



NEW MEDIA STUDIES

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STUDENT NUMBER: N00172227

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MODULE: Final Year Project

ASSIGNMENT: Final Year Project Critical Essay

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Final Year Project Essay on Female Representation in Dungeon & Dragons an Edition-to-Edition Examination by Connor Coleman

This critical essay is written with the intent of giving insight into the critical and theoretical thinking that may not be obviously on display in the final project, as the format of a blog is a less academic and critical format than an essay. This critical essay will also explore the production process the student went through in producing the final project, highlighting how the projects shape changed over time during production, the issues encountered and other aspects of the production.

The project went through a number of revisions to its focus, early on in production the focus of the project was more broad aiming to not just cover Dungeons and Dragons but to also extend into other popular tabletop roleplaying games such as Pathfinder¹, Warhammer Age of Sigmar² and Vampire the Masquerade³ to name just a few. Though due to a lack of articles that covered these games compared to the market leader Dungeons and Dragons as well as concerns with the word count of this project. If each one of these games were covered, they would not be explored as critically at the same depth than one can with just focusing on one Tabletop Roleplaying Game System.

Early in development the future blogs text was divided into four main articles to later be uploaded as finished blog posts on WordPress.

These were:

1. An article that would concentrate on explaining what Dungeon and Dragons is, detailing how a Tabletop Roleplaying game is played as well as detailing some of Dungeon and Dragons History.
2. An article that detailed and investigated the Third Wave Feminist movement detailing key feminists and the history of the movement, including how it differed from First and Second Wave Feminism.
3. One post was to focus on looking at the depictions of women in Dungeons and Dragon visually with the purpose of seeing how these depictions have changed over the games many different iterations (Editions.).

¹ "Pathfinder Roleplaying Game: Unleash Your Hero! | Paizo", *Paizo.Com*, 2021 <<https://paizo.com/pathfinder>> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

² "Warhammer Age Of Sigmar", *Games-Workshop.Com*, 2021 <<https://www.games-workshop.com/en-IE/Warhammer-Age-of-Sigmar>> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

³ "Vampire: The Masquerade | Roleplaying Game", *Modiphius Entertainment*, 2021 <<https://www.modiphius.net/collections/vampire-the-masquerade>> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

4. The final article would look at noteworthy female non-player characters (NPCs) in Dungeons and Dragons, specifically focusing on those who have appeared in multiple editions to gauge how their depictions differs narratively in different adventure modules and settings over the different editions.

For instance, during production the third article was often referred to as the ‘armour piece’ as it was originally inspired by tropes involving the depiction of female armour such as the aptly named boob armour found in several pop cultural works.⁴ Though the finished article still centres on armour a minority of the images in the finished blog do not illustrate the female character wearing armour such as the inclusion of the cover of Basic Editions Eldritch Wizardly which depicts a naked woman in a scene of ritual sacrifice.⁵

The third and fourth article would culminate in producing a consensus of whether the depictions of women in Dungeons and Dragons had improved. If they had in what specific ways was this improvement evident. After completing the blog, it was evident that an improvement was made not only in the depiction of women but also in the discussion of gender. The 5th Edition Player Handbook explicitly asks players to critically look at Gender as a historical construct, to not feel restricted by historic gender norms or gender binary.⁶ The concept of sexuality and gender being a historic construct is taken from some of the critical thinking of Third Wave Feminism.⁷

In early drafts of the blog Third Wave Feminism was explored in detail. From discussions regarding the term’s origins being credited to Rebecca Walker back in 1992, when she included the term in an article, she wrote in response to Clarence Thomas’s confirmation to the supreme court. He had been accused of sexual harassment by a woman named Anita Hill. ‘I am not the postfeminist feminist. I am the Third Wave’.⁸ Though after several early drafts of the blog it was evident that in the writing of this topic, the student had lost focus of what the blogs overall topic was meant to be, as they ended up writing about the history of Third-Wave Feminism extensively without connecting it back to Dungeons and Dragons in any meaningful way. That is why when the blog was being finalised the direction of this article was shifted away from being centred on Third-Wave Feminism and instead the finalised article was titled ‘Feminism & D&D’.

⁴ "Fabricatedgeek — "Why Do You Hate The Shape Of Breasts In Plate...", *Fabricatedgeek.Tumblr.Com*, 2021 <<https://fabricatedgeek.tumblr.com/post/142022434068/why-do-you-hate-the-shape-of-breasts-in-plate/amp>> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

⁵ Gary Gygax and Brian Blume, *Eldritch Wizardry* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Games, 1976).

⁶ Jeremy Crawford and others, *Player's Handbook*, 1st edn (Delémont: Hasbro SA, 2014), p. p.121.

⁷ R. Claire Snyder, "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay", *Signs: Journal Of Women In Culture And Society*, 34.1 (2008), 175-196 <<https://doi.org/10.1086/588436>>.

⁸ JANNI ARAGON, "Teaching The Third Wave", *Transformations: The Journal Of Inclusive Scholarship And Pedagogy*, Vol. 16.No. 1 (Spring 2005) (1992), pp. 112-124 (13 pages) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/trajineschped.16.1.0112>> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

This finalised article covered some examples of how mechanically in past editions female characters were restricted compared to their male counterparts⁹¹⁰ as well as troubling content in past editions such as first edition's harlot table that allowed the DM to roll to see which harlot their players would encounter.¹¹¹² This improved article also touched on why the 5th Edition of Dungeons and Dragons is so inclusive and is open to more progressive critical thinking regarding the depictions of gender and sexuality. The reason 5th Edition is so inclusive in its content is a conscious effort of its designers, for two years before 5th Editions official release the game was being play tested and refined. During this time, the game designers heard a lot of feedback and suggestions from their play testers, including a number that dealt with feedback regarding inclusion and diversity. This led the designers to make diversity one of the explicit goals of 5th Edition.¹³ The reason D&D is more diverse and inclusive then ever is because there has been a conscious effort to bake in this into the game system. At times they do not meet expectations, but they are constantly responding to feedback and attempting to project a sense of diversity in their products.

In the student's development of this blog there were issues regarding the requirement of an interview component. The student at first organised interviews with his D&D group for the purpose of getting their impressions on the representation of women in the game. From interviewing them and inquiring '**Do you think female npcs are represented well against their male counterparts? Do they have narrative importance, or do they tend to fulfil trope roles?**' These three interviews went well, they were not the cause of any issues, the issues happened with an interview that the student thought would end up being more integral to the finished blog. This was an interview that was organised with Rachel Just a graduate student who had written two thesis that were quite relevant to the topic of this blog and subsequent critical essay.¹⁴ So, the student made contact via email with this graduate to request an interview on the topic of gender roles representation in Dungeons and Dragons, the recipient Rachel replied with great enthusiasm and a date and time for the interview was set. Despite this enthusiasm when the day came Rachel did not show and any subsequent emails were left unanswered. At the time this was a major blow to the students work process as this graduates works was one of the key texts referenced in the finished blog. The student did move on and still utilised Rachel's thesis's, but this was both an unexpected and disappointing turn of events for the project.

⁹ Oakes Spalding, "Gender Based Strength Maximums In Old School D&D", *Saveversusallwands.Blogspot.Com*, 2017 <<https://saveversusallwands.blogspot.com/2017/06/gender-based-strength-caps-in-old.html>> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

¹⁰ Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*, 6th edn (Lake Geneva: TSR Games, 1978), p. 15.

¹¹ Rob Bricken, "The 12 Harlots Of The Dungeons & Dragons Random Harlot Table Explained | Topless Robot", *Topless Robot*, 2008 <https://www.toplessrobot.com/2008/06/the_12_harlots_of_the_dungeons_dragons_random_harl.php> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

¹² Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: Dungeon Master's Guide*, 1st edn (Lake Geneva: TSR Games, 1979), p. 192.

¹³ "Diversity And Dungeons & Dragons | Dungeons & Dragons", *Dnd.Wizards.Com*, 2020 <<https://dnd.wizards.com/articles/features/diversity-and-dnd>> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

¹⁴ Rachel Just, "'Are There Any Girls Ther E Any Girls There?' Empowering Ex E?" Empowering Excursions And Gender Cursions And Gender Role Subversion In Dungeons And Dragons", *Scholarworks.Umt*, 2016 <<https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1134&context=utpp>> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

Another issue that comes to mind in the development of the finished blog was that the student in question close to the submission date of the blog had the terrible misfortune of unintentionally going massively over the word count. To put this into perspective the original wordcount for the blog submission was 2,500-3,000 words, the same as this critical essay, this student went 1,500 over the word count reaching just over 4,500 words. The student had to quickly course correct this disparity with only 48 hours till the final submission. This caused the blog to lose a lot of content and some articles such as the ‘The Evolution of Armor in Dungeons and Dragons’ became more visual based with small written sections, then they otherwise would have been. Though this was a poor turn of events this may have been for the best for the blog as the blog became more concise and centred on the main aspects of its subject matter. The finalised Armor piece made more sense in its current state as a gallery like article that is supported with text rather than the text heavy state it was in prior to this change.

Theory and the Critical Journey:

The blog went through many revisions and changes in direction during production this section details some of the key texts used in development:

Dungeons and Dragon’s Arts and Arcana a visual history¹⁵: Arts and Arcana was one of the most essential texts used in the initial planning of this project, the book is an official historic look at the art of the game system. The game systems multitude of editions are each touched on in their own specialised chapter which highlights several art pieces, products released at the time and the historic context of the releases e.g., how the company was doing, what issues were happening at the time and what was the general mindsight of the time. The book was an essential primer to the multitude of editions that allowed the student to later research specific publications to be used in the gallery section as well as getting a sense of the historic context of their release.

Player’s Handbook (2014)¹⁶: The 5th edition Player’s Handbook was the first of the three-core 5th edition rule books to be released back in the Summer of 2014. The Player’s Handbook as the name suggests is a book that contains several resources for the players. It demonstrates how they are to make their characters including information on the rules of the games, the available races, and classes to choose from and information on what different spells they could learn. The nature of the Player’s Handbook from the students perspective is the book that should set player’s expectations of the game system. It should highlight what players can do and exhibit what sort of representation they should expect from playing the game and purchasing future publications. For these reasons, the player’s handbooks of multiple editions were examined in some of the articles included in the blog to gauge the quantity and quality of the representation of female heroines compared to their male counterparts. This became the basis for the initial comparisons between editions that was essential in gauging whether Dungeons and Dragons had improved in its representation of female characters.

¹⁵ *Dungeons & Dragons: Art & Arcana: A Visual History*, 1st edn (California: Ten Speed Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Jeremy Crawford and others, *Player's Handbook*, 1st edn (Delémont: Hasbro SA, 2014).

What is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay¹⁷: Though as previously mentioned much of the content that directly went over the history of Third-Wave Feminism movement was taken out from the finished blog. That does not change that this article informed some of the feminist concepts of the finished blog. This article was the main article the student in question used to define Third-Wave feminism and acted as a jumping off point to exploring feminist ideals in relation to Dungeons and Dragons.

During the research of the project the student read a couple of articles that talked about some of the progressive aspects of 5th edition D&D¹⁸, these articles made mention of the term Third-Wave feminism as a source of some of the progressive ideals around gender that this latest incarnation of the game embodied. Third-Wave Feminism is the most recent feminist movement, it differs from First and Second Wave feminism in several ways. One way is in response to the aptly named sex wars that divided Second Wave feminists due to different opinions of sexual freedom, third wave seeks to be more sex positive. Another Third-Wave feminism differs from the first and second wave feminism as it directly resists the idea of being defined. Many Third Wave Feminists feel that everyone has their own experience with feminism and their own definition for their own brand of feminism, therefore, to be truly inclusive and progressive modern feminism cannot be restricted into a single definition. This includes not having a rigid boundary of what is women as there are feminists who identify as transgender or other gender identities.¹⁹

Theory Framework:

The objective of the project was to find an answer to the question **‘Has Dungeons and Dragons representation of women improved over the course of its many editions?’**

The first aspect of this question is to tackle what was wrong about the representations of women in past editions? For the purposes of the project this was centred on a couple of main issues.

The visual depictions of female characters: In a multitude of past editions the depiction of women heroines and prominent characters often sexualises them heavily compared to their male counterparts. This can be examples of their clothes or armour being more revealing and exotic than their male heroic counterparts, them being positioned in exotic positions in imagery that extenuate their prominent sexualised features. This can be summed up as female characters being depicted in ways that sexually objectify them rather than displaying them as characters of action the same as their male counterparts.²⁰

¹⁷ R. Claire Snyder.

¹⁸ Cecilia D’Anastasio, "Dungeons & Dragons Has Caught Up With Third-Wave Feminism", *Vice.Com*, 2014 <<https://www.vice.com/en/article/exmqg7/dungeons-and-dragons-has-caught-up-with-third-wave-feminism-827>> [Accessed 30 December 2020].

¹⁹ R. Claire Snyder.

²⁰ Connor Coleman, "The Evolution Of Armor In Dungeons And Dragons", *Depictions Of Women In Tabletop Rpg's*, 2021 <<https://dungeonsanddragonsarchive.com/2021/03/17/example-post/>> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

Mechanical representation: In some of the earliest editions Dungeons and Dragons depictions of female player characters were disproportionately made weaker than their male counterparts in some statistics if certain player race options were chosen for them. For instance, in first edition if a player made a female character that was a dwarf, elf, gnome, half-elf or halfling their maximum strength score they can reach through levelling up is less than if they had made a male character of the player race. For example, a female elven character has a max strength of 16 compared to their male counterparts that has a max of 18. Though other stats maximums were not affected in this way this example illustrates a disparity between the strength potential of female and male heroic characters.²¹

Narrative Representation of Female Characters: Though for some players the campaigns and worlds they explore may be crafted by their Dungeon Master, many other players play in the official or third-party published adventures. An important format to look at when considering how female characters are represented is to consider what female characters are introduced in adventure modules and campaign settings. One example of this is the character Ireena Kolyana, Ireena is a major character of the adventure *Curse of Strahd*²² for 5th edition. Despite her visual representation depicting her in full armour and armed, in the narrative of the story she is the target of the main antagonist of the adventure, the vampire Strahd Von Zarovich. This leads the player characters to be tasked to escort her away from her village in the hope this will impede Strahd's attempts of kidnapping her to finish turning her into his vampire bride. Even though this depiction of Ireena is depicted less passive than in past incarnations²³, it is still quite lacking as from the players perspective this plot point is just an escort mission. This has prompted many Dungeon Masters who have ran *Curse of Strahd* to suggest changing her a bit to make her more dynamic or useful or even to change the narrative so that it is one of the players characters who is the reincarnation of Strahd's lost love.^{24,25}

²¹ Gary Gygax, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook*, p.15.

²² Christopher Perkins, Jeremy Crawford and Mike Mearls, *Curse Of Strahd*, 1st edn (Renton: Wizard of the Coast, 2016), p. p.45.

²³ Tracy Hickman and Laura Hickman, *Ravenloft* (Lake Geneva, WI: TSR Hobbies, 1983), p. 9.

²⁴ "Fleshing Out Curse Of Strahd: The Village Of Barovia", Reddit, 2018
<https://www.reddit.com/r/CurseofStrahd/comments/8xu9lo/fleshing_out_curse_of_strahd_the_village_of/> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

²⁵ "My Notes On Running Ireena Without Making Her A Badass", *Reddit.Com*, 2018
<https://www.reddit.com/r/CurseofStrahd/comments/8vsw2p/my_notes_on_running_ireena_without_making_her_a/> [Accessed 30 April 2021].

Inclusion of Female Characters: Through the examination of past publications including several past editions equivalent of the Player Handbook art that depicts females was used much less than their male counterparts. This illustrates that it was not just how female characters were represented but also the quantity of representation that each sex was getting in these publications was not even close to equal. The student brings up, that for some of the earliest editions it was even hard to find images of women in the first place. In comparison from the students examination of the 5th edition player handbook this disparity has become somewhat rectified, at least in this key publication the visual representation of women made up about 40% of the images, the remaining images containing their male counterparts. It should be noted that there are also several images in the Player Handbook that contains both sexes as part of representing adventuring parties.²⁶

In conclusion the student encountered many issues in the production of the finished project, but the student was able to move past these issues finding solutions or changing his approach to the project. The student not only learnt significantly about the history and design of earlier editions of Dungeons and Dragons but also how to recognise and prove to others that the game system had truly improved significantly in its representation of women and generally being more diverse and inclusive. The student leaves this finished project with the thought that Dungeons and Dragons is a game that can safely introduce many future players to its wonders while making them feel comfortable and accepted through its baked in message of inclusivity.

Link to the finished blog: <https://dungeonsanddragonsarchive.com/>

²⁶ Connor Coleman. "The Evolution Of Armor In Dungeons And Dragons.

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