upon learning this, the heroes decide to give the drow a chance to escape the city. Unfortunately, the city guards eventually kill him, but the Mighty Nein manages to retrieve the artifact—not allowing it to fall back into the hands of imperial mages. Although they do not know its true nature or properties, they keep it for themselves (Lost and Found).

The attack brings immediate consequences and the hitherto dormant conflict between the two countries erupts with renewed force. The Mighty Nein, having no special desire to join the imperial army, decide to remain neutral. Many episodes later, however, fate leads them to Rosohna, the very capital of the Kryn Dynasty. When they finally arrive there, they slowly begin to find out empirically that not everything they have learned so far about the Kryn Dynasty and Xhorhas is necessarily true.

In the fifty-sixth episode of the campaign, the heroes face the ruler of Xhorhas, the drow Bright Queen Leylas Kryn—and they decide that, surprising even the Dungeon Master, will change the trajectory of the entire plot. They give the mysterious dodecahedron to the Bright Queen, not even

knowing its functions and power, but knowing that it was once stolen from her (*The Favor*, 2:51:30). This way, they unwittingly become traitors to the Empire—and heroes to the Dynasty. By getting to know Xhorhas and its inhabitants, and befriending the drow dignitaries, the Mighty Nein gains a new perspective and discovers just how many lies contain imperial propaganda. The truth, however, is not a simple reversal of roles. Neither the Dwendalian Empire nor the Kryn Dynasty is the unequivocally good or bad side, neither of them is morally superior. Ultimately, the heroes find their own truth—no matter what, war brings destruction and death to both sides, and it is not enough to help one or the other. The solution is not victory, but peace.

In creating the Dwendalian Empire and Xhorhas, Matthew Merce has, probably quite intentionally, used stereotypes existing in fantasy since the times of Tolkien—and he has also intently negated them by nuancing the situation and adding shades of grey. The Dwendalian Empire, though definitely racially heterogeneous, is ruled by a human dynasty and humans are the dominant element there. Xhorhas and the Kryn Dynasty on the other hand are coded as the Other. Humans are a minority there, power is in the hands of the drow, most inhabitants are primarily monster races. In the geographical description of Wildemount in *Explorer's Guide to Wildemont,* Mercer writes specific statistics. Rexxentrum, the capital of the Dwendalian Empire is inhabited 81% by humans, 8% by dwarves, 6% by halflings, and 5% by "other races" (Mercer et al., 2020). The inhabitants of the Kryn capital Rosohna consist of 66% drow, 9% goblins, and 7% duergar (dwarves originating from the Underdark)—the rest are also "other races" (Mercer et al., 2020). At first glance, the division seems very clear and automatically puts the Kryn Dynasty in the position of the enemy in the eyes of players and viewers, the classic "evil and monstrous empire", another reflection of Tolkien's Mordor. Only by getting to know Xhorhas and its residents better, the Mighty Nein slowly, in a natural way, get rid of their own prejudices and stereotypes—starting with small but significant moments, like the one when they realize for the first time that the term "Cricks" is in fact as strongly pejorative slur and they stop using it. With time, they even find in Xhorhas what they could not find in the Dwendalian Empire, in many ways a country that is much less tolerant and open for "otherness"—a home, a place they can treat as their own, at least for a while. And while, as I have mentioned before, these changes are not based on a simple reversal of the good vs. evil dichotomy, ultimately the Mighty Nein ends their adventures much closer and more closely tied to the Kryn Dynasty than the Dwendalian Empire.

What All This Tells Us About Society

This narrative, I believe, has much more in common with current trends in creating morality and conflict in fantasy than the two previous examples. The audience today, more sensitive to the delicate issues of stereotypes and harmful cliches than in previous decades, no longer so easily accepts purely evil monster races, finding in them the problems perfectly captured by Jemisin's quote in the introduction. There is also a trend nowadays to move away from the archetype of the "unique and special" Drizzt-type hero—either for the reasons described above, or because it has already become a boring cliché. It seems that the audience today tends to be more interested in morally nuanced stories, with conflicts presented in shades of grey and with less explicitly heroic protagonists.

It is also worth noting that another prevailing trend in the last decade among the "young generation" of fantasy manifests itself, among others, in the popularity of the "#ownvoices" initiative. It was originally created for children's and teen literature, but due to the close affinity of the latter with fantasy (the targets of Young Adult Fiction, Young Adult Fantasy and regular fantasy often overlap), it quickly penetrated this genre. It was initiated in 2015 by writer Corinne Duyvis, who started a thread on the Twitter platform in which she proposed the hashtag "ownvoices" to "recommend kidlit about diverse characters written by authors from the same diverse group" (Duyvis n.d.). This is meant to promote work written by and about people of marginalized identities—racial, sexual, gender etc. Under this banner have been published novels such as *The Poppy War* by a Chinese-American writer R.F. Kuang (2018), set in a fantasy world inspired by Chinese history (notably the Opium Wars), and Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2019), inspired by Nigerian culture. Both these novels, as well as many others, break with the stereotypical fantasy set in worlds heavily influenced by medieval Europe.

There are many indications that today's authors and consumers of fantasy differ from their predecessors in what can be called social sensitivity. Although fantasy as a genre bears various stigmas, imprinted by its precursor's works—created in completely different climates and socio-political mentality—they are more and more often not copied but contested. One example of this is the departure from the concept of monstrous races such as orcs and dark elves. This can be seen in how the image of the latter has changed over the years in D&D-related media. In the beginning, the drow were only enemies, monsters that existed to be defeated by heroes.

With time, however, people started to look for potential nuances—among others Drizzt was born, a good drow who, thanks to his uniqueness and morality unusual among his kin, despite his origin became a hero fighting evil himself. Such a portrayal unfortunately also entails problematic implications. On the other hand, Critical Role is one of the most influential and popular narratives associated now with D&D. Its fifth edition departs from both the one-sided portrayal of the drow as a monster race and from doing exactly the same thing with potentially few exceptions. Without completely breaking with traditional drow characterization and playing even with audience expectations, it presents both drow community, culture and individual characters in a nuanced way—both the "human country" and the "drow country" are drawn in varying shades of grey.

These changes attest—as do other phenomena such as the #ownvoices initiative that promotes inclusivity—indicate that fantasy narratives today are moving away from elements that for many years were taken for granted but are now clearly beginning to bother a new generation of genre fans. This is again indicative of a shift in attitudes toward similar issues, a greater public sensitivity to what fictional stories represent and their real-world implications.

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