Article

The Table and the Tomb: Positioning Trans Power and Play Amid Fantasy Realism in *Dungeons & Dragons*

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Abstract

This article contends with the transphobic logics perpetuated by the "world's greatest roleplaying game," *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D). Bringing together game texts and scraped social media data from reactionary D&D fans, I argue that despite cursory improvements in official representation, D&D's hostility to trans play is inscribed in the game's engagement of *fantasy realism*—a culturally sculpted "common sense" that rearticulates the logics of established fantasy media. From sex-swap curses in Gygax's "Tomb of Horrors" (1978) to the shapechanging "blessed elves of Corellon" (2017), D&D's approach to fantasy realism mechanically and narratively excludes trans bodies, vilifies trans stories, and diminishes trans power. Drawing on the work of analog game and trans media scholars, I use this case study to center trans power in tabletop gaming and explore D&D's relationship with fantasy realism by asking *Whose fantasy?* and *Whose reality?*

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Prelude

The paladin raises his torch and looks around the room.

"You see a fountain," the dungeon master (DM) begins, pausing to check the module: "*Three marble maidens stand in the fountains, holding pitchers out of which water flows.*"

I step forward. "Hang on, let me try some rogue trickery," I say. I cup the water in a magic, spectral hand. Poke it with a spear. Check for traps.

Eventually the paladin cuts me off. "Enough of this—I'll bite. I'll drink the water," he says.

The GM nods, suppressing a smile. "Alright. You drink the water…" He rolls a die off-screen and pauses. "You, uhm," he says, stumbling. "Your character. He's a man, right?"

The paladin's player looks concerned. "Yes?" she says.

"His, uhm. His sex changes. So he, uh… or she…" the DM looks uncomfortable. Everyone looks surprised—some amused. Some appalled.

"What the hell does that mean?" the paladin's player asks. I can tell she's furious.

There's a long, uncomfortable quiet.

"Okay, you know what, I'm going to do it too," I say. "If Wizards of the Coast wants to keep putting sex-swap curses in dungeons, I want to see what happens when my non-binary firbolg drinks from the fountain."

The DM nods. "So, you also drink from the fountain?"

"Yep."

He rolls, then grimaces. "Uhm. Well… actually, your firbolg is going to take… forty-four points of necrotic damage." He looks up at me. "How many hit points do you have?" he asks quietly.

"Not that many," I say, incredulous. "I guess I'm down… can someone heal—"

"Actually…" the DM says getting very quiet. "The rest of you watch as your firbolg friend turns to a cloud of dust…"

Introduction: Through the Glowing Archway

This was the last *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) campaign I ever played: the 2017 module *Tomb of Annihilation* (TOA) in which our party and my genderless firbolg (a giant-like forest guardian), were "cursed" and disintegrated by an enchanted sex-swapping fountain in the game's titular dungeon. The context of this moment could not have been more unfortunate: I had, just the previous week, come out as nonbinary to a few friends—including half the players in the party.

The sex-swap curse featured in TOA's final dungeon (Figure 1) is an homage. Gary Gygax's 1975 module "The Tomb of Horrors" (TOH) is one of the most famous adventures in the history of D&D (and perhaps gaming itself) and remains notorious for its party-slaughtering traps. Among these traps was the orange glowing archway—once entered, the offending character would have their sex and alignment (morality) "reversed." Given that early editions of the game included sex-based limitations on characters' statistics (female characters had arbitrary, misogynistic limits on their strength, for example), this would have been devastating for players who realized that their characters' identity and stats had been altered. Each time TOH has been reprinted or reimagined, such as in TOA and *Tales from the Yawning Portal* (Wizards of the Coast, 2017), a sex-swap curse is included. The anecdote I share here is an example of the ludic and narrative transphobic violence of D&D—imagining the possibility of a shifting bodies, of unfixed gender, of the instability of sex as a curse and a trap. This legacy of sex-swap traps is indicative of the systemic problem of positioning trans[1] people, bodies, and stories within the procedural and narrative logics of D&D.

In this article, I contend with these transphobic logics perpetuated by the self-described "world's greatest roleplaying game," *Dungeons & Dragons* (Wizards

B. **Archway of Glowing Orange**: As already stated, the skeleton on the floor of the chapel room is outstretched and pointing to the arch. (Show your players GRAPHIC #5, and explain that none of the stones of the arch glow, but that the entranceway is filled with luminous orange vapors of an exciting hue.) These vivid orange mists cannot be penetrated with any sort of vision or magic. The skeleton, of course, misleads the party, for any character passing through the portal will enter a 10' x 10' room where their sex and alignment are reversed by a terrible **curse**. (Although restoration of alignment and sex to original is difficult, the **curse** once reversed will not alter paladin-hood, ranger status, etc.) Re-entering the archway will restore original alignment, but 1-6 hit points of damage will be sustained in so doing. Going back a 3rd time will reverse sex again, but the individual will be teleported as arch 10A does. **Only wish** or **alter reality** spell will restore both alignment and sex. However, if alignment is restored by entering the orange portal, a **remove curse** spell will then restore original sex. Prior to alignment restoration, no spells other than those stated will affect the cursed character.

MAGIC FOUNTAIN EFFECTS

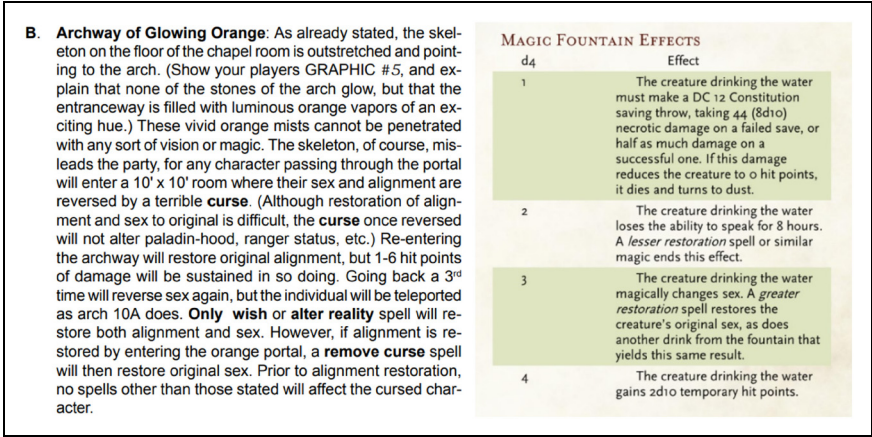| d4	Effect
1	The creature drinking the water must make a DC 12 Constitution saving throw, taking 44 (8d10) necrotic damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one. If this damage reduces the creature to 0 hit points, it dies and turns to dust.
2	The creature drinking the water loses the ability to speak for 8 hours. A *lesser restoration* spell or similar magic ends this effect.
3	The creature drinking the water magically changes sex. A *greater restoration* spell restores the creature's original sex, as does another drink from the fountain that yields this same result.
4	The creature drinking the water gains 2d10 temporary hit points.

Figure 1. Left: the glowing archway trap from TOH, republished for *Advanced Dungeons & Dragosn* (Gygax, 1981, p. 5). Right: random effects table for the magic fountain in TOA (Wizards RPG Team, 2017, p. 135). TOA: *Tomb of Annihilation*; TOH: The Tomb of Horrors.

RPG Team, 2014). Drawing from game texts across various editions, work by analog game scholars, and social media data from reactionary D&D fans, I argue that despite cursory improvements in superficial representation, D&D's hostility to trans play is coded deeper than any single narrative or mechanical system. Instead, it is inscribed in the game's promise of *fantasy realism*—which is used to exclude trans bodies, vilify trans stories, and diminish trans power. While I focus on transness in D&D as a site of contest, these arguments reinforce broader, critical arguments regarding how D&D—and tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) more generally—can reinscribe biological essentialism.

To demonstrate this, I present a multipart examination of D&D's engagement with fantasy realism across three parts (which I playfully call "sessions"). True to form, each session contains a brief case study called an "encounter."

- 🐢 **Session 1**: I argue that *D&D is ultimately a game about simulating fantasy realism.* I look to D&D's roots in wargaming simulationism to contextualize #KeepGamingFantasy, a hashtag used by reactionary D&D fans. I draw on analog game historians to ask what fantasy—and what reality—D&D was designed to simulate and maintain.
- 🗡 **Session 2**: Drawing on this understanding of fantasy realism, I argue that *the boundaries of fantasy realism are used to validate specific kinds of embodied power.* By analyzing practices of hyperoptimization within the hobby I look at how fantasy realism creates exclusionary power fantasies.
- 👁 **Session 3**: Finally, I argue that *trans characters, bodies, and stories have their power mechanically curbed and narratively contested to recenter cisnormative power fantasies.* Performing a deep dive into 5e's sourcebooks, I demonstrate how the game fosters ludonarrative hostility to trans play.

Yet before I untangle these arguments, I'd like to cast a *Message* cantrip to my trans readers. I have written this article because I, perhaps like you, have loved D&D. This game has been the source of memorable days and dear friendships. In fact, tabletop games (including D&D) were a core piece of my own coming out(s). It was through dozens of characters, tables, and adventures that I began a parallel character arc: exploring the Forgotten Realms of my own treacherous relationship with gender. I am far from alone in this; queer theorists and phenemonologists have long documented the ways that gender is always rooted in performance (Ahmed, 2006; Butler, 2011) and—as game designers, journalists, and scholars such as Nedjadi (2021), Proudman (2021), and Mejeur (2022) have pointed out—there is power in exploring one's gender through tabletop roleplay. But I have also been hurt by D&D—by hostile tables, DMs, stories, and rules—and this article is my attempt to reckon with the complex hegemonic poisons that exist in this game and its fandom. I want to be clear: while I argue here that there exists a fundamentally violent hostility towards trans play at the heart of D&D—my arguments are never meant to diminish the joy of trans players who continue to thrive in, hack, and reimagine games hostile to our presence.

To my trans friends out there rolling dice and kissing pirate queens—your play does not belong to any game or table, any book or Wizard. You're perfect. Carry on. 💖

Literature Review: A Game Scholar's Guide to Monsters

Let me begin by situating D&D's transphobic legacy within a broader context of tabletop gaming history and critical game scholarship. No longer a niche hobby celebrated by social outcasts, D&D—a fantasy TTRPG in which players go on adventures in a multiverse of goblins, trolls, and extraplanar dragon-queens—has grown into a multibillion-dollar franchise developed by Wizards of the Coast (Wizards). D&D has also evolved into a transmedia phenomenon: podcasts and actual plays such as *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone*, television shows including *The Legends of Vox Machina*, and online play options have cemented its place in pop culture (Hedge, 2021). Likewise, D&D's influence on videogames—RPGs and dungeon-crawlers in particular—has long been documented (Cover, 2010; Nylund, 2021). As I have written previously, referencing what Aaron Trammell has called the "new economy" of TTRPGs (Trammell, 2019), due to the new affordances of online play, D&D has become a cultural juggernaut, and "the table is everywhere" (Berge, 2021).

D&D's explosion in popularity has also drawn further attention to its troubling legacy of racism, misogyny, ableism, and queerphobia. As Stenros and Sihvonen (2017) have noted, "despite its long history as something that is perceived as dangerous, blasphemous and alternative, the culture of tabletop role-playing games has remained fairly conservative, especially so when it comes to social issues" (p. 73). Trammell's extensive work on the hobby game scene echoes this. He notes that D&D draws from the racist legacy of fantasy fandoms, writing that "RPGs in the *D&D* tradition inherit essentializing and stereotypical notions of race from fantasy authors like Tolkien" (Trammell, 2018, p. 445). He documents how early hobby game communities produced a hobbyist identity that "desires white privilege and hegemonic masculinity, yet sees [itself] as subordinate" (2023, p. 11). Other scholars have likewise shown how D&D often represents femininity (Stang & Trammell, 2020), disability (Jones, 2018; Stokes, 2020), and queerness (Stenros & Sihvonen, 2017; Stokes, 2020) as inherently monstrous.

Yet there have been few scholarly investigations of D&D's legacy as it intersects with transness specifically—though some studies regarding queer representation in D&D have touched on this. Stokes (2020) notes that early editions of D&D limit discussions of sex and gender to describing characters' morals, and that the game's reliance on biological offspring for generational play problematically centers cisheteronormative reproduction. Both Stokes and Stenros and Sihvonen (2017) likewise describe how early editions of D&D espoused a faux-apolitical stance that rejected the possibility of queer identities.

Several analog game scholars have celebrated, however, that D&D's Fifth Edition (5e) includes the franchise's first passage emphasizing the possibility of queer play (Jones, 2018; MacCallum-Stewart et al., 2018; Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018; Stokes, 2020). Stenros and Sihvonen (2017) note that the passage is "awkwardly worded

and pandering," but remains "explicitly welcoming toward queer play" (p. 173). Stokes goes further, writing "the suggestions for character creation here make an accessible route into the game for transpeople, nonbinary people, and queer people whose sexual and gender identity are fluid" (2020, p. 120). Yet in considering trans play, this celebrated passage leaves much to be desired:

> You don't need to be confined to binary notions of sex and gender. The elf god Corellon Larethian is often seen as androgynous or hermaphroditic, for example, and some elves in the multiverse are made in Corellon's image. You could also play as a female character who presents herself [sic?] as a man, a man who feels trapped in a female body, or a bearded female dwarf who hates being mistaken for a male. Likewise, your character's sexual orientation is for you to decide. (Wizards RPG Team, 2014)

"Awkward wording" is perhaps an understatement. Although these hypothetical characters are vague, the text possibly misgenders the first of its examples (or at least clunkily conflates presentation and identity), and the "bearded female dwarf who hates being mistaken for a male" implies that misgendering, gendered assumptions about facial hair, and dysphoria are all expected parts of the game world. At best, this passage represents what Stenros and Sihvonen (2017) have called a "cue"—a signal to queer and trans players that the worlds of D&D can include queer people. Yet such cues are only part of the picture (Berge, 2021)—we must also examine the ways that games structurally support trans possibilities.

In the space below, I want to move beyond cues and explore how trans play is procedurally and narratively positioned within D&D's fundamental logics. The following sessions ask how (1) "fantasy realism" emerged as an exclusionary rhetorical device in D&D, (2) how it has been wielded by reactionary fandom—that is, politically reactionary fan culture which opposes change through a narrative of self-victimization, fear, and fantastic nostalgia—to invalidate certain kinds of play, and (3) how it ludonarratively binds trans play. To answer these questions, I discursively examine textual data to contextualize how fantasy realism is framed by D&D's source materials and by reactionary fans. I then illustrate how D&D's own engagements with trans play remains contested by fantasy realism. Because I am discussing D&D's cultural legacy, it is important to acknowledge both the text of the game itself and the discourse that surrounds it. For this reason, I not only analyze contemporary and historical D&D sourcebooks but draw from discourse by players and fans—namely scraped textual data (primarily taken from Twitter[2]) as well as paratexts (such as online build guides).

🐢 Session 1. *Flesh to Stone*: D&D and Fantasy Realism

To dismantle the structural transphobia at the heart of D&D, we must first reexamine D&D's relationship with fantasy realism. In this first session, I examine the rhetoric of the early wargaming scene to illustrate how the sensemaking logics of D&D were shaped and describe how fantasy realism has become an instrument of exclusion.

Wargaming historian Peterson (2020) points out that early wargames were preoccupied with realism and simulation. Michael Korns wrote in 1966 that "There is only one rule to our wargame… *simulate reality*" (p. 18, 1966, qtd. in Peterson, p. 6, emphasis added). Peterson notes that D&D's embrace of science fiction and fantasy (SFF) marked a break with wargaming's preceding approaches to simulation. Whereas earlier games were defined by their ability to "duplicate actual conditions of battle" (Perren, qtd. in Peterson, p. 11), D&D featured wizards and dragons—embracing a superhuman genre of fantasy heroes. D&D's designers—Gygax especially—were adamant that the game was uninterested in following the simulationist tradition of old-school wargaming. In the first edition of the *Dungeon Master's Guide*, Gygax notes that:

> Of the two approaches to hobby games today, one is best defined as the realism-simulation school and the other as the game school. *AD&D* is assuredly an adherent of the latter school. It does not stress any realism (in the author's opinion an absurd effort at best considering the topic!). It does little to attempt to simulate anything either. (Gygax, 1979, p. 9, parenthetical original)

Yet Gygax's dismissal of simulation in D&D is specifically referencing the wargaming tradition of military realism. As Peterson notes, D&D did *not* abandon the old-school promise to "simulate reality" but instead "strove for a system that represented magic and monsters in a balanced way, preserving the logic of the fantasy literature that these systems emulated" (p. 12). While previous wargames strove to emulate military realism, D&D was guided by a new aim: to simulate *fantasy realism*, rearticulating the procedural and narrative logics established in canonical SFF literature and media—from Tolkien's high fantasy to Lovecraft's eldritch horror.

Fantasy realism can be understood as the common sense that governs D&D's design and at-the-table execution. But as critical game scholars point out, "common sense" is a rhetorical construct that often shrouds and reproduces encoded hegemony (Cote, 2020; Gray, 2020). D&D's roots in wargaming and SFF—overwhelmingly white, straight, cisgender fandoms—have shaped its approach to fantasy realism. Many game scholars have pointed out that extreme misogyny was rampant in early wargaming; Gary Allen Fine's *Shared Fantasy* highlights now-notorious anecdotes wherein players purposefully excluded women and "fantasy rape" was recurrent in gameplay (Fine, 2002, p. 69). In this case, misogyny and even sexual violence were expected within the lines of "realistic" medieval fantasy and enabled by the overwhelmingly monolithic playerbase. Peterson notes that surveys in 1975 showed the wargaming fandom to be almost exclusively white men, with ∼0.5% of players being women (p. 2). This is crucial context for understanding D&D's interpretation of fantasy realism. As Stang and Trammell (2020) point out: "In 1978, Gygax was a 40-year-old, married, Christian, White male insurance underwriter with a passion for wargames and science fiction"—a positionality that has shaped D&D's understanding of monsters, now "fixed in our cultural imagination" (p. 733).

Encounter! Make a Wisdom Saving Throw: #KeepGamingFantasy[3]

In 2020, amid national protests against racist police violence in the United States and following the public resignations of several Black and queer designers who called out the company's practices (Stubby the Rocket, 2020), Wizards announced a push for more diverse and thoughtful representation in their games (Wizards of the Coast, 2020). Yet Wizards' promises sparked backlash from old-school TTRPG fans. Ernie Gygax (son of the "father of D&D" himself) unleashed a transphobic rant on a video-podcast, claiming old-school players were being run out of tables for being old fashioned and not understanding gender identity. He exclaimed that the hobby would never "get back the diamond that was *Dungeons & Dragons*" (Live From The Bunker 277, 2021). Gygax's lamentations and fantastical nostalgia are indicative of what Cross (2017) has termed as "the terror dream" of gaming. Cross describes the gamer's disposition towards melodramatic doomsaying as politically reactionary and inherent to their interpretation of the "Gamer" persona. As she writes: "gamer love must be a reactive thing, forever under outside threat. Protecting against these threats or opposing them has become part of the very practice of being a gamer" (p. 184–185). In the weeks that followed, a company account run by Gygax, @TSR_Games, began a new hashtag as a rallying cry: #KeepGamingFantasy.[4] True to established patterns in reactionary geek spaces (Gray, 2020; Phillips, 2020; Salter & Blodgett, 2017), fans used #KeepGamingFantasy as a launching point for racist and queerphobic rants about what they claimed were—as one Twitter user put it—"hamfisted lectures about gender identity and racial politics."

What is of interest here is how Ernie Gygax and reactionary fans laid claim to *fantasy* as their rallying point against the so-called-*political*. This recalls Kishonna Gray's (2020) point that "when conversations around diversifying content within games emerge, the tendency is to adopt a color-blind, postracial, antifeminist stance" (p. 42). As one reactionary user put it: "race, social class, sexual orientation, politics has never mattered the moment your butt hits the seat." If the "political" means the multifold identities of trans, queer, and non-white people, then what does it mean to #KeepGamingFantasy? As trans media scholar micha cárdenas (2021) writes, the "bodies and lives of trans people of color can feel unimaginable in societies whose common sense imagines that we do not exist" (p. 29). Fantasy realism, as a culturally sculpted common sense, performs this same boundary-setting of imagination: defining what or who is realistic within the shared fantasy. This is the first of this article's key provocations. If D&D is meant to simulate fantasy realism, we must first ask: *Whose fantasy? Whose reality?*

⚔ Session 2. *Alter Self:* Fantasy Realism and Embodied Power

To answer such questions, we might look to what fantasies are celebrated through the play of D&D. Central to the SFF tradition inherited by D&D lies the *power fantasy*. Below, I explore ways that power fantasies get lived out (or shot down) during play

and how fantasy realism is used to police bodies and stories that do not conform to specific kinds of embodied power.

In D&D, characters begin at a starting level (generally Level 1) and must earn Experience Points by killing monsters, completing objectives, or meeting milestones set by the DM. In this way, characters slowly become more powerful—gaining access to new spells, features, magical items, health, wealth, and abilities. Mechanically, power in D&D is defined by a character's ability to move through and manipulate the world around them—to deal damage to people and structures, alter the terrain, build, create, shift, transform, destroy, and protect. Other abilities help characters navigate the world in terms of speed and counter-surveillance (disguise or invisibility). This is the superhuman power fantasy of an adventurer who progresses through accomplishment from a low-level character with little power to a demigod.

Shelly Jones (2018) notes the Darwinian nature of this familiar gameplay loop in which super-heroic characters are motivated to become increasingly powerful and grow "ever stronger, faster, and 'better'". This is further evidenced by the prominent powergaming subculture within the fandom. Sites like tabletopbuilds.com, the D&D Wiki, and D&D subreddits feature pages of "build guides," specifying the optimal combinations of character features to maximize in-game power. These guides produce a meta—an understanding of relative power-levels defined by fans outside the game. Such builds consider the initial character creation and foreclose later choices the player should make as they level up. This culture of optimization has resulted in the continued rearticulation of several specific character archetypes and some builds have been so heavily optimized that they are known by their own names, such as the notorious "Sorlock" (a damage-optimized half-elf sorcerer/warlock combination).

The effect here is twofold. Certain character archetypes are understood as more powerful than others in a way that problematically reinforces hegemonic tropes. More importantly, one's metaknowledge of optimal character builds becomes itself a kind of power fantasy: players track their own mastery of D&D's intricate mechanics (detailed over hundreds of pages of rules, lore, and online paratexts). The powergaming culture of D&D creates a meta-fantasy that players will, over time, master the mechanics of the game to create increasingly perfect characters.

But what happens when players want to embody characters or tell stories that do not conform to this power fantasy? D&D, like all TTRPGs, is fundamentally flexible—just as commonplace as build guides are third-party supplements, "homebrew" ideas, and reimaginings of the rules. Yet such modes of play are often deemed illegitimate—and this can create problems for players in finding tables. For example, players who wish to participate in official Adventurer's League games are required to have characters that follow rules-as-written guidelines and fall within the game's level band. There is a certain paradox here: while players are encouraged to embrace the fantastic possibility of D&D, the dual-power-fantasy pushes players toward ever-narrowing, established modes of play.

Encounter! Make a Perception Check: The Combat Wheelchair[5]

In July of 2020, game designer Sara Thompson published a third-party supplement for D&D 5e: *The Combat Wheelchair*, a module providing wheelchair item rules for adventurers with disabilities (Thompson, 2020/2021). The combat wheelchair was widely considered a breakthrough in representation for disabled characters, received substantial press attention (Jarvis, 2020), and was featured in a campaign by popular D&D podcast *Critical Role*. Yet there was vitriolic backlash among D&D players on 4chan, Twitter, Reddit, and gaming forums.

Broadly speaking, critics' posts fell into two camps. One group argued that the wheelchair was "overpowered," "unfair," or felt too "homebrew." They pointed to mechanical aspects of the chair, such as its speed or durability. As one Twitter user wrote:

> I'm not just gonna give my players these magic, tank-like wheelchairs with no penalties right off the bat. If they wanna play that way, they earn it like everyone else at the table… Literally makes the player MORE powerful than their able bodied counterparts. Totally not broken. I'm not stating opinions, I'm stating the reality of the world.

These fans rallied around the supposed problem of adventurers with disabilities being more powerful than able-bodied heroes. Their arguments also tended to separate the adventurer from the chair itself. On the other hand, the second camp questioned why mobility aids might belong in the narrative world of D&D at all. In a world of magical healing, characters with disabilities could, these critics problematically argued, simply "get cured." As one 4chan user speculated: "Healing magic exists in DnD and is generally available to the [players] (most parties want to have a cleric or druid who can cast healing spells… so any [c——] character should be able to just get a cleric to heal their legs)" (slur redacted).

This ableist backlash illustrates fantasy realism's role in gatekeeping non-normative bodies in D&D. As Gray writes, "gaming culture replicates racialized and gendered exclusionary practices based on whose content and bodies are deemed worthy" (2020, p. 28). By reducing adventurers with disabilities to their embodied technologies, dismissing them as "unfair" or "overpowered," and questioning why characters who use wheelchairs might exist in the stories of D&D at all, these players forcibly exclude disabled bodies from the mechanical systems and narrative possibility of the game. The argument being made here has less to do with the statistics of the chair, or the narrative context for healing and mobility aids, but rather the broader construct of fantasy realism. As the first fan notes: "I'm just stating the reality of the world"—but which world he means, the world of D&D or our own, is blurred. As Amanda Phillips writes, "for those who move effortlessly through the world thanks to various forms of privilege, the disruption of a potent power fantasy can be more unsettling" (2020, p. 17). The backlash to the combat wheelchair shows how players draw lines at the borders of fantasy realism to exclude disabled bodies: fans

cannot conceive of a reality—or a fantasy—in which using a wheelchair might be a source of power, because to do so would acknowledge a fantasy that decenters able-bodied play.

As I look at the noxious reactions to the combat wheelchair, I am reminded of ongoing conversations about trans people and bodies in other spheres of play. As I write this, the "discourse" regarding Lia Thomas, a transgender collegiate swimmer and winner of the NCAA Division I Women's Championship, remains heated and volatile. In a much-publicized letter written by University of Arizona swimmers to the NCAA, the authors rhetorically dance around—without ever directly discussing—Thomas' body. They describe "a competitive advantage" and "unfair direct competition." Much of the letter focuses on "anabolic agents," references to banned technologies, and comparing times ("Swimming World," 2022). There is a startling similarity in these transphobic arguments—this time centered on a real athlete's human body. A body that is, at once, described as unfair. Deemed overpowered. Underpowered. Reduced to its technological interventions. These arguments rely on a similar appeal to a constructed reality: an invisible border of the obvious and a fantasy of play that cannot include trans bodies. To be clear, I am not suggesting that disabled and trans bodies are equivalent (though as Stokes points out, crip and trans theory are always entangled). Rather, marginalized people—including trans people and people with disabilities—have the borders of fantasy and reality drawn to exclude their bodies.

In D&D, power is litigated to preserve both fantasies: that of individual mastery over the rules, and the in-game power of characters to manipulate and move through world. As Stokes writes, "for diverse identities to be implemented in *Dungeons & Dragons* they must be both a part of the cultural conversation about the game and desirable" (p. 107). Fantasy realism serves as the shifting lines drawn to exclude certain bodies. How is it that a fan can cite "reality" as a reason for dismissing a mobility aid in a game full of plane-shifting lich-kings, astral fortresses, and clock-angels? This is the second provocation: after asking whose fantasies are being centered, we must also ask how these fantasies are used to validate and shape embodied power. This raises the question: *Can we position trans people, players, and stories within the logics of D&D's exclusionary power fantasy?*

☉ Session 3. *Planeshift:* Binding Trans Power

There exists a hopeful impulse to "hack" trans play into D&D despite the cultural violence of fantasy realism. Yet, in this final session, I examine D&D's own "poster-child" examples of queer play to demonstrate how, in D&D, gender deviance is seen as a power that must be mechanically and narratively curbed.

At first glance, D&D appears to be filled with possibility for exploring trans play through transforming bodies, fluid identities, and complex characters. In 5e, many of the game's fantasy races—such as changelings, doppelgangers, and certain elves—have the power to shift their physical form. Additionally, several spells

center bodily remaking and transformation: *Disguise Self*, *Alter Self*, and *Polymorph*, to name a few. The potential for storytelling in which characters can reimagine and remake their own bodies—to transform or operationally "shift" (cárdenas, 2021)—opens space for trans play. And yet in D&D, such power over the self is suffocatingly regulated.

To fit within the scope of fantasy realism, D&D offers two possibilities. One is to disempower transness and make it flavor. As D&D's lead rules designer, Jeremy Crawford (2018), has stated: "In D&D, you can make any character gender-fluid; no rules are associated with gender." This neoliberal approach seems to be the one D&D's designers are most invested in—where any character can simply *be trans* without altering the mechanical elements of the game (at least, I suppose, until they happen upon a sex-swap curse). The second option is to squeeze trans play into a hostile power fantasy. If transness is recognized as powerful, then that power must be diminished and moralized through the procedural and narrative logics of fantasy realism, as gender nonconforming characters, stories, and bodies are brought to heel.

Perhaps the best example of this curbing effect is the changeling fantasy race in D&D 5e (appearing in *Eberron: Rising from the Last War,* 2019). Changelings can transform their bodies at will through an ability called Shapechanger, which states: "change your appearance and your voice. You determine the specifics of the changes, including your coloration, hair length, and sex" (p. 18). The game notes that changelings may create masks (temporary identities of convenience) or personas (longstanding identities with beliefs and history). The potential for trans play as a changeling is immediate—a character who can rebuild and reimagine their body and identity and "have a fluid relationship with gender, seeing it as one characteristic to change among many" (Wizards RPG Team, 2019, p. 18). And yet such possibility is immediately curbed by limitations on the Shapechanger ability, specifically:

- Your height and weight adjustments are limited.
- Your statistics (such as Strength) do not change.
- You must have the same arrangement of limbs.
- Your clothing and equipment are not changed.
- You revert to your "true form" when you die.

These limitations are intended to balance the changeling's transformational power but present a troubled boundary for trans possibility. The unchanged character stats impose a superficiality on the transformation. The framing of the "true form" here is especially harmful—describing changelings' transformations as obscuring an innate, bodily reality that is somehow more honest than their visible form. Changelings' original forms—described as "pale, [with] colorless eyes, and silver-white hair"—also troublingly center a plastic whiteness. Despite the nuanced language about identities and masks in some flavor descriptions, other text regarding changelings describes them

simply as "clever shapechangers who can disguise themselves as other people" (p. 17). In this way, changelings' transformational power to reimagine their bodies and identities is procedurally diminished to a monstrous true form and a disguise. Most disturbing is the last clarification, which notes that a changeling forcibly reverts to this true form upon death—suggesting a transphobic threat of violence that will somehow expose the ostensive 'truth' of the body through physical harm.

D&D 5e's other shapechanging races fare no better. Doppelgangers, who can change their form to mimic others, are not a playable race—but characters in *Rime of the Frostmaiden* (2020) can be generated with the secret that they are doppelgangers. Doppelgangers share changelings' feature of reverting to their true form upon death and are likewise vilified, described as "devious shapeshifters that take on the appearance of other humanoids, throwing off pursuit or luring victims to their doom with misdirection and disguise" (Wizards, 2014, p. 82). In the 5e *Monster Manual*, it's noted that doppelgangers "assume attractive male forms to seduce women, leaving them to raise their progeny" and that a doppelganger will realize their "true nature" only at adolescence and then are "driven to seek out its kind to join them" (Wizards, 2014, p. 82). The doppelganger is steeped in transphobic narrative logics of disguise and infiltration and is framed as a threat to cisheteronormative reproduction. Like changelings, their transformational power is understood as evil, recentering the static body.

Many of the spells that center transformation also fall short. In 5e, *Disguise Self* is a spell available to characters from the 1st-level that allows them to change their appearance for 1 hour. The spell limits the size of the change, and notes that the cosmetic changes a character makes to their body will "fail to hold up to physical inspection" (Wizards RPG Team, 2014, p. 235). Other characters can also make Investigation checks to determine if the caster is disguised. Similarly, while higher-level spells such as *Alter Self* and *Polymorph* allow for a material transformation of the body, they are also time-limited—and face similar restrictions to Shapechanger. While any character of a compatible class and level can cast these spells, such transformation is always limited, always temporary, always framed within the logics of stealth and surveillance.

D&D features enormous potential for trans play and yet, because transness in D&D is recognized as a mechanical power—one of disguise, manipulation, and subterfuge—the game procedurally litigates such power. Despite D&D being a game with shape-changing dragons and lycanthropes, the power of transformation must not disrupt a cis-normative fantasy. Instead, D&D centers the fantasy of a static body which becomes stronger only through a supposedly natural progression, while bodies with innate powers of transformation are vilified and restricted in the name of balance.

Encounter! Make A Religion Check: The Blood of Corellon

While fantasy races and spells show how trans power is curbed by D&D's mechanics, the game's lore demonstrates how trans stories are narratively frustrated by fantasy

realism. Crawford's tweets about genderfluid characters and the 5e *Player's Handbook* both cite the elf god Corellon Larethian and the blessed elves as defying traditional expectations of sex and gender. The most detailed account of Corellon Larethian comes from *Mordenkeinan's Tome of Foes* (MTOF; Wizards RPG Team, 2018):

> When consorting with other gods, Corellon often adopted their appearances—male, female, or something else—but just as often kept their company in the form of a rose blossom or a delicate doe… Corellon's flamboyant, mercurial personality showed through no matter which form the entity took. (MTOF, p. 35)

Much like changelings, Corellon is described as beautiful in their transformative power—yet this is also linked to their treachery, as they are later described as breaking oaths "without reservation." Even worse is the passage which follows:

> Most of the gods accepted Corellon's mutability and passionate behavior, but these traits infuriated Gruumsh, the greatest of the orc gods… the battle was a clash of titans fought across many planes and worlds… But all the legends agree that the first elves emerged from the blood that Corellon shed. (MTOF, p. 35)

The transphobic subtext is compounded: Corellon's "mutability" and "passion" drive Gruumsh to violence—alongside a suggestion that all elves in the D&D multiverse are descendants of this transphobic bloodshed. This is enabled by D&D's narrative system of bivalent alignment, inherited from SFF, which designates that all beings in the multiverse are arranged in a cartesian chart of law ⇔ chaos and good ⇔ evil. Corellon shows that if transness is power within the cosmology of D&D, then that power must be cosmically opposed by an equal cisnormative power—a troubling rivalry of "Chaotic Trans" versus "Chaotic Cis."

The blessed elves likewise have their transformational powers made tragic. MTOF describes the generations of primal elves that emerged from Corellon's blood as "akin to Corellon, not nearly as powerful but just as changeable and audacious" (p. 36). The lore goes on to say that one elf—who declared herself feminine and named herself Lolth—convinced the other elves to "relinquish a bit of their freedom" and "take static forms, largely resembling what elves look like today, and thereby turn[ing] away from the example of Corellon's wild, ever-shifting ways" (MTOF, p. 36). The power of bodily and sexual fluidity is cut off from the elves because of their misstep in trusting Lolth, making it a source of shame and loss. This is reinscribed in the description regarding how to play a blessed elf (Figure 2).

Not only is it suggested that only elves who are born especially androgynous might be deemed a blessed of Corellon, but that Drow (or "dark elves") detest and violently rebuke the blessed elves—again centering racialized violence and transphobia. 5e's characterizations of both Corellon and the changeling fantasy race illustrate that where trans power does exist within the logics of D&D, it is only made possible through the plasticity of whiteness. The same bioessentialist
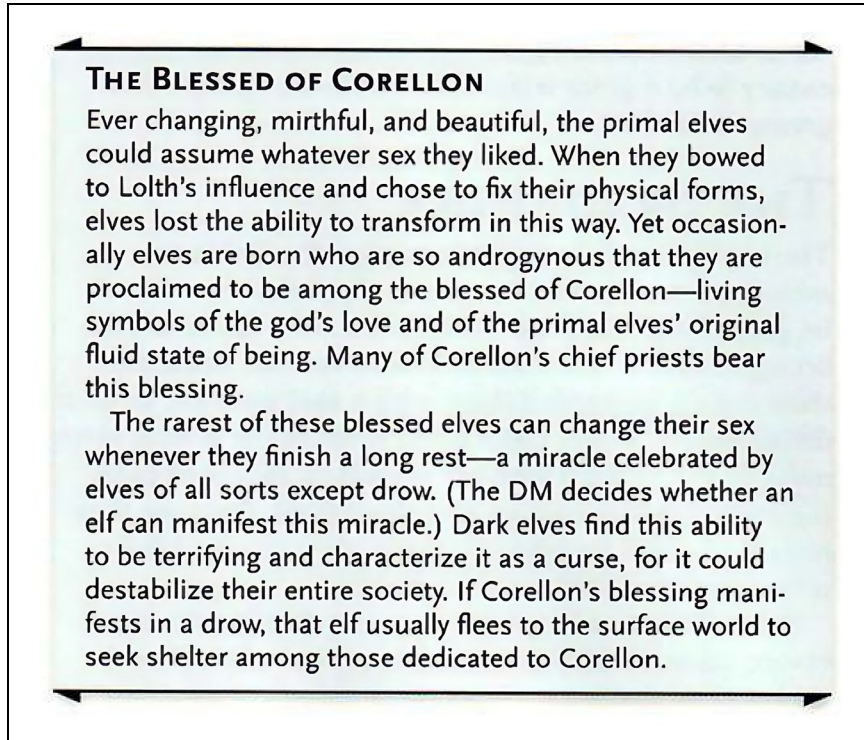
THE BLESSED OF CORELLON

Ever changing, mirthful, and beautiful, the primal elves could assume whatever sex they liked. When they bowed to Lolth's influence and chose to fix their physical forms, elves lost the ability to transform in this way. Yet occasionally elves are born who are so androgynous that they are proclaimed to be among the blessed of Corellon—living symbols of the god's love and of the primal elves' original fluid state of being. Many of Corellon's chief priests bear this blessing.

The rarest of these blessed elves can change their sex whenever they finish a long rest—a miracle celebrated by elves of all sorts except drow. (The DM decides whether an elf can manifest this miracle.) Dark elves find this ability to be terrifying and characterize it as a curse, for it could destabilize their entire society. If Corellon's blessing manifests in a drow, that elf usually flees to the surface world to seek shelter among those dedicated to Corellon.

Figure 2. Guidance for playing a "blessed elf" (*Mordenkeinan's Tome of Foes*, p. 44).

logics of fantasy racism—which scholars have long noted associate humans and elves with whiteness and orcs with Blackness (Poor, 2012; Premont & Heine, 2021; Trammell, 2018)—are leveraged here to suggest that the pale, blank, ever-shifting elves and changelings are fundamentally opposed to the orc gods and drow.

Corellon and the blessed elves embody the problem of positioning trans stories and bodies within the fantasy realist logics of D&D. To bring trans power into D&D's systems is to accept a reductive quantization: setting awkward and disturbing limits on trans power in the name of balance while centering hostility, violence, and shame to make transness an obstacle for narrative growth.

Conclusion: "So, You Also Drink From the Fountain?"

The first time I played a trans character in D&D (a transfemme mousefolk pirate)—my DM made me roll a disguise check each time I introduced myself to a new character. I'm far from the only person to have been frustrated by my attempt to tell trans stories

through D&D. In their interviews with Bo Ruberg (2020), game designers Kat Jones and Avery Alder both cite their frustration with D&D as a motivation for their own creative work designing new games. This is an approach many have taken: to leave D&D behind and explore the possibilities of other game systems. Frustration with D&D is itself generative, and indie TTRPGs developed by and for trans people are thriving on sites like itch.io and DriveThruRPG. In March of 2022, a bundle of more than 490 TTRPGs raised over $400,000 for trans support networks in Texas. Other indie publishers are also foregrounding trans stories in TTRPGs: *Thirsty Sword Lesbians* (Walsh, 2021) and *Advanced Lovers and Lesbians* (Walsh, 2022) reimagine established SFF tropes in explicitly queer and trans contexts, and *Extreme Meatpunks Forever* (Sinister Beard Games, forthcoming) explores trans power by putting players in the role of giant-meat-robot-pilots with the tagline "Be gay. Punch Nazis." TTRPGs by indie designers and zinesters explore trans relationships, joy, community, bodies, resilience, sex, transformation, rage, (in)visibility, politics, solidarity, and complex monstrosity. These games push the envelope for trans possibility across gaming culture itself and, while they lack the cultural recognition of D&D, represent a welcome and bold horizon for the hobby.

Yet D&D is a cultural juggernaut and, for many, the gateway game into TTRPG spaces. While Wizards of the Coast's actions indicate further moves toward neoliberal representation, this will do little when the structures at the heart of D&D enforce an exclusionary understanding of fantasy realism. As I've shown, the transphobic logics at work in D&D extend beyond lore and mechanics, beyond sourcebooks and modules, and even beyond Wizards of the Coast. These self-perpetuating structures are embedded into the conventions of fantasy and science fiction, reinscribed by gaming culture, and deployed by players. Of course, individual players, DMs, and parties will continue to hack D&D into a better version of itself in their own sessions and third-party content. But D&D has inherited the worst features of its parental fandoms, and in enshrining a specific power fantasy—one of a static self that gets stronger through conquest—D&D has failed to ask itself: *whose fantasy are we playing?* If we want to make space for trans play in D&D, we need to reckon with its central logics.

It is precisely the contradictive flexibility of fantasy realism that makes it such a volatile rhetorical tool: D&D is, at once, claimed as fantasy (and therefore, cannot be harmful or political) and as real (and thus can be enforced—"just stating the reality of the world"). In citing fantasy realism, reactionary fans construct an exclusionary fantasy of reality. Across the examples I've unpacked here, the flexibility of *the real* becomes the fulcrum by which play and power in D&D must be—by the logics of fantasy realism—curbed to a projected world in which disabled and trans characters being disempowered is allegedly more realistic.

This is a phenomenon that is neither new nor exclusive to games. Judith Butler points out that while it has long been established that sex and gender are provisional, imagined categories (if you will, *fantasy*), the "phantasm" of gender, and those who violently enforce it, remain a consistent danger to trans people (Butler, 2024). At the same time, reactionary arguments which cite fantasy realism bear striking

resemblance to the long-contested concept of the "magic circle"—which problematically upheld play as distinct from reality and similarly claimed that games could not be harmful or political because of this (Consalvo, 2009). We might see fantasy realism as, similarly, a rhetorical phantasm or—in the Baudrillardian sense—an example of simulation "translated by the hallucinatory resemblance of the real to itself" (Baudrillard, 1994). D&D does not need to be simulating historic battles or wargaming traditions to maintain exclusionary ludic and cultural logics. While D&D's designers promise that "no rules are associated with gender" (Crawford), D&D's roots in wargame simulationism, its legacy of biological essentialism, and continued entanglement with fantasy realism paint an entirely different picture. Despite its recent pushes toward diversity and the increasing number of queer characters in its adventures, D&D's enforcement of fantasy realism means that trans power must either be defanged as flavor, curbed as limited abilities, or vilified to recenter exclusionary fantasies. This is the final provocation. We cannot continue to squeeze trans power into cisnormative structures meant to diminish trans stories. Instead, when we see the borders of fantasy realism drawn to exclude us, we might loudly say: "fuck this fantasy, fuck your reality, roll for initiative!"

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Notes

1. In this article, I use "trans" to reference the practices of unraveling, reimagining, and exceeding extant gender ontologies. When discussing trans people, I am referring broadly to anyone who experiences such a slippery relationship to gendered systems or, as Bey writes, anyone with a "trans relationship to gender" (2021, p. 82).
2. While preparing this manuscript, the platform formerly known as "Twitter" has rebranded to "X."
3. Session 1 references social media data scraped from Twitter by the author. All reproduced posts are anonymized. I collected all tweets using "@TSR_Games" and "#KeepGamingFantasy" during July of 2021 using the snscrape Twitter scraper (JustAnotherArchivist, 2020). The sample was narrowed to 151 particularly exemplary tweets which were individually analyzed for the purposes of demonstrating how fans rhetorically used "fantasy" as a way of justifying their reactionary position.

4. I have discussed #KeepGamingFantasy elsewhere in the context political shifts within the "Old School Renaissance" fandoms and the TTRPG hobby (Berge, 2022).

5. Session 2 also references scraped data. I collected all tweets containing "combat wheelchair" from January 2021–April 2022. Additionally, one thread from 4 chan's "Traditional Games" forum was scraped using Python. The sample was narrowed to the most pertinent 4595 tweets and 74 posts which were examined both qualitatively and using Orange and AntConc. This data was used to contextualize how fantasy realism (and its emphasis on "balance") was used to make ableist arguments about excluding mobility aids from D&D.

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