The Evolution of Fantastical Storyworlds: A Study of Tabletop Role-Playing Settings

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Abstract

Landscapes evolve. Forests turn into cities, rivers change course and even mountains slowly erode. Perhaps it stands to reason then, that the landscapes of the fantastic evolve as well. In recent times, the evolution of the imaginary worlds found in speculative works of fiction appears to favour diversity and inclusiveness, keeping in touch with wider societal trends. This transition in fantastic chronotopes is extensively chronicled in the genre of Tabletop Role-Playing Games, or TRPGs for short. The present paper aims to examine the evolution of fantastical landscapes within the very influential TRPG genre through the combined framework of narrative and cultural theories. The settings of the most successful TRPGs, Dungeons and Dragons and World of Darkness, will serve as examples. The results will provide valuable insights into how and why the worlds of speculative fiction change over time, often in response to wider societal change.

Keywords: landscapes, fantastic, chronotopes, Tabletop Role-Playing games, narrative, popular culture.

The Connection between TRPGs and Speculative Fiction

Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPGs) are narrative games first created in Wisconsin U.S.A., in 1975. Gamer and, later, game designer Stephen Lortz, defines RPGs as “Any game which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment” (6). During a TRPG, players gather around a table. First they decide upon a storyworld, or setting: an imaginary world, where their adventures will take place. Second, they each create a setting-appropriate unique character, complete with predetermined abilities, a name, and a backstory; during the game, they will play using the role of that character. Finally, one player who assumes the role of the game master will present them with a scenario and will ask them to resolve it through the actions of their characters, assisted by dice rolls that help determine the success or failure of a given endeavour. During each session, an ephemeral, collaborative narrative emerges out of the actions and the choices of the participants. In the end, there are no winners or losers: the adventure itself is the goal.

These adventures take place in imaginary storyworlds or, to use the game term, “settings,” which are drawn directly from the literature of the fantastic (as well as movies and more recently, TV series). From the beginning, the TRPG gaming genre has been widely regarded as a
cross between wargaming and fantasy literature (Mackay 2, 7). While wargaming provided a set of rules and dice rolls to differentiate TRPGs from pretend play, fantasy literature (and speculative fiction in general) provided the settings, the imaginary worlds, where the players’ adventures could take place.

There are two kinds of TRPG settings. Game designers might license a setting from a well-known work in the speculative genre: one such example is the Lord of the Rings TRPG or the Star Trek TRPG. Alternatively, game designers might base their setting on the entirety of a genre or sub-genre, making heavy use of tropes, imagery and very often clichés, in order to convey to the player the shape of the world they are about to enter. In both cases, the majority of the players will already be familiar with the world before they even open a game book.

This familiarity with the setting is beneficial to the game for a number of reasons. Firstly, as Byers and Crocco (5) point out, the opportunity to immerse oneself in the worlds we come to love through fiction, movies, and television, and go from passively consuming those to inhabiting them is one of the major draws of the game. Indeed, both Mackay (112-13) and Bowman (1) have confirmed this connection. Secondly, upon instantly recognizing the world and, by extension, its conventions, the players are capable of immersing themselves in the role, and thus in the narrative immediately, without the need to pause the game for worldbuilding clarifications. Furthermore, this allows the game to flow easily, since familiarity with the setting allows for easier communication and the use of pre-existing codes (Hendricks 39-40). For these reasons, game designers make liberal use of genre tropes, clichés, and conventions during their worldbuilding (Nikolaidou 2017).

The reliance on familiar settings might be beneficial for the game itself; however, it could also prove to be a factor of stagnation in the evolution of the fantastic landscape. To understand why, we need to delve deeper into the connection between speculative works and TRPGs.

**TRPGs as Cultural Influencers**

Do TRPGs influence the culture of the fantastic? And to what degree is this influence felt? During a gaming session, players automatically add their own stories to the genre that inspired the game in the first place; however, since this is an oral game, such stories are always ephemeral. However, the influence of such stories on the culture of the fantastic can be registered in a number of ways.

One of the most obvious and well-established influences is the impact the game has had on the literature of the fantastic. Indeed, many important authors have referred to the influence that TRPGs have had on their work. Shannon Appelcline’s exhaustive *Dungeons and Designers* catalogues the growing number of creators who were either involved in the creation of tabletop RPGs or were players themselves. The list includes Raymond Feist, George R. R. Martin, Phyllis Ann Karr, Larry Niven, China Mieville, Scott Lynch, John Ambercrombie, David Mitchell, Jon Kovalic, Patrick Rothfuss and many more.

Direct adaptations of fantastic literature into TRPGs constitute another measure of impact. A growing number of works of the fantastic have been directly licensed and adapted as TRPGs
(such as *Star Trek, Wheel of Time*, and the Cthulhu Mythos). These game books are considered as falling within the canon. In this way, TRPGs add further material to a world of transmedial storytelling. Provided with the right tools, players are encouraged to add their own stories to the storyworlds of Star Wars, Game of Thrones and Lord of the Rings.

Additionally, scholarship suggests that the medium of video games—including the widely successful Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games—originates directly from tabletop role-playing games. In their introduction to *Dungeons and Dreamers*, King and Borland propose the following: “Scratch almost any game developer who worked between the late 1970s and the early 2000s, and you’re likely to find a vein of role-playing experience” (5). Further scholarship also suggests a direct line of evolution between Tabletop Role-Playing Games and digital games in general. Matt Barton goes so far as to name the attempts to adapt the tabletop experience as “the holy grail’ of early computer programming.”

Focusing solely on digital role-playing games, Michael Tresca notes that “Fantasy CRPGs borrowed heavily from *Dungeons and Dragons* rules, though developers have felt free to modify them”. Despite not claiming *Dungeons and Dragons* as the source of all fantasy-themed computer role-playing games, Tresca considers such games as a continuation in the *Dungeon and Dragons* evolutionary path (134-60).

This influence continues to shape the medium of video games. Most of the staple video games, especially role-playing games and Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMOs), clearly have their roots in video games.¹ The popularity of digital gaming has certainly contributed to the current popularity of the fantastic, a fact that further underlines the importance of TRPGs.

Moreover, successful role-playing games often produce successful tie-ins, such as licensed novels, comics, artwork, video games, movies etc. The Dragonlance novels, written by Margaret Weiss and Tracey Hickman, are one such example. Other commercially successful tie-ins include *Baldur’s Gate, Icewind Dale*, the *Dungeons and Dragons* movies, the band Midnight Syndicate, and the TV series *Vampire: The Masquerade*.

Cultural products related to, or referencing, TRPGs often enjoy a great amount of popularity. One such example is the medium of webcomics, which became established mostly through reference to TRPG culture (early works in the medium include *pvponline, Penny Arcade, Dork Tower*, etc.).

TRPGs further influence the culture of the fantastic through the communities they help establish. Such communities vary in size and strength. One of the greatest examples is GenCon, a gaming convention hosted in Lake Geneva, which exploded in popularity when the place became known, as the birthplace of D&D. Internet communities sustained in digital forums dedicated to the subject constitute other examples. On a more local level, gaming shops, tournaments, and conventions also bring gamers together. Finally, since this is a game that requires a group of

¹ For example, the initial choice of character, the distribution of experience points, the importance of equipment and loot, etc.
people, small communities are instantly created whenever groups form. Such communities eventually coalesce into a gaming subculture, largely due to the internet.

Ultimately, the most important TRPG influence on the culture of the fantastic is the influence the game exerts on the players themselves. Numerous scholars have assessed the great degree to which TRPGs help participants shape their personal identity, help them express themselves, and lead to the creation of communities. Scholarship has also shown that, while immersed in the game, the players tend to experience the narrative, rather than simply consuming it. Thus, TRPG-emergent narratives are likely to have a greater impact than books, movies, or other cultural products destined to be passively consumed. Given that the majority of TRPG players already are, or are expected to become consumers of the fantastic and perhaps even creators, the influence of these games is easy to discern. Players’ expectations concerning the fantastic and the relationship to the genre will be directly influenced by the games they play.

Given these points, it is safe to say that since 1975, TRPGs are connected with, and have become a factor, both in the evolution of the speculative genre, as well as the evolution of the culture of the fantastic.

The Shared Worlds of TRPGs

The influence that TRPGs clearly yield, suggests that the storyworlds in which they take place—each game’s “setting”—also require closer examination.

As it is to be expected, our primary source for a study on TRPG settings is the game book, the published material necessary for a group to begin playing. Successful TRPGs also tend to publish a lot of supplemental material; supplements usually detail further corners of the setting’s storyworld (major cities, far-off places, alternate dimensions etc.). Alternatively, they provide the players with pre-constructed adventures, which also contain information about the setting.

Scholarship suggests that published materials are a major factor in how the game, and thus the storyworld, is perceived by the player. While most game books underline that TRPGs allow the players to tell their own story, limited only by their imagination, in truth, their content is bound to guide the player through a certain style of play. Scholars, including Daniel Mackay (66) and Jennifer Grouling Gover (138), point out that the text guides the player; Joris Dormans has added that even the ruleset influences the storyworld (that is, if the rules make it difficult to cast a spell, then the players perceive the world as low-magic). Jara argues that books “not only affect the reception of the diegesis (once it has come into existence) but, because they temporally precede its actual creation, [they] heavily influence player expectations and are thus decisive for the subsequent production of text” (39).

The idea that the player is created by the text is further supported by narrative and cultural theory. Porter Abbott considers setting as one of the core elements of narrative, following

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2 Among them Gary Alan Fine, Sarah Lynne Bowman, Michael Tresca, Jennifer Grouling Cover, Jakko Stenros, Daniel MackKay, Markus Montola.
3 Diegesis can be defined as a story told by a narrator, colored by his/her voice.
narrative, story, and narrative discourse. In his words, “it is often difficult to disentangle setting from what is going on and who is doing it” (20). His theory raises the question of how settings are constructed by both author and reader. Keen argues that, in order to participate in worldmaking, we respond to pre-existing cues, while Benhabib suggests that we are bound by the narratives of our predecessors (15). Narrative can also be railroaded by what Porter Abbott calls “masterplots,” skeletal stories like the quest or rebirth, which accommodate a number of different narratives (18). In their quest for familiarity, TRPGs tend to embrace masterplots in their suggested narratives. Genre is another decisive factor, as Keen suggests that we are conditioned to associate genre with certain elements, stories, and characters (8). TRPG players, who come to the table inspired by certain stories, are then very likely to repeat them in their own narratives.

However, the game book is not the only factor determining the direction a TRPG narrative will take. As discussed previously, TRPG narratives are collaborative. Indeed, the first academic treatise on the subject was Gary Alan Fine’s Shared Fantasies. While the game book is created by game designers, published, and sold to the players, its setting will only come alive when players narrate their own stories within. Angelina Ilieva quotes the work of Fine, Montola, Hendricks, Tychsen, etc., to demonstrate that TRPG game worlds are mainly constructed orally, through player communication (27-28). Examining the cultural language of role-playing, she concludes that:

> Role-play is a type of cultural bricolage (as per Genette 1982). Every text—both as a mode of expression and as a carrier of meaning—is created ad hoc, in a collaborative process of analysis: extracting elements from various already constituted wholes; and synthesis: combining these heterogeneous elements into a new whole where none of them retain their original meaning and function. Examining role-playing games as cultural systems (as per Fine 1983) implies that we should always place them within webs of cultural relations, in which each system element leads to other systems, other cultures, and other discourses. (35-36)

Ilieva points out that the players will inevitably draw elements from the cultures they participate in. As a result, the narratives they produce will be an amalgam of their various experiences, codes, and cultural language.

Such a narrative is most likely to divert from the initial, trope-laden material presented in the game book. This is true of every narrative. Benhabib points out that cultures are contestable, “complex human practices of signification and representation, of organization and attribution, which are internally driven by conflicting narratives” (ix). Even popular culture, initially

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4 The double role of the player, as both reader and partial author, is one of the reasons TRPGs pose a challenge for narratology studies. At the same time, they afford scholars of narrative theory with the opportunity to study how a reader interacts with the text, by studying the production of emergent TRPG narratives. Scholars such as Grouling Gover, Ilieva and Jara have contributed significantly to the field.
condemned by the Frankfurt School as homogenizing and hegemonic, is viewed by later thinkers such as Claude-Levi Strauss and Margaret Mead, as “a totality of social systems and practices of signification, representation, and symbolism that have an autonomous logic of their own, a logic separated from and not reducible to the intentions of those through whose actions and doings it emerges and is reproduced” (qtd. in Benhabib 3). Indeed, though Porter Abbott warns that “culture constrains all narrative” (125), and though critics of the mass culture that produces genre tend to view popular culture as an iron cage which strangles creativity and original thought (Appadurai 5-7), modernists reject this view. Without doubting the prescriptive powers of culture, modernists deny that the consumer is without agency.

Indeed, the TRPG player tends to be much more powerful than the consumer of genre narratives, since, to play a game, they have to produce a narrative for themselves. Moreover, immersion guarantees that this narrative will come as an expression of the player’s true self. A contested concept, immersion refers to the experience of losing oneself in a character. As Bowman and Standiford have suggested, players experience the game both as their character and as observers and both modes can lead to a temporary loss of self-awareness (13-14). Narratives emerging from such states are much more likely to express the player’s actual experience than blindly follow genre tropes. Ethnographic research suggests that, while players are likely to draw their characters from popular culture, they are also likely to introduce character concepts from one genre to another. Moreover, they are likely to forego their initial inspiration as the game proceeds, crafting a unique, personal voice for their character (Nikolaïdou 145-59).

Given, then, that player culture will be reflected within player narratives, our perception of the settings’ evolution through time can be framed as cultural; after all, it is a common claim that culture, far from being wholly prescriptive, is instead a series of conflicts. Seyla Benhabib argues that cultures are not monolithic; instead, she defines cultures as contestable, “complex human practices of signification and representation, of organization and attribution, which are internally driven by conflicting narratives” (x). Similarly, Scott McCracken posits that pulp narratives are driven by societal conflicts:

Who we are is never fixed, and in modern societies an embedded sense of self is less available than ever before. Popular fiction has the capacity to provide us with a workable, if temporary, sense of self. It can alleviate the terror described by Mandelstam. It can give our lives the plots and heroes they lack. While the same can be said for all fiction, narratives read by large numbers of people are indicative of widespread hopes and fears. Popular fiction is both created by and a participant in social conflict. (2)

Having established that societal conflict will influence genre narratives in general and will be even more prominent in players’ emergent narratives due to a high degree of immersion; it becomes apparent that TRPG evolution is bound to reflect such conflicts. While examining the narratives themselves as a whole is impossible, given their ephemeral quality and the fact that every gaming troupe experiences games differently, we can turn to published TRPG settings to
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examine how societal conflicts influence previous established tropes. Given that TRPG designers are attuned to feedback for a variety of reasons (the early wargaming tradition, crowdfunding, internet culture, the fact that the settings are built as a backdrop for player narratives and not as a complete work), the changes they incorporate in their worldbuilding can be said to reflect the desires of the community.

The Evolution of TRPG Worldbuilding

I. The Evolution of the Dungeons and Dragons Setting

*Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*) is the first, and the most successful, TRPG ever created. Erik Mona correctly calls it the lingua franca of role-players and suggests that most people’s understanding of a TRPG comes from *D&D* (25).

*D&D* has gone through five editions, some more successful and well received than others. Shannon Appelcline and Jon Peterson have both recorded, in their lengthy historical treatises, how *D&D* began as a spinoff of the wargaming hobby. The first impromptu game was a tale of dungeon exploration set in the Napoleonic period but, soon, the fantasy elements took over and a new gaming genre emerged. The first *D&D* world, Greyhawk, allowed for the existence of elves, dwarves, Halflings (essentially Tolkien’s hobbits), and orcs, as well as barbarians, fighters, and wizards. From the very beginning, Gygax marketed *D&D* as a game of exploration, adventure, and combat. The game was as much about traversing a terra incognita, as it was about fighting monsters and finding treasure. In this, it followed in the footsteps of its pulp inspirations, where the encounter with alien worlds was very much part of the appeal.

However, while the landscape was alien to the characters, it remained familiar to the players who controlled them: the places described in the game text were a pseudo-medieval Europe, complete with castles, hereditary monarchies, robed spellcasters reminiscent of Merlin, etc. The list of references included in nearly all editions of the game, from the *Original Dungeons and Dragons* (1975) to the fifth edition (2014) points to staples of fantasy fiction. The monsters and fantastical creatures were seemingly drawn from mythology but as Peterson notes, their actual roots were to be found in pulp fiction and not in the myths that provided the imagery (84). In terms of diversity, this proved problematic.

As Clive Bloom (178) and Scott McCracken have noted, such pulp fictions were often quick to render the Other in a rather unflattering way and present the non-Western landscape as alien, essentially ready to be colonized by bold white men. Monsters and landscapes drawn from non-Anglo-Saxon myth were there, yet there was never any depth or understanding to be found in such depictions. Instead, they were heavily exoticized and based on a number of stereotypes. It should be noted that the Anglo-Saxon myth was not presented in depth either. However, given that the players’ characters were expected to originate from the pseudo-European continent, their depiction came across as less problematic.

In terms of culture and social issues, *D&D* presented a setting where the social norms were reinforced—and, at the same time, subverted. However, in an unexpected turn of events, given the time of its publication, the game designers created a world where women and men were
equal and where the prevalent polytheistic religion removed many of Christianity’s taboos. Still, paratextual elements, such as illustrations, and a lot of the supplemental material did not build on this premise. Women were often depicted bare-breasted and mainly as spellcasters, and the social structure did not adapt to the notion of equality.

The second edition of the game clarified that the game text would use male pronouns—not because the game was intended for male players only, but supposedly for reasons of convenience. Much of the published material made use of the standard fantasy tropes in its depiction of female heroes, who were significantly fewer than the male heroes. People of colour were rare, and, despite the claim that there were no sexual taboos inherent in the setting, homosexuality was not depicted or mentioned in the game text. This was problematic. As Shaw suggests, “not being referred to in the public discourse is just as problematic as being referred to stereotypically. Not being ‘hailed,’ in [Althusser’s] terms, is a form of ‘symbolic annihilation’” (231).

The third edition (2000) made a conscious effort to change this. It used both male and female pronouns; the illustrations presented an equal number of men and women, as well as people of colour. However, there were no further subversions in the narrative. Published adventures continued to exclude homosexuality and alternate lifestyles. The supplements detailing lands inspired from non-Western, non-Anglo-Saxon cultures became more detailed, yet they still relied on a variety of stereotypes.

The fourth edition of Dungeons and Dragons was a departure in theme and style, and it was viewed as an attempt to attract MMO players and a younger audience. It made no changes in terms of how cultural issues were handled; moreover, since it was not well received, it published few supplements detailing the world of the setting. The fifth edition however, published at a time (2014) when gender and racial issues had come once again to the forefront, was different. The Player’s Handbook, the most necessary game book required for play, tackled the issue of alternate gender expression directly. Furthermore, it chose a woman of colour as the symbol for the human race and eliminated unnecessary female nudity. When sexuality is overt due to the nature of a creature (for instance, the fey), there is always a male and female version. Moreover, the game presented its first openly homosexual couple in a published adventure entitled Storm Kings’ Thunder (2017). Addressing this milestone, lead developer Jeremy Crawford stated that “I wasn’t about to have this book go out and not acknowledge that people like me exist.” Every published adventure since then has included homosexual characters (D’ Anastasio).

II. The Evolution of the World of Darkness Setting

The World of Darkness (1991) is an umbrella term for a number of horror TRPGs set in the same universe. Initially inspired by Anne Rice’s novel, Interview with the Vampire, the World of Darkness (WoD) was created, in many ways, as a direct antithesis to D&D. The player assumes the role of a monster, gameplay is meant to be story-heavy with little emphasis on

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5 The games include Vampire, Mage, Werewolf, Changeling, etc.
combat, and it is set in our own world. For this reason, many of the supplements published for *WoD* and especially for the *Vampire the Masquerade (VtM)* sub-game, detailed existing cities, describing their “supernatural” side according to the game’s mythos.

Published as it was in the early 1990s, *WoD* (and *VtM*) attempted to distance itself from the pulp roots of *D&D*. Many counter-cultural ideas were prevalent in the game from early on. The villains of *VtM* were an obvious metaphor for capitalism and organized religion; feelings of desperation and wrath experienced by the powerless were a major theme. Furthermore, instead of focusing on cities usually connected with the Vampiric Mythos, the game attempted to turn the entire world into its game setting. Supplements detailed the supernatural aspects of Cairo, Montreal, Constantinople, and Mexico City, as well as London and Transylvania. Moreover, these supplements delved deep into the traditions of each city they described, drawing from their actual history and culture, instead of relying on Western tropes and stereotypes. Critiques of cultural hegemony and colonization were abundant and so was the interaction with local myths. As an example, the Transylvania supplement made only passing reference to Dracula and focused instead, on the complex politics of the region, essentially de-colonizing the landscape. Supplements were crafted presenting the African continent and the Asian traditions as entirely different from their Western counterparts.

Most importantly, the use of the entire world as a valid gaming backdrop gave the players the impression that *WoD* stories were taking place all over the globe, enacted by people who could be of any race or religion. In this way, the player felt much less obliged to re-enact the tropes of the Vampiric Mythos as previously seen in fiction or in the cinema, since the game made an effort to subvert these clichés through the use of unexpected backdrops for its stories. The available roles reinforced this sense: the player could choose to play a character belonging to one of several vampiric clans, many of them being inspired by different cultures. Finally, the game clarified that, while supernatural creatures could carry the prejudices of their human culture, women were, more or less, in an equal position in the supernatural community. In this way, it both addressed the issue of real-world gender inequality and allowed for in-game equality.

However, it is unlikely that someone reading these supplements today would not find fault with them. To give a few examples, one of the vampiric clans, the Roma Ravnos, were presented as compulsive liars and thieves, while the signature character for the irrationally violent Brujah was an African-American man. In a personal interview with game developer Phil Brucato on 23 May 2018, he suggests that “it was always our intention to make games and stories for a larger audience than the then-usual straight white suburban American boys.” Brucato went on to explain that nearly half of the White Wolf developers were “some definition of ‘queer,’” nearly half were women, several were people of colour, and a few had been sometimes “desperately poor.” Thus, they wanted to appeal to “female gamers, queer gamers, gamers of colour, and folks who would not have considered themselves interested in gaming until they encountered our work... We created the games we wanted to see, and those games were intentionally radical in terms of content, approach and philosophy—if ‘radical’ only by the standards of the gaming industry at that time.” His last sentence hints at the issues these developers had when attempting
to radicalize tabletop gaming. In the early 1990s, when their games first came out, they were only able to hire “suburban American white folks,” who, to create game content, “were riffing off the popular media of that time... which was not exactly known for its factual accuracy or cultural sensitivity... And so, even when our people dug deep for research, the materials at our disposal were often inaccurate, superficial, and generally offensive.”

Brucato’s words highlight a lot of the issues facing the TRPG industry today. Even when the creators aim for diversity, subversion, and representation, their sources are often rooted in material one could call offensive by today’s standards. However, despite its problems, WoD’s work made a difference and drew an entirely different player base to TRPGs.

In 2004, the new World of Darkness came out, rebooting the games. The new edition ushered in an entirely new mythos, and thus introduced different storyworlds. The new material was indeed far more inclusive, diverse, and free of many of the traps Brucato mentions. While many of the contributors came from outside the U.S. WoD’s commitment to addressing social issues became even more prominent: as an example, the Changeling the Lost subgame, which was inspired by classic European fairytales, details Miami as a sample city, focusing on the issue of immigration.

Despite these efforts, the new edition is considered less welcoming to international players than the old one. While the first edition of the games drew from international folklore and tapped into the roots of many archetypal myths to draw its material, the new edition instead creates new myths from scratch. While, in this way, the problematic elements of older myths and archetypes are avoided, the game’s narrative also feels more artificial and less rooted in the collective subconscious. While the non-supernatural aspects of the storyworld carefully address real-life issues, the supernatural mythos itself has abandoned its international inspirations and is significantly more U.S.-centric.

Though the new edition was a success, the company was eventually pressured by its player base into re-introducing the first edition. Currently, both editions are published simultaneously.

III. A Common Thread

The evolution of both games towards more diverse and socially conscious settings is owed to multiple factors. To begin with, unlike other forms of art, these games have always received and incorporated feedback from the community. In the early days of D&D, the designers presented parts of the game that were in development in fanzines and expected to hear back. Nowadays, the same process is repeated through the internet. For their latest editions, both D&D and WoD chose a process of “open development” (or “crowdsourcing”) whereupon they published their drafts on the internet and received continuous feedback. The desire to appeal to a wider audience is also a factor, since making the game more attractive to women and international players, benefits sales. Moreover, the very nature of the game means that it will always be a “shared fantasy”. Since much of the game is produced by the players through various means, it is to be expected that the settings will change along with the “real” world, and will reflect an expanded player base.
Conclusion

TRPG storyworlds/settings have been influential in the culture of the fantastic since the game’s inception in 1975. Due to a variety of reasons, these settings have evolved from their pulp roots in a way that tends to be reflective of various social conflicts and struggles. Issues of gender, race, and sexual orientation, as well as political and class conflicts have informed the evolution of TRPG settings. TRPGs’ close relationship with speculative works and fantasy culture suggests that these changes are reflective of wider trends.

Closer examination of these settings then, as they are continuously framed by designers and players, allows for a better understanding of the landscapes of the fantastic. Future research would benefit from examining independent games along with the staples of the industry, in order to discern a pattern in the evolution of speculative storyworlds.

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