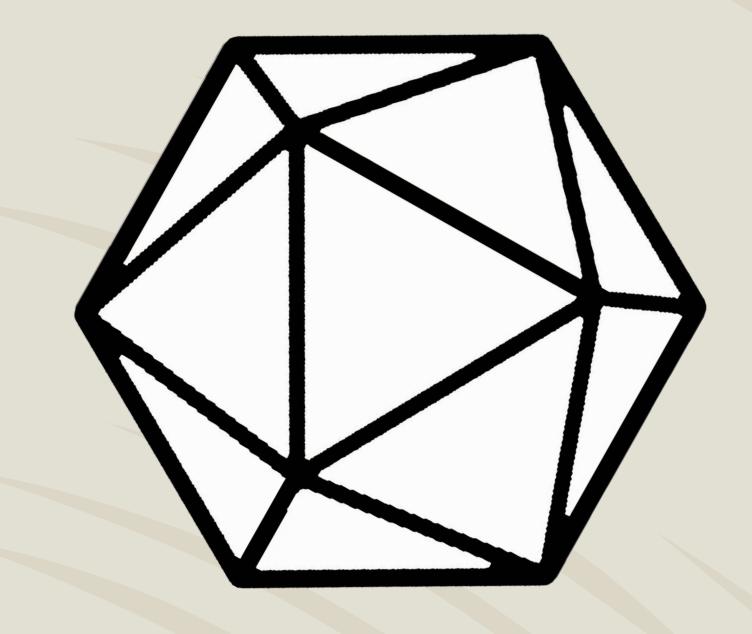


# Crit Rolls, Culture Roles:

Social Consciousness and Critical Representation in Dungeons and Dragons Real-Play Media Cal Quayle (callyjquayle@gmail.com)





How do representations of race, gender, and sexuality in Dungeons & Dragons popular media challenge or confirm cultural stereotypes?

Tabletop roleplaying games such as Dungeons & Dragons, at their core, explore identity; race, class, sexuality, gender, etc. But what information and mindset are players using to explore the possibilities for diversity that present themselves? Every person's views of race, gender, and sexuality differ based on upbringing, location, or even age. From author J.R.R. Tolkien's influence on high fantasy as a genre via the popularity of his Middle Earth series, to shows where a bunch of nerdy voice actors sit around and play Dungeons and Dragons so hard they make themselves cry, this thesis covers the history of diversity and representation in the so-called D&D "resurgence" caused by shows such as Critical Role or The Adventure Zone. Podcast ethnography allows a deeper analysis of a handful of characters from these shows, as well as the way they make connections to real-life allegories and both challenge and confirm various stereotypical views of identity.

#### Literature Review

- Began with Rearick (2004) examining racially-coded language in Tolkien's work, including white-centric allegories to Jewish ethnic communities and pan-African tribes.
- Fine (2018) explains the phenomenon of "modern" Dungeons & Dragons, and how it has changed with the help of creators such as the McElroy Brothers (The Adventure Zone, 2014-present) to include more diverse representation, i.e. "queering" white male nerd media.
- Butler (2004) and Griffith (1998) to examine race and gender in media, and the roles of lesbians & black men in society.
- Pelurson (2018) discusses identity stereotypes in gaming and their interpretation from the point of view of a gay man

#### Methodology

- Discourse analysis studying the context of what is being said in any given piece of media or text
- o Carta (2019) "perspective on the nature of language and its relationship to central issues of the social science[s]", rather than strict methodology.
- Lundstrom (2020)'s "podcast ethnography" allowed me to create a framework through which to examine various episodes featuring moments from episodes of Critical Role and The Adventure Zone.
- o Allows insight into a "particular universe", rather than a singular "case" basis.
- Examining how characters are able to "engage" with their identity

## Data and Findings

- Fjord Stone Half-Orc, Male, Warlock/Paladin. Played By Travis Willingham. (Critical Role)
- o This arc is largely metaphorical, but relates to Fjord's identity by creating clear allegories to real-world issues such as the pressure on POC black individuals in particular - to adhere to "white" societal expectations of dress, speech, personal identity, etc. As a half-orc, his character relates directly back to Rearick (2004) speaking about Pan-African tribal metaphors. Willingham portrays Fjord as actively hiding parts of himself that define him as "different" in order to fit the common idea of beauty and speech. Instead, he adopts a fake dialect from a human he looked up to and continually files down his tusks to appear more human. In Clay and Dust (e2x72), he says, "The first time I adopted that speech and changed the way that I looked, everyone listened". Throughout the show, Fjord comes to accept who he is and his natural orc characteristics.
- Beauregard Lionett Human, Female, Monk. Played by Marisha Ray. (Critical Role)
- o Though Beauregard faces trials throughout the show, none of them stem directly from her sexuality as a lesbian. When she is introduced, she adheres to societal stereotypes of a lesbian- brash, masculine, flirting shamelessly with other women. However, as the characters and audience learn more about her, she opens up about past trauma with her love interest Yasha Nydoorin, becoming more empathetic and learning to rely on her fellow party-mates. Instead of tropes like "Bury Your Gays" where a show culls queer characters, Critical Role leans into a trope created by the queer community known as the "Disaster Lesbian" which refers to a woman who is so enraptured with her love interest that she stumbles over her words, has a hard time focusing, etc.
- Taako Taaco Elf, Male, Wizard. Played by Justin McElroy. (The Adventure Zone)
- o Taako's arc as a character is not related to his sexuality as a gay man in any way. Instead, it acts as an accompaniment to his personality. His preferences for both men and feminine clothing are accepted as facts of his character instead of a source of conflict. McElroy is quoted out-of-character talking about Taako's sexuality as, "Not for any other reason than, like, Taako doesn't seem like somebody who shares a lot of that stuff necessarily anyway. [...] I just don't want anybody to misconstrue it as Taako being like, cautious about talking about his sexuality. It's literally just he doesn't think it's anybody's f\*\*\*\*n' business, especially not these three" (Episode 51, 2016). The McElroys work to normalize diversity in their work through a passive form of representation...
- Shawn Gilmore Human, Male, Sorcerer. Played by Matthew Mercer. (Critical Role)
- o Critical Role Campaign 1's Shaun Gilmore leans into his identity as a gay man. Mercer states in Talks Machina: Clash At Daxio (2016) that he based Gilmore off a flamboyant, outspoken person he had previously done theater with; while he appears to lean into the stereotype of the flirty, masc-feminine gay male, the key difference is that there is no conflict that stems directly from his identity, which is where issues would begin to
- Aubrey Little Human, Female, "Spellslinger". Played by Travis McElroy. (The Adventure Zone)
- o Aubrey Little, a character played by Travis McElroy in 36 episodes of season 2 of The Adventure Zone, gets a similar treatment. In the second episode, she mentions that she finds a character, Dani, cute, and as such her magic reacts to her presence. Her sexuality isn't explicitly addressed until episode 32, however, when she says outright that she's bisexual. This lack of "coming out" scenes is a common trend in The Adventure Zone; a character simply "is".
- Lup Taaco Elf, Trans Female, Wizard. Played by Griffin McElroy. (The Adventure Zone)
- o Perhaps the most well-loved example, Lup is Taako's twin sister and a trans woman. Despite being a fan favorite, Lup only appears in 11 episodes, translating to roughly 12 hours. Her identity is treated in a very similar manner as Taako's; the McElroys establish the fact that she was assigned male at birth, but transitioned far prior to canon and uses well-established she/her pronouns. Otherwise, she is treated just as any other female character in The Adventure Zone.

### Analysis & Discussion

(It is important to consider that majority of the characters in each of these shows are primarily played by white individuals or people whose gender/race/sexuality do not otherwise align with their characters.)

Representation seems to be contingent on the length and depth of said media. Longer campaigns such as Critical Role seem to depend on long-term character development, allowing a character's identity to become part of their story arc, while shorter series such as The Adventure Zone aim to passively represent. On average, episodes of Critical Role span from 3-4 hours (BlizzardWatch 2021); the average Adventure Zone episode is about an hour.

This trend of passive representation calls back to Fine (2018), and his discussion of "troubling" and redefining certain stereotypes and identities. Simply by refusing to have a "coming out" moment, these characters are making a statement and challenging the idea that a diverse character needs to be a sensation. Active representation, on the other hand, works to explicitly challenge stereotypes, in the way that Fjord addresses with real-life allegories to racism and othering, while Beauregard's character develops beyond a stereotypical idea of a lesbian. Fjord directly engages with Griffith (and Pierce) in discussing the "adaptation" to mainstream institutions, then outright challenges them by returning to his childhood accent.

Pelurson (2018) also addresses both concepts of passive and active representation, suggesting that neither are mutually exclusive. While a character may challenge the status quo by embracing his or her stereotypical identity presentation- as in the case of Taako or Gilmore- that doesn't mean they're unable to engage critically with their identity like Beauregard or Fjord do.

#### Conclusion

Active and passive representation both have their strengths; one allows us to examine, while the other normalizes. In playing Beauregard Lionett and Fjord Stone, Marisha Ray and Travis Willingham let scholars deep-dive into what it means to show identities on screen, whether that be directly or indirectly. Meanwhile, passive representation such as in the case of Taako or Lup makes a statement about what a character is "supposed" to be, quite often without saying anything on the topic at all.

Representation is one of the most critical elements to validating one's identity; roleplay (and roleplaying games) allows players the freedom to explore both their own culture and identity, as well as others, offering a deeper understanding of what white, masculine, or heteronormative culture considers "normal".

In their own ways, creators of media such as Critical Role or The Adventure Zone challenge these normativities, allowing further, more diverse representation free from — or developing off of — popular stereotypes.

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