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An Analysis of the Literature Surrounding the Intersection of Role-Playing Games, Race, and Identity

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Introduction

- A copy of these presentation slides is available at **marissambaker.wordpress.com/gallery**

- Some of the most popular role-playing games (RPGs) limit the potential for diversity among player characters, link character abilities with their racial backgrounds, and provide platforms for real-life racism.

- This presentation briefly reviews a body of multidisciplinary scholarship and popular sources discussing race in fantasy RPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *World of Warcraft*.

- Integrating interdisciplinary literature on the topic of race in RPGs provides an opportunity for exploring race, games, and identity discourse from a critical perspective.

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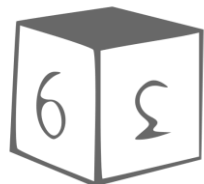
Critical Literature Review: Representation

- Associate Professor of Sociology **David R. Dietrich**'s "**Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expression in Video Game Characters**" (2013) examined the limitations built into 65 massively multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPGs) released between 2000 and 2010. His study found that "only four … had the ability to create a 'black' character'" (95).

- In "**Character Creation Diversity in Gaming Art**," sociologist **TiMar Long** (2016) examined artwork depicting humans and demi-humans in various editions of the *Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook*. This study revealed that *D&D* consistently struggles to represent racial minorities, though representation has improved in recent editions.

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Critical Literature Review: Influence of Character Race Options

- In "**Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games**," professor of informatics **Aaron Trammell** (2018) noted, "the *D&D* rules model race as a fixed biological species with fundamental bodily differences" that "reproduces an essentialist understanding of race found in eugenics" (444).

- In "**Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games**," media studies scholar **Tanner Higgin** (2009) suggested that offering black character options is not enough to fix underrepresentation issues. Game designers also ought to provide "a default Black race," which "structurally encourages a Black presence" and may help counter the disappearance of blackness in RPG spaces (16).

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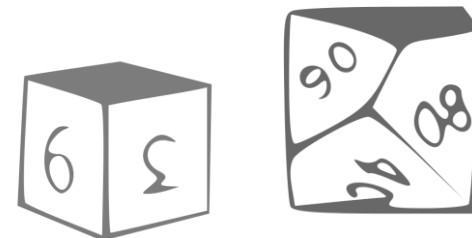
Critical Literature Review:
Effect of Representation on Players

- In his article "**The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric, and Roleplaying Games**," professor of drama and speech communication **Gerald Voorhees** (2009) argued that representation in RPGs is rhetorical and that character creation options deeply affect player experience.

- Rhetoric scholar **Danielle Nielsen** (2015) noted in "**Identity Performance in Roleplaying Games**" that RPGs make use of "feminist game design strategies" to offer options for those who want to play characters modeling identities outside of the "straight, white, male" gamer stereotype (47).

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Critical Literature Review: Real-World Impact

- **Lisa Nakamura's** (2009) article "**Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in World of Warcraft**" examines examples of "anti-Asian racial discourse" (141) that emerged between MMORPG players.

- **Sarah Lynne Bowman** and **Karen Schrier's** "**Players and Their Characters in Role-Playing Games**" (2018) points out that, at their best, RPGs let players engage in positive social experiences, express themselves, and "enact different races, ethnicities, nationalities, sexualities, and even species, depending on the game" (406).

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Potential for Change

- While progress toward correcting racial misrepresentation and under-representation in existing RPGs is slow, that progress is meaningful and it can pave the way for more significant changes in new RPGs .

- Fantasy games have a great potential to step outside the issues of real life and engage with topics such as race in a way that undermines stereotypes and encourages nuanced representations.

- Though there is not always a clear parallel between a real-world race and a fantasy race, the notion of "otherness" connects the two ideas (Warnes 2005).

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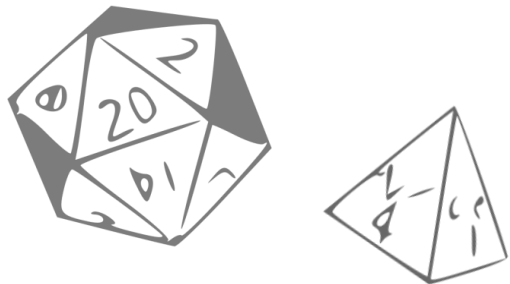
Conclusions

- RPGs are one of the most popular game genres, and fantasy RPGs impact real-world discourse.

- It is vital that scholars continue the work of the authors discussed in this presentation by encouraging nuanced diversity of representation in games and advocating for "own voices" game designers (Beer 2020).

  - For example, Native-designed TRPG *Coyote & Crow,* which is set in "an uncolonized North America" (Hall 2021).

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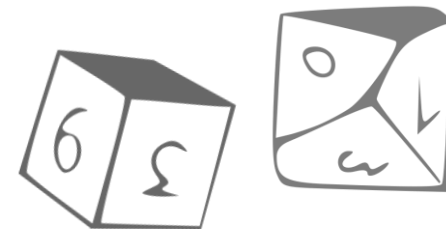
Conclusions

- Existing RPGs and new games are working to reduce and correct racial stereotypes in digital and tabletop RPGs (Wizards 2020; Hall 2021). Progress is often slow, but it is encouraging.

  - In "Privilege, Power, and Dungeons & Dragons: How Systems Shape Racial and Gender Identities in Tabletop Role-Playing Games," Antero Garcia (2017) states that while *D&D* does have a racist history, "it is also a promising reminder that like people, cultural constructions, and systems change" (242).

- The positive potential of fantasy RPGs can only be fully realized when designers, scholars, and players come together and work toward meaningful, accurate, and diverse representation in RPGs.

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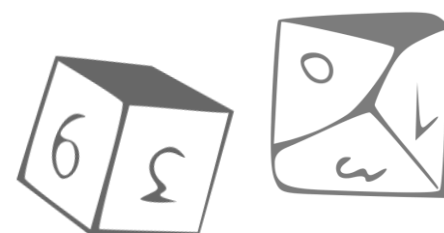
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