

MISOGYNY AND THE FEMALE BODY IN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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There is a clear problem of representation in games and — more broadly — in the cultures produced by games. This problem in representation has most recently yielded controversies such as #gamergate,¹ but it is also more or less responsible for debacles such as the PAX dickwolves saga, and the recent death threats to Anita Sarkeesian spurred by her “Tropes vs. Women in Games” series. Outside the spotlight of digital games, some members of other game communities, such as Ajit George² and Shoshana Kessock,³ have been outspoken about problems of representation at Gen Con,⁴ North America’s largest tabletop game convention. Even in Gary Alan Fine’s classic book, *Shared Fantasy*, the

1. #Gamergate refers to an alleged scandal in which independent game developer Zoë Quinn was accused by her ex-boyfriend, a game journalist, of sexual coercion in order to receive positive press for her game *Depression Quest*. Since the incident, Quinn has received rape and death threats, some from the #gamergate “community,” which claims that they work to further objective journalism.
2. Ajit George. "Gaming's Race Problem: Gen Con and Beyond." *Tor*. August 13, 2014. <http://www.tor.com/blogs/2014/08/gamings-race-problem-gen-con-and-beyond>.
3. Shoshana Kessock. "Can't Swing A Con Badge Without Hitting A Nazi." Shoshana Kessock. August 21, 2013. <http://shoshanakessock.com/2013/08/21/cant-swing-a-con-badge-without-hitting-a-nazi/>.
4. George has noted the explicit lack of people of color at Gen Con, while Kessock was startled by the normativity of Nazi cosplay at the Gen Con scene.

distinction between reality and fantasy for role-players is considered “impermeable,” despite the sociologist’s own admission that “[frequently] non-player male characters who have not hurt the party are executed and female non-player characters raped for sport.”⁵ Given that even canonical game theorists such as Fine seem unconcerned with the reproduction of rape culture within the space of role-playing games, it is important to better understand the history of racist and misogynist attitudes in game culture. This essay addresses this problem by offering a close read of two articles on the topic from *The Dragon*, TSR Hobbies’ flagship magazine for all things *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). Unlike Jon Peterson’s recent essay, “The First Female Gamers,” which argues that TSR Hobbies was instrumental in bringing women into the hobby, this essay concerns the unfortunate amount of currency still afforded to misogynist attitudes in the gaming community.⁶ It proposes that these attitudes reproduce themselves by way of the community privileging the *accuracy* of simulation over the *ethics* of simulation.

The first article reviewed in this essay is “Notes on Women & Magic – Bringing the Distaff Gamer into D&D,”⁷ which offers a schematic for the ways in which the female body should be understood and regulated within *Dungeons & Dragons*. The second article, “Weights & Measures, Physical Appearance and Why Males are Stronger than Females; in D&D,”⁸ also deals with the schematization of bodies, but deals more specifically with how characters look when role-played. Together, the articles offer a glimpse of game culture in years 1976 and 1977.

5. Gary Alan Fine. *Shared Fantasy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 44.

6. Jon Peterson. “The First Female Gamers.” *Medium*. October 5, 2014.

<http://medium.com/@increment/the-first-female-gamers-c784fbc3ff37>.

7. Although this article was first published in Lakofka’s fanzine, *Liaisons Dangereuses*, it was reprinted in issue three of *The Dragon*. Len Lakofka. “Notes on Women & Magic -- Bringing the Distaff Gamer into D&D.” *The Dragon* 1.3 (1976), pp. 7-10.

8. P.M. Crabaugh. “Weights & Measures, Physical Appearance and Why Males are Stronger than Females; in D&D.” *The Dragon* 2.4 (1977), pp. 19-20.

Regarding audience, these articles were published for men and by men. Although *The Dragon* operated on a publication model that openly accepted articles by any contributors, women were infrequent contributors in the early years.⁹ The two essays analyzed in this article offer clues toward understanding the poisonous trends of racism and sexism within the hobby.

Len Lakofka, author of “Notes on Women & Magic,” was an avid participant in the play-by-mail *Diplomacy* community. Most notably, Lakofka served as the vice-president of the International Federation of Wargamers in 1968 when they sponsored the first Gen Con convention. Later, Lakofka would take on a stronger role in organizing the convention, organizing most of it in 1970. In the 1970s, Lakofka was responsible for playtesting many *Dungeons & Dragons* supplements and, in fact, advised Gary Gygax on many design decisions made over the course of the game’s development. Lakofka was an important figure in the history of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and although many of the rules proposed in “Notes on Women & Magic” failed to stick,¹⁰ they do offer an interesting historical lens through which the culture of the time can be interpreted. Specifically, they allow us to understand the ways in which a predominantly white male gaming community imagined the bodies of women.

Needless to say, women were not the intended audience of *The Dragon*. This is made abundantly clear in the antagonistic and condescending tone Lakofka takes in “Notes on Women & Magic.” As the essay begins, one must wonder whether the notes were staged as a manifesto of whether or not women should be

9. One notable exception to this rule was Lee Gold, the main editor of the fanzine *Alarums & Excursions*. *Alarums & Excursions* #19 was instrumental, as Peterson notes, in contesting Lakofka’s sexist missive in *The Dragon*.

10. There is also a notable companion article within *Dungeoneer* #2, entitled “Those Lovely Ladies,” by an anonymous contributor which replicates many of the tropes regarding diminished fighting capability and beauty that were first penned in Lakofka’s article. The preface even admits that the article is intended to continue the conversation begun by Lakofka’s work. Anonymous. *The Dungeoneer* 1.2 (1976), pp. 5-7.

allowed at the game table, or within game worlds more broadly. Lakofka writes:

There will be four major groups in which women may enter. They may be FIGHTERS, MAGIC USERS, THIEVES and CLERICS. They may progress to the level of men in the area of magic and, in some ways, surpass men as thieves. Elven women may rise especially to high levels in clerics to the elves. Only as fighters are women clearly behind men in all cases but even they have attributes that their male counterparts do not!¹¹

Despite the clearly sexist language employed in this article (where Lakofka allows women to participate in game fictions through his use of the word “may”), Lakofka makes an earnest effort toward offering a workable simulation of the female body for interested players.

The key difference between the male and the female body, according to Lakofka, is that instead of a charisma score, women have a “beauty” characteristic. This statistic, unlike charisma (which has become a standard statistic in role-playing games), has a range of 2-20 as opposed to 3-18, and is relied on for a number of special skills that only female characters can use during the play of the game. These abilities focus on the character’s beauty specifically, and consist of abilities such as “Charm men,” “Charm humanoid monster,” “Seduction,” “Horrid Beauty,” and “Worship.” As shown in Figure 1, some of these abilities could be used to charm men of various races provided the female’s beauty score was equal to or higher than the number shown on the chart. Additionally, Figure 2 shows the ways in which characters can opt to roll a die in protest in order to resist seduction. These abilities represent a woman who uses beauty as a weapon to get what she desires from men who must in turn resist succumbing to temptation. Not only do these statistics reinforce the stereotype that a woman’s value and power lie only in her beauty, but they also reify a heteronormative standard

11. Lakofka, p. 7.

of sexuality where relationships are exclusively staged between men and women. Finally, Figure 1 can even be read as a schema of discrimination wherein I argue that the slight and fair builds of Elves are preferable to the plump and ruddy Dwarven build, or to the dark, muscular build of the Orc.¹² Thus, these charts work to reinforce racial stereotypes that revere a pale and slight standard of beauty, that prefer exotic “oriental”¹³ bodies, and that and read black bodies as invisible.

Woman's Race	Male's Race				
	Men	Elves	Orcs	Hobbits	Dwarves
Elf	10	11	10	10	10
Woman	11	12	11	12	12
Hobbit	12	14	13	11	12
Orc	15	20	11	14	17
Dwarf	13	15	14	13	11

Figure 1: Image first published by TSR Hobbies in *The Dragon* #3, p. 9. Reproduced for purposes of critique.

12. As indicated, human players (indicated by the column “Men” on this chart) will remain chaste when resisting the sexual advances of an Orc on a roll of 15 or less (on a 20 sided die), while they will have considerably more difficulty remaining celibate when resisting the advances of an Elf which will require a roll of 10 or less. Even Dwarves, according to this chart, prefer the exotic body of the Elf to those of their own kind (“A Dwarf can seduce another Dwarf on a roll of 11 or less, while an Elf can seduce a Dwarf on a roll of 10 or less.”).
13. See Figure 4 for an example of orientalism in *Dungeons & Dragons*. Or, for that matter, the core manual *Oriental Adventures* (1985).

Saving Throws against seduction. The Saving Throw is based upon **seduction level** (spell # — not level of seductress), **Beauty score**, **Wisdom** of person being seduced, and **type** of figure being seduced.

Sum seduction level and beauty scores.

Subtract the Wisdom of the Target Figure and add that product to a 20 sided die roll.

A Fighter needs a score of 13 or higher to be saved (That is NOT laid — is that being saved???)

A Thief needs a score of 12 or better to be saved

A Paladin needs a score of 10 or better to be saved

A Magic User needs a 9 or better to be saved

A Cleric needs an 8 or higher to stay celibate.

Figure 2: Image first published by TSR Hobbies in The Dragon #3, p. 9. Reproduced for purposes of critique.

In addition, Lakofka presents tables that elaborate on the abilities of women engaging in combat. Here, women are compared to men via the “default” standard of fighting prowess. Statistically speaking, Lakofka works to show the ways in which women fight at a disadvantage to men in a variety of contexts. A level one thief, titled “wench,” fights at the ability of “man-1,” while a level two thief, titled “hag,” fights equivalently to a “man.” Even a level one fighter advances at a disadvantage, fighting only at the strength of “man+1” upon reaching level two (see Figure 3). Lakofka justifies this by explaining that it is easier for women to advance in levels, and so they fight at a drawback as they progress. Still, as evidenced in his introduction, fighting women may only advance to a maximum of tenth level, regardless of their tenacious advancement. As a whole, the system makes a consistent point: the bodies of women can only be understood when set in opposition to those of men, and within this realm they excel in abilities which foreground the importance of their beauty.

In contrast, P.M. Crabaugh’s article, “Weights & Measures, Physical Appearance and Why Males are Stronger than Females; in D&D,” offers a more precise take on the configuration and abilities of bodies. It focuses specifically on the ability of bodies to lift, measures of height and weight, and the cultural parameter

of ethnicity. Crabaugh saw the bodies of women in a different way, and saw female bodies as superior to male bodies in a variety of ways (aside from sheer strength), granting female player characters a +1 bonus to their constitution statistic and a +2 bonus to their dexterity. He also offers a defense to those in the community who might beg to differ:

[Constitution and Dexterity] and body mass are the only differences between male and female. Before someone throws a brick let me explain. As Jacob Bronowski¹⁴ pointed out, as well as, no doubt, many others, there is remarkably little difference between male and female humans (the term is here extended to include the Kindred Races), compared to the rest of the animal kingdom. There is little physiological difference, no psychological difference (Think about it. Consider that human societies have been both matriarchies and patriarchies. Don't let your own experience blind you to history.), and so forth.¹⁵

He then goes to offer the point that a constitution bonus is due to the fact that women are more resilient to disease than men, and that the dexterity bonus hails from the fact that women have lighter builds, with slighter fingers, and that they are then therefore more adept at picking locks than others.

Although not as condescending as Lakofka's treatise on women, Crabaugh reveals in his writing an essentialism that reads bodies as purely biological entities. By this, I mean to say that – for Crabaugh– knowledge of the body could be and was apparently ascertained through strictly “scientific” measures. Michel Foucault calls such a reduction of bodies to numbers a mode of informatic power, primarily used to manage and control bodies in the modern state.¹⁶ Within Crabaugh's writing (and within *Dungeons & Dragons* as an entire game system, which views bodies as assemblages of strength, dexterity, constitution,

14. Bronowski was a historian who focused on the history of science.

15. Crabaugh, p. 19.

16. Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage Books, 1976, pp. 154-5.

wisdom, intelligence, and charisma statistics) we can read this as a means of controlling bodies in the game state, but also, more broadly, a reification of existing modes of state and scientific control within the game state.

Alongside “handedness” in Crabaugh’s tables, lies “Skin” (Figure 4). According to this table, roughly one tenth of all players should have a “dark” complexion, one tenth of all players should have a “black” complexion, and one tenth of all players should have an “oriental” complexion. In defense of his chart, Crabaugh immediately explains that these determinations stem from representations in the literature that players drew on for play: “The reason that 16 out of 20 possibilities are variations on caucasion [sic] is not that I think that that represents the actual population-distribution; it is because the literature of swords & sorcery is *primarily* (but not entirely) concerned with Caucasians.”¹⁷ Here we find representation functioning as a mode of power that replicates and reifies. The representational contexts and normativities traditionally valued by members of the community are replicated and reinforced here within the systematic logic of the game (where it might replicate then, again).

THIEVES			
Wench	1	man-1	-
Hag	2	man	-
Jade	3	man + 2	-
Succubus	4	2 men	1 limited and special
Succubus	4	2 men	1 limited and special
Adventuress	4+1	2 men +1	2 limited and special
Soothsayer	4+2	3 men	2 1 limited and special
Gypsy	5	3 men +1	2 2 limited and special
Sibyl	5+2	hero-1	2 2 1 limited and special

Figure 3: Image first published by TSR Hobbies in *The Dragon* #3, p. 8. Reproduced for purposes of critique.

17. Crabaugh, p. 20.

Skin (0-20)	
Die	Complexion
15-16	Dark
17-18	Black
19-20	Oriental
Handedness (2 6-sided)	
Die	Handedness
2	Ambidextrous
3-4	Left
5-12	Right

Figure 4: Image first published by TSR Hobbies in The Dragon #10, p. 20. Reproduced for purposes of critique.

The problem that recurs in both of these historic examples of game systems is one that elevates the ideology of simulation above values of inclusivity, plurality, and compassion. Such pursuits of authentic recreations and representations of past histories (such as in historical reenactments) can be problematic for the ways in which they offer an airtight alibi for the reproduction of predominantly white, male, historical vignettes. But Crabaugh and Lakofka move this attitude regarding authenticity and simulation into worlds of fantasy where the alibi is lost (no longer is the reenactment about history). But here, again, an opportunity to establish gender equity was lost, owing to the racist, misogynistic, and homophobic trappings of that particular genre of literature. For instance, Robert E. Howard, author of the original Conan the Barbarian stories (1932-1969), though idolized by the fan communities engaged in *Dungeons & Dragons*, has also been heavily critiqued for themes of white

supremacy in his work. To simulate fantasy in the 1970s was to simulate work that divides people between good and evil, depicts a world filled with predominantly white male heroes, and often holds that might makes right.

Disappointingly, the scene has changed very little in the past 47 years. In George's 2014 essay regarding the lack of diversity at Gen Con, he touchingly writes: "As an awkward teen, like other awkward teens, I wanted to be accepted. But acceptance meant something different to me, as perhaps it does to other minority teens. Acceptance meant being white."¹⁸ With that in mind, it is interesting to note Lakofka's historic intersection with Gen Con, as both attendee and organizer in the early years. We must ask whether Gen Con and other related community events have ever been particularly free of problematic racist and misogynist tropes. To some extent, the hobby has been coping with these biases since its infancy, and they are a seemingly inextricable part of the rules and cultural traditions that have been passed between players for years.

The simulation of literature, imagination, and other fantastic worlds, however, is not without potential for improving representation and inclusion. Although several toxic pathologies (specifically racism and misogyny) can be traced through the genealogical work above, players, designers, and gamewrights alike can choose to represent whatever they like when playing games in the future. Though some game rules are cemented in print, the culture of the hobby also allows games to bring with them an interpretive flexibility where rules can be broken, statistics can be changed, different bodies can be designed, and new worlds can be represented. This task is one that must be taken up by all members of the community. It means not considering these discussions as solely for "social justice warriors," it means acknowledging that extreme biases are

18. George, par. 10.

written into the games we play, and it means taking deliberate steps to avoid reproducing rules and images in games that play host to a problematic politics of representation.