

The Role of Race within Fantasy TTRPGs

Introduction

“These were the stories of a restless people who long ago took to the seas and rivers in longboats, first to pillage and terrorize, then to settle. Yet there was an energy, a love of adventure, that sang from every page” (Player’s Handbook 29)

The depiction of humans as seen above encapsulates the essence of the role of human as well as the broader reasons for why people play table top role-playing games. Not only does it provide insight into the violent ways in which humans interact with other fictional races; it shows the extent that humans will go to claim meaningful adventures. More importantly, this quotation shows how flexible the idea of human within these games is. A human can do anything they wish as long as they themselves will it. Perhaps this why players of Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs) play the game at all. Any player gains near infinite autonomy over the way they play the game as well as control over their player character. Whether it be terrorizing a village or saving it, players love the adventures that they embark on.

TTRPGs allow players to take on any role or challenge they wish. From a happily-go-lucky gnome dreaming of owning their very own tavern to a scornful dwarf seeking revenge on the demon king, these games provide a sense of awe and wonder that is not capturable in any other medium. This is the crux of what makes fantasy TTRPGs unique: the medium provides players with a sense of autonomy in both the decisions that they make and the story that they craft. In cooperation with the Dungeon Master (DM), players work together to tell a unique story that shapes the world in which they play in forever.

As a player of fantasy Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs) for almost a decade, I have seen the ways in which Wizards of the Coast and Paizo Entertainment, the creators of Dungeons and Dragons (DND) and Pathfinder, respectively, utilize concepts of race to encourage player creativity and agency. In these games, ‘race’ describes fictional races, such as orcs, elves, and halflings, as well as humans, a fictional race that resembles real-life human beings. Within the games’ racial framework, the human race is normative, with humans treated as the baseline for mechanical and narrative purposes. ‘Mechanical race’ broadly dictates a character’s statistics for strength, intelligence, and other traits affecting their success in various challenges, whereas ‘narrative race’ affects how a character will interact with others of the same or different race. Comparing fictional races, such as dragonkin, elves and gnomes, to the fictitious human ideal, makes it easier for new players to understand what makes each race unique. But the normative role of Humans in the games also obscures the distinctive qualities of the role, in a way that recalls whiteness as an unmarked racial category (Dyer). A veteran fantasy TTRPG player, I still cannot fully appreciate the role of the human. To what degree does being a human being and playing a human character influence my in-game decisions?

Fantasy table top role-playing games provide a productive area of study because they influence representations of fictional races, like elves, dwarves and orcs, that are depicted in other fantasy works, including video games, films, and books. Thus, in addition to examining Pathfinder 2e [second edition] and DND5e [fifth edition], I will analyze the video game Divinity: Original Sin 2 in order to gauge the ways in which values upheld in TTRPGs are transferred to the video game genre. Specifically, I will examine how the video game prompts players to interpret race during the character creation process, a process that resembles how TTRPG rule books dictate concepts of mechanical and narrative race. Originally released in 2017, Divinity:

Original Sin 2 has gained popular and critical acclaim, making it an ideal case study for how the core values fantasy TTRPGs have shaped understandings of race in other mediums.

In order to properly contextualize scholarly conversation surrounding race in TTRPG, I must first define race as it relates to the ideological Western understanding. Race is an ideological tool created and maintained by humans in order to construct racist ideologies. Racial ideologies exist within contemporary cultures as a means to articulate racist rhetoric (Hall), with racial representation being one of the key mechanisms for asserting power. Race also holds power through visibility (Dyer). When confronted with race, a human becomes the subject and shifts from what Dyer calls 'racial consciousness' into 'difference rhetoric'. Difference rhetoric is an ideology that unites humans through the differences that they collectively recognize. Often more successful in unification than race or class alone, difference rhetoric allows groups of people to unite for an identity that they themselves create. The positioning of race within fantasy TTRPGs mimics this ideology by manufacturing difference between races and then pitting themselves against each other. Race, then, when recognized and attached to a human, becomes a form of power that instigates difference. Noteworthy, 'race', as it has just been defined, excludes those of European descent. 'White' as an ideological category is entirely unmarked as those who created the hierarchal system of race were white people themselves (Dyer). This is precisely the link that makes race studies so intriguing in its complexities within TTRPGs as a genre. Humans take on the identity of an unmarked category, while fictional races become virtual manifestations of real-world racial rhetoric.

A wide range of scholars have investigated how race operates in fantasy role-playing games. Antero Garcia argues that racial characteristics applied to fictional races mimic stereotypical representations of races in the real world (Garcia). Building on the idea of fictional

racial representations in TTRPGs as normative is Martina, who claims that racial stereotyping, in itself, is not problematic because it provides players with a way to relate to a fictional race. She concludes that race becomes a discursive tool for othering when monster factions that greatly resemble a real-life race are treated as little more than tribal killing machines (Martina).

My study of the DND5e and Pathfinder 2e rulebooks serves to test the authenticity in these claims. By examining the way that races are portrayed within the rulebooks, the degree of racial stereotyping will become clear, as well as the ways in which the fictitious category of human is represented as unmarked, in ways that recall how whiteness is represented. Thus, the construction of race within DND5e and Pathfinder 2e rulebooks mimics contemporary racial discourse. By framing how these rulebooks construct race in relation to the racial theories presented by Stuart Hall and Richard Dyer, I argue that race within fantasy TTRPGs functions in two distinct ways. First, race becomes an ideological category that begets power through its visibility. Second, humanness functions like whiteness as being entirely unmarked while also functioning as a powerful position.

In order to investigate how race is created and perpetuated within TTRPGs, I will analyze how the concept (and actual term) of race is used in the handbooks of the two most popular fantasy TTRPGs, DND5e and Pathfinder 2e. I will employ a joint methodology, utilizing critical discourse analysis and a modified version of Sven Dwulecki's Game Dynamic Narrative Analysis to showcase how each rulebook approaches the idea of race. Critical discourse analysis is helpful in analyzing the intricacies of race within fantasy TTRPGs as a whole because it is the most effective way to explain the ways in which race is constructed, problematized and legitimized. This method breaks down how the language surrounding race in the Pathfinder 2e and DND5e rulebooks relates to its function as a social practice. Moreover, this is the most

effective strategy for understanding the intricate power dynamic between fictional races, especially in reference to the constructed human race. Dwulecki's GDNA will be helpful in revealing how mechanical and narrative instances incorporate (and in some cases, revolve around) race. Moreover, this methodology allows me showcase how flexible both TTRPGs are as a genre, as well as the human race as portrayed within. The GDNA helps account for player agency by commenting on the proposed mechanical and narrative limitations of players, as seen within fantasy core rulebooks. I will address the following research questions: How do concepts of race function within fantasy TTRPGs? How is the human portrayed within fantasy TTRPGs? How do real life racial politics influence the creation of race within TTRPGs? How does the rulebooks explanation of race impact overall player agency? How are humans portrayed within fantasy video games based on TTRPGs?

In order to answer these questions, this paper will first contextualize the history of DND and Pathfinder. It will continue by investigating Divinity: Original Sin 2 in relation to fantasy TTRPGs. Then, it will put into focus scholarly conversations surrounding race within TTRPGs and fantasy video games. It will continue by delving into how Dwulecki's GDNA can be modified to better suit TTRPGs as a medium, as well as how each rulebook separates the mechanical and narrative 'race' to form meaningful rhetorical instances. After, it will review the differences between DND5e and Pathfinder 2e's definition of race by highlighting quotations taken from each rulebook. It will discuss how humanity is constructed within fantasy TTRPGs as a whole by highlighting similarities and differences between humans in each TTRPG. Finally, this paper will help to define the role of the human in the fantasy video game genre.

Context: Understanding the Games

TTRPGs can be played within digital, virtual, real, or a combination of any of these play spaces. They are distinct from other types of games because they allow players to create and take control of a character in order to participate in a guided narrative dictated by the DM. Unlike computer or board games, which have strict rules and regulations that must be followed in order to enjoy the game in a way that the developers intended, each TTRPG has a series of recommendations for DMs and players to follow, which streamline the overall play experience. TTRPGs require that players communicate through speech, which enables them to become arbiters of gameplay for the characters within the game space. According to Jon Garrad, TTRPGs merge two seemingly opposed game design principles: aesthetics (which he calls fluff) and content. In contrast to computer games, in which aesthetic acts as an impediment to the core rules and narrative within the game, Garrad believes that within TTRPGs aesthetic dictates content because players will not properly engage with content that does not suit their personal interests (Garrad).

The relation between content and aesthetics—or, rather, mechanics and narrative, the terms I use in this paper—is core to my analysis of the DND5e and Pathfinder 2e. Mechanics refer broadly to any statistic that influences gameplay, such as a character's hit points (HP), armour class (AC), or modifiers. Within the context of this paper, mechanics take on a more specific role of dictating the degree of agency a player has within their game, as well as how impactful mechanics stemming from race can be. Seemingly on the contrary, narrative refers to social situations performed by players through their TTRPG character, as well as the agency and role-playing potential that a player may exhibit within the game world. Mechanical and narrative parameters are created and enforced not only by the rulebook, but by the players and DM.

While mechanics and narrative within TTRPGs seem to be oppositional in nature, they work together to form what Dwulecki calls meaningful rhetorical instances. These instances are the combination of mechanics and narrative and serve to gauge the effectiveness of each. Garrad argues that rules are embedded within the medium and that the true experience garnered by players is mediated through mechanical means. For example, a player may want his in game avatar to dash heroically, jump over a small chasm and plunge his sword into the earth below. While the specific mechanical parameters would be set by the DM and determined by the mechanical rules of the game, the player would have to roll a twenty-sided die (often referred to as a d20) and add various modifiers. Unlike a traditional video game or board game which would have particular actions and consequences listed, TTRPGs as a medium rely on both the discretion of players and the DM to decide appropriate outcomes for anything the players decide to do. If a player feels autonomous within a situation, the DM has successfully merged narrative and mechanical elements. Therefore, rhetorical instances are used to gauge player satisfaction of a situation.

DND and Pathfinder

While DND5e and Pathfinder 2e are both fantasy TTRPGs, it is important to recognize their differences. On one end, DND focusses on creating and maintaining a simple set of general mechanics that make it easy for new players to join. On the other, Pathfinder focusses on providing players with full autonomy of their character during both the character creation process and throughout the gameplay campaign. The complexity and intricacy a player must actively understand throughout any given Pathfinder 2e campaign demonstrates the different trajectories along which the two TTRPGs have developed. From a mechanical perspective, DND5e is simpler because, as a player progresses throughout the campaign and gets stronger,

they receive pre-destined abilities and ability modifiers. Pathfinder 2e's complex nature stems from the sheer number of abilities and the autonomy a player has over the way their character develops. The process of getting stronger, referred to as scaling within the TTRPG community, influences every mechanic within the game and is pertinent to this paper because it places more importance on ability score improvements/gifts given, which is determined largely by a character's race.

Dungeons and Dragons (DND1e) was created by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 1974. It functioned as a way for Gygax and his friends to role play within a world that Gygax had created. In 1977, the release of DND Advanced split DND into two distinct gameplay paths. DND1e was mechanically light and focussed on the narrative dynamics created by the DM and the players, whereas DND Advanced was mechanically intense, boasting a heightened rules system that directly addressed many actions a player could take within the ludic space. In 1989, Wizards of the Coast published DND Advanced 2e, which removed elements of the game, such as demons and devils, that had proven controversial. Moreover, considerable changes were made to the battle system as well as to the overall customizability of the player character. In 2000, DND 3e released which implemented a dice rolling system to liven gameplay even further from past releases. Starting in this edition, players roll a d20 and add various modifiers to resolve both mechanical and narrative situations. However, game players were frustrated with the balancing and the lack of enemy variety, so, in 2003, DND 3.5e released to address the community uproar. In 2008, DND 4e was released, posing itself as a new way to play DND. This edition fundamentally changed the battle system, giving all of the classes' access to abilities that could be cast at anytime in certain directions. While this provided a lot of agency within a turn, it also forced each player to have to prepare a physical representation of their character, referred to

within TTRPG communities as a miniature. Finally, in 2014, DND5e was released, taking core elements of every previous edition in an effort to streamline gameplay. DND5e focussed on balanced narrative and gameplay encounters to streamline all aspects of the game.

The most recent edition, DND5e is also by far the most popular TTRPG to ever be released, boasting a phenomenal 40 million fans in 2019 (Wizards of the Coast). Statistics taken throughout the first quarter of 2019 showcase that the player growth margin for players in Europe increased by over 20% and that the gender split between male and female players are 60/40%, as close to all encompassing as the game has seen. It is noteworthy that player ethnicity is not captured in these statistics.

DND's biggest competitor in the TTRPG field is Pathfinder. Pathfinder 1e was issued by Paizo Publishing in 2009 due to creative disagreements between Paizo Publishing and Wizards of the Coast. With the release (and massive combat overhaul) of DND 4e, Paizo publishing believed that fans would feel unsatisfied. Pathfinder 1e was created to streamline the advanced combat mechanics of DND 3.5e whilst simultaneously being fully cross compatible. Supplementary material such as official storylines, classes and spells were continuously released between 2009 and 2019 in an effort to ensure that fans were satisfied. The reception to Pathfinder 1e was incredible, outselling DND 4e? between 2011 and 2014. In 2018, Paizo Publishing publicly posted a preliminary rule set that streamlined the action economy and changed the overall scaling of the game. After community suggestions, the official Pathfinder 2e rule set was published in 2019.

Although DND5e and Pathfinder 2e are both fantasy TTRPGs, they have myriad differences that warrant discussion. First, the way in which each game is mechanically balanced is quite different. Both games utilize a twenty-sided die to determine the outcome of most

mechanical events, wherein the player will roll a D20 and then add various modifiers. This is then weighed against either the difficulty score of the enemy or the event (depending on the rhetorical instance). The differences emerge in the way that the modifiers are added. DND5e does not increase the number of dice rolled with attacks nor the modifier added each level. Instead, power comes from either an additional modifier/die being added or a new move altogether. This mechanical adoption encourages players to experiment with the abilities that they take because they will not be doing so in lieu of gaining mechanical statistics. Pathfinder 2e, on the other hand, provides players with increased modifiers and new attacks at every single level. This means that each time a character levels up, they gain drastic statistical advantages that are elevated by their racial stats and class stats. This difference is worth stating because it showcases both the way that player characters and enemies scale in each game, as well as the importance that each game places upon mechanical agency.

Second, DND5e and Pathfinder 2e approach the mechanics of fictional and non-fictional race differently. Pathfinder 2e heavily recommends that a player choose a race with base modifiers that support their class while DND5e takes a laissez-faire approach. Pathfinder 2e approaches the ‘mechanical race’ very specifically while DND5e provides the player with more agency in their racial decision at the cost of overall mechanical balance.

Divinity: Original Sin 2

Contextualizing *Divinity: Original Sin 2* in relation to DND5e and Pathfinder 2e first requires me to shine light on the scholarly conversations taking place in the broader fantasy RPG video game genre. Firstly, some stereotypes present in tabletop gaming rear themselves in video games inspired by the TTRPG medium. Critically acclaimed video games like *Dragon Age* (Released in 2009) and *Baldur’s Gate* (Released in 1998) openly follow racial signifiers created

and perpetuated in TTRPGs like DND and Pathfinder, treating race as a determinate factor of social status (Hellstrom 8). In these open world role-playing video games, in which the players are offered a perceived ‘full autonomy’ of their characters, real world racial conflict is mirrored to promote inequality (Beyer 88). Beyer argues that elves in Dragon Age act both as a signifier of European royal stereotypes and as second-rate citizens. This fictional racial divide pushes players to avoid choosing this race, embracing colonial ideas of white supremacy and essentialism (90-3). This idea of video games based on TTRPGs representing race unfairly is shared amongst scholars in the field, with both Jong and Hellstrom concluding that certain fictional races provide detriments to the game’s playability. Moreover, these scholars claim that within the playable Human race, there is a significant lack of cultural representation, with only light skinned characters available (Hellstrom 11; Jong 6).

Fantasy video games often employ problematic worldbuilding techniques that encourage the player to prioritize fictional racial lives. Major cities present in Baldur’s Gate and Dragon Age are built on the aforementioned racial inequalities, treating narrative city building as a tool for racial othering. As argued by Jorgensen, player agency acts as a way to reinforce normative ideals of race through the fictional races that are present within the city. Ultimately, the actions that a player takes allow for one race to ‘win out’ over another, affecting the world’s landscape by subduing a race completely (Jorgensen 88). Micro-racial encounters in Dragon Age lead into the macro subjugation of race, where the intimacy of the already racialized other is implicitly presented to the player (91). Yet, Jong argues that this worldbuilding technique is integral to RPG video games because of its quasi-interdeterminism. Each time that a player interacts with these towns for the first time, the player is thrust into the midst of race subjugation but, throughout the story, the player continuously gains more autonomy over it, shaping it in a

nuanced way each time (Jong 9). The conversation surrounding race in RPG video games is similar in both scope and nature to popularized TTRPGs, by treating racial identity as a way of inciting player agency and racial othering through inherently racist social encounters.

By analyzing how what I call “narrative race” functions within video games based on the fantasy genre, this scholarly literature helps explain how fantasy role playing video games represent race, but it fails to capture the relation between the video games and the fantasy TTRPGs that they are based on. Interestingly, these scholars analyze games that came out in the early twentieth century; more recent games, such as *Divinity: Original Sin 2*, have not been examined. This has led to a gap in scholarly research on the role of race and worldbuilding in all fantasy RPGs. Moreover, little attention has been paid to the role of the human in fantasy video games.

Literature Review: Race within DND5e and Pathfinder 2e

Race is incredibly important in shaping characters for both DND5e and Pathfinder 2e. Through both the mechanical and narrative descriptors, the rulebooks for these games inform players of all skill levels what makes each race interesting, and they help players choose a race that suits their expected playstyle. The key to creating races that differ from each other is to include cultural and societal references that players can relate to, by referring to humans as the baseline race. This comparison to the human is normalized within scholarly conversation, to the point where it is widely unmentioned. In general, scholars look to the relationship between fictional and real races in an effort to showcase the problematic nature of racial construction within TTRPGs. This approach, however, overlooks the crucial role played by the game rulebooks. The following section provides an overview of relevant scholarly conversations and identifies what sets my research apart from them.

Scholarly conversations surrounding race construction in popular TTRPGs argue that the ways in which race is explained and enacted within the game is reminiscent of real-life stereotyping. To these scholars, the idea of race as stereotypical in TTRPGs is formed from cultural understandings of race in the real world. This cyclical representation of race allows table top game makers to take normative ideas of certain races in the real world and apply them to races in their game. To triangulate racial stereotypes across TTRPGs, Garcia argues that specific racial qualities taken from real life are the crux of believable characters in a context that is seen as readable. She continues by saying that these stereotypes are reinforced through the Eurocentric standard of storytelling (Garcia).

Similarly, Oliviander asserts that racial stereotyping enters TTRPGs through descriptions of hobbies, hair style, and clothing. For example, orcs are represented in DND as dark skinned with long, wavy hair and natural clothing, drawing inspiration from Indigenous aesthetics, with the 'orc shaman' drawing on associations between indigeneity and notions of nature and herbalism. Martina adds that "problems appear when it comes to monster factions such as orcs, who are described as killing machines that care only about battle and conquest, all while visually being clear representations of Western African shamanism." Warnes argues that race can also be represented as an innocent aesthetic choice, wherein playable characters will have a certain skin colour in order to seem unique and relatable (Warnes). Through the literature, stereotypes as aesthetic phenomena, rooted in European oppression, is a central theme.

The racial stereotypes presented in TTRPGs often are reinforced by the players themselves. Discussions in the current literature find a link between those who play TTRPGs and the characters that they play. Forsythe argues that those who play TTRPGs choose to either reinforce or oppose the racial stereotypes associated with their character. This need for players to identify

with their game characters becomes an issue of identity, rather than global stereotyping (Forsythe). Curran asserts that player identities are manifested through their characters' race, whereas in-game race directly affects the perceptions of the player (Curran 9). While the ideological perspectives in TTRPGs are fictional, the influence that they have on players are entirely real. The identification between in-game race and player perceptions perpetuate cycles of normative belief systems (Curran; Poor).

Scholars are in the midst of discussing how important a TTRPG's core rulebook is in dictating a player's overall agency within the game world. In general, TTRPG players are provided with a high degree of agency through the game's player manual. However, all players must adapt to the rules of the world which they play within, including choosing an appropriate class and race. Though the specific classes, abilities and races differ from game to game, there are certain races that are constant, such as elves, orcs and humans. Scholarly literature about race construction in the games concludes that racist tendencies are embedded in the ruleset, wherein the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (DMG) grants certain races inherent advantages over others (Johnson; Garcia). In this case, the ruleset given through the DMG acts as clarification from Gygax himself, reinforcing problematic belief systems regarding race. Furthermore, it signals to symbolic violence between races, which ultimately limit player customization and interactivity (Garcia 6).

On the other hand, some scholars argue that racial representations in TTRPGs are the product of contemporary culture. As Poor observes, narrative spaces containing elves represent cultural othering through the parallels that it draws from the real world (Poor 3). Mixed elves and humans (half-elves), or drow and elves (dark elves) mimic race discourse in the late twentieth century, drawing attention to the disparity between the mixed races and highlighting their lack of

belonging (12). For Jorge Garcia, race acts as a means for players to enact their power fantasies, choosing an inherently dominant race in the game to enact power over a group of people within the game space (Garcia 26).

Academic conversations surrounding race construction within popularized TTRPGs like DND5e and Pathfinder 2e prove the distinctness of the genre by discussing both the efficacy of race as an autonomous tool and a tool for furthering problematic real-world stereotypes. On one end, scholars believe that race is used as a tool to provide autonomy for players to capture real, personal morals and principles. On the other, race construction is seen as problematic due to the sometimes-explicit references to negative stereotypes present in the real world. This dynamic discussion highlights the uniqueness of the genre as scholars cannot unify on the efficacy of how race is practiced.

In all of the discourses surrounding the ways in which race is represented in TTRPGs, the role of player choice is key, including using technology to build characters. Adams recognizes the ways in which RPGs have ‘adapted to suit a variety of demographics and play-styles’ (Adams 71). Games like Pathfinder and DND have websites devoted to the creation and maintenance of characters, allowing the plethora of racial options and features to be streamlined to create characters against the stereotypes (Pathbuilder). These technologies, developed by fans of the games, are created to give players a different style of building a character, outside of the ideals perpetuated by the TTRPG itself. Hendricks and Winkler argue that third party character builders affect the social reality of the player, which is intertwined with the characters they construct (Hendricks, Winkler 32, 34-6). Ultimately, scholars agree that third party, character building technologies are becoming popular, but they question whether these programs support or decrease player autonomy.

The role of individual racial construction undertaken by players is becoming a central conversation within fantasy race studies. Arteez argues that players may want to create a new race, but cannot due to a lack of power from the DM. In this case, “[Races] need to be modified and recontextualized in order to properly absorb them into the new setting. In the end, even the common or cliché fantasy races could be recontextualized” (Arteev 5). While the ideas of race creation on a micro level is still emerging, a lack of understanding around what real world inspiration players are drawing their racial ideas from is significant. To this degree, players may unknowingly invoke normative stereotypes or implicit racism while simultaneously believing they are creating something wholly unproblematic. This idea that Arteev brings to light is pivotal in recognizing the effects that race-building within TTRPGs can have on the broader understanding of fictional races by recontextualizing races as they appear across TTRPGs; the clichéd role of any given fictional or non-fictional race can be reidentified and expanded upon within other mediums and genres.

Furthermore, the Pathfinder 2e and DND5e core rulebooks play a pivotal role in influencing the creation and continued support for each race at both a micro and macro level. By dictating the player requirements both mechanically and narratively, these books effectively form a virtual equivalent of what Stuart Hall calls ‘race as a floating signifier’ (Hall). This term expresses that race cannot be identified and explained like other theories because it is totally reliant on cultural or social political definitions. Since race as a concept is extraordinarily diverse, it should be explained and understood in relation to its discursivity. As Hall writes, “discursive systems are discursive systems because the interplay between the representation of racial difference, the writing of power, and the production of knowledge, is crucial to the way in which they are generated, and the way in which they function” (10). The rulebooks of famous

TTRPGs such as Pathfinder 2e and DND5e, then, are discursive systems for which racial definitions are created and then perpetuated within the game world.

My research serves to bridge the gap in the literature by examining how racial constructions within the core rulebooks for DND5e and Pathfinder 2e influence both player agency and racial representation. Although DND foregoes providing race-wide data while Pathfinder 2e prioritizes it, race construction is something that both Paizo and Wizards of the Coast take seriously. Moreover, each game's design philosophy influences how racial ideologies are expressed within the game. DND5e's laissez-faire approach to race decreases standardized role-playing potential while enhancing each player's creative agency, whereas Pathfinder 2e sacrifices a player's creative agency (in reference to the narrative race) while elevating their ability to role play effectively.

Methodology

To analyze how concepts of race are used in the Pathfinder 2e and DND5e rulebooks, my methodological framework draws upon the Game Dynamic Narrative Analysis (GDNA) model, originally proposed by Sven Dwulecki (Dwulecki). GDNA is crafted as a holistic approach to understanding mechanical and ludological agents, and it helps reveal the interplay between ludological and narratological perspectives in games, regardless of the medium (e.g., tabletop, video game, TTRPG) (49). It specifically examines procedural rhetoric and the effect that game making practices have on the ideology they advocate. Below, I will specifically analyze the way in which mechanical and narrative race relates to procedural rhetoric. Procedural rhetoric, in my study, describes the ways that racial coding within the rulebooks influence how race and race-dynamics are portrayed. I will also examine how race is constructed and maintained in both the DND5e and Pathfinder 2e rulebooks. Dwulecki's GDNA model resembles a DNA strand, using

two theoretical strands in order to merge the discourse between narrative and game (8). For TTRPGs, the narrative strand explains the classic rhetorical intricacies of player encounters with the game maker's created society – including the ways race, language, and gender are perceived – while the game strand analyzes the ways mechanics and procedural rhetoric impact the creation and playthrough of combat encounters.

To fully understand the nature of mechanical and narrative performance within the TTRPG genre, a quick summary of the transient nature of ludology and narratology is required. Due to the nature of TTRPGs as a medium, players are required to understand the mechanics of the game while simultaneously performing within the game space. Unlike other fantasy mediums like video games or books, players not only interact with the world in which they play in, but shape it. As Dwulecki claims, all games imbue varying degrees of mechanical and narrative agency onto the player, but there is not an all-encompassing method to test the efficacy of the mechanical/narrative techniques used. In the early 2000s, much of the work on mechanical and narrative interactions has focused on video games (see Angelica Fuchs and Marie-Laure Ryan). More recently, scholars have turned to trans-medial ludology, which defines games that take advantage of mixed reality to deliver novel modes of gameplay. It follows the school of thought coined by Espen J Aarseth who claims that all video games fit within the following categories of study: ontological, aesthetic, clinical/sociological, utilitarian, exploratory, and/or affirmative—which together are encompassed by the 'Classic Game Model' (Aarseth). In contrast to the idea that any game must fit within set categories is, TTRPGs allow players to perform within a near infinite number of virtual/ludic spaces that is only dictated by the collective wishes of the players. Therefore, I argue that TTRPGs as a genre not only exist wholly outside of the 'classic

game model’, but also are not fully represented within the current iteration of Dwulecki’s GDNA.

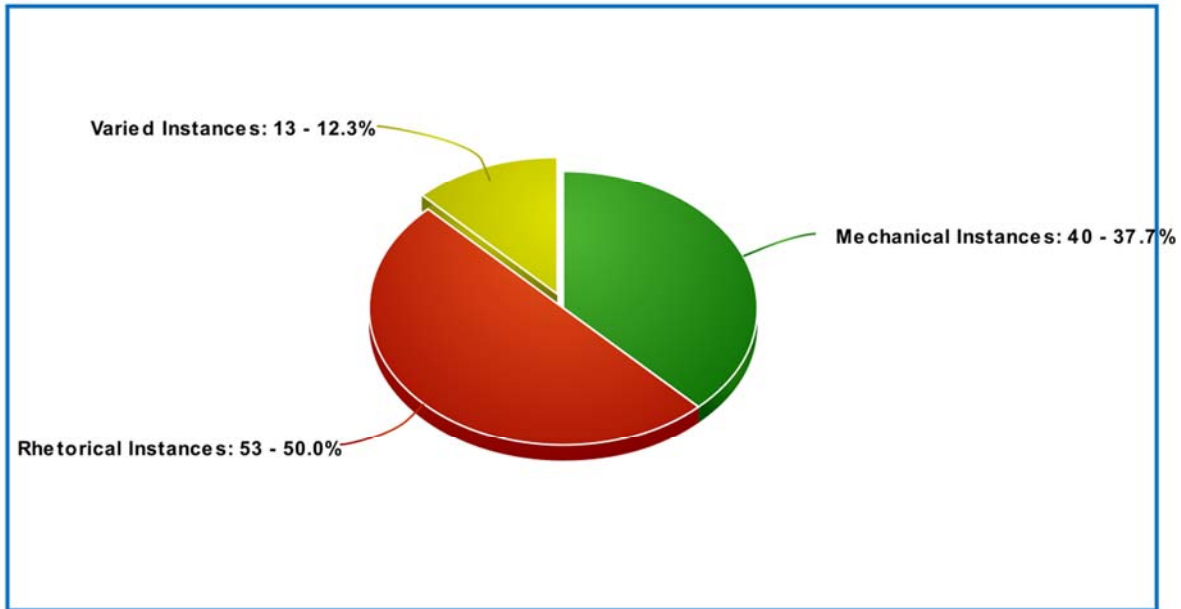
Because definitions of ‘mechanical’, ‘narrative’, and ‘rhetorical’ information are broad and widely based on the medium, allow me to state how each of these terms will be defined in relation to TTRPGs (as taken from DND5e and Pathfinder 2e’s core rulebooks). Mechanical information in TTRPG rulebooks provide details of all aspects related to the in-game character including: height, race, class statistics and abilities, carry capacity, and equipment. Narrative information in these rulebooks help to provide players with a sense of how to roleplay their in-game character within the world. Narrative within TTRPGs helps to answer questions such as “how do factions interact with each other or what social characteristics do each race possess?” Rhetorical information describes the interplay between the mechanical and the narrative. This often results in rhetoric being used to reward or dissuade players from performing certain actions. For example, a player may spend time with a non playable character (NPC), helping them do various chores. During the time allotted to helping them, the player will roll their D20 and add the appropriate modifiers, all the while role playing their character. While performing the chores, the player may stumble across something that can help them on their journey and the NPC gives it to them as a gift. The interplay between simple mechanics and narrative found within TTRPGs form a rhetorical scenario.

In order to gauge how effective TTRPGs are at differentiating between ludological and narrative elements, I have collected and organized instances of ‘race’ and ‘human’ within the DND5e Player’s Handbook and the Pathfinder 2e. These handbooks are the primary way in which the developers encourage players to interact with their game. It includes all of the necessary information that players must understand in order to play the game as intended

including mechanical instruction like how to set up a character and narrative advice for how particular classes/races often interact. Key terms like these are used often within each rulebook and can be used as a marker to showcase the way in which Wizards of the Coast and Paizo Publishing interact with their audience. Information was gathered from these two core rulebooks and sorted into multiple tables based on whether instances of ‘race’ or ‘human’ qualified as mechanical, rhetorical, or a combination of the two based on the GDNA. However, throughout the process, it became clear that the GDNA was not wholly adapted towards TTRPGs as a medium. Multiple instances were flagged as both mechanical and rhetorical in nature, yet did not accurately portray meaningful information.

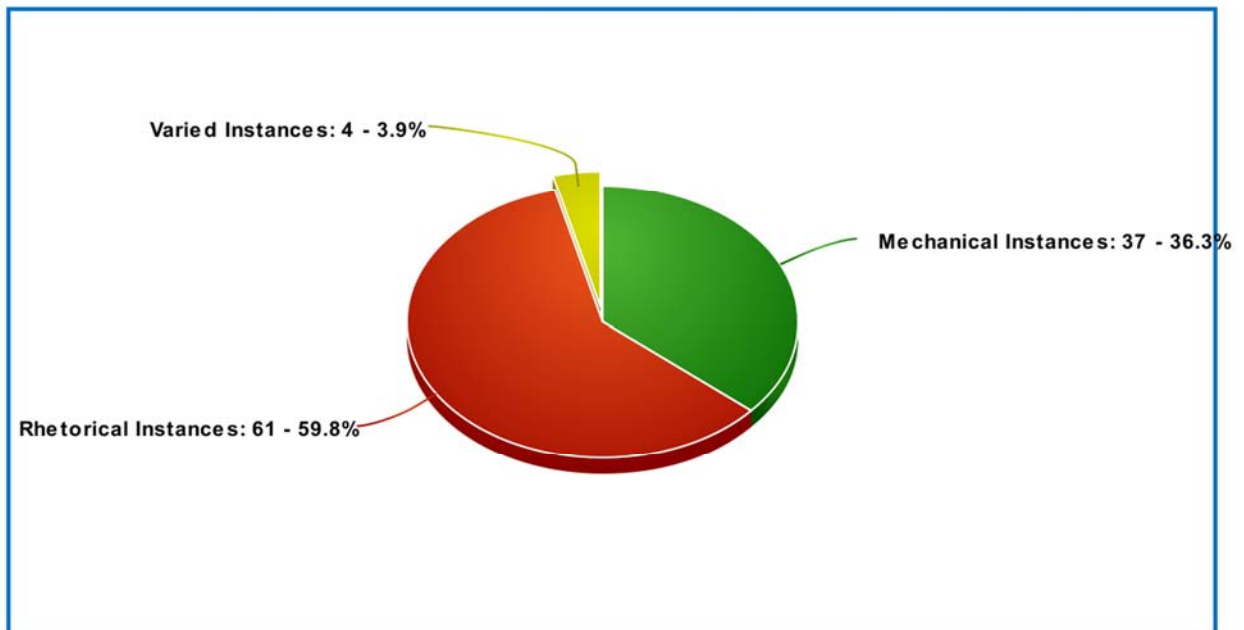
In total, 102 instances of race were documented within the DND5e Player’s Handbook while 18 instances of human were documented. Of these numbers, 37 instances of race were categorized as being mechanical in nature and 61 as narrative. 1 instance of human was marked as mechanical and 16 as narrative. Moreover, there were 4 instances of race and 1 instance of human that did not fall cleanly within the narrative and mechanical categories. Similarly, in the Pathfinder 2e core rulebook, there were also 102 total instances of race documented and 22 instances of human. 40 instances of race were categorized as mechanical and 53 as narrative. 3 instances of human were also documented as mechanical and 18 as narrative. Similarly, to DND5e, there were 9 instances of race and 1 instance of human that did not fit into the mechanical or narrative categories. The reason why these statistics are worth noting are twofold: it proves that narrative race is more important than the mechanical race, and that some instances can function both mechanically and narratively.

Pathfinder Quantitative Data



■ Mechanical Instances ■ Rhetorical Instances ■ Varied Instances

DND Quantitative Data



■ Mechanical Instances ■ Rhetorical Instances ■ Varied Instances

Below are quotations containing examples of mechanical and rhetorical instances of ‘race’ used within the DND 5e Player’s handbook.

- Some races have subraces, such as mountain dwarf or wood elf (17).
- Chapter 2 provides more information about these races, as well as the less widespread races of dragonborn, gnomes, half-elves, half-orcs, and tieflings (11).
- The race you choose contributes to your character’s identity in an important way, by establishing a general appearance and the natural talents gained from culture and ancestry (11).

The instances of race seen above can be utilized to gauge the efficacy of Dwulecki’s GDNA within the TTRPG genre. The first instance simply offers the player some guidance on the mechanic ‘subraces’, regional variants of classic races like Dwarf or Elf. Within Dwulecki’s GDNA, this can be simply coded as mechanical because it does not “emphasize the allegorical dimension of the game’s story world (Dwulecki 48). The second instance of race seen in the table above can be seen as narrative because it is describing the commonness of various races. This instance does not describe a mechanic that players can use within the game world so much as it provides a suggestion directly to the player about where to find mechanical information. It is within this subtype of rhetorical information that the GDNA model falls short in capturing the rhetorical/mechanical split within TTRPGs. Dwulecki defines rhetorical activity within video games through the procedural systems that they utilize, broadly defined as speech acts (48-9). Moreover, in video game worlds, there cannot be procedural rhetoric mechanics that have no impact on the story-world. Dwulecki calls this a co-dependent duality, which grants the Game Dynamic Narrative Analysis its name. The second instance of race documented above uses a modified speech act to contact the player and provide information but has no impact on the game

world itself. Therefore, I propose that the GDNA model be modified for TTRPGs to improve upon the structured approach for investigating narratological and ludological aspects within the game space. Below is a comparison of the strengths of the initial GDNA model and the modified model suited for TTRPGs.

Even though there are many similarities between the video game and table top role-playing game genres, the differences allow for a more creative understanding of both genres. The narrative strand of Dwulecki's GDNA proposes that video games utilize classical rhetoric and

Dwulecki and Gaudreau GDNA

Dwulecki Narrative Strand	Dwulecki Game Strand	Gaudreau Narrative Strand	Gaudreau Game Strand
Classical Rhetoric	Procedural rhetoric	Classical rhetoric	Procedural rhetoric
Speech acts, visual representations etc.	Rules, mechanics etc.	Roleplay	Rules, mechanics etc
		Creative agency	Visual representations, speech acts etc

various speech acts/visual representations to further the narrative. Classical rhetoric in Dwulecki's case references how video games mimic other sorts of media and that any rhetorical systems present within may present itself in video games (47-8), while speech acts and visual representations are narrative encouragements to help players in various ways. The narrative

strand changes that I propose to better suit the nature of TTRPGs include accounting for the roleplay elements as well as the creative agency players hold. Scholars leading the conversation on the intersection between performance studies and role-playing games determine that role playing rituals performed between player avatars influence the content of the game. Hoover et. al assert that not only are these game-based performances rehearsed and prepared, but that they are ritualized in a way that allows players to engage with cultural phenomenon in a formalized manner. Moreover, they argue that “performances are enacted and attended to with special care – or at least expected to be” (Hoover et. al). In reference to the GDNA, this means that role playing, regardless of the degree to which the player is invested, help to further the narrative and contribute to a fulfilling rhetorical situation.

Creative agency is a factor that is widely unexplored within Dwulecki’s GDNA but is crucial to understanding the relationship between narrative and ludological elements in TTRPGs. In-game agency within traditional video games is difficult to achieve because interaction between the player and the in-game character is mediated through technology and various mechanics. A video game character has a set of movement and action choices that they may perform in any given situation. There are many choices a player can make, but they require them to press certain combinations of buttons on the gamepad. This limits the amount of autonomy a player can have when playing any video game, due to the limiting nature of the medium. On the other hand, the trans-medial nature of TTRPGs allow for players to perform various in-game actions in myriad ways. The mechanics that allow players to take control of a situation are more fluent and expressive, allowing a certain action to be used in countless ways to suit the situation. Antero Garcia believes that players create agency based on the mechanics that the game encourages. Garcia focuses particularly on the rules of DND5e, deducing that both the

cyberculture that the players create in the game space, as well as the larger community surrounding TTRPGs are forever changed based on the ritualistic actions performed by players. For example, players will create contextual narrative conversations that pertain solely to the game world but that are ultimately dictated by the mechanics outlined in the game's player rulebook. Therefore, players themselves perform a duty through their roleplaying and creative agency as players that is influenced by the ruleset of the game (Garcia). The discussions that take place within the game world may only exist within the players' collective, but these discussions are heavily influenced by the information provided from the rulebooks. The rulebooks and players work in tandem to fulfill rhetorical instances as well as present the illusion of choices and control over the outcome of an instance. Dwulecki believes that procedural rhetoric acts as a sort of 'gatekeeper' to ensure that players stay within the bounds of the game design (52). Rules and mechanics act synonymously with this endeavor, keeping players in tune with the overall design philosophy of the game. On the surface, this seems to limit the player but, in reality, it aids in crafting a fulfilling experience for the player by allowing them to master particular mechanics, rather than introducing and changing them consistently.

Applying the game strand of Dwulecki's GDNA to TTRPGs offers a new perspective on procedural rhetoric. By Dwulecki's definition, procedural rhetoric is conditional upon the built-in mechanics/rules of the game space. In TTRPG's, however, rules are generalized and used in tandem with the discretion of those who are playing. Therefore, procedural rhetoric exists not as a 'gatekeeper' to force players to abide to the game's design, but as a way to enact agency within the gamespace. It is included within the modified game strand because it is still conditional upon the generalized rules/mechanics outlined within any given TTRPG rulebook. Moreover, the rules and mechanics within TTRPGs are meant to shape the way players perform within the game

space, not dictate the actions players take. For example, a mechanic within DND 5e may state that a character traversing difficult terrain will move at half speed. The player can circumvent this rule with creativity, perhaps finding a way to glide over or otherwise nullify the effects of the difficult terrain. This freedom, or ‘rule of cool’, is the major separating factor between Dwulecki’s definition of mechanics within video games and mine for TTRPGs.

I propose that visual representations and speech acts in TTRPGs, while technically falling under both the narrative and game strand, benefit mechanical endeavors far more. Speech acts and visual representations within video games include most non pivotal dialogue options and many cutscenes. Within TTRPGs, however, speech acts are mechanical in nature because conversations are often required to perform a mechanic. Within Pathfinder 2e, social situations are broken down mechanically as follows: deception, diplomacy, intimidation, performance. A player may wish to acquire more information or claim a reward but must role play by utilizing specific speech acts to accomplish their goal. For example, a player avatar enters a tavern, proficient in intimidation and inept in diplomacy, and strike up a friendly conversation with the barkeep requesting information. The player would be forced to perform a mechanical roll of diplomacy rather than intimidation because the player avatar did not perform the correct speech act. Simply put, speech acts are guides that dictate which mechanic to draw from. Similarly, visual representations are often used as guides for the players to understand the range, cast time, height, or status effects occupying a rhetorical instance. A fifth level wizard casts fireball at a group of goblins but must ensure that their party will be unaffected. The player would reference a visual aid in order to visualize the range of the ability. Visual representations also manifest themselves to varying degree based on the medium that the particular instance of TTRPG being played. If a party of players utilize an online TTRPG program such as tabletop simulator or

roll20, visual representations are built into the user interface. This means that they are easy to access and barely slow down the pace of the game. If the group decide to play in person without physical props, visual representations become rarer as the game takes place wholly in the theater of the mind.

Analysis: Narrative Race Construction Within DND5e in Relation to the Modified GDNA

This section will unravel the ways in which race as a narrative tool is described and maintained within DND5e and Pathfinder 2e. It will analyze examples that will demonstrate how DND5e values the uniqueness of all races while Pathfinder 2e differentiates race into common and rare. Within DND5e, ‘rare’ races are created by fans, but are not present within the DND core handbooks. I will utilize my modified version of Dwulecki’s GDNA to holistically and systematically understand how narrative and gameplay in TTRPGs are structured in order to determine how race is both portrayed and functions. Moreover, it will allow me compare and contrast how these two TTRPGs dictate player agency and racial ideologies. Below are examples of narrative instances of race within DND5e’s Player’s Handbook, following the classifications I developed the modified GDNA model. Unlike the list given in the previous section, which showcases basic mechanical and narrative instances, this list details information about race and identity that players can apply to their character.

- And the people themselves people of varying size, shape, and color, dressed in a dazzling spectrum, of styles and hues represent many different races, from diminutive halflings and stout dwarves to majestically beautiful elves, mingling among a variety of human ethnicities (Player’s Handbook 14).

- Scattered among the members of these more common races are the true exotics: a hulking dragonborn here, pushing his way through the crowd, and a sly tiefling there, lurking in the shadows with mischief in her eyes (17).
- Half-elves and half-orcs live and work alongside humans, without fully belonging to the races of either of their parents (17).

As seen in the three narrative-based quotations above, race is put in the spotlight. At first, it may appear as though the first quote falls solely within the narrative strand under the ‘classical rhetoric’ sub-category because it asserts various characteristics that races often exemplify. Implicitly, however, this is better classified in the ‘procedural rhetoric’ category because it describes general racial characteristics. By identifying and attaching broad physical qualities to races, Wizards of the Coast is providing players with a visual sense of what to expect when choosing a race. Interestingly, this quote identifies various human ethnicities. Within the context of the DND universe, this implies that ethnicity is the identifying trait for humans, akin to elves’ majesty or dwarves’ stoutness. Moreover, the care put into differentiating between clothing styles, physical size and skin colour showcase that Wizards of the Coast values uniqueness on an individual level, not only between races. The second quote communicates the concept of rarity between the playable races in DND5e, simultaneously drawing attention towards the sheer number of different races as well as towards the relationship between them. As established in the first quote, the characteristics that define the dwarf and halfling races are solely size based. In the second, each listed race is defined by their rarity and their ability to use inherent (mechanical) advantages to perform an action. For example, the dragonborn are able to draw attention to themselves using their larger size, whereas the tiefling uses their natural stealth to avoid contact

altogether. Therefore, although each race is unique to a certain extent, rarer racial identities can dictate the overall identity of the player character. The third quotation further shapes the race dynamics at play within DND5e by indicating how mixed races are perceived within the game world. These half humans, half fictional races possess the physical characteristics of their parents but are not fully accepted into either community.

An overview of the fictional racial politics described within the DND5e Player's Handbook, as described under the modified GDNA, shows that race plays a factor in both the mechanical and narrative strands. Through physical traits that may manifest in making a race better or worse at certain statistics and descriptions that paint how races perceive each other, it becomes clear that a character's racial identity will impact how a player interacts with the game world. Even though DND5e values uniqueness on an individual level, rather than solely a race-wide one, the parameters dictate what a character could be capable of, as well as how they are perceived. The aesthetic and mechanical information given within the Player's Handbook prompt deeper thinking about how a player character looks and interacts with their environment. Within this rulebook, the action, temperament and general persona of a race is outlined but never enforced. The framework laid out within the DND5e Player's Handbook provides a path for players to follow, but it does not punish them for straying from it. Therefore, race is handled in a nuanced way within this edition of DND because it prompts the player to think deeply about why they are choosing a certain race.

Analysis: Narrative Race Construction Within Pathfinder 2e in Relation to the Modified GDNA

Though DND5e and Pathfinder 2e are both TTRPGs, the way in which each explain racial significance is vastly different. First, it's important to note that the way in which

Pathfinder 2e's player guide informs the player is entirely different than in DND5e's player handbook. Pathfinder's rulebook uses speech acts and classical rhetoric to speak directly to the player, using a second-person address and colloquial language, in an attempt to provide a detailed overview of how races are formed and how they interact with each other. In fact, the Pathfinder 2e rulebook has a section discussing each of the seven core races and how they interact with each other (see the table below). DND5e on the other hand uses third person and elevated language to paint a detailed picture of the game world while giving a general description of different racial characteristics.

Below is a series of quotes, classified using the modified GDNA, which I will use to explain how race affects the player experience in Pathfinder 2e.

- The seven races presented in this chapter have wildly different abilities, personalities, and societies, but at the same time, all seven races are quite similar – none of the races here deviate too far from humanity, and all of their abilities are roughly equal and balanced (Pathfinder Core Rulebook 18).
- Other races, more powerful and more exotic, exist in the game world as well, but the Pathfinder RPG is built and balanced with the expectation that all players start on roughly equal footing (18).
- Rules and guidelines for playing more powerful or more unusual races can be found in Chapter 12 (21).
- From the stout dwarf to the noble elf, the races of the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game are a diverse mix of cultures, sizes, attitudes, and appearances (19).

The first quotation demonstrates how creative agency is sacrificed in order to help promote role play and how differences that make each race unique does not make them foreign to players. This is different from DND5e because recognizes race as a factor in displaying individual creativity/uniqueness. The Pathfinder's player's guide regularly reiterates that all races show characteristics of humanity (presumably those that are present in the real world), which helps make the world believable. The last part of the quotation speaks to the mechanical balancing of the game. In contrast to DND 5e, Pathfinder places particular importance on ensuring that the player knows all races have a series of balanced statistics.

The second quotation demonstrates the role of exoticism within the Pathfinder world. It explicitly informs the player that exotic races are more powerful and may not be suited to intermingle with 'regular' races because the power discrepancy could be mechanically problematic. According to the modified GDNA classifications, it functions both mechanically and narratively. Mechanically, it could simply be classified under the 'rules and mechanics' category because it speaks to the nature of balancing racial statistics. But, looking deeper, it becomes clear that these races should be utilized by the DM in order to push the party of adventurers into unique challenges. While usage of these rare races is managed by the DM, unlike the more common races, the player's guide does not discuss common racial interactions. This lack of racial discourse for exotic races demonstrates that:

- 1) Exotic races should not be played by players because there are no distinctive role-playing recommendations provided through the Pathfinder 2e player's guide; and
- 2) Exotic races function fundamentally different than common races within the Pathfinder world, using mechanically empowered statistics to shift the power level of the party while leaving narrative agency entirely in the hands of the player.

In Pathfinder 2e, race functions as a way to dictate both the mechanical and narrative play style of a character, with the players guide going so far as to dissuade the player from choosing a race that is not inherently suited to the skill set of a player character's class or other features. For example, a Gnome in the Pathfinder world is small in stature and lacking in physical strength. The drawbacks in their hereditary physical fortitude means that playing a gnome as a physically demanding class will yield them far weaker than their companions. Strongly encouraging players to choose a race that matches a particular class's characteristics is a bold strategy by Pathfinder 2e, which ensures that players feel fulfilled while playing their character. However, this is not the biggest difference between Pathfinder 2e and DND5e. As will be discussed below, Pathfinder 2e's Core Rulebook includes a distinct section describing how each race behaves culturally as well as in relation to each other.

Analysis: Fictional Race Dynamics Between Common and Rare Races in Pathfinder 2e

This section analyzes the society and relations described within the Pathfinder 2e Core Rulebook. It compares and contrasts the narrative perspectives of a core race as well as a more exotic race in order to gauge the means by which Paizo Publishing understands general race dynamics within its game.

- Dwarves are a stoic but stern race, ensconced in cities carved from the hearts of mountains and fiercely determined to repel the depredations of savage races like orcs and goblins (Pathfinder Core Rulebook 21).
- More than any other race, the dwarves have acquired a reputation as dour and humorless craftsmen of the earth (21).
- Male and female dwarves pride themselves on the length of their hair, and the men often decorate their beards with a variety of clasps and intricate braids. A

cleanshaven male dwarf is a sure sign of madness, or worse – no one familiar with their race trusts a beardless dwarf (21).

- Dwarves and orcs have often lived in proximity, theirs a history of violence as old as both their races (21).

The quotations listed above convey Paizo Publishing's narrative understanding of the race 'dwarf' within the official Pathfinder 2e player's guide, while simultaneously suggesting how broader racial dynamics work in the game. When examined other, the above series of quotations provide an all-encompassing way for players to understand the narrative impact of the dwarf race before deciding to play the race themselves in a campaign. Interestingly, these descriptors. When looked at with the modified GDNA model, function as assisted roleplay tools, through which players may roleplay a dwarf by implementing these tidbits of information in pertinent rhetorical scenarios. The first quotation exemplifies how Paizo Publishing has structured race within Pathfinder 2e by showcasing how entire races can be minimized and stereotyped. Within this quote, orcs and goblins are explained to be savage in nature. Yet, the half-orc class is seen as civil enough to be a playable race. The second quote describes the general demeanor of dwarves, functioning again to aid the player in various role-playing scenarios. The third quote brings a sense of culture to understanding the race, further showcasing how important this information is in rhetorical situations. The fourth quote continues to shape the narrative of the dwarf race by comparing and contrasting them with orcs. Within these passages, it becomes clear that Paizo positions dwarves as the more reclusive, civilized version of orcs. Moreover, these series of passages exemplify how easily Pathfinder discusses positive and negative aspects of a race in order to represent them with a sense of uniqueness and depth.

An analysis of an exotic race showcases how narrative and mechanical race dictate the creative agency a player possesses. A more exotic race within the Pathfinder 2e world is the kitsune, “shapechangers with two forms: one of a fox-headed humanoid and one largely depending on where they were raised.” (Core Rulebook). Kitsune who were raised in a populated area have a tailless form, a humanoid body that resembles a common race such as human or elf. This race is characterized by both its rarity and their diverse connection to both the material and spiritual worlds, which allow kitsune to have ‘diverse concepts of self and identity – going so far as for some to even view their forms as separate individuals altogether, using them to explore different aspects of their personality’ (Core Rulebook). Within this description, dissimilar mechanical and narrative racial themes emerge. Mechanically, this class is given the ability to shift between races, allowing them to gain the appearance of another race of their choosing. While they do not gain the racial features/statistics of the more common race, they are able to pose within this society, rarely revealing themselves. Narratively, this dual-natured race thrives by aligning themselves with the narrative ideals of the race they have shaped into and striving to perform to it. To a player playing a kitsune, they strive to form as strong an interpersonal relationship as they can (with both their party and the race in questions) in order to achieve their own goals.

A direct comparison between a traditionally common race like the dwarf and an exceptionally rare race like the kitsune within Pathfinder 2e demonstrates the importance of the narrative and mechanical ‘race’ within TTRPGs as a whole. Through these examples, ‘race’ is divided into being both mechanical or narrative in nature to create an exceptional rhetorical scenario. Yet, each usage of race within both DND and Pathfinder 2e is used without referencing whether it is mechanical or narrative. While Pathfinder covertly recognizes the difference

between the two definitions of race by separating their mechanical and narrative descriptions, the language that is used is muddled. This emerging separation between the narrative and the mechanical usage of race is in direct correlation with the modified GDNA as the use case for each is drastically different. As explained earlier, mechanical and narrative instances of race merge together within the game to create distinct rhetorical scenarios. These rhetorical instances, though not mentioned within either the DND or Pathfinder Player's Guide, require each player to carry out in-game racial performances. By allowing the player to understand the nuances between the mechanical and narrative definition of race, these rulebooks are providing valuable insight into how race is constructed and carried out in the game world before the player is immersed within it.

Discussion: The Role of Human within DND 5e and Pathfinder 2e

Within both DND5e and Pathfinder 2e, humans are framed through a colonial lens. The fictional human race is described as pillaging and migrating in order to conquer and claim land and resources as they please. At the same time, humans are described as being able to negotiate trade relations with any race. The descriptions of humans within these books are simultaneously flexible and rigid. Moreover, the human directly recalls Dyer and Hall's claims that the European human is often represented as the true, universal human experience. Within DND5e and Pathfinder 2e's rulebooks, discourses of colonialism and whiteness are connected.

- In the reckonings of most worlds, humans are the youngest of the common races, late to arrive on the world scene and short-lived in comparison to dwarves (Pathfinder Core Rulebook 25).
- Or maybe they feel they have something to prove to the elder races and that's why they build their mighty empires on the foundation of conquest and trade (25).

- With their penchant for migration and conquest, humans are more physically diverse than other common races (Player's Handbook 19).
- Humans are the most adaptable and ambitious people among the common races (20).
- Humans who seek adventure are the most daring and ambitious members of a daring and ambitious race (20).

The narrative descriptions of humans within DND5e seen above showcase the core qualities of humans. While they touch on similar ideas to the Pathfinder 2e descriptions, there are a few key differences worth mentioning. First, these quotations do not exemplify the extent that humans will go to conquer. It is implied that when humans first arrived within the game space, they expanded through conquest but now simply migrate to different lands. This paints the humans not as colonial in nature, but nomadic-adjacent. Humans have the ability to create their own functioning societies with unique cultures and ethnicities, as well as to adapt to any circumstances. Within DND, the human is represented as being infinitely flexible. This is echoed in the way in which the mechanical statistics are demonstrated to new players, with a player being able to increase any ability score, choose any single skill proficiency and a single feature. Rather than inherently being proficient in a stat like other fictional races, the human's adaptability is emphasized. Narratively, the human is seen as adaptable and ambitious while, mechanically, they are seen as flexible and acquiescent to the needs of other races.

- Humans possess exceptional drive and a great capacity to endure and expand, and as such are currently the dominant race in the world (Pathfinder Core Rulebook 27).

- Though the oldest human cultures trace their histories thousands of years into the past, when compared to the societies of common races like elves and dwarves, human society seems to be in a state of constant flux as empires fragment and new kingdoms subsume the old (27).
- Humans are fecund, and their drive and numbers often spur them into contact with other races during bouts of territorial expansion and colonization (27).
- In many cases, this leads to violence and war, yet humans are also swift to forgive and forge alliances with races who do not try to match or exceed them in violence (28).
- Proud, sometimes to the point of arrogance, humans might look upon dwarves as miserly drunkards, elves as flighty fops, halflings as craven thieves, gnomes as twisted maniacs, and half-elves and half-orcs as embarrassments – but the race’s diversity among its own members also makes humans quite adept at accepting others for what they are (28).

The set of quotations featured above are taken from the Pathfinder 2e core rulebook and outline the narrative understanding of the human race. They convey humans as having a colonial mindset by showcasing ideas of dominating, expanding and being in a state of constant flux. This colonial mindset recalls Hall and Dyer’s claim that racial identity begins as a powerful fantasy, projecting desire and degradation onto others and then imposing (what Hall calls) European categories and norms onto every other race – all underpinned by already existing stereotypes (Hall, Dyer). The human as presented in the quotation list above is an unstoppable, ruthless force that acts on a collective whim to conquer at a convenience. It is not representative of the full

human experience, although it is represented as being universal. As Dyer explains, , whiteness is an invisible racial position that is not inherently dominant, but is ubiquitous (Dyer 3); however, “The media, politics, education are still in the hands of white people, still speak for whites while claiming -' and sometimes sincerely aiming - to speak for humanity” (3). Likewise, the narrative human within Pathfinder 2e possesses the same special circumstances and representation that a white human in real life showcases. A human in this game is the inherent default, and is able to conquer, expand and/or oppose other fictional racial virtues without repercussion.

Within popular TTRPGs, the human is portrayed as infinitely flexible. There are no restrictions or bounds that trouble a human mechanically or narratively. A player who chooses to play a human within these games does not have to memorize and enact particular narrative racial qualities. The core rulebooks for DND5e and Pathfinder 2e describe the human as the baseline in order for players to understand the mechanical and narrative distinctness of the other races. Therefore, humans are seen as normative, falling into vague descriptions taken from the colonial perspective of the “real” (i.e., white) human race. Within TTRPGs, they serve as the standard that each other race is consistently compared to. Race construction within DND5e and Pathfinder 2e becomes a tool that begins to create mythology, with the human (a familiar figure), being utilized to aid in legitimizing the fantasy.

Race in Divinity: Original Sin 2

Even though the role of the human is clear within TTRPGs, the question of how well the table-top human is showcased within video games remains. The TTRPG human serves as the culmination for normalcy in order to help new players make sense of the less familiar, fictional races created and maintained throughout the game space. Humans within TTRPGs are flexible, both mechanically and narratively. They are shortsighted and often short-tempered, yet malleable

and highly adaptable. Physically, humans' diverseness is highlighted, with both rulebooks encouraging players to choose various ethnicities, stylistic choices and culture.

What is unclear, however, is how the human is brought to life in video games that follow the TTRPG format. My approach to race and the human within *Divinity: Original Sin 2* is determinant upon the work of Dyer on whiteness. It will focus on the character creation process as well as the character models of the pre-generated main characters. By utilizing this dual methodology, I will be able to determine the degree of ethnic representation in the character selection process. The idea of whiteness is important to keep in mind because *Divinity: Original Sin 2* is representative of the core tropes taken from the fantasy (TT)RPG genre. By looking at this video game in relation to *DND5e* and *Pathfinder 2e*, the role of human can be directly contrasted between genres.

Divinity: Original Sin 2's character creation process can be understood in relation to Dwulecki's GDNA under the narrative strand and visual representation sub-category. The menus and visual nature of the process allows it to fit nicely within the original GDNA. The process of creating a character is narrative in nature because the way that character interacts with the world is based on the traits taken. While there are traits that can affect how a character interacts with particular groups of people within the game world, these interactions are considered rhetorical instances that are initially influenced by the character creation process. This process plays out in contrast to my findings on racial construction in TTRPGs because it minimizes the physical uniqueness and ethnical diversity praised in *DND5e* and *Pathfinder 2e*. Within the rulebooks to popular fantasy TTRPGs, physical descriptions of race encourage players to promote their own cultural values within their character. They offer various options and opportunities to leave players widely unrestricted.

While it is impossible to claim how the entirety of the human race is treated/portrayed within Divinity: Original Sin 2 as a whole, it is worth discussing the character creation process because it is the first interaction a player has within the game world. If the game cannot provide opportunities for players to express themselves, they will not be able to relate and the game will fail to create meaningful rhetorical instances. Noteworthy, when looking at the pre-generated characters slated to be played alongside the character that the player creates, it becomes clear that whiteness is the standard. Below is the opening image showcasing all of the pre-generated characters that have stories tied to them.



The image above exemplifies the ways in which racial identities formed in popular fantasy TTRPG rear themselves in a visual medium. At first glance, there is little ethnic diversity. Each of the races presented in the image above, both fictional and not, have light colored skin. Divinity: Original Sin 2 is a representation for how values presented in TTRPGs can be adapted and portrayed onto the video game medium. The care that both Pathfinder 2e and DND5e put into ensuring that all races and ethnicities are equally represented is lost. Whiteness within this fantastical adaptation of TTRPGs begins to align itself with what Dyer calls the

technological aesthetic of whiteness (Dyer 82). Within technologies that need to accurately portray race and racial difference, “light has the tendency to privilege and construct the idea of a white person” (84). This idea is easily related to Divinity: Original Sin 2 (as well as to all video games that utilize game engines to automatically display light) because this video game prioritizes whiteness, dropping face-light quality when displaying non-white faces. Below is a screenshot of the basic skin colour options present within Divinity: Original Sin 2’s character creation screen. The first is the lightest skin colour options and the second, the darkest.





The figure above demonstrates how Divinity: Original Sin 2's lighting system demonstrates Dyer's idea of the aesthetic hierarchy of race. Within the first three pictures, aesthetic values are clear, with highlights, mid-tones and shadows clearly visible and distinguishable. In the latter 3 images, however, these values become muddled. The darker that the skin tone becomes, the harder it is to differentiate between the dark tones especially. Moreover, this example illustrates how systems of racial representation favor light skinned characters over dark skinned ones. While seeming to provide agency to the player, it actually reinforces white privilege in its aesthetics.

Conclusion

TTRPGs as a medium are made up of rhetorical instances that showcase the creative agency displayed by the players and the DM. Under Dwulecki's modified GDNA, the rulebooks for TTRPGs can be broken down into two distinct strands, narrative and game. The narrative strand outlines classical rhetorical instances, roleplay elements and a player's creative agency while the game strand encompasses procedural rhetorical instances, all rules and mechanics as well as most visual representations and speech acts. These work together to create meaningful

rhetorical instances for players, and race plays a key part in creating these meaningful instances. Within the rulebooks for DND5e and Pathfinder 2e, race is implicitly divided into mechanical and narrative means. In some sections of the rulebooks, race is recognized as a means to impart statistical values or deficits while in others, it is used to justify racially charged interpersonal interactions. This narrative race can be viewed as problematic because it dictates player interactions and minimizes certain racial characteristics and factions. Humans fit into this paradigm by functioning as a consistent comparison point for players. They are infinitely flexible in both the mechanical and narrative definitions and are used by both DND5e and Pathfinder 2e to justify the uniqueness of the other, fictional races. Comparing these ideas, present in TTRPGs to Divinity: Original Sin 2 (which stands as a synecdoche of the fantasy role playing video game genre), further reinforces racial inadequacies. Race in Divinity can be seen in relation to Richard Dyer's idea of aesthetic whiteness. The pre-generated characters within this game space are white or white adjacent, regardless of their race. Fictional and non-fictional races are presumed to be white and though this game provides the option for a player to construct a character of colour, the lighting systems in place lack the resources to properly show the details. The result is that a light skinned character looks pristine, while a dark skin character lacks detail and overall clarity.

One of the limiting factors of this study is that only two fantasy TTRPGs were studied. Pathfinder 2e and DND5e are contemporary and popular fantasy TTRPGs, but they cannot speak for the entirety of the genre. The study of race in the rulebooks of DND5e and Pathfinder 2e cannot be fully representative of the ideals of the fantasy TTRPG genre as a whole, nor specific modules released. The other limiting factor within this study relates to the role of human within the fantasy TTRPG genre, as well as the in-game racial dynamics explored within the core

rulebooks. It is important to note that these racial factions explored are not perfectly defined because the players and DM may pick and choose characteristics to employ within their sessions of play. These racial dynamics are fluent and may change from game to game, module to module, or moment to moment.

Further research on the subject of race dynamics or the role of the human within TTRPGs may be conducted in multiple ways. One way to further explore my research is to develop a system to understand racial dynamics between each race in fantasy TTRPGs. My research sheds light onto how races are created and maintained within the rulebooks but does not delve into the real-life cultural inspiration for each race. By looking intently at the inspiration for each race, more nuanced adaptations of real-world stereotypes would be discovered and provide context for communication based race studies. Another route researchers may utilize my work for is to explore race within a broader sample size of TTRPGs. The human within a contemporary fantasy TTRPG is understood but the human in lesser known TTRPGs or sci-fi TTRPGs is widely unexplored. If the constructed human within these other TTRPGs is portrayed significantly different than in Pathfinder 2e and DND5e, the question of ‘what makes a human’ will become even more nuanced. Finally, further research into the topic of race dynamics within TTRPGs can be continued by conducting studies into video games based on TTRPGs. By formulating a more in-depth analysis of what features and characteristics video games based on TTRPGs take from, scholars will identify problematic and progressive trends in the genre as a whole.

My takeaway from this research is that players should not match their class to their race for solely the statistical advantage. While making a character that is as strong as can be can be fun in its own way, it should not come at the cost of player satisfaction. Playing a character that goes against the traditional character creation ‘tips’ given in the books can provide a more

engaging narrative experience because the focus shifts away from raw statistical strength. I hope to see players move away from mechanical strength within these games into more creative character builds that give them more creative freedom both mechanically and narratively. From the side of the game makers, I hope that in new editions of the rulebooks, the mechanical side of racial features will be decreased or scaled. Race is a core feature of these games that should not be removed because it adds diversity and uniqueness to a character, but race alone should not dictate the class or the ways in which a character should behave.

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