Does Gramsci Have a Stat Block? Adapting Critical Theory to Dungeons & Dragons Content

Brian McKenzie

This paper examines the opportunities and challenges of adapting critical social theory to game design. Specifically, I am interested in table-top roleplaying games (TTRPGs) such as Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) and the question of how writers can create content that is persuasive and potentially transformative. This paper builds on and compliments Trent Hergenrader's structural approach to worldbuilding for games (Hergenrader, 2018). The case study presented in this paper applies two theoretical frames to Hergenrader's structural model of worldbuilding, those of the political scientist Theda Skocpol and the nineteenth century French theorist Alexis de Tocqueville. Both offer a structural explanation for the origins of social revolutions (Skocpol, 1994; Tocqueville, 1998). Using Hergenrader's model I adapted these two theoretical frames to create an underground Drow (a type of elf in the D&D universe) city on the brink of social revolution.

Nevertheless, worldbuilding is not storytelling (Hergenrader, 2018). In the context of analog TTRPGs where, following Cover (2010), narrative is co-created and players have narrative agency, structure must serve narrative. Caught between the narrative agency of players and the precarious authority of their texts (Hammer, 2007), what hope, then, is there for designers to create transformative content? This case study argues in favor of a narrative strategy based on understanding reception through the lens of symbolic interactionism. This theory holds that social and material context is important to how individuals sense of their world (Fine, 1983). "Cultural objects" possess shared meanings but are also unstable and thus open to transgressive and subversive use (McDonnell, 2023). In the case of game design, this understanding allows an author to deploy tropes that are likely to be read by the players as intended.

The case study demonstrates the complexity of adapting critical theory to TTRPG design. It argues that critical theory must be embedded in narrative play, and that structural theories of worldbuilding based on an understanding of reception theory offer an approach to game design. In doing so, the paper confronts the tension between structure and agency in game design, the issue, as described by ICGAN's CFP, of "the relationship between designer, text…, and player" (The Games Institute, 2024).

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Author Statement

My research explores the creation of content for tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) that embeds critical social theory and is potentially transformative or persuasive. There are two axes to my research: how to do it and where to do it. As regarding the 'how,' I am interested in reception theory: the relationship between author, text, and player. Here I advocate for the use of symbolic interactionism as a way of crafting content and understanding reception. As for the 'where,' I want to make an argument informed by political economy: the site of praxis for critical game designers should be commercial publishing in general and the hegemonic rules system of *Dungeons & Dragons* specifically

Giuseppe's Neurodivergent TTRPG Design Workshop Proposal

Bio:

Giuseppe Femia is an English PhD Candidate at the *University of Waterloo*. He previously completed a double major for his Bachelor of Arts, in English, Rhetoric, Media, and Professional Communication & Honours Arts and Business, as well as a Master of Arts, in Rhetoric and Communication Design, both at Waterloo.

Giuseppe's current research in game studies, media studies, queer studies, disability studies, and performance studies observes different types of gaming media and the appeal it has to its audience. He previously presented his work on queer reparative play and *Dungeons & Dragons* at the Transformative Play Initiative Seminar in Visby, Sweden, and then had it published as a peer-reviewed article in the *International Journal of Role-Playing*.

Giuseppe is now partnering up with other scholars researching the intersection of disability studies and game studies to broaden the horizons of the growing field.

Abstract

Disability is not an aspect of culture that we often see adequately represented in our modern media (Dolmage 20; Ellcessor and Kirkpatrick 43). When the majority of contemporary games are designed with an able-bodied and neurotypical main character in mind (Ledder 30), playing a character with a disability puts the player at an unnecessary disadvantage for the goal of winning the game, a handicap if you will. So, when academics attempt to look for disability representation in gaming culture, they are left with few good examples to draw from as there does not seem to be a common appeal for people without disabilities, outside of fetishization of identity tourism, to play a disabled character when they are more likely to have physical, mental, and social barriers in accessing the game world (Jung par. 3-6). This article reports on a workshop I conducted to address this scholarly gap.

In the Fall of 2024, I ran a Neurodivergent Tabletop Roleplaying Game (TTRPG) Design Workshop as part of my dissertation research, bringing together Neurodivergent Scholars, Activists, and Game Designers in a story-telling and community-building initiative. The purpose of the workshop was to observe instances of TTRPG design done by and for neurodivergent individuals with a heavy emphasis on allowing anyone playing the game to tell their neurodivergent story. In this article, I display the TTRPG media artefact resulting from the workshop as my object text and explain the thematic design choices that went into the neurodivergent representation. I supplement this work by drawing from an array of disability media theorist such as Christa Mullis, Kathleen C. Sitter et al., Kara Stone, Adrienne E. Raw, and Elizabeth Ellcessor and Bill Kirkpatrick.

The research question I use to focus my work is: How can we approach TTRPG design to respectfully include and acknowledge the diverse experiences of neurodivergence while still being critical of disabling politics and social injustice in the real world? This will be approached from two angles: 1) navigation of the social and physical environments illustrated through the game mechanics; and 2) relatable neurodivergent themes within the narrative.

Concerning game mechanics, the TTRPG design will have neurodivergent-informed methods of taking action and navigating the world for the players' characters. I observe instances where mechanics that represent neurodiversity within the player characters thematically exemplify neurodivergent values and understandings of the world. By observing the mechanics available to the player, I develop an understanding of how neurodivergent stories are and are not approached by the workshop participants.

Concerning narratives, the neurodivergence of the characters play into the story that is made and interpreted entirely by the players. Therefore, the framing of the story provided by the game system sets a precedent of what the players' expectations might be. For example, the dark fantasy genre of TTRPGs tends to implicate tragedy so depictions of characters with neurodivergence are not afforded a positive setting to frame themselves in. Within the narrative, we can observe how neurodivergent stories is framed and depicted by the workshop participants.

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Title: Sentiment Analysis of Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Paper Abstract

When participating in a Tabletop Role-Playing Game (TTRPG), players are speaking both in the fictional world and in reality while portraying a fantasy character. Emotional expressions when playing TTRPGs have often been described as fully embodied feelings where the players may truly feel the emotions that they are portraying as their characters [1]. Yet, Fine [2] states that roleplaying games are better understood as group storytelling rather than as an exercise in acting and embodiment. With conflicting opinions about how in depth this embodiment goes, and differences between each individual TTRPG table and playstyle, it can be difficult to delineate between player and character in a concrete fashion. This paper will explore how sentiment analysis techniques and emotional theories can be applied to both aspects of the self to better understand the divisions between the emotional states of the players and the characters.

To examine tabletop role-playing games, transcript data will be used from the popular actual play Dungeons & Dragons show, Critical Role. Each utterance by the players will be assigned sentiment values using a fine-tuned DistilRoBERTa natural language processing model [3]. The sentiment values will be mapped to both Ekman's categorical theory of emotions [4] and Russell's dimensional theory of emotions [5] to get a clear picture of the emotional expressions in statements made during play, as well as the progression of these emotions throughout the narrative. This analysis will examine differences between the emotional states of the characters and the players, as well as the emotional dynamics between the group throughout play.

Critical Role is a special case when it comes to TTRPGs, as the cast is composed of professional voice actors who often exhibit strong divisions between reality and fantasy during play. Consequently, Critical Role is often criticized for not being representative of the average Dungeons & Dragons game, [6]. Yet, their professionalism means that it is clearer when the speech is taking place in reality compared to when it takes place in the fictional, and their longevity ensures that a fully complete narrative can be analyzed. As professional voice actors, the Critical Role cast are often fully embodying the emotions displayed by their characters. By analyzing the show, I will take a closer look at how emotions are displayed authentically or superficially when portraying a character separate from the primary self, and how that effects the narrative flow and emotional dynamics throughout play.

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Author's Statement

Hanna Dodd is a master's student in computer science at the University of Waterloo studying the intersections of artificial intelligence and storytelling. She has previously explored topics related to information-seeking behaviour and embodiment in tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) during her master's in library & information science where she examined how everyday life information behaviour is portrayed during TTRPG play. Her current interests lie in how artificial intelligence can helps us to better understand, explore, and create fictional worlds.

Author's statement

GUILHERME DA SILVA BRAGA holds a Ph. D. and a Master's degree in Literature Studies from UFRGS (Brazil) and has concluded a post-doctoral research project in Literary Translation at UC (Portugal). He currently teaches Portuguese and English as a visiting lecturer at IFRS – Campus Canoas in Southern Brazil and has published articles and book chapters on literary translation in Brazil and in Europe. In addition to pursuing an academic career, he is also an award-winning literary translator working from English, Norwegian, Swedish and Danish into Brazilian Portuguese for some of the most renowned publishing houses in the country.
Guilherme has been playing *Magic: The Gathering* on and off since the 90's, when he bought a Revised booster pack and opened a Bayou. Thirty years later he is still rambling about *Magic* translations – this time with academic works to cite.

Abstract

WORDS OF WASTE:
MAGIC: THE GATHERING'S DELOCALIZATION OUT OF BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE

Magic: The Gathering has a quite long history in Brazil: from the game's 4th edition (1995), *Magic* had always been translated into Brazilian Portuguese. On February 2024, however, Wizards of the Coast officially announced that it would no longer produce Brazilian Portuguese versions of *Magic* cards, effectively delocalizing the game out of Brazilian Portuguese. The news sparked immediate social media outrage from Brazilian *Magic* players and enthusiasts, and prominent figures within the scene expressed fears that the decision might seriously endanger the future of *Magic* in Brazil.

The available data suggests that these concerns are well-founded. A British Council report from 2014 found that only 5.1% of Brazilians state that they speak English when asked; out of those, only 16% claim to have advanced knowledge of the language – a staggeringly low 0.81% of the general population. Still according to the report,

> Statutory and the National Curricular Guidelines [in Brazil] make the teaching of a foreign language at elementary and high school compulsory. However, teachers and experts acknowledge that English teaching – both public and private – is unable to provide students with a usable level of English. (British Council, 2014)

An article by Pereira (2016, *apud* Batista 2020) mentions lack of student motivation as an additional factor for the shortcomings of English teaching and English learning in Brazil. According to this study,

> One of these [learners'] misconceptions is that English is the language of England and the United States only and, therefore, that there is no point in learning it if one is not to go to these places. Another misconception is that foreign languages can only be successfully learnt in private language schools and – preferably – outside Brazil. (Pereira, 2016)

As it turns out, since the worldwide release of the *Bloomburrow* set in August 2024, Brazilian *Magic* players have come to realize that English has become a necessity to play with colorful cardboard after all – even in their overwhelmingly monolingual corner of the world.

Previous studies have investigated the potential use of *Magic: The Gathering* as a learning resource for learning English in Brazil (Sousa Filho and Tomitch, 2017; Sousa Filho, 2018) with inconclusive results. As for *Magic'*s translation into Brazilian Portuguese, Fornazari (2020) writes:

> How are card games localized? Unfortunately, due to Non-Disclosure Agreements, most of the localization teams are unable to provide data for academic research; therefore, only the published product can be analyzed to derive their practices. (Fornazari, 2020)

After reconstructing the implied principles gleaned through a careful analysis of the cards which make up the *Magic 2013 Core Set*, the author presents the claims below:

> The following possible constraining translation policies could be derived drawing on the findings (Magic 2013 Core Set) in English and Portuguese:
> 1. Translation seems to be produced to create a product that is adequate as text in Brazilian Portuguese, which can make the text seem truncated and not acceptable in its tenor of being written to be played,
> 2. Due to flavor narrative of fictional fantasy universes, translation may be discouraged to produce real-world culturally-specific references, unless the development language has already done so; in that case, they are still translated to be adequate when they could be translated to be acceptable in the Brazilian cultural point of view, in which sometimes creative flavor can be lost in humor or meaninglessness. . . . (Id.)

Overall, the *Magic* situation in Brazil is quite perplexing at the moment. After mass producing translations of questionable quality that were sold and played across the country for almost 30 years, Wizards of the Coast decided to stop it altogether – theoretically barring over 99% of Brazilians from ever trying the game, if advanced knowledge of English is understood as a requirement to play it. After the last Brazilian Portuguese set (*Modern Horizons 3*) and the first two English-only sets (*Bloomburrow* and *Duskmourn*), the effects of this decision should have already been felt by players, enthusiasts and storeowners countrywide. But what is happening to *Magic* and Brazilian *Magic* as a result?

As far as we are aware, there has been no previous research into the relation between fluency in English and access to the game of *Magic* or perceived translation quality and language preference among players in Brazil. In this ongoing study, we aim to collect data which allows us to address some of the following questions regarding the *Magic* community in Brazil:

- If and to which extent English proficiency is higher among *Magic* players;
- If and to which extent *Magic* players learn general English through *Magic* or vice-versa;
- If and to which extent *Magic* players learn specialized *Magic* terminology in English that allows them to play the game even while not being fluent in the language otherwise;
- If and to which extent *Magic*'s "truncated and not acceptable" (Fornazari 2020) translations have affected players' perception of translated cards;
- If and to which extent players have quit the game now that *Magic* has been delocalized out of their native language;
- If and to which extent card game store owners have noticed any changes in sales, attendance and influx of new players of *Magic* after the delocalization of *Magic* out of Brazilian Portuguese.

The data collection method is going to be a freely distributable informed consent form followed by a questionnaire related to the points above (currently in development).

Results are to be shared, discussed and analyzed at ICGaN 2025 in an effort to better understand the current and future developments of delocalizing *Magic* out of Brazil – as well as the wider implications of delocalizing a well-established game out of an overwhelmingly monolingual locale.

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