

Performing inclusivity in Dungeons and Dragons actual plays

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Abstract

This research examines the way in which players in Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) actual plays perform inclusivity for their audience. Throughout its history, D&D has been shaped and dominated by white heterosexual male perspectives, as has the entire fantasy genre. Recently, more and more critics have been calling for changes in the game's design, claiming that the game is ingrained with social injustices against people of color, queer people and people with disabilities. The current rise in popularity of D&D was accompanied by the rise of actual plays, in which D&D game sessions are streamed online. Some actual plays actively use their platform to advocate for a more inclusive community. This research focuses specifically on actual play groups that are diverse in terms of race, gender identity, sexual identity and disabilities. Through the use of a digital ethnography, this research combines observations of six different actual plays to form an understanding of how inclusivity is performed through the players' behavior, decisions and actions. The analysis shows a top-level differentiation between performance in the primary world (real world) and the secondary world (imaginary world). Performance of inclusivity in the primary world involves explicit statements that explain individual stances towards contemporary topics of inclusivity, as well as explicit explanations for changing parts of the game. Performance of inclusivity in the secondary world involves the behavior of roleplayed characters, as well as the worldbuilding, which is regularly shifted to highlight marginalized identities in its stories. Additionally, the actual plays and, in specific, the Dungeons Master play an educational role towards their audience in communicating ways to make any game of D&D more inclusive to marginalized identities.

Keywords: *Dungeons & Dragons, actual play, inclusivity, biological essentialism, queer identities, disabilities, imaginary worlds*

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1. Introduction

Millions of people eager to watch others play a game. Not something new if we are talking about esports, but it is a fairly recent development in the world of tabletop roleplaying games (ttrpgs). In short, ttrpgs are collaborative storytelling games guided by a set of rules, in which participants take on the role of a character in an imaginary world. When a group of ttrpg players decides to broadcast their games online, they become actual play performers. So called *actual plays*, referring to the (video) podcast genre in which people play ttrpgs, not only draw in millions of online fans, but are able to sell out live performances in theaters as well. The eight voice-actor friends of the actual play series Critical Role (criticalrole, 2015-present) are arguably at the forefront of this development. Their infectious personalities and talent for (voice-)acting shine through the imaginary characters they play in their fantasy world. It is partly because of them that Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), the ttrpg they play, has greatly risen in popularity in the last decade. Other factors, such as D&D's features in popular Netflix show *Stranger Things* and the Covid-19 pandemic also drew people in to take up the game for themselves. However, with great media popularity also comes great scrutiny. Admittedly, the criticism on Dungeons and Dragons has been a less recent development. In the 1980s the game endured the so-called *satanic panic* from conservative religious groups who claimed the game to be an occult tool allowing teens to become possessed by demons (BBC News, 2014). Throughout its past, the game also received more fundamental criticisms of racism and its representation of cultures. In D&D's first editions, critics observed a lack of racial diversity in the illustrations of heroes, finding no depictions of nonwhite adventurers (Tresca, 2011). Scholars have attributed this issue to the hegemonic white European male voices that have shaped the fantasy genre throughout history, as well as Dungeons and Dragons (Young, 2018). Recently, these criticisms have gotten newfound attention because of the game's growth in popularity. The goal of these criticisms is to spread awareness that the game perpetuates social injustices towards (mostly) people who are not white heterosexual males and to set in motion the changes needed to make D&D more welcoming and accessible to those marginalized identities.

However, it cannot be ignored that D&D publisher Wizards of the Coast has made improvements regarding some criticisms. For example, they made illustrations of heroes more culturally and racially diverse and have published adventures inspired by non-European cultures as well (Wizards of the Coast, 2022). Still, critics claim that the real issues are not remedied by such surface level adjustments and want to see more fundamental changes in

D&D as a game and within its community. As a result, some D&D players have taken matters into their own hands and adapted their ways of playing to their own needs and desires.

While games of D&D are usually played in private, actual plays are live streamed for an online audience, broadcasting the choices of adapting the game to beyond the gaming table. Therefore, this research aims to gain an understanding of the way performers in D&D actual plays approach the relationship D&D has with the social injustices they experience, as well as the use of their platform and performance to communicate their ideals for a more inclusive community. This leads me to the following research question:

How do players in Dungeons and Dragons actual plays perform inclusivity?

In practice, performance in actual plays takes place on different levels. On one hand, a player performs the roleplaying of their imaginary character in the story, as any other ttrpg player does. On the other hand, a ttrpg player in an actual play also performs their own self in front of the audience. Therefore, this research distinguishes between these levels on the basis of Wolf's (2012) *primary* and *secondary worlds* framework. In this framework, the primary world reflects on the *real world*, while the secondary world reflects on the *imaginary world*. These concepts will be further discussed in depth in the theory chapter. This distinction in levels of performance introduces the following two sub-questions:

1. *How do players in Dungeons and Dragons actual plays perform inclusivity in the primary world?*
2. *How do players in Dungeons and Dragons actual plays perform inclusivity in the secondary world?*

In short, performance of inclusivity in the primary world is mainly seen in behavior out of game and statements made by the cast members as themselves. In the secondary world, this is mainly observed through behavior and expressions of identities as imaginary characters.

As actual plays have strongly risen in popularity the last few years, their influence on pop culture and D&D communities has as well. Seeing how actual play groups deal with issues of inclusivity in their storytelling can offer multiple insights, especially as the calls for more inclusivity in media have grown stronger in recent years. For one, each Dungeons and Dragons game is different. Because it is a game of collaborative storytelling, each different group of people playing D&D will result in a different story being told. Therefore, the

freedom in altering rules, lore and ways of playing will also be appropriated in different ways by different groups. This allows D&D groups to change parts of the game they deem unfun, but also social injustices ingrained in the game they find problematic.

Since actual plays are a fairly recent phenomenon, relevant research into the topic is limited. While the relationship between performers and audience has been subject to research, the focus on creating inclusive communities through this medium has not. With the popularity of actual plays, the popularity of D&D grows as well. This can allow the medium to be a vehicle for communicating approaches to inclusivity in the game. Critics have pointed out the social injustices ingrained in the game's design, but the ability to create meaningful social interaction through D&D makes it so that it can be used to drive ideological change as well (Clements, 2019). Still, Clements' suggestion is limited to play at a private gaming table that does not livestream their D&D games to a large audience. Since the popularity of actual plays provides a large platform with a dedicated and engaged audience, it is interesting to see how D&D is used as a potential tool for ideological change beyond a private gaming table. Additionally, actual plays have the potential to start debates around inclusivity within D&D, paving the way for eventual changes to the game that could improve its relationship with inclusivity. However, we can not forget that fun is also a big factor in D&D's draw. Not all aspects of the game are or should be politicized. Rather, D&D is a vessel of fun, in which social and political commentary and ideas can be blended. Consequently, the aim of this research is to understand the individual and collective actions and behavior of actual play performers and to what extent this communicates their ideals of inclusivity within D&D communities.

In order to gain insight into this phenomenon, this thesis starts by laying out a theoretical framework, which puts its focus onto a player's performance in the two different worlds: the primary world and the secondary world. An explanation of D&D as a game and its history will be discussed in detail, which helps form an understanding of the intricacies of the primary and secondary worlds as well as an understanding of the criticisms the game has received in regards to social justice issues. Insight into the perceived social injustices form the basis of our focus on inclusivity, as these are mostly experienced by people of marginalized identities, who feel uncomfortable with parts of the game. Following the theoretical framework will be a methodological discussion, in which the choice to carry out a digital ethnography of six selected actual play series will be substantiated. Then, in the results chapter a range of observed approaches to performing inclusivity is presented, from ignoring perceived social injustices in the game altogether to explicitly challenging situations where

they are the norms. Finally, the conclusion chapter reflects on the results by concretely structuring the different ways of performing inclusivity and by discussing how this could lead to a more inclusive game and community for Dungeons and Dragons.

2. Theory

2.1 An introduction to Dungeons and Dragons

In 2024, Dungeons and Dragons (Arneson & Gygax, 1974) will celebrate its 50th anniversary, while being more popular than ever. Current D&D publisher Wizards of the Coast (n.d.) explains the essential elements of the game as follows: each player creates a heroic character and together with the Dungeon Master, they create an exciting story where their bold adventurers confront deadly perils. Regardless of the outcome, the good times and memories are central to the game. A lot of inspiration for D&D was pulled from Robert E. Howard, C. S. Lewis, H. P. Lovecraft and other white male authors, but the writings of Tolkien have become the default for the fantasy setting (Young, 2018) and are what have shaped D&D the most. Many find Tolkien's creation of Middle-Earth to be so detailed, lively and vivid, that the imaginary world became a place people actually longed to visit physically (Barton & Stacks, 2019). Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax were the first to offer that possibility in gameplay to people through their creation of Dungeons and Dragons. As seen with the incorporation of elves, dwarves, orcs, magic, and so on, the presence of Tolkien's influence is immense in D&D. In turn, D&D has also significantly contributed to shaping the landscape of pop culture represented in other creative media, like books, films and videogames (Garcia, 2017). Most notably Netflix's hit show *Stranger Things* features evil beings like the *Mind Flayer* and *Vecna*, that are directly taken from D&D. John Carmack, videogame developer of the popular first person shooter *Doom*, has also cited Dungeons and Dragons as a direct influence on the creation of his game (Hoad, 2014).

A typical game of D&D goes as follows: about three to seven players get together to go on adventure in an imaginary world to complete narrative-driven quests that involve combat, exploration and social interaction (Wizards of the Coast, 2014c, p. 8). Usually, this imaginary world is formed in the theater of the mind, meaning that it is verbally communicated through descriptions of vision, feel, smell or any of the other senses in order to create an image in the mind of the players. Props like printed maps and miniature characters are often used to represent the imaginary world in a more tangible way. One of the players at the table takes on the role of the Dungeon Master, who guides play. They act as the main narrator and their responsibilities include preparing quests, worldbuilding, guarding the rules of play and everything else that facilitates smooth gameplay.

The core D&D books, the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (Wizards of the Coast, 2014a), the *Monster Manual* (Wizards of the Coast, 2014b) and the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast, 2014c) provide the Dungeon Master with guidelines to worldbuilding, a fully fledged set of rules and the lore, referring to the stories, cultures and history that canonically took place in the officially published literature of D&D, of several types of creatures they need to prepare a game of D&D. Often, D&D games take place in established imaginary worlds and settings provided by officially published campaign setting books, such as the *Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide* (Wizards of the Coast, 2015). These provide adaptable stories, quests, characters, environments and other tools and building blocks for worldbuilding. However, the Dungeon Master also has the option to think up worlds, characters, quests and, to some extent, rules themselves, which is commonly referred to as *homebrewing*. The other players create their own characters by choosing a race, such as dwarf, elf or orc, and a class, such as fighters, wizard or barbarian, and by coming up with their backstory, motives and goals. Throughout several game sessions the Dungeon Master and the players take these imaginary characters through quests, in which they create and experience intriguing stories together. For example by freeing the village below the mountain of the suffocating grasp of the evil wizard living at the top.

Since it was first published in 1974, Dungeons and Dragons has undergone many changes through iterations of later editions of the game, while simultaneously inspiring the creation of several other games and gaming systems (Barton & Stacks, 2019). The core of D&D still lies with adventure, exploration, combat and social interaction, but the forms of play, as well as the hegemonic societal ideologies that indirectly influence its text, have developed from edition to edition (Garcia, 2017). As real-life society develops, so does our perception and understanding of the politics and ideologies reflected in imaginary worlds. Since creative media is a product of its time, storylines, worldviews and characterizations that were once seen as unproblematic may start to receive negative criticism as time goes by.

For example, Tolkien has been criticized for his implementation of racial differences in his works (Stuart, 2022). One article likens Tolkien's descriptions of races to the language used in far-right political propaganda, because he uses "non-white characteristics" like "dark", "slant-eyed" and "broad-faced" to describe evil races (Yatt, 2002). However, Tolkien also fiercely opposed racist propaganda during the second world war (Rearick, 2004). Still, Tolkien lived in a time shaped by British colonialism, which informed many of the social ideologies at the time. These ideologies have seeped into his writing and, consequently, into the entire fantasy genre at the foundations of D&D (Young, 2018). This is not to say that *Lord*

of the Rings and Tolkien, or *Dungeons and Dragons* and Arneson and Gygax are explicitly racist. These manifestations of creativity are not a linear product of racism or a reflection of racist ideas. Rather, these imaginary worlds were conceived parallel to a society which was shaped by ideologies now seen as problematic and dehumanizing. Therefore, this research follows Garcia's (2017) approach to the academic relevancy of studying this side of D&D, which is as follows: the values and influences embedded in D&D must be excavated, as they are fundamental to the player's exploration and construction of meaning.

2.2 The primary and secondary worlds

Dungeons and Dragons is a role-playing storytelling game that takes place in an imaginary world, which is diverse, dynamic and constantly developing (Wolf, 2012). Researchers in the field of psychology have suggested that humans experience an intrinsic need for creating imaginary worlds, going as far as saying that it serves an evolutionary purpose (Wolf, 2012). Holland (2009) provides an overview of the formulated arguments to support these claims. First, imaginary worlds provide a safe environment where situations can be simulated and practiced, which is of great value to the survival and the reproductive abilities of humans. Second, all cultures engage in the creation of imagined worlds and humans find these intrinsically interesting. Third, imaginary worlds allow one to act through one's emotional systems, rather than through one's physical action systems, allowing for thought and deliberation on one's behavior. Fourth, humans have evolved to develop the ability to pretend, deceive and imagine, allowing them to participate in imaginary worlds. And last, humans can differentiate between imaginary and real-life experiences. From these abilities and affordances, Wolf (2012) argues that the imaginary world is a great way for one to express themselves, stepping into the realms of art and entertainment.

To emphasize the interconnectedness of fantasy and reality, Wolf (2012) makes the distinction between the primary world (real-life) and secondary worlds (imaginary worlds), noting that someone's primary world is highly mediated through their indirect experiences gained from their consumption of media. Therefore, looking into and understanding secondary worlds may help form an understanding of how we experience the world we live in, both from a research standpoint as well as from a player's perspective. For example, the players and gamemaster of a ttrpg group can together create queer characters and situations in order to explore queer themes and narratives (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018). This creates opportunities for a group of players to form an understanding of how queerness is related to

their own identities in the primary world. Furthermore, as described by Holland (2009), imaginary worlds are a safe environment in which situations can be simulated and practiced, allowing someone with a queer or otherwise marginalized identity to explore how they would like to enact those identities in the primary world.

The interaction between the primary and secondary world works the other way around as well: any secondary world is at least partly reflective of the primary world (Wolf, 2012). One example in Dungeons and Dragons is discussed by Sihvonen & Stenros (2018): from the inception of roleplaying games up to quite recently, queerness has either been presented in a negative light or not been represented at all. Recently, inclusivity of queer representation has been pulled into the mainstream of D&D by a somewhat reserved, but non-judgemental passage which informs players that they do not have to adhere to binary notions of sex and gender in roleplay.

You don't need to be confined to binary notions of sex and gender. The elf god Corellon Larethian is often seen as androgynous or hermaphroditic, for example, and some elves in the multiverse are made in Corellon's image. You could also play a female character who presents herself as a man, a man who feels trapped in a female body, or a bearded female dwarf who hates being mistaken for a male. Likewise, your character's sexual orientation is for you to decide. (Wizards of the Coast, 2014c, p. 121)

While this does put a lot of the responsibility on the players' shoulders, this notion would ideally lead to better and more queer representation in Dungeons and Dragons. In any case, calls from the primary world for more (queer) inclusivity have evidently led to changes in the secondary worlds. Apart from the above quoted passage, we also see adaptations to inclusivity in *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* (Wizards of the Coast 2020). This book introduces the optional custom origin rule, allowing the player to step away from the cultural and racial stereotyping on which the game's race system is based.

As Wolf (2012) states, the primary and secondary worlds exist in relation to each other. Understanding one would be difficult without taking the influences of the other into account. During a D&D game the interactions between the primary and secondary world are mediated through the dynamics between game rules and game goals. Björk and Holopainen (2003) divide these into endogenous and exogenous categories. Here, endogenous refers to the rules and goals determined by the game's design and structure. For example, the rules

determine the physical capabilities of a character and the goals of D&D are provided in the *Dungeon Master's Guide*: combat, exploration and social interaction (Wizards of the Coast, 2014c, p. 8). Exogenous refers to the rules and goals which players themselves bring into the game as a way of giving meaning to this activity. An example of this could be a desire to avoid racist stereotyping in play and have an escape from primary world reality. Montola (2008) adds a third category for game rules and game goals: diegetic rules and goals. This refers to rules and goals that occur through roleplay in the secondary world. An example of a diegetic goal could be the desire to become the greatest wizard in the kingdom. Evident from these categorizations are the different levels at which both primary and secondary worlds are at play during the activity of playing D&D. Where endogenous and diegetic rules and goals are strongly based in the primary world and secondary world respectively, exogenous rules and goals form a category that brings both together.

In practice, the rules of D&D are much more defining of the physical than they are of the social. To illustrate this, the rules for combat explain in detail how far one can move, how many times they can attack or cast a spell and how many points of damage they do. Additionally, characters' abilities and features, more often than not, are useful in combat or other situations involving physical capabilities. During play, this structure is important to create fair challenges and to highlight the unique strengths of different character types. On the other hand, the social aspects of the imaginary worlds are more dependent on roleplay, which is guided by less concrete rules. Even though roleplay usually takes place within the borders of a world's known lore, these borders are often renegotiated on the fly, when players come up with interesting ideas or plot points during roleplay. This looser system of social aspects, as opposed to the physical, allows players much more freedom in their social interactions.

Garcia (2017) suggests that this agency in roleplaying social aspects can be used as a tool to disrupt stereotypes ingrained in roleplaying games. Garcia also sees the depiction of D&D players as mostly white male characters in media (e.g. popular Netflix show *Stranger Things* and 90's American tv-show *Freak and Geeks*) as unsurprising, but argues that by focusing on the perceived problems with inclusivity within and around D&D it is possible to redefine these communities. This lines up with Sihvonon & Stenros (2018) who suggest that players in a game session are only bound by its source and rulebooks if they choose to be bound. The sourcebooks merely provide structure in which queerness and racially diverse narratives can be included, again, if they so choose.

This narrative freedom introduces a debate around escapism. Evans (2001) defines escapism as any activity that takes an individual out of troublesome reality and puts them into

a pleasing non-reality, through recreation and consumption of mass media. However, *mass media* is a broadly encompassing concept under which different forms of media will have a different relationship with escapism. Kapitany et al. (2022) note that media like books, movies and songs do not require the degree of active behavior that is usually present in D&D roleplay. From this notion, Kuo, Lutz and Hiler (2016) differentiate between active escapism and passive escapism. They found that both are rooted in the primary desire to deal with stressful emotions. However, active escapism embeds the individual in a fully interactive fantasy world, while passive escapism merely takes the individual's attention away from their stressful thoughts.

While one might see the narrative freedom of imaginary worlds as a tool for escapism, Wolf (2012) finds that this categorization as escapism falls short. Stories in imaginary worlds incorporate conflict, oppression and dark times for their characters, just as much as they occur in the primary world. With this in mind, secondary worlds hardly sound like places one would long to physically escape to and/or stay in. Arguably, this notion is even more relevant in the secondary worlds explored in D&D. By creating stories and characters, one would have to draw upon their own perspectives and experiences or actively confront them if they want to escape from these experiences. The active, rather than passive, approach of D&D will always culminate in a secondary world heavily mediated by the primary world and, in a way, departing or ignoring perceived injustices from the primary world is less a form of escapism and more a way of critiquing. Immersion in a fully interactive secondary world can lead to recognition and confrontation of the social injustices you perceive, whereas in a secondary world with limited to no interactivity the ability to confront these problems will be limited as well.

2.3 Inclusivity within Dungeons and Dragons

It is not uncommon that the term *inclusivity* is conflated with *diversity*, but the two are not the same. Martinez-Acosta and Favero (2018) defines inclusivity as a feeling or belief which is unquantifiable. More specifically, inclusivity is a feeling that one's personal experiences are accepted and respected by the people around them and even valued for the unique perspectives these experiences bring to the table. Diversity, on the other hand, is a quantifiable measure of individuals (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018), such as the variation of nationalities in a group of people. With a larger variation, there would be more unique perspectives and experiences present in the group. So, while diversity does not directly reflect

on the inclusivity of a group of people, it does provide insight on the social environment in which the feeling of inclusivity may or may not be experienced.

Diversity in regard to the primary world aspect of Dungeons and Dragons is something that has been studied before. A study by Trygstad (2019) found that D&D players are predominantly heterosexual white males. The history of D&D's creation reflects a similar demographic: the 1979 Dungeon Master's Guide credits 30 authors, of which 27 were white men and 3 were women (Garcia, 2017). Additionally, it was found that the imagery of humans and demi-humans in D&D books up until the 5th edition were mostly white heroic characters (Garcia, 2017; Tresca, 2011). Lead designer for D&D 3rd edition Jonathan Tweet claims that the artwork of iconic heroes in this edition already strikes a good balance in terms of diversity of gender and ethnicity (Tweet, 2019). However, Tweet also claims that the marketing team added an additional white male character to the lineup of iconic heroes, impacting that balance somewhat. Conclusively, the history of D&D as a game, as well as its literary foundation is imprinted with predominantly white male voices (Clements, 2019). More specifically the white male voices of J. R. R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard that shaped the foundation of the fantasy genre (Young, 2018). However, as mentioned before, Clements (2019) notes that D&D's game design allows for a great flexibility in stories that can be told by players, meaning that theoretically commonly accepted fantasy tropes can entirely be avoided, if players wish to do so. Still, there is no guarantee that these predominantly white male players will take this narrative freedom to step out of the predominantly white male created and inspired frames that are presented in the books of D&D.

Fortunately, the society we live in is not a static one, but rather keeps developing by challenging power structures. Social injustices like racism and homophobia are being recognized and called out, which over time leads to paradigm changes that, in turn, influence the realm of creative media and popular culture. Clements (2019) sees this at D&D gaming tables as well: even though the texts and tropes that are deemed problematic still linger around, players at the table recognize and question instances of in-game racism and sexism and choose to mock and subvert them. Findings by Johnson (2020) show that the collaborative labor of players who critique and modify D&D's socially problematic ideologies reflect a collective ambition to reimagine neomedievalistic history in a more optimistic view. In other words, sexism, classism and, to some extent, racism were rampant in the primary world during the middle ages, but in the secondary world these historical facts can be changed to create a world where past, present and future social injustices are rectified.

At the same time, Clements (2019) found that players who see fantasy racism as a reflection of real-life racism often had no issue with engaging in racially motivated violence in-game. This is somewhat unsurprising as racial warfare is found to be the norm in the fantasy genre (Young, 2018). On the other hand, social safety is an important aspect at a D&D table, meaning effort is made to make sure everyone in the group feels comfortable with the topics explored and the behavior of players in and out of game. As a result, attention to social safety can affect the story, rules and lore, by subverting controversial topics like sexism or racism. However, it can also result in a D&D game where these topics are kept in place and stay unchallenged if players approach the secondary world in a vacuum where social injustices are not related to the primary world. In line with the example by Clements (2019), the players then embrace the regular conventions of the fantasy genre, including its racial tensions and warfare, in order to immerse themselves in the realm of fantasy. Dashiell (2022) extends this point further through another dominant trope specific to the fantasy: the male hero's journey. His findings suggest men use ttrpg's to practice a warrior masculinity akin to army men, while reducing women to objects of protection in their D&D campaign. Furthermore, he challenges the hypocritical aspect of gaming and geek culture by arguing that they pose with an outward sense of acceptance, while in reality they often do not offer equal respects to each gender. These findings paint a picture of a community of predominantly white men who do recognize social injustices, but choose not to challenge them in their games of D&D.

Still, the options available to improve inclusivity in the D&D community seem optimistic. Arguably, D&D allows you to create an imaginary world with endless possibilities. Essential to the game are the rules, which provide structure largely by governing the physical capabilities within play in the 5th edition. As for the social aspects, large texts on the lore and backgrounds of worlds, characters, races and monsters are provided, but remain entirely optional through homebrewing, allowing for a great deal of agency. Within the framework of the physical rules, anyone can make up their own lore and background stories that form their imaginary world. This is communicated in the 5th edition Dungeon Master's Guide (Wizards of the Coast, 2014a, p. 4): "The world is yours to change as you see fit and yours to modify as you explore the consequences of the players' actions." This affordance allows a Dungeon Master and their players to completely depart from the white male established fantasy tropes that are largely present in D&D's lore and create a world more inclusive of other unique experiences and perspectives, if they so choose.

Looking beyond the white male dominated gaming groups, it is not difficult to find D&D groups that do include marginalized (queer, black, disabled, and so on) experiences. Many studies have seen the psychological and social benefits in these inclusive D&D groups. The narrative freedom in storytelling allows players with socially stigmatized identities to enact and explore parts of their identity which they are not able to perform in the primary world (Rogers, 2020). Furthermore, this freedom facilitates collaborative storytelling in which players can use character roleplay to gain a better understanding of stigmatized identities in the primary world, because of social stigmatization. (Shepherd, 2021). Therefore, the amount of agency that is built into D&D grants the player the ability to create safe and inclusive gaming spaces, where unique perspectives and identities can be explored and shared. This is important in order to bring in and learn from other people's perspectives.

Interestingly, while the overall player demographic seems to be lacking diversity, recognizing problematic rules and lore and altering them at the table would still increase the sense of inclusivity by respecting the experiences and troubles of the marginalized identities. As discussed, research shows different sides of the D&D community, which ranges from informed and motivated to ignorant on the topic of social injustices.

2.4 Criticism on Dungeons and Dragons

With the above perspective on inclusivity in mind, I will shift the focus to specific marginalized identities and how these are mis- and underrepresented in Dungeons and Dragons. The discussion of social injustices towards non-white people, queer people and people with disabilities forms the basis of how this research approaches the performance of inclusivity in an actual play.

Biological essentialism

The way the term *race* is used in Dungeons and Dragons is not directly comparable to how we use it in the primary world. While race in the primary world generally refers to skin color and ethnicity, the term race in D&D refers to which humanoid fantasy species they belong to (Johnson, 2020). Although these definitions of race clearly differ, its primary world connotations sparked suggestions that the term should be changed to *species* in the game, which is confirmed to be changed for the successor to 5th edition D&D (D&D Beyond Staff, 2022a). By distancing the term species from our primary world perspective on race, accusations towards D&D's game design of racial stereotyping could seem less foundational

(Kostrzewa, 2022). However, racial stereotypes are still undeniably applied to fantasy races, which provides grounds for narratives to dehumanize intelligent beings (Hodes, 2019). To explore the problems regarding race in fantasy, this research will look at *biological essentialism* in Dungeons and Dragons.

The rulebooks of Dungeons and Dragons provide descriptions, abilities and physical and mental strengths that are specific to creatures and races available to play. Because these factors are explicitly linked to a specific race, D&D uses something called a biological essentialist approach to race. This means that a character's personality and/or specific qualities such as strength, intelligence and goodness is an innate and natural essence belonging to the specific race of that character (Chandler & Munday, 2011). With this approach, external factors like upbringing, culture and life experience are seen as less detrimental to determining someone's qualities. As a result, the rulebooks maintain a structure, which provides the grounds for racial stereotyping.

In practice, the roots and background of an entire race are used to impose personal qualities upon an individual. In the Player's Handbook (Wizards of the Coast, 2014c) a half-orc is described as barbaric, living in tribes and being hated and feared by others. Derived from this racial background are features like *Menacing*, which gives a character a bonus to the intimidation skill. The half-orc race also gives ability score increases for the Strength skill and the ability to execute *Savage Attacks*, which both put emphasis on the physical prowess a half-orc is supposed to have. The race of the Dwarves is known to live in mountains and spend their lives in the mines and forges, which is why they gain a bonus to their constitution skill, giving them more resilience and durability. Both of these examples make sense as their gained bonuses and traits fall in line with the historically generalized origins of the respective races. However, if a player wants to explore narratives through characters that do not adhere to the same background as this lore, these bonuses can be contradictory. Still, the game's designers decided to give heed to the criticisms in the release of the supplemental rule book *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* (Wizards of the Coast, 2020), by introducing the before mentioned custom origin rule.

In order to bring the primary and secondary worlds together again, I argue that biological essentialism in fantasy is a storytelling tool rooted in racism. Young (2018) explains race theory originated as an explanation and justification of European imperialism and supremacism. The same can be said when we look at fantasy races being described in terms that classify them as certain degrees of being civilized; e.g. the brutish orcs living in the wild and the high society elves who live in great cities. Following Young's (2018) argument,

the undertones of the descriptions in the D&D Player's Handbook are rooted in the understanding of race that was formed in an era of European colonization. Consequently, racial stereotyping can be considered to form the foundation of character creation in D&D.

Queer exclusion

A study by Sihvonen and Stenros (2018) found that queerness, referring to the identities that go against heteronormativity and the gender binary, has long been under- and misrepresented in the history of roleplaying games. In the case where queerness was even present in a game it was often met with humor and ridicule. However, in the same research they state that queer themes and characters have been surfacing more and more in games and roleplaying games since around the year 2005. As of 2014, Sihvonen and Stenros (2018) see inclusivity of queer representation becoming mainstream through the inclusion of a passage on stepping outside gender binary found in the 5th edition Player's Handbook of D&D (Wizards of the Coast, 2014c). Still, as queer representation in gaming increases, it is also met with clashes of values in game products and services (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018).

Regardless of game rules and lore, queer play can thrive if the social context allows for it. For example by roleplaying behavior that breaks the heteronormative code of conduct in public places (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018). However, another study notes the importance of the affordances of both rules and lore in facilitating queer play (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2019). They note that, while games with opt-in queer lore give the opportunity to engage in queer play, the result is often a heteronormative world. On the other hand, a roleplaying game with queerness written into the rules and playing a significant role in the world, disrupts norms of the primary world and makes alternatives to those norms visible. This allows players to explore queer identities and narratives much more freely.

Disabilities

Leading up to this research, not only racism, sexism and queerphobia surrounding D&D came to my attention, but the under- and misrepresentation of disabilities also appeared to be an issue. Oftentimes, this problem is overlooked as it may be less controversial or political in public discourse; many seem to agree that society is not wholly adapted to people with disabilities. However, acknowledgement of this does not mean improvement of the situation. Previous research on the relationship between disabilities and D&D focuses mostly on social and developmental benefits for neurodivergent individuals (Adams, 2013), such as

people with autism, ADHD or other neurodevelopmental disorders. For example, fantasy games have been used as a teaching tool for students with learning disabilities (Mather, 1986) and as a tool to help depressed people meet certain social needs (Hughes, 1988).

Less attention is given to the representation of disability in roleplaying games, both in research and, according to critics, in D&D's game design. Shelly Jones (2018) notices increased initiatives to improve the physical accessibility to the game for people with a disability in the primary world (e.g. the use of dice with its numbers in braille). Contrarily, she sees that the written lore and rules encourage the creation of characters with a limp and to attach a story and effect from the *Lingering Injuries Table* from the *Dungeon Masters Guide*. Arguably, this frames the disabled experience as merely a hindering character trope, which adds some flavor to a character. Furthermore, she criticizes the *Madness Table* for presenting mental illnesses in a negative light. All in all, the rules deem these disabilities as *conditions* which can be magically cured, reiterating the ableist medical approach that sees disability as a negative condition which should be avoided (Jones, 2018).

Erin Hawley, a game reviewer who is disabled, reinforces Jones' findings in an interview (Leão, 2021). Hawley states she does not know of any acceptable representations of disabled people in tabletop gaming, specifically noting and disapproving the portrayal of mental illness as a dangerous or scary character trope. Jones (2018) also sees disabled non-player characters regularly falling into the evil stereotype in adventure modules published by Wizards of the Coast. Many of these criticisms challenge not only norms and attitudes towards disabilities in ttrpgs, but their representation in entertainment media in general. While acknowledging the solution to this problem is not easy, more awareness and sensitivity in the portrayal of disability should be the start of positive change (Jones, 2018).

Since a lot of initiatives to increase awareness and positive change come from the community, the D&D shareholders are also starting to listen. Disability consultant and ttrpg performer Jennifer Kretchmer is one of the voices pushing the change for more disability awareness in *Dungeons and Dragons*. In order to facilitate better representation and inclusivity of disabilities in ttrpg games, she compiled a document with resources to help educate others on the topic (Kretchmer, 2020). Sometime later, she and other ttrpg performers with a disability came together on the D&D Beyond channel to stream a D&D campaign, which focuses entirely on disability representation in a fantasy setting (D&D Beyond, 2022). In line with Jones (2018), initiatives like these have potential to be the start of more awareness and positive change in the community.

2.5 The role of media and public discourse

The above mentioned problems that can be found within Dungeons and Dragons have to be put in perspective. For this perspective, we fall back on the primary and secondary world dichotomy (Wolf, 2012). While both worlds exist in relation to each other, they are separate entities of which one is real and the other is imaginary. More importantly, the main purpose of D&D as a form of entertainment, which takes place in the secondary world, is to have fun. Through active escapism it provides an engaging step back from troubles in the primary world, while movies provide a more passive form of escapism (Kuo, Lutz & Hiler, 2016). So, while critiques of racism, sexism and homophobia are echoed throughout media publications and online forums, this does not mean that many D&D players take these primary world social injustices to and into their games. Here, the fact that most D&D games are played in a private setting strongly factors in. Actual plays on the other hand are played in the public eye, which can bring in expectations of the audience to address these criticisms or adapt to them.

Still, research shows that predominantly white male voices and experiences shape played narratives in D&D (Trygstad, 2019) and, up until recently, D&D rulebooks mis- and underrepresented queerness (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018). However, as D&D players are also predominantly white heterosexual males (Trygstad, 2019), the critiqued social injustices are not relevant primary world issues that personally affect this white male majority of D&D players. Approaching the game with an escapist mindset would make these social injustices easy to be overlooked and ignored in an average D&D game.

Consequently, minority groups that do take issue with socially unjust content in D&D rulebooks and its lore, have more reason to make their voices heard. Independent actual plays such as *Transplanar* (TransplanarRPG, 2020-present) and *Three Black Halflings* (3BlackHalflings, 2020-present), who explicitly aim to push non-white and queer narratives forward, are a direct result of that. Critiques were also heard in news articles and on social media. For example, publisher Wizards of the Coast was criticized in 2022 for their depiction of the *Hadozee* race having racist connotations (Power, 2023). The Hadozee were described as sentient monkey-like beings who were enslaved and accompanying illustrations showed a Hadozee minstrel playing the lute. Critics likened this depiction to the racist stereotyping black people have historically endured, directly relating the illustrations to historical minstrel shows, in which white people performed with their face painted black to ridicule black

people. This resulted in a formal apology by the Wizards of the Coast and the removal of the racist content in all future prints and digital versions of the book it appeared in.

The same article also discusses those opposing the criticisms: veteran gamers feeling protective of their favorite game. These veteran gamers feel a strong attachment with D&D and have interpreted the criticisms on D&D to be criticisms on them as well. Consequently, they turned their anger towards Wizards of the Coast for adapting to the criticism, accusing the publisher of ruining *their* game. Arguably, this is comparable to large societies becoming more and more politicized, where the loud voices calling for progress are met with loud voices that oppose change and progress. But while the public discourse around D&D can seem filled with angry voices, it should not be forgotten that playing a game of D&D can offer an escape from that, by temporarily putting aside opinions in the public debate and making room for a fun activity.

2.6 Actual play as a tool for change

Another area where primary and secondary worlds come together is at the actual play. The term actual play refers to a genre of (video) podcasts in which tabletop roleplaying games are played and broadcasted to an online audience. The popularity of actual play podcasts has exploded in the last few years, with podcasts such as Critical Role (criticalrole, 2015-present), Dimension 20 (dimension20show, 2018-present) and The Adventure Zone (McElroy et al., 2014-present) gaining millions of views combined across their platforms. Apart from the high streaming numbers, Critical Role's popularity is arguably illustrated even more by the fact that they are attempting to make a franchise out of it, branching out their D&D campaign stories into books and even an animated TV-series.

To understand how actual play can be used as a tool for creating an inclusive community, we first look at the social dynamics in which D&D itself operates. Fine (1983) provides three frames for understanding fantasy roleplaying games as social worlds: (1) the *primary framework* or *actual world*, referring to the understandings of the primary world, (2) *game context*, referring to awareness of the structure and rules of the game, and (3) the *gaming world*, referring to the imaginary world. This framework falls in line with Wolf's (2012) dichotomy of the primary and secondary world, taking the interconnectedness of the two into account as well.

As Fine's (1983) work is merely focused on fantasy role-playing, a reframing is necessary to reflect how actual play fits in the discussion. Actual play distinguishes itself from

a regular game of D&D through the addition of an audience in its social dynamics. Something that comes up in multiple studies is the occurrence of parasocial relationships between the actual play performers and their audience (Lasley, 2021; Torner, 2021). Within a parasocial relationship, someone with celebrity status engages with their fans, but are unaware of their fans as individual persons. On the other hand, the fan does experience the celebrity as a tangible person and develops a one-sided relationship with them (Taylor, 2018). Although this definition sounds like a contradiction, it differentiates the parasocial from the social by disembodiment of the fan. In other words, this means that a fan can be very attached to a celebrity and feel like they know them like they know their close friends, while the celebrity could not differentiate them from any other fan. To connect Fine's (1983) three frames to actual play and its relation with audiences, Decicio (2020) links them each to a popular media genre (documentary, game and fiction), while making slight adjustments.

In Decicio's (2020) reframing, the actual world becomes the *documentary frame*, as primary world elements of the actual play include friends coming together, discussions unrelated to the game and actions as real people in the real world, which gives a documentary-like insight into the performers' lives and personalities. The game context frame is referred to as the *game frame*. This frame considers the actions, tactics and mediation of real-life players, which determine action and consequence in the imaginary world, through mediation of mechanics, rules and structure. This frame acts as an intermediary between the primary and secondary world. Lastly, Decicio (2020) changes Fine's (1983) gaming world frame to the *fictional frame*, reflecting the secondary world as created by the players. While Fine's description of the game frame strongly relies on the portrayal of narratives, Decicio argues that the term narrative focuses more on representing events rather than creating events and that the term therefore would be more applicable to the documentary frame. The multiplicity of frames and media genre reflections that come together in actual play allows for a new presentation of self by the performers. With the addition of an audience to a D&D game, motivations for actions and the relation between the primary and the secondary world become different than play without an audience.

While Decicio's framework considers the actual play altogether, (marginalized) identities are usually communicated and explored on a more individual level. Waskul and Lust (2004) present a way of understanding an individual role-player's behavior similar to the previously discussed frames. Their research describes how role-players negotiated the boundaries between three different roles while role-playing: (1) the *person*, (2) the *player* and (3) the *persona*. Again this falls back on Wolf's (2012) dichotomy of primary and secondary

worlds. The role-player is first and foremost a person; this describes their identity in the primary world: a student, a worker, a partner, a parent or any other variety of roles they occupy in society. As a player an individual takes on the role of the gamer who plays an imaginary character. In this role, structure, rules and experiences from the primary world are transformed into expressions of identity in the secondary world. Lastly, the persona is used to describe the created identity of one's character in an imaginary world; for example, a noble warrior, an educated wizard or an untrustworthy thief. In order to engage and immerse in roleplay, one needs to separate their persona from their person (Fine, 1983).

Where Decicio's (2020) view on actual play expanded on Fine's (1983) frames, Burton (2021) argues to add a fourth role, the *performer* to the roles presented by Waskul and Lust (2004). While participating in actual play, a player is aware that their D&D session is recorded for an audience to see and hear. This inherently makes them a performer, a position which can influence their behavior. Waskul and Lust (2004) illustrate this role by drawing comparisons to social situations where we as people also perform. While attending a funeral you experience different social expectations placed on your behavior, than when you are dancing in the club at 3:00 in the morning. Burton (2021) argues that the performer role is not an extension of the person role, but rather entirely its own role. A cast member in an actual play is not only their own person or in-game character, but also the person they want the audience to know and see or sometimes a spokesperson for a company with certain goals and motivations. In other words, a cast member is a performer. Burton's argument is supported by Freeman and Wohn (2020), who found that live streamers are aware of the audience that is watching them. Furthermore, their research shows that the performer feels a resistance to any expectations the audience may have towards their identity. The presented identity of the performer is not affected by audience expectations, but rather shaped by the motivations of the performer themselves. This means that someone participating in an actual play is performing twice; their character in the fantasy world and their performed self in front of the audience.

The relevance of the distinction of the performer role lies with the relationship between them and their audience. Torner (2021) argues that actual plays may have been a deliberate facilitator of sociality among geeks, by legitimizing the ttrpg hobby through a popular entertainment media event. This is supported by research of (Lasley, 2021), which reports viewers of Critical Role connecting with thoroughly developed character identities that were related to the viewers' self-identity. This connection was especially strong when the viewer experienced a degree of social isolation related to that specific performed identity trait.

Specifically, one participant in Lasley's (2021) study felt a real connection to the way the characters in Critical Role expressed their gender identities. The participant described this as a factor that helped them come out to other people about their own gender identity. Together, Lasley's (2021) and Torner's (2021) findings suggest a great potential of actual plays and their performer's ability to create inclusive stories and communities within the ttrpg hobby. Firstly, the popularity of actual plays grows the hobby, bringing in more people with different life experiences and perspectives. Secondly and most importantly, the performances of socially marginalized identities in imaginary worlds that accept them, lets viewers with similar identities relate and feel respected, creating inclusive spaces (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018).

On its own, Dungeons and Dragons can already serve as a tool for ideological change at the gaming table (Clements, 2019). Actual plays take this tool and broaden the reach of D&D beyond one table, to audiences of millions of people. As the performer is aware of the audience and their behavior is adapted to what they want the audience to see, they can use the combination of D&D and their platform, not only to perform versions of identities, but to drive ideological change through their performances as well.

3. Method

3.1 Research design

This chapter will explain the methodological steps and research design used to gain insight into the performance of inclusivity in D&D actual plays. For this, the following research question was formulated:

How do players in Dungeons and Dragons actual plays perform inclusivity?

From the initial steps in data collection, as well as the theoretical insight provided by Wolf (2012), it quickly became clear that performance of inclusivity happens on two distinct levels: the primary world and the secondary world. This led to the introduction of the following two sub questions:

1. *How do players in Dungeons and Dragons actual plays perform inclusivity in the primary world?*
2. *How do players in Dungeons and Dragons actual plays perform inclusivity in the secondary world?*

In order to gain insight into performance of inclusivity in actual plays, this research made use of a digital ethnography, for which six different actual plays were selected. The observed actual plays were selected on the basis of player group composition. In specific, groups containing mostly people of color, people who identify as LGBTQIA+ and people with disabilities were subject to study. As the history of identity representation in fantasy has been quite favorable towards the white male experience (Young, 2018), these cases show how people with mis- and underrepresented identities deal with the social injustices that they recognize in D&D, through their perspectives and experiences.

It is important to keep in mind that not every observed objection or alteration to a rule was political in nature, sometimes a change is made to make the game a little more fun for someone. Still, alterations that might mean nothing to one person could be an alteration that makes the game more inclusive or less inclusive to someone else. In this sense, an indication for the normalization of inclusivity in D&D could be pointed out.

3.2 Sample and data collection

The primary focus of this research lies with video recorded actual plays found on YouTube as a unit of analysis. Additional units of analysis were YouTube comments, interviews and panel talks with actual play performers. Through the use of selective sampling a selection was made of six different actual plays that were analyzed on the basis of three different criteria. The choice to use selective sampling was based on its ability to select a population, from which data could be gathered specific to the research topic (Gill, 2020). A pitfall of selective sampling could be the selection of a sample that is not representative of the variation in the population (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). This was avoided by not focusing on a comparison between diverse groups and white male groups. This also allowed this research to analyze a larger variety of diverse actual play groups, which provided a larger variety in observed performance of inclusivity.

The first sampling criterium considered the composition of player groups in the actual play and their degree of diversity. As mentioned by Freeman and Wohn (2020), self presentation of gender and sexual identity is something that female and LGBTQ streamers prioritize over the expectations of their audience. Since the hegemonic white male history of D&D has often excluded these identities, it was expected that these groups of D&D actual play streamers would display similar attitudes as found by Freeman and Wohn. Although Freeman and Wohn focused their attention solely on female and LGBTQ streamers, this research includes the following subcriteria, in addition to queer identities: people of color and people with a disability. This sampling decision was made in accordance with the discussed criticisms of D&D in the theory chapter. By focusing on perspectives that are not white, heterosexual and male altogether, this research aims to gain insight in how people with marginalized identities approach the issues in D&D that relate to these same identities. As D&D groups contain multiple people, an actual play is eligible for this research when its player group contains people with marginalized identities as a majority.

The second criterium concerns the use of the 5th edition ruleset of Dungeons and Dragons, which is the most recent officially published version of the game at the time of this study. While much of the criticism spans the entire history of D&D, it should be acknowledged that some adjustments have been made accordingly. For example the less biologically essentialist approach to race in 5th edition supplemental rulebook Tasha's Cauldron of Everything (Wizards of the Coast, 2020) was introduced to address some

criticisms (see section 2.2). Furthermore, 5th edition Dungeons and Dragons has been the peak of the game's popularity (Wieland, 2021). It has brought in more and more players through its accessible rule system and appearances in popular tv-shows like *Stranger Things* on top of digital developments which made it able for people to connect and have fun with others during the Covid-19 pandemic. Another, more practical reason for this criterium is the researcher's prior knowledge of D&D. Outside of my academic interest, I play Dungeons and Dragons myself using the 5th edition rule system. In the role of researcher, this prior knowledge gives me the ability to better understand player behavior and notice how performers appropriate the rules and lore provided by the books.

Finally, the third criterium acts to maintain a balance of represented commercial interests. While there is a large variety of actual plays representing marginalized identities out there, the most popular ones are often produced by companies that have commercial interest in maintaining and growing the popularity of D&D. For example, D&D publisher Wizards of the Coast hosts an actual play with a full person of color cast called *Rivals of Waterdeep* on their "Dungeons and Dragons" YouTube channel (2018). While hosting inclusive actual plays is a progressive statement, it is also a marketing opportunity for Wizards of the Coast to reach audiences that have previously felt left out. Furthermore, the performers in these commercially produced actual plays are more often than not hired individuals. On the other hand, independently produced actual plays are more likely to consist of a group of friends who have more benefit in creating an entertaining story to create and engage with a community around their own brand, while being less concerned with the sales of Dungeons and Dragons products. The selection of the six actual plays, as well as how they fit the criteria can be found in appendix A, the entire list of analyzed actual play episodes can be found in appendix C.

In practice, the data collection process in this research went as follows: I watched 80 hours of recorded footage, during which I took extensive field notes. These field notes contain detailed descriptions of quotes, behavior, attitudes or anything else that is observed (Brennen, 2017). It is important to make these notes detailed by describing as much of the observed situation, so that the data is clearer to be subjected to interpretation in the process of analysis. Of the 80 hours of footage, the majority consisted of actual play recordings found on YouTube. Additionally, relevant video interviews and discussions were taken into account, as well as comments placed under the videos on YouTube.

During the phase of selecting the sample, some changes were made over the course of this research. Most importantly, the initial selection of actual plays had a majority being

produced by companies that have strong commercial interest in the sales of D&D products. Ultimately, it was decided to balance this out by looking into who produced each actual play and make sure that half of the selected were independently produced. Furthermore, while immersing in each separate actual play, a better understanding of the internal story arcs and dynamics of the played characters was gained. This understanding was necessary to reflect on what data was most relevant to this research. Quickly, it became clear that most performances of inclusivity took place in the first few episodes of each actual play. After the performers, stories and characters had been introduced and established, the amount of notable observations declined as more of the performed stories were explored. Therefore, about the first five episodes from each actual play were subjected to research in general.

3.3 Digital ethnography

The logistics of studying inclusivity in actual plays led this research to the method of digital ethnography. Ethnography allows the researcher to form an understanding of people's behavior, as well as what they believe and think, through a blend of observational field notes and interpretation (Brennen, 2017). This blend of observation and interpretation ultimately led to a *thick description* of the studied group (Geertz, 1973). Digital ethnography is a type of ethnography that considers digitally archived material within a virtual community. This material can range from video and audio recordings to emails, online chats and any other forms of virtual communications (Brennen, 2017). This research primarily used video recordings of actual plays and supplemented this with interviews and comments under the YouTube videos.

Practically, the length of actual plays provided an enormous amount of data, which was not all relevant to this research's objective. Actual plays are similar to tv shows in the sense that they usually consist of multiple episodes within several seasons. However, these episodes often last for around three hours, while a season can contain anywhere from about 10 to 150 episodes. Where content analysis approaches the subject of analysis wholly as a cultural artifact, it can fail to reach for insight below the surface of the data. Through digital ethnography, this research was able to take the time to find and gain an understanding of the subtleties within the observed cultural environment. Approaching the data through digital ethnography allowed the research to focus on specific moments that provided meaningful insight on the performance of inclusivity. Furthermore, digital ethnography allowed the research to look beyond the performances within the video recordings of actual play, by

considering audience comments, interaction between performer and audience and even behavior from performers outside of the actual plays. Finally, the nature of D&D and actual plays is improvisational. So, while changes to the provided lore and rules can be made deliberately and in advance, impromptu behavior cannot be disregarded. Observing performers in real time allowed this research to see this improvisational behavior in a way that a method like content analysis or an interview with performers could overlook.

In digital ethnography, the approach of participant as observer in data collection is considered by many to be the most effective (Brennen, 2017). This practice has the researcher immersed in a culture or group of people, where they observe, interact and take field notes. Although digital ethnographers could engage in online discussions, this research focused solely on archived data. This means that the actual plays observed were not affected by the position of the researcher as the data already existed before this research took place. However, as discussed in the theory section, the behavior of actual play performers does likely differ from the behavior of players at a private D&D session, because the actual play is meant to be watched by an audience. Through the focus on different roles an actual play performer takes on (Waskul & Lust, 2004; Burton, 2021), this effect is taken into account for the analysis.

The constant reflection on the sample, the collected data and on my fieldnotes was an essential part of the data collection process. The differences in group composition meant that there was not one single community to immerse myself in as a researcher. To analyze and represent these groups carefully I employed the adaptive listening technique (Winter & Lavis, 2019). Adaptive listening recognizes the heterogeneity of different online communities and offers a way of understanding distinct online cultures by mapping out connections and relationships between different digital spaces. In this research, adaptive listening was used for a large part of understanding the ideologies represented in performances and how they relate to the understanding of the history and discussed problems of D&D.

3.4 Operationalization and analysis

The theory by Wolf (2012) showed that both the primary and secondary worlds are at play during a game of D&D. In both separate worlds and in overlapping parts, the player takes on several roles: the person, the player and the persona (Waskul & Lust, 2004). With a D&D session in an actual play, an extra role is added: the performer (Burton, 2021). Because these roles are so intertwined with the primary and secondary worlds, no single one can be left out when considering performance in a D&D actual play. This research carefully looked at the

behavior displayed in actual plays that relates to both the primary and secondary worlds. While criticism on the representation of marginalized identities in D&D is often focused on secondary world content, this content is inherently linked to representations, perspectives and experiences within the primary world. In order to gain insight into the secondary world, the focus was put on the performers' appropriation of D&D's rules and lore, as well as their roleplaying within the framework provided by the rules and lore.

The approach to appropriation of game rules this research took is straightforward. The rules considered are those from the 2014 published *Dungeons Master's Guide* (Wizards of the Coast, 2014a) and the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast, 2014c) of *Dungeons and Dragons* 5th edition. Rules introduced in officially released supplemental rulebooks after this edition's initial release are taken into account as well. While this research considers these rules as official, the supplemental books note that they are optional and have to be discussed with the Dungeon Master before being instated in a specific game. For example, the custom origin rule (see section 2.2) is referenced in this research regularly. In itself, the use of this optional rule can be considered a performance of inclusivity. As D&D rules play a large part in governing the physical aspects of the game, they were paid specific attention to during sequences of combat. Where rules were changed, indicating it was done to propel narratives around marginalized identities, a notice was made. Other observed instances of alterations of the rules were in relation to the lore, such as a pre-established moral alignment that forces a character to behave a certain way.

Approaching lore as a concept is more difficult to define. The concept of lore refers to a body of knowledge and traditions, similar to our understanding of the concept of folklore. In this case lore is used to refer to the stories, cultures and history that canonically took place in the officially published literature of *Dungeons and Dragons*. Taking a look at the sourcebooks for D&D 5th edition, it is apparent that rules are often inspired by the lore and simultaneously govern the lore. For example, the biological essentialism present in D&D's implementation of race stems from the fantasy genre and its history (Young, 2018). While already present in the lore, the rules enforce this approach by giving certain traits and features to specific playable races. Changes to rules can thus inherently mean that changes in the lore are made as well. Through the encouraged practice of homebrewing, the introduction of new or altered lore provided strong insight into performance of inclusivity in the secondary worlds.

Since D&D has been criticized for under- and/or misrepresenting race, queerness and disabilities throughout its history in the stories it tells, this research investigates if, and to what extent, the original stories and world-building present in D&D has been ignored, changed, or

copied in the actual plays. Examples could be an actual play's use of an entirely homebrewed secondary world which centers cultures and experiences of marginalized people or the alteration of an officially published adventure in order to take out story elements that perpetuate social injustices.

This focus on under- and misrepresentation also provided the basis of the operationalization of inclusivity. As discussed in the theory chapter, the concept of inclusivity refers to the feeling that one's personal experiences are accepted and respected by the people around them and even valued for the unique perspectives these experiences bring to the table (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018). Where the white male perspective in D&D has been dominant throughout its history in both primary and secondary world aspects, this research put its sights on perspectives outside of this hegemony. When these marginalized perspectives are observed in the performances within an actual play, work is being done to create a community in which those marginalized perspectives are valued and respected, ultimately leading to a more inclusive community.

In the primary world, the research focused on explicit statements of the performers that either spoke out about their experienced social injustices, or statements that clarified their motivation for approaching D&D in a different way than prescribed in the rulebooks, which also circumvented social injustices they recognized in the game. In the secondary world, the focus lies on worldbuilding, narrative and rules and how these differentiated from either published adventures or from the established lore and rules. In the observations, the practice of homebrewing worlds and lore frequently came up. In these homebrew worlds, observations gave attention to what kinds of narratives, experiences and perspectives were incorporated and how these factor in the performance of inclusivity.

In ethnography, the first steps of data analysis take place during the data collection process. While extensive field notes were made during the digital ethnographic process, these field notes were constantly reflected on. For example, in the first episode of *Lost Mine of Phandelver* (Roll20, 2020) the Dungeon Master, in discussion with their fellow performers, explains what type of campaign they will run (e.g. how much roleplaying, how much violence, etc.) and how they will run their game. This observation brought the educational role of the Dungeon Master and the actual plays forward, which in turn became a topic of focus in the other actual plays as well. Through the process of rereading notes, adding additional commentary and linking them to other observations, a basis for the analysis and interpretation of data was formed. This basis simultaneously functioned as a framework of information which helped guide the adaptive listening technique (Winter & Lavis, 2019).

As described by Brennen (2017), ethnographic analysis and interpretation is based on the understanding of the social context in which their subject of research is present. To help come to a better understanding, an ethnographer will constantly reconsider key concepts to their research, tinker with their research question and discuss their observations with other academics. The same approach has been applied to this research. Reflecting on patterns, observations and the research itself, as well as having regular discussions with my thesis supervisor provided me with a better understanding of my observations and how they relate to the answering of the research question. Early on in the research, this shifted the focus on performance of inclusivity in the secondary world, to include performance in the primary world as well. The result of the analysis process is a written account of theoretically informed interpretations of the observed performance of inclusivity in actual plays, which were placed in a coding tree (Appendix B) in order to categorize the observed patterns.

3.5 Reflexivity

The constant process of reflection during the ethnographic process should not be limited to just the field notes and the understanding of the observed social contexts. An ethnographic research should also critically reflect on the position of the researcher in the study (Brennen, 2017). While the influence of the researcher on the behavior of the observed people is not at play in this digital ethnography, the position of the researcher will inherently affect the interpretations they make. Some academics even consider ethnographic studies to produce fictional reports (Geertz, 1973). However, they deem ethnographic studies fictional, not because they are made up, or inaccurate, but simply because they are interpretations by the researcher. In order to be able to provide interpretations as an ethnographer that are academically sound, the researcher needs to be reflective and critical of their role in the research process (Brennen, 2017). As stated before, the duration of a digital ethnography mends the interpretational bias of the researcher to some extent. In the 80 hours spent observing actual play, a detailed understanding of the intricacies and subtleties in the players' performance was developed. Furthermore, the detailed field notes, as well as the thorough description of my observations in the results chapter show what steps this research takes to get to its conclusion. This started with an exploratory phase in the data collection which identified the primary relevant data categories. After this, focus was put on recognizing the identified themes in the actual plays, constructing a data set that builds upon itself. Through constant

reflection of found data in relation to the themes, the patterns within the data were found, forming the basis of strong thick descriptions as well as the in depth results.

4. Results

The digital ethnography of six different actual plays led this research to a broad spectrum of ways in which inclusivity is performed. Similar to the idea in which the concept of inclusivity is rooted, the different perspectives, experiences and backgrounds of individual performers result in different approaches to performance of inclusivity. With this in mind, as well as being based on the observations of this research, the interconnectedness of the primary and secondary worlds are integral. The observations of the primary world include multiple instances of clear cut activism as performing inclusivity, while the observed performances of inclusivity in the secondary world are more nuanced in both language, behavior and attitude. Furthermore, the results provide insight into the way actual plays deal with the three main social injustices often recognized in D&D: bio-essentialism, queer exclusion and misrepresentation of disabilities.

While activism and dealing with social injustices can be a way of performing inclusivity for people outside of the gaming table (Burton, 2021), the performances also show the importance of an inclusive and safe environment at the table. Here, the players and, most importantly, the Dungeon Master fill a somewhat educational role of how to behave and what you can do to create a safe and inclusive space within the group of people you play Dungeons and Dragons with. This too takes place in both the primary and secondary world, where respect for each other and the guidance of the Dungeon Master take a leading role. Below, the variety of ways inclusivity is performed in actual plays is discussed in more detail.

4.1 Inclusivity outside of play

This categorization takes strictly the primary world into account. While what is observed here does affect what happens in the secondary world, it is important to look at behavior and statements by performers that more explicitly highlight their performance of inclusivity. In other words, the actual plays communicate their commitments to inclusivity and explanations for their differing approaches to *D&D*, through explicit language, statements and branding. From this, activism, escapism and fun, and representation emerged as focus areas.

Activism

Arguably, the most direct and obvious approach to performing inclusivity in actual plays happens outside of gameplay in the form of activism. While Dungeons and Dragons in itself is a game, the medium of actual play turns it into consumable content for entertainment beyond its players, which is accompanied by non-roleplaying content. Where activist behavior and motivations break through is primarily and most noticeable in the primary world. A strong example of activism can be found in the second episode of Transplanar (TransplanarRPG, 2020-present) and onwards. At the beginning of this episode, the performers make a collective statement criticizing D&D publisher Wizards of the Coast and its treatment of workers who are people of color. Additionally, they criticize a senior manager's hiring of an alleged neo-Nazi and sexual abuser, creating an unsafe workspace altogether. After the more detailed statement in this second episode, they start off each following episode by saying "fuck Wizards of the Coast" and referring viewers to their earlier detailed statement. While a harsh disapproval and criticism of a company whose game you keep playing in front of an audience could be seen as pandering, Transplanar uses the statement to give more strength to their motivations and the approaches they take to playing D&D. Even before airing the statement, they have been very clear on how their D&D actual play campaign tackles the social injustices they perceived in the game and how they create a secondary world in which these do not have a place. Transplanar's approach is summarized in the actual play's channel description on YouTube:

Transplanar is an all-trans, POC-led, 100% homebrew 5th Edition Dungeons and Dragons livestream campaign set in the non-colonial, anti-orientalist world of Andake, based off various Asian and Pacific Islander mythologies. (TransplanarRPG, 2020-present)

In their statement against Wizards of the Coast, they clarify their motivations for this approach saying they aim to move away from white cisgendered (someone whose gender identity conforms with their gender assigned at birth) male power fantasy tropes that are deeply ingrained in D&D. By doing so the performers from Transplanar want to claim a space in the D&D community for transgender people of color where stories of themselves as marginalized people are represented. The direct way of stating opinions and thoughts like Transplanar does, makes it very unambiguous for the audience what they want to achieve: an

active contribution to making the Dungeons and Dragons community a place where non-white perspectives, experiences and, most importantly, people gain the same respects as their hegemonic white European male counterparts have gotten in the history of D&D. Building on that, Transplanar uses D&D as a vehicle for communicating and enacting this activism, which falls in line with Clements' (2019) argument for D&D as a tool for ideological change.

In a similar vein, but expressed with more nuance, is the activist approach *Galesong* (D&D Beyond, 2022) takes to performing inclusivity. While not explicitly naming the under- and misrepresentation of disabilities in D&D, their aim is to "...advocate for increased awareness and education around accessibility and disability inclusion" (D&D Beyond Staff, 2022b). In other words, their intent is also to claim a space in the community for the marginalized perspectives and experiences of people with a disability, through this actual play series. They do this by creating an imaginary world which allows these under- and misrepresented perspectives to play an active role while getting the respect they rightfully deserve. In this case, the actual play as a whole product is seen as an activist tool, which fills in a lack of representation both in the primary world and secondary world. The more nuanced approach compared to Transplanar could stem from Galesong's commercial background as an entertainment product from a company owned by the D&D publisher Wizards of the Coast.

Staying in the primary world, glimpses of activism can also be found in the actual play *Three Black Halflings* (3BlackHalflings, 2020-present). In the observed actual play, their secondary world departs from the usual colonial western European narratives much like how Transplanar does. They explicitly want to put the African perspective in the center of focus, by crafting the world's environment, mythology and cultures around inspirations from the African continent in the primary world. In a podcast episode separate from their actual play (Cartwright, Cobb & Kennedy, 2020), as well as another interview on the Dungeons and Dragons YouTube channel (Dungeons and Dragons, 2020), the cast members from *Three Black Halflings* discuss the importance of representing black perspectives in D&D as the white perspective has been dominant throughout the history of the game. Specifically, they take issue with the biological essentialist approach to race ingrained in D&D, drawing comparisons to primary world representations of black people in sports media, who are often praised for their physical talents, while white athletes are more often praised for the intellectual understanding of the sport. In D&D, they see the same with orcs being described as uncivilized brutal warriors from the wild, while elves are more likely to live sophisticated societies. Additionally, the performers reveal that the title "*Three Black Halflings*" is in itself a reference to the representation of the black perspective. While looking for artwork of

halflings online, they were only able to find halflings depicted with white skin. In a way, the title “Three Black Halflings” is a symbolic protest of the hegemonic white European perspective in D&D.

All in all, what makes these three actual plays activist in nature is not only the explicit protest of the perceived social injustices present in D&D, but the unambiguous clarification of their motivation to approach the game in the way each of the separate actual plays do as well. This starts with addressing the issues they see present in the game, following an explanation of how their imaginary world aims to tackle these problems. Following Wolf’s (2012) dichotomy, the activist behavior takes place most explicitly in the primary world. However, there is a mixture of roles each cast member takes on in their activist behavior. Primarily, the role of the performer (Burton, 2021) is present above all. The cast members use their role and position as performers to speak directly to their audience in order to communicate what they see as flaws in D&D’s game design and its business practices. Additionally, as their activist behavior affects their personal game design choices, such as the overhaul of the race system, they also take up the role of the player (Waskul & Lust, 2004). As a player the cast members use experiences from the primary world in order to facilitate a secondary world in which they can explore expressions of identity. Finally, the explicit communication of ideals and support for marginalized identities, invites audience members with similar marginalized identities to come into their communities. This practice is comparable to Torner’s (2021) theory that deems actual plays as a deliberate tool to facilitate sociability among geeks. While the term geek is somewhat arbitrary, it can be seen as a marginalized identity in the larger society just like queer people, people of color and people with a disability fall into that categorization.

Escapism and Fun

D&D is a game primarily played for fun, leisure and entertainment. This is a sentiment reiterated by multiple performers in the actual plays as well. For some, achieving fun appears to be related to the idea of escapism. In an interview with Three Black Halflings (Dungeons and Dragons, 2020), they talk about leaving social injustices experienced by black people in the primary world out of the secondary worlds they play in. They motivate this desire by saying that their fantasy world is used for celebration of cultures and for having fun. In other words, the secondary world offers people an escape from the social injustices they suffer in the primary world.

The same desire to escape can be found in the first episode of *Lost Mine of Phandelver* (Roll20, 2020). In this episode the performers discuss together how they would like to play their characters and how they would like the secondary world to be, before they actually start playing. One of the performers states they rather not roleplay in situations or imaginary worlds where racism or conflict between races plays a part, further relating it to the fact that they experience enough of that in the primary world. For the officially published campaign they are playing, this would require adjustments, as in this adventure the goblin race is mostly depicted as an evil race. Whether they actually made changes to facilitate this desire is difficult to see in the observations. Overall, goblins are still the main antagonistic element of the story they play. Arguably, the biologically essentialist nature of goblins as an inherently evil race has been nuanced through their roleplay, where the goblins are clearly humanized and shown to have good hearted social interactions such as singing songs and joking around. Due to the generally laid-back and jokey roleplaying style of these performers, it cannot be said with certainty that the goblins were humanized to mitigate the presence of biological essentialism, as the party does engage in racially motivated violence. Their approach to roleplaying in these situations will be further discussed in the section under ‘biological essentialism’. Still, through their depiction of the goblin as a race and further worldbuilding, they create a secondary world which is more respectful of others and thus more inclusive, notwithstanding their roleplay.

Arguably, the activist elements of *Transplanar* are rooted in the desire to escape the primary world as well. Their desire explicitly recognizes the social injustices in the primary world, as well as their respective counterparts ingrained in D&D and aim to have these injustices not present at all in their game. In its core, the world and stories disregard the hegemonic white European male perspective on which a lot of fantasy literature is based, while taking inspiration from Asian and pacific-islander cultures. In an interview (*Dungeons and Dragons*, 2021) *Transplanar*’s Dungeon Master states that conflict and combat in their world is and never will be between people, meaning that evil is embodied only in monstrous creatures. While this approach to the secondary world illustrates their ideal society through roleplay and worldbuilding, they also aim and desire to create a safe D&D community for transgender people of color. Through their performance and use of escapism, both in the primary and secondary world, they try to bring this desire to a realization.

Where the examples above air an explicit claim to escapism to some degree, other actual plays leave these desires unspoken. Observations of *High Rollers* (HighRollersDnD, 2017-present) show a diverse group of people with various gender identities playing the

officially published adventure *Curse of Strahd* (Wizards of the Coast, 2016). Interestingly, the performers do not address or change the publicly criticized social injustices in the story, which have been a heated topic of discussion in the D&D community. *Curse of Strahd* has been criticized strongly on its use of negative stereotypes to depict its *Vistani* cultural group, which is directly inspired by the Romani people in the primary world. Interestingly, while most of the performers are white people from the United Kingdom, one of the performers in High Rollers is a Chinese-Malaysian British activist who fights against racism towards east and southeast Asian communities. This activism against racism has not seemed to be of influence on the campaign's story. Another criticism of *Curse of Strahd* has to do with the story's use of the helpless woman trope, which is argued to be a derivative of the white male hero fantasy, where the "strong" man has to save the "weak" woman. The group's composition being more diverse in terms of gender identity also seemed to have no effect on this element of the story.

In short, High Rollers is an example of a group that stays with the story as it is given to them, while not making any explicit changes that tackle the aforementioned criticisms. Arguably, this approach to the game can be considered as another way of achieving escapism. Here, the story itself is not alone what offers escapism of the primary world. Rather, it is the immersion into a game and social activity with friends that offers the escape. In multiple episodes the performers mention social isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic as a reason to want to play even more Dungeons and Dragons than they were already doing. Perhaps, this less explicit desire for escapism rests more on the need for fun, rather than an explicit escape from social injustices such as racism or sexism. Both the desire to have fun and the desire to escape from social injustices are exogenous approaches to the game (Montola, 2008). However, it depends on the individual player if they experience a feeling of escapism. From the perspective of both Evans (2001) and Wolf (2012), the argument can be made that the secondary worlds in actual plays are not "pleasurable non-realities" in which one would like to exist, because of threats all the characters face. Still, where Transplanar's secondary world is positively representing queer identities, parts of the secondary world are favored over their primary world representations, and, where High Rollers endures and fights evil for fun, dangerous and dreadful experiences are now fun, because it is imaginary.

Representation

An approach that does seem to be widely used to make the D&D community more inclusive is representation. Merely the ease in which diverse groups of actual play performers can be found online, shows a gaming community which definitely wants to show its diversity.

Although diverse representation of disabilities was only seen in Galesong, all actual plays groups included people of color and were all diverse in terms of queer identities and gender identities, not limited to the gender binary. Here, it should be mentioned that the ratio of men and women (taking a binary view on gender) was also balanced. Of course, the gender binary view of men and women does not fall into the category of queer identities, but as D&D has historically been a male dominated gaming community, the representation of women can not be disregarded when analyzing the creation of inclusive communities. The actual play performers of Three Black Halflings, Transplanar and Galesong even explicitly cite a previous lack of representation of their identities as a motivator to get together for an actual play series. Additionally, all three actual plays state that they want to provide that representation so other black people, queer people or people with a disability can see that people with similar marginalized identities have a place at the gaming table as well.

Apart from diverse group composition, representation comes forth in much of the actual play's branding as well. For example, the channel description of Transplanar says "...all-trans, all POC-led..." (TransplanarRPG, 2020-present) signifying what marginalized group they represent. Similarly, Galesong states:

To celebrate our diverse community of players and Dungeon Masters, we're hosting Galesong: Dragons' Convergence, an actual play event presented with American Sign Language interpretation and showcasing characters and performers with disabilities. (D&D Beyond Staff, 2022b)

For Three Black Halflings, the marginalized identity they represent is clearly stated in its name. Furthermore, most actual plays' performers state their pronouns, as well as the pronouns of the character they are playing at the beginning of each episode. This signifies a respect and welcoming of the variety of gender identities that people can identify with. Actual plays like Transplanar and Lost Mine of Phandelver incorporate a performers' pronouns in the visuals of the video feed and Transplanar even incorporates the pride progress flag in the design of their video layout, which represents LGBTQ+ communities of color. On top of stating pronouns, the cast of Galesong also goes in depth on the disabilities each of them have and how this affects them. All this together creates a strong stance of marginalized people that want to and take a place in the community and that others with similar marginalized identities can as well.

Representation, like activism, surfaces strongly through the role of the performer (Burton, 2021). In several actual plays, the collective of performer roles of the cast members craft a brand message that communicates their support of marginalized identities and their ideals to create a more inclusive community to their audience. This too, aims to draw people with marginalized identities towards their respective communities and facilitates sociability among outsiders (Torner, 2021).

4.2 Tackling social injustices

The following section shifts the focus to the secondary world. Most of the observed approaches are in some way mediated by the aforementioned explicit motivations in the primary world. For example, Transplanar's commitment to anti-racism is partly reflected in roleplay by them not engaging in conflict between people, but only using conflict between people and monsters. Following the well documented criticisms of D&D discussed in the theory chapter (section 2.4), roleplaying choices and behavior were analyzed in the areas of biological essentialism, queer exclusion and representation of disabilities.

Tackling biological essentialism

As discussed in the theory chapter, biological essentialism is ingrained into D&D and its approach to race. The results section on activism shows that this problem is not just apparent to researchers, but to many players as well. The performers in the actual plays see that these approaches to character attributes are narratively a direct derivation from the stereotypes around our understanding of both fantasy races and real-world racial differentiation of humans. In other words, the players recognize the biological essentialist approach and express their issues with it being present in D&D. Similar to Three Black Halflings, the player group of Transplanar discuss biological essentialism in an interview and how this approach forces you to incorporate character traits, which might not fit with the character you want to play, on top of its main problem of racial stereotyping. By choosing not to adhere to the prerequisite traits and features of a playable race as dictated in the rules, Transplanar's performers argue that the opportunities to try and form different identities are much easier to explore.

As performers of multiple actual plays explicitly recognize the presence of biological essentialism within the 5th edition rule system of D&D, they make time to explain what changes they make to the rules, lore and world before they start playing their campaign. In the

character creation episode from *Lost Mine of Phandelver*, these changes are explicitly discussed and applied. Here, the players recognize the biological essentialism present in the rules about race as well and explain that they will change the way your character gets features and traits. Through the use of a questionnaire that determines background information of your character, specific features and traits are gained in relation to what type of character you play. However, in this case the features and traits are linked to a character's previous life experiences, rather than the biological race they are. This approach to gaining abilities is in line with the earlier mentioned custom origin rule introduced in *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* (see section 2.2). At the time of recording this actual play, *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* had not been released yet. This could indicate that changing and adapting rules in actual plays has the potential to popularize approaches to experienced social injustices, which may eventually get adopted in the official rules of D&D.

Three Black Halflings also introduces a major change to the rule system in their actual play. Although at its core it still is the 5th edition rule system, they use a world-setting book, released by a different publisher than Wizards of the Coast, which overhauls much of the lore-deduced rules that have to do with character and world creation. The setting book is called *The Wagadu Chronicles*, which is jokingly described as "What if J.R.R. Tolkien blessed the rains down in Africa". This campaign setting book changes the approach to race by disregarding the construct completely. Instead, players can only create human characters, who are differentiated through a system based on lineages. The lineages represent ancestral histories, as well as a current life history that shapes a character's identity and supernatural powers. A statement clarifying the primary world motivation for changing the race system to a lineage system is offered by the author of this book. The author, who is a person of color, states that they used to think people who look like themselves were not at home in the fantasy genre, as most fantasy stories were western European influenced and rarely contained people with other skin colors than white. From this negative experience with fantasy, they decided to create a fantasy setting which revolves around African cultural narratives rather than the standard western European narratives. Still, it can be argued that the use of lineages is only partially a fix for the issue *Three Black Halflings* experiences with biological essentialism. It is partly still factors outside of a character's life or control, which affect their identity and physical abilities, rather than the shaping of identity through their own experiences. Where the rule change goes against biological essentialism is thus merely through a narrative separation from the concept of race, while mechanically, the approach that rules determine identity and physical ability is still similar.

While intentions of fighting biological essentialism and creating more inclusive gaming spaces are often explicitly stated in the primary world, it is ultimately important how these intentions translate to the performed behavior in the secondary world. A narrative approach to conflict that was observed in Galesong, Transplanar and Rivals of Waterdeep is the use of an order versus chaos construction. This order versus chaos construction replaces the often used good versus evil alignment in D&D. In D&D's rules, the lore of one race generally determines whether that race is either good, neutral or evil. Essentially, this is another instance where biological essentialism dictates the approach to race in D&D and thus an individual character's qualities.

Although changing the moral alignment system to order versus chaos could seem like you are using different words for the same construct, the differentiation with order and chaos lies more on actual behavior than a race's inherent inclination towards being evil. The moral tensions of good and evil can also be very subjective between different cultures and ideologies or between people with different life experiences. While the same can be said for the order versus chaos construct, the observed actual plays generally use it to impose conflict or hardship that is a problem for everyone. For example, the story of Transplanar revolves around a calamity which removed all gods from their world, turning the habitable world into a chaotic one where safety from otherworldly monsters cannot be guaranteed. In an interview, Transplanar's Dungeon Master has stated their game does not include combat against other people, but only combat against monsters. In practice, this is precisely what is observed, which emphasizes the idea that chaos is what the players have to fight rather than an organized group of different people. Similarly, in Rivals of the Waterdeep (Dungeons and Dragons, 2018) the main conflict surrounds a war between demons and the living and in Galesong malicious dragons attack innocent people.

However, these observations could be complicated by the degree of perceived anthropomorphism of antagonistic creatures. For example, D&D lore describes many dragons to be highly intelligent creatures who sometimes disguise themselves as humans and live among them. With this in mind, it is questionable to say whether prejudice against intelligent creatures is the encompassing social injustice, or whether this is only relevant to humanoid fantasy creatures, to which we can better relate in the primary world. In other words, we see the depiction of these dragons as evil, which follows the same racial logic as when we see the Orcs depicted as evil. This raises the question of whether the act of stereotyping is only perceived as a social injustice when it is done to fantasy races that more physically resemble real life humans and their racial differentiations. Still, in Galesong, we see a reframing of evil

into chaos, when the dragons engage in antagonistic behavior, which disrupts the civilized order of the secondary world's society

Looking further into the worldbuilding and roleplay in the different secondary worlds, another distinction can be made between two approaches in dealing with biological essentialism. On one hand, actual plays have been observed to play in imaginary worlds where biological essentialism is not in play at all, nor is explicit racism, xenophobia or conflict between racial groups. This approach is observed mostly in imaginary worlds that are largely homebrewed, especially in *Transplanar*, *Galesong* and *Three Black Halflings*. On the other hand, observations also show an approach which incorporates these social injustices in secondary worlds and stories, while challenging them through roleplay. This approach is used most notably in *Rivals of Waterdeep*.

Regarding the approach used by *Transplanar* and *Three Black halflings*, their exclusion of social injustices in their secondary worlds is supported by their out of game statements in interviews and discussions (see 4.1). Important to note is that the evidence of this approach is apparent in their gameplay as well. The player characters in *Transplanar* partly consist of races that are generally considered as outsiders in societies that follow traditional D&D lore. However, their presence in the societies of their homebrew secondary world is never questioned. In contrast, the races of the player characters in *High Rollers* campaign are similarly non-traditional to the lore, but do receive comments on their appearance when entering a village of only humans. When walking through a town, the characters get weird and suspicious looks from its inhabitants and the Dragonborn (dragon-like person) and Tabaxi (cat-like person) characters get called “a dragon that walks on two legs” and a “weird cat” respectively. Still, the players do not perceive this as racism, but more as a fascination for something that the humans have never seen before.

Like in *Transplanar*, the player performers in *Lost Mine of Phandelver* experience the same approach to multi-racial society, but overall their relationship with biological essentialism lies a bit more complicated. During character creation, the performers express the desire to not deal with any form of racism in the world. However, they also note that this might be tricky, considering a large part of the pre-written adventure centers around the stereotyping of goblins and them doing bad things. In observing the players' performances and worldbuilding of this actual play, it appears that they approach the problem by ignoring story elements that could perpetuate social injustices. Again, the uncommon fantasy races present in the player group, raises no questions when they enter a town of the more common dwarves, humans and elves. Still, they do engage in violence against goblins that is hard to

justify as merely completing the quest: as the party was previously attacked by each goblin they encountered, they decide to ambush a merry band of goblins making music together. Thus, on the surface, the observations show that these players aim to avoid the appearance of racism in their play, but taking a deeper look shows behavior that falls in line with the stereotyping of races.

Another example of this is the bugbear player character. In D&D lore, bugbears are evil creatures related to goblins who raid and hunt to get by and “love carnage” (Wizards of the Coast, 2014b, p. 33). In the character creation episode, the performer who plays the bugbear stated they wanted to play a civilized bugbear who was raised in a warm and loving multicultural home in the city. In play, this bugbear character does fall out of the established lore in the sense that they are not evil, but the other intentions of the performer seem less realized. The identity of the performer’s bugbear is quite unintelligent and unaware of social cues and norms, which you might expect from someone who was raised in a city, rather than being a creature from the wilderness. In this case the performance falls back on the racial stereotypes dictated by the lore of the bugbear. Evidently, the relationship between this actual play and biological essentialism is complicated. On one hand, they state their disapproval of parts of the game they find problematic. On the other hand, as their game progresses, they sometimes fall back on the structure provided by the original rules and lore, perpetuating the aspects of the game they deemed problematic before.

What distinguishes *Rivals of Waterdeep* from the other actual plays is their incorporation of social injustices many experience in the primary world, while challenging them through roleplay. This approach is observed through the secondary world experiences of a player character who is a Tiefling. Tieflings are a playable race in D&D, who have the essence of Asmodeus, the overlord of the nine hells, present in their blood. The *Player’s Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast, 2014c, p. 43) tells us that this biological association of their heritage with a devil creates a mistrust in Tieflings with other people. This same sentiment towards Tieflings appears in the city in which *Rivals of Waterdeep* takes place. Multiple times the Tiefling player character is racially profiled because they are suspected of having evil intentions. Other player characters stand up for the Tiefling against the guards and civilians who say they do not want the Tiefling around. Additionally, the Tiefling tells their companions that they are aware of the prejudices against Tieflings and that they would like to show the world otherwise, by being a Tiefling who is morally distanced from the devil or any other evilness. This performance in the third episode stood out to viewers as well, with YouTube user *LiselleMade* commenting:

Watching the party deal with the racial profiling upon entering Waterdeep was extremely interesting. :) (LiselleMade, 2018)

The narrative building around the Tiefling's experienced racism continues in a different episode where they recount the trauma of being hunted for sport. All together, this narrative approach to biological essentialism and racism as a whole is evidently crafted to show the audience an empowering story which fights, not only an imaginary problem, but what they see as a real social injustice that is present in the primary world as well. In other words, *Rivals of Waterdeep* is a strong example which shows the interconnectedness of the primary and secondary worlds. While their secondary world takes in elements such as racial profiling from the real world, it does so to comment on and critique the primary world. Although this is a less explicit way of communicating your stance on social injustices than activism, their roleplay performances do communicate the desire for more respect and acceptance of marginalized identities and thus a desire for a more inclusive community.

Altogether, various approaches to dealing with perceived social injustices within the secondary worlds of D&D are observed. Most actual plays see D&D's use of stereotypes to portray race as an issue and deal with it in their own ways. In the role of the player (Waskul & Lust, 2004), the cast members mediate primary world rules, structures and personal experiences into choices that affect the secondary world and its story. Sometimes explicitly explained in out of game communication (see section 4.1), we see rules that dictate racial abilities being altered in *Lost Mine of Phandelver*, or even being completely overhauled in *Three Black Halflings*. Additionally, commonly used racial stereotypes that structure the lore and stories such as a race's innate evilness are altered in order to create worlds in which racism is less prevalent or even non-existent. The mediation between the primary and secondary worlds enacted through the player role ultimately shapes the world in which the persona role (Waskul & Lust, 2004) is taken on. The in-game persona is used to highlight certain marginalized experiences, as seen in the example of *Rivals of Waterdeep*, where the characters deal with racial profiling.

Where biological essentialism is recognized by the actual plays and deemed problematic, changes are made in the rules, worldbuilding and roleplay in regards to the wishes of the players. In *Transplanar* and *Three Black Halflings*, which are explicitly activist, we see an approach through the role of the performer (Burton, 2021) that takes the wishes of the audience into account as well. Ultimately, this allows them to create a secondary

world, as well as a story, that is respecting of unique experiences and marginalized identities, creating an atmosphere of inclusivity (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018) around them.

Queer identities

Where biological essentialism is strongly present in the D&D rules and its lore and adventurous conflict often incorporates racial differences and warfare, the mis- and underrepresentation of queer identities has been an issue that is less on the surface of the game. The way in which the observed actual plays aim to establish inclusivity towards queer identities is mainly through representation. This representation starts in the primary world by playing in groups that contain people who identify with a diverse range of gender identities and sexualities.

When shifting the focus to performance of queer identities in D&D gameplay, Transplanar emerged from the observations as a source of many ways of performance that aim to make D&D and their actual play as inclusive as can be. Firstly, all performers in this actual play identify as transgender. Although for most characters it is not explicitly stated that they are transgender, their characters in game identify with the same gender as their respective performer. Some time further into the story of this campaign, a narrative arc is introduced around one of the player characters being transgender. At some point, this character reveals the top surgery scars that are present on their torso to the other party members, who are very supportive and even offer to heal the scars through means of magic. This performer's character represents a physical aspect of the transgender experience and puts it into a respecting and accepting context. Whereas in the primary world, transgender people who underwent gender-affirming surgery may have a less positive experience, this story element and performance portrays Transplanar's inclusive attitude towards marginalized identities clearly.

Apart from the focused representation of the transgender experience, a more casual way of representation is observed in many of the actual plays. In Transplanar, the first non-player characters that are introduced are a gay couple that meet the party at their house. Further into the first episode as well as in the following episodes, non-player characters with queer identities make a regular appearance, from gay, bisexual and pansexual to characters identifying as transgender, non-binary or any other queer identity. Similarly, queer relationships make an appearance in Lost Mine of Phandelver. The casualness lies in the fact that these identities are never questioned or even made a topic of discussion. The secondary

world of Transplanar appears to normalize queer identities in its societies. This normalization is a performance of the ideals of Transplanar's performers in the sense that they aim to create a more inclusive community for transgender people of color in the primary world.

Of the observed actual plays, Transplanar was the only one to center queer identities as part of a narrative arc. Other actual plays take a more casual approach similar to what Transplanar does as well, with gay characters making appearances in various actual plays. Here, queer identities are normalized in the secondary world, but also put aside to make room for character development that is focused on adventuring, combat and the quest at hand. However, there was also a lack of exploration of gender identities and sexualities that stood out in the observations. Arguably, this can be attributed to the nature of Dungeons & Dragons as a game, where the goal is generally to complete a quest involving an antagonist that needs to be fought. The exploration and shaping of identities can be very personal and possibly something which can make a player feel uncomfortable. Thus it would not be unthinkable that actual plays avoid topics such as sexuality or gender identity as it is something a performer might not be comfortable with exploring in front of a large audience. Following this, one's identity as a person (Waskul & Lust, 2004) can differ strongly from one's identity as a performer (Burton, 2021).

For the representation of queer identities in actual plays, the role of the persona (Waskul & Lust, 2004) stands out the most. Through roleplaying their characters as well as non-player characters, the cast members pull queer experiences and identities in the spotlight. However, this does not mean that the entire story arcs revolve around queer identities. In addition to the casual representation, we see secondary worlds in which queer people exist without questioning their place. Here, inclusivity (Martinez-Acosta & Favero, 2018) is depicted through the cast members' efforts in worldbuilding and roleplaying.

Disabilities

Much like the representation of queer identities observed in Transplanar, the perspective of people with a disability is best observed in Galesong. The two actual plays are even comparable in the primary world motivation for creating each of the actual plays. Galesong consists of a group of performers who all live with one or multiple disabilities, ranging from physical disabilities to psychological disorders. The actual play states that they have come together to advocate for increased awareness and education around disability inclusion. In other words, Galesong aims to make the D&D community more inclusive towards people with a disability. In the session zero of this actual play, a game session in

which usually the setting, themes and rules of the D&D campaign is discussed with all the players, the performers introduce their characters who each have the same disability as the performer who plays the character. The performers also talk about their own previous experiences with tabletop roleplaying games as people with disabilities. Here, one performer, who is deaf, stands out, as they have never played a ttrpg with other people who are not deaf. Specifically for this actual play, three deaf interpreters are used to facilitate communication between the deaf performer, who speaks sign language, and the other performers who do not speak sign language.

In the secondary world of Galesong, the approach to worldbuilding and roleplay also uses the approach of normalization of the marginalized experiences. The narrative itself does not focus on the exploration of the experiences of people with a disability, but rather creates a story in which a character can thrive, regardless of how able-bodied they are. Still, disability is in the spotlight of this actual play. From the character creation episode, the audience learns that each player character has a disability as well, but that it will not hinder them in play. For example, one player character has an amputated arm and is equipped with a prosthesis, which can also magically transform into a rapier or a tool. The character is modeled after the person who plays them, who also uses a prosthesis for their amputated arm. Likewise, there is a performer who is an ambulatory wheelchair user, whose character possesses a handheld magical item that transforms into a wheelchair when they throw it on the ground. Another example is the deaf character, who wears a magical necklace that allows them to understand others regardless of what language they speak. This item is described to magically make subtitles appear in the air, which only the deaf character is able to read. All in all, the experience of people with disabilities is acknowledged and even highlighted in Galesong's approach to representation, but instead of focusing on the difficulties the performers might also experience in the primary world, the focus is shifted towards a secondary world which empowers and is arranged to facilitate people with a disability.

The way in which Galesong's secondary world facilitates the needs that come with people with a disability shows in its normalization of disabilities as well. Similar to Transplanar's approach to queer identities, the disabilities of the player characters are in itself never a point of interest. More importantly, people with disabilities are represented widely in its world setting. For example, the party encounters various non-player characters who are deaf or use a wheelchair. The worldbuilding itself normalizes disabilities as well by having sign language be a commonly spoken language and by being physically accessible to characters with disabilities that would limit their ability to move in the primary world.

Altogether, the homebrew items that highlight the characters' disabilities and the normalization in the worldbuilding, form a D&D campaign in which barely any changes have to be made to the rules, even though these rules are focused heavily on physicality. In specific, the rules that construct combat encounters set boundaries for the physical capabilities of a character, such as movement, power, swiftness. Through the use of homebrew magical items like the prosthesis or the wheelchair, these physical capabilities are not hindered.

From the observed audience's perspective, the goal of Galesong to spread awareness of disabilities and create a more inclusive community, is received very positively. One YouTube user positively comments on the way worldbuilding facilitates people with a disability:

[...] It's so cool to see so many different disabled PCs together, and you can tell the players felt really empowered to create the rich stories they wanted to tell in this super vibrant world knowing their would actually be support for it. [...] (Rowan iCarly, 2022)

Another user on YouTube expresses how they were emotionally touched by how inclusive the actual play is, while showcased on the large platform of D&D Beyond:

I had no idea... I'm legally blind and quite isolated, and didn't know things like this existed. Watching this made me emotional, knowing there are people and groups out there, that are so inclusive. (Pie Powered, 2023)

These YouTube comments show the direct impact which performers of an actual play can make on their audience and the larger community of Dungeons and Dragons.

Much like many actual plays' approaches to queer identities, the representation of disabilities is mainly a result of behavior enacted through the persona role (Waskul & Lust, 2004). With Galesong as the prime example, we see characters that have disabilities. However, rather than being impaired by these disabilities, the characters are empowered by them. From their position as a player (Waskul & Lust, 2004), the cast members use their experiences in real life (their disabilities) and use these to craft a story, which is highly inclusive of people with disabilities. Combined with their explicit motivation to "celebrate our diverse community of players" (section 4.1), Galesong appears to use D&D as a tool to increase awareness of disabilities and create a more inclusive community.

4.3 The role of the Dungeon Master

Central to any game of D&D is the guidance of the Dungeon Master through the secondary world in which the story takes place. Either they pick a pre-written adventure in an established imaginary world, or they make up their own entirely and facilitate the roleplay and immersion for the players at their table. From the secondary world perspective, the Dungeon Master manages the narrative and the actions of characters. However, they manage their players in the primary world as well by creating a safe social environment in which people feel comfortable to play the game. In the observed actual plays, the role of the Dungeon Master is a significant factor in creating and guiding meaningful narratives in the secondary world, while making sure that the performers in the primary world feel comfortable with roleplaying, even in emotionally tough scenarios.

Worldbuilding plays a large part in facilitating inclusive roleplay. The section on tackling social injustices (see 4.2) partly covered worldbuilding and how normalizing marginalized experiences in the secondary world creates a more inclusive story, but there are also more subtle elements of worldbuilding which affect the creation of inclusive D&D campaigns. Specifically, actual plays like *Three Black Halflings* and *Transplanar* use lore and environmental storytelling to bring cultural perspectives into their games that are uncommon in most D&D campaigns. The Dungeon Masters of both actual plays have stated in interviews that their campaigns aim to depart from the widely used fantasy tropes based on western European medieval history. In *Three Black Halflings*, a world is described where people and nature live harmoniously together, taking clear inspirations from African landscapes and carefully incorporating flora and fauna native to specific areas of the continent. In one instance, a player character wants to use their wildshape ability, which allows them to turn into an animal. Here, the Dungeon Master takes the time searching online to find an appropriate animal native to Africa in which the performer would like to transform. This worldbuilding inspired by African environments is juxtaposed in the story with visions of industrialized cities that look more like western European inspired areas, in which evil creatures have enslaved people of one specific lineage. By introducing this tension between different types of societies and placing the industrialized cities on the antagonistic side of the story, subtle commentary is put into the actual play that reinforces the performers' desire to depart from western European narratives. The responsibility for carefully crafting these

narratives to (subtly) present perspectives from varying cultures lies with the Dungeon Master.

In *Transplanar* a departure from the western European fantasy tropes is made towards Asian and Pacific Islander inspired environments and cultures. Although inspired elements can be difficult to recognize for what they originally are derived from, the Dungeon Master provides the viewer and their performers with a specific example in episode 5. Here, the player characters participate in a New Year's tradition, which is explained to be almost literally taken from Mongolian traditions for celebrating the new year. Another example is found in episode 2, where the God of the Sun, Field and open Sky, *Gal Tenger*, is introduced. While not explained in the actual play, this secondary world God is possibly inspired by the Turko-Mongolic religion of Tengrism, where the god of the sky was called Tengri. Incorporating details such as these into the secondary world does not explicitly advocate for inclusivity, but rather subtly pushes non-western European cultural perspectives forward. In these cases the traditional lore of Dungeons and Dragons is significantly overhauled to make room for other cultural perspectives.

In order to explore marginalized cultural narratives and sensitive topics such as racial and sexual equality, a safe social gaming space needs to be established. As the Dungeon Master guides the players through a story, they also need to make sure their players are comfortable with roleplaying through certain sensitive topics. For this, they can make use of a variety of safety tools and techniques. One example of the implementation of safety tools can be found in *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* (Wizards of the Coast, 2021), which deals with horror themed stories. Here, it is suggested that the Dungeon Master surveys their players on topics such as phobias, descriptions of gore and violence, themes of mental health, romance and topics related to social or cultural discrimination. The players are asked to note whether they want these topics to be included or avoided in their D&D game. Through these practices, boundaries can be established, allowing for gameplay that is respectful of each other's well being.

The actual plays function somewhat as an educational resource on the use of safety tools. Both *Transplanar* and *Lost Mine of Phandelver* offer valuable insight into how the Dungeon Master and the players can look out for each other's mental wellbeing. Quite simply, the Dungeon Master of *Transplanar* regularly asks their players if they still feel well after roleplaying through emotionally heavy interactions, offering the option to take a break from play and live streaming. In the session zero of *Lost Mine of Phandelver*, the performers together create a list of lines and veils. This list helps the Dungeon Master steer clear of

sensitive issues their players might take issue with by either leaving that topic out completely (line) or by only stating that something surrounding a sensitive topic happens, but not going into any further details (veil). Additionally, the Dungeons Master introduces the use of the *X-card*. This safety mechanism allows a player to hold up the X-card when something happens in game that is traumatic or uncomfortable for them, resulting in the group completely skipping over the situation without question and picking up the story further along. While the educational elements of actual plays do not explicitly address the perspectives and experiences of marginalized identities, it does center around respect for others, which ultimately is in line with our understanding of inclusivity.

At the position of the Dungeon Master, all four roles of the person, the player, the persona and the performer (Waskul & Lust, 2004; Burton 2021) appear to stand out. The roles of the person and the performer are similarly present in the Dungeon Master's behavior as the other cast members within the actual plays. This shows us that, in general, all cast members share very similar views on relevant social issues and that they present these views together as a group. For example, this brings forth a very vocal opposition towards perceived social injustices within Transplanar. On the other hand, the motivation for play in High Rollers is almost solely for fun, resulting in a group of players that in unison focuses on performing the aspect of fun in their actual play.

Regarding the roles of the player and the persona, the Dungeon Master fulfills a more versatile role in play, as well as being the main guide through their secondary world. Where the other cast members take on the role of one specific character, the Dungeon Master roleplays a large variety of characters that are present in this world. From this perspective, we see the Dungeon Master exploring and presenting a wide variety of identities and thus adopting many differing personas. For the activist leaning actual plays, the Dungeon Master often uses their position to inject characters with marginalized identities into the story. As a player the Dungeon Master is acting as the mediator between the primary world and the secondary world. The structure provided by D&D's rules and lore, combined with their own experiences are transformed into characters, quests and storylines within the secondary world. Additionally, this combination plays a part in the social safety at their game tables. Through clear communication with everyone at the table, the Dungeon Master takes the lead in creating an actual play in which all cast members are comfortable within the primary world, as well as happy with what happens in the secondary world.

5. Conclusion

Concluding this thesis, I will reflect on the results and formulate an answer to the research question: *How do performers in Dungeons and Dragons actual plays perform inclusivity?* Furthermore, I will reflect on the entire research process, looking at limitations which could introduce new ventures in researching this area of inclusivity in the Dungeons and Dragons community.

5.1 Performing inclusivity in the primary world

To carefully reflect the nuances between performing a Dungeons and Dragons character and performing a version of yourself as an on-screen personality (in other words, a performer), this research distinguishes between performance of inclusivity in the primary and secondary worlds, as is reflected in the sub questions. First, I will answer sub question 1: *how do performers in Dungeons and Dragons actual plays perform inclusivity in the primary world?*

In short, the performance of inclusivity in the primary world has its basis in behavior, choices and actions that do not take place during the playing of Dungeons and Dragons. Specifically, this type of performance includes activism, escapism and representation. Still, as Wolf (2012) also mentions, the primary world and secondary world influence each other, so behavior, choices and actions taken in the primary world also reflect on what happens in the secondary world. Additionally, the performance of inclusivity is mainly expressed through the role of the performer (Burton, 2021), as well as through the role of the person (Waskul & Lust, 2004), which is reflected in the individual cast members' identities. The motivation behind this form of performance is mainly for the cast members to communicate their support of marginalized identities in the D&D community specifically and in society as a whole. These motivations can be categorized as exogenous goals (Björk and Holopainen, 2003). Key findings in the results that support this conclusion stem from the actual plays *Transplanar*, *Galesong* and *Three Black Halflings*. In statements outside of the imaginary world that are both self-reflective and in criticism of Dungeons and Dragons, these actual plays communicated an explicit want and need to create a D&D community that is more inclusive towards trans people of color, people with a disability and black people respectively.

Furthermore, through statements made in the primary world during interviews and session zero's, the performers provided explanations for why certain game design choices

were made. This led part of the research to focus on different forms of escapism. A strong example of the desire to escape from racism experienced in the primary world is provided in the first episode of *Lost Mine of Phandelver*. Here, a performer tells the Dungeon Master they would rather play in an imaginary world where racism does not exist as they already experience it enough in their own life. The same desire is communicated by performers of *Transplanar* and *Three Black Halflings*, who explicitly say they avoid colonialist western European fantasy tropes in order to establish a secondary world in which social injustices based on race, gender or sexuality do not exist. This is in line with Evans' (2001) view of escapism, which provides the players with a pleasurable non-reality, away from the troublesome social injustices they experience in the primary world.

As discussed in the theoretical framework, the presence of these social injustices in D&D has long been a point of contention in the discourse around D&D and ultimately stem from the fact that white male perspectives have shaped the fantasy genre (Young, 2018). Therefore, by explicitly communicating why and how actual plays steer clear from these criticized fantasy tropes, the performers show the audience their willingness and desire to highlight and explore the perspectives and experiences of marginalized identities and that this is entirely possible in a game of D&D.

Examples of escapism were also observed in instances where the relationship with inclusivity was less distinct. For example, the performers of *High Rollers* play the prewritten adventure module called *Curse of Strahd*, without discussing or adapting to the criticisms around the negative stereotyping of races, genders and disabilities that the adventure module has gotten. They do explain their desire of playing D&D is rooted in the need for an escape from real life and the COVID-19 pandemic that was ongoing at the time. Following Kuo, Lutz & Hiler's (2016) theory, this group does seem to engage in active escapism. However, while other actual play's take the opportunity to engage in active escapism related to perceived social injustices, *High Rollers* unquestionably engages in a story that incorporates negative stereotyping as a narrative element. Conclusively, *High Rollers* does not seem to actively put elements of inclusivity into their performance.

Lastly, a way in which actual play performers communicate inclusivity in the primary world is through representation. This representation is observed in group composition, branding and visual design. Although the actual plays that have been observed for this research were selected on the basis of having a diverse performer group, the fact that racially diverse groups and groups with a variety of gender identities and/or sexual orientations were easy to find, shows that the D&D community is developing to be more and more inclusive.

This finding is supported when looking at the way these actual plays advertise themselves. In describing their actual plays, Transplanar, Three Black Halflings and Galesong all explicitly state that the goal of their actual play is to uplift the perspectives of their respective marginalized identities and to create a more inclusive community for these identities. The brand names of Transplanar and Three Black Halflings are in itself already nods to their focus on inclusivity, with Transplanar both referencing travel between (trans-) planes of existence and having transgender performers and Three Black Halflings criticizing the lack of existing artwork of black halflings. What stood out visually in the majority of actual plays is the inclusion of performers' used pronouns on screen, indicating a respect for other people's gender identities and providing the audience with a way to properly address the performers when talking in the chat. On top of that, Transplanar used the progress pride flag as a stream layout, emphasizing their representation of marginalized identities. Within the role of the performer (Burton, 2021) the cast members use not only their own outward identity as a person (Waskul & Lust, 2004), but also their ideals to communicate inclusivity to their audience, using the actual play as a tool. From the ethnographic observations it is evident that these (explicit) performances of inclusivity in the primary world, provides a strong framework which supports an imaginary world where any individual perspectives are valid and respected. And since the primary world and secondary world are partial reflections of each other, this could result in a more inclusive community in the primary world as well.

5.2 Performing inclusivity in the secondary world

In this section, I will answer sub question 2: *how do performers in Dungeons and Dragons actual plays perform inclusivity in the secondary world?* While taking observations of the secondary world, a strong focus was put upon the three areas of criticism on D&D discussed in the theory chapter: biological essentialism, queer identities and disabilities. Furthermore, it appeared that the player and persona roles (Waskul & Lust, 2004) are strongly at play during the performance of inclusivity in the secondary world. As performance in the secondary world of D&D is structured by the lore and rules that are used, this research looks at how these were interpreted, used and altered for the purpose of performing inclusivity. Additionally, a factor in performance of inclusivity that emerged was the role of the Dungeon Master. Below, I will discuss how performance related to these four areas of focus contributes to inclusivity.

Firstly, the actual plays widely adapted to the critiques of biological essentialism in D&D. Where the game's rules provide the basis of physical capabilities of characters, only a limited amount of changes were made. For example, *Lost Mine of Phandelver* changed the biological essentialist rule, which dictated parts of a character's physical abilities and identity for belonging to a certain race. A more drastic approach was taken by *Three Black Halflings*, which overhauled the entire race system of D&D and used a system based on historical and spiritual lineages. Where the performance of inclusivity stood out was in the actual plays' approach to the use and alteration of lore. Arguably, this is facilitated by the nature of D&D as a collaborative storytelling game, which encourages homebrewing, the creation of your own imaginary worlds and stories. Here, the cast members take exogenous goals, such as a desire to not deal with racism (*Lost Mine of Phandelver*) and integrate them into endogenous rules and goals (Björk & Holopainen, 2003) by, for example, creating a world in which racism does not exist (*Transplanar*). Interestingly, *Rivals of Waterdeep* approached the topic of racism head on in their secondary world. When one player experienced racist remarks against them, all player characters chose to confront the issue. Possibly they take this approach to gain a feeling of catharsis in the primary world. As Holland (2009) says, the secondary world provides a safe environment where you can practice social situations. By confronting racism in *Rivals of Waterdeep*, the cast members empower themselves, whereas the situation might have played out differently if it took place in the primary world.

The importance of homebrew for the performance of inclusivity was evident from the differences between the various actual plays. *High Rollers* and *Lost Mine of Phandelver* followed pre-written adventure modules, which allowed for little room in adapting storytelling and worldbuilding elements to emphasize on inclusivity. In contrast, *Transplanar*, *Three Black Halflings*, *Galesong* and, to some extent, *Rivals of Waterdeep*, show the freedom homebrewing allows the performers to explore perspectives and experiences which have historically been mis- and underrepresented in D&D. Although the stories of *Galesong* and *Rivals of Waterdeep* are based in established world settings, the freedom in storytelling allows them to address or avoid perceived social injustices and deal with it on their own accord. The completely homebrewed worlds of *Transplanar* and *Three Black Halflings* allows for an even greater freedom in storytelling, which both actual plays use to step away from the often used western European inspired fantasy tropes in order to highlight African, Asian and Pacific Islander cultures and environments. Here, the cast members take on the role of the player (Waskul & Lust, 2004) and mediate exogenous rules and goals into expressions of identity in the secondary world.

For the focus areas of queer identities and disabilities, the widely observed approach to performing inclusivity was the casual representation of those marginalized identities in the lore and worldbuilding. Queer identities were rarely observed to take a central role in the performed stories, while still widely making appearances in multiple secondary worlds. Merely the presence of queer identities in worlds shows how the performers would like queer identities to be approached in the primary worlds: normalized in society and irrelevant to one's character. Similar, although included in less actual plays, was the approach to characters with disabilities. While Galesong does make it a point to integrate disabilities into their character design, the worldbuilding places the physical abilities of people with disabilities on par with those of people without disabilities. Through performance in the persona role (Waskul & Lust, 2004), the cast members normalize disabilities and, in a way, provide an example of how they would like the primary world to be accessible towards people with disabilities.

Finally, the role of the Dungeon Master plays an essential part in facilitating worlds and stories which highlight marginalized identities. As stated before, homebrewing plays an integral part in the creation of a secondary world that is inclusive toward marginalized perspectives. For the most part, it is the Dungeon Master's responsibility to come up with the structure of the world and fill it in with details, in order to tell the story they want to tell. During play, it is the Dungeon Master who guides the story and, as observed, can decide to spend time focusing the story on marginalized experiences. Strong examples of this are found in *Transplanar*, which incorporates the backstory of a transgender person who transitioned, as well as in *Rivals of Waterdeep*, in which the players encounter racial stereotyping and racism in the world and get the chance to confront this issue through roleplay. In the observed actual plays, the Dungeon Master also fills in an educational role in showing how to play D&D, as well as providing ideas for improving inclusivity, as the actual play format allows for a unique insight into their thoughts and decisions. For example, through hearing the explanation of safety tools and seeing them in use, the audience can learn of ways to approach heavy themes in their own D&D games and even how to deal with social injustices that they recognize in the game. While some of the actual plays have an explicit goal to highlight marginalized perspectives and experiences in their worlds and stories, they are in itself great examples for other players and Dungeon Masters on how to run an inclusive game of *Dungeons and Dragons*.

5.3 How do performers in Dungeons and Dragons actual plays perform inclusivity?

To conclude, actual play performers perform inclusivity in both the primary world and secondary world. As both types of worlds exist in relation to each other, we see primary world performances of inclusivity, such as activism, address D&D relationship with social injustices both inside and outside of the game and secondary world performances use homebrew to create more inclusive worlds. The cast members also perform inclusivity through different roles: the person, the player, the persona and the performer roles (Waskul & Lust, 2004; Burton, 2021). Within these separate roles, they mediate their own identities and rules, structure and goals from the primary world into expressions of identity and inclusivity in the secondary world. Through these forms of performance, the diverse player groups in D&D actual plays aim to build a more inclusive D&D community and reinforce the importance of fighting social injustices, even at places where these problems are not directly visible.

For the players, D&D lends itself especially well to the safe exploration of various identities in the secondary world (Holland, 2009; Rogers, 2020). Adding to the findings of Lasley (2021), we see that this applies to the audience of actual plays as well from comments under the YouTube videos. People are actively looking for representation in the media they consume and can be helped to form their own identity from others' exploration of marginalized identities. What ultimately stands out is the doubled function D&D can fulfill through both the primary world and the secondary world. On one hand, as Wizards of the Coast says, D&D revolves around having fun and creating good times and memories with friends. On the other hand, roleplaying in an imaginary world can be used as a tool for the exploration of one's identity in the primary world. Through the medium of the actual play, the same happens: the performers provide entertainment, as well as a source for getting to know the possibilities of self-identity creation.

5.4 Implications and future research

At its core, the results of this research offer insight on the role of actual play performers and the way they communicate ideals and values regarding inclusivity. While D&D is normally played in a small group with no spectators, the addition of an audience affords performers the ability to communicate their views on problems in the primary and secondary worlds through their on screen persona as well as through their imaginary D&D character. As mentioned in the theory chapter, Clements (2019) sees D&D's ability to serve as

a tool for ideological change at the gaming table. The results of this research show the potential of D&D as a tool for ideological change to extend its reach far beyond the gaming table. With the most popular actual plays getting millions of views, performances of inclusivity in its many forms can inspire the people watching to recognize and confront social injustices they encounter in both real life and in their own Dungeons and Dragons games. Initiatives like these are a start to more awareness in communities, but it is yet to be seen whether perceived problems with inclusivity in D&D's game design will also see fundamental changes.

Where the potential of actual plays making a more inclusive community stands out, this research only partly reflects on their effect on the community. Below many of the actual play videos analyzed, people posted comments that appreciated the way these performers highlighted marginalized identities and dealt with social injustices. However, fundamental change takes time. The history of D&D shows that its publisher does not ignore criticisms and has attempted to improve parts of the game in relation to accusations of ingrained social injustices. A deeper analysis of the D&D community as a whole, as well as subsections of that community, may help form an understanding of how it will develop over time. Where media plays a strong role in the shaping of society, actual plays do too in the shaping of the D&D community. They are able to amplify the voices of marginalized identities in the community and give examples of the changes they would like to see. Further research into the wide variety of changes that different actual plays adapt in their D&D campaigns might also provide insight into the future of D&D's game design. Furthermore, insight into the way regular D&D players approach secondary world social injustices and making their games more inclusive could indicate an ideological shift towards more inclusive communities. All in all, as the secondary world partly reflects the primary world, addressing prevalent problems in both could eventually lead to improvements in both our society and in people's enjoyment of Dungeons and Dragons.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Selective sampling of six actual plays

Actual play name	Group composition	Official ruleset and adventure?	Commercial or independent?
Galesong (D&D Beyond, 2022)	Six people who all have a disability, ranging from physical to mental disabilities.	Uses 5 th edition ruleset. Story is homebrew, but set in an officially published world setting.	Commercially produced by D&D Beyond, which sells D&D books on its platform.
Transplanar (TransplanarRPG, 2020-present)	Five people who are people of color and identify as transgender and with various gender identities.	Uses 5 th edition ruleset, but its world is set in a completely homebrewed world setting.	Independently produced by the performers themselves.
Lost Mine of Phandelver (Roll20, 2020)	People identifying with a variety of different gender identities as well as several people of color.	Uses 5 th edition ruleset. They play the officially published starter adventure.	Commercially produced by Roll20, which is an online ttrpg platform that also sells D&D books.
Curse of Strahd (HighRollersDnD, 2017-present)	People identifying with a variety of marginalized identities (transgender, non-binary, people of color).	Uses 5 th edition ruleset. The play the officially published Curse of Strahd.	Independently produced by media company ‘Yogscast’, which does not have a direct relation to the D&D brand
Rivals of Waterdeep (Dungeons and Dragons, 2018)	All performers in this group are people of color.	Uses 5 th edition ruleset. Story is homebrew, but set in an officially published world setting.	Commercially produced by the Dungeons and Dragons brand itself.
Three Black Halflings (3BlackHalflings, 2022-present)	All performers in this group are people of color.	Uses 5 th edition ruleset, with alterations. They play in a homebrew world.	Independently produced by the performers themselves.

Appendix B: Coding tree

Selective code	Axial code	Examples
Primary world	Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ‘Fuck Wizards of the Coast’ statement, criticizing treatment of black employees - Explicit criticism of social injustices in D&D
	Escapism & fun	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Explicit mention of using D&D as a means to escape the social injustices present in real life - Mention of playing D&D to escape the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic and socialize with isolated friends
	Representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visual stream layout incorporates LGBTQIA+ flag - Diversity in player groups - Pronouns shown and or stated
Secondary world	Biological Essentialism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Departure from western European inspired fantasy narratives - Change of rules that have a bio-essentialist foundation - Reframing of evil versus good, where evil is not a trait that is forced upon all of one race or creature - Racism/racial stereotyping in the imaginary world <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Occurs and is challenged in roleplay o Not present in the world at all
	Queer identities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Casual representation in the imaginary world

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Worlds are not heteronormative and include (for example) gay/bisexual relationships - Specifically highlighted in the story <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Transplanar includes a subplot around top-surgery scars of a player character
	Disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Secondary world is facilitated to be accessible for people with disabilities - Casual representation in the imaginary world <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sign language is commonly spoken ○ (Non-) player characters appear with physical disabilities - Disabilities are normalized <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Characters with disabilities are not questioned and is not limited in play ○ Galesong centers heroes with disabilities without making the story about disabilities
	Role of the Dungeon Master	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Homebrewing lore, worlds and characters that facilitate inclusive experience for both players and audience - Subtly educate the audience on how you can adapt D&D games to be more inclusive - Guarding the social safety of their players through safety tool

Appendix C: Actual play episode list

Three Black Halflings

3 Black Halflings. (2022, September 3). *Tales of Wagadu: The Curse of the Spider Queen - Episode 1 "The Fall" D&D 5E Actual Play* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfGekx0a-G8>

3 Black Halflings. (2022, September 16). *Tales of Wagadu: The Curse of the Spider Queen - Episode 2 "The Pridelings" D&D 5E Actual Play* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xa9Xs4riaxg>

3 Black Halflings. (2022, November 13). *Tales of Wagadu: The Curse of the Spider Queen - Episode 3 "The Hunter" D&D 5E Actual Play* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsBlikj0dIo>

3 Black Halflings. (2022, December 6). *Tales of Wagadu: The Curse of the Spider Queen - Episode 4 "The Forest of Memories" D&D 5E* [Video]. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U8HeP1_1NyY

3 Black Halflings. (2023, February 11). *Tales of Wagadu: The Curse of the Spider Queen - Episode 5 "The Swarm" D&D 5E* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=equqBFNLqps>

Dungeons & Dragons. (2020, December 3). Three Black Halflings | Dragon Talk [Video].

YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8pRor9Q41w>

Headgum. (2020, July 20). Three Black Halflings - "Let's Hamilton This Guy" - Systemic

Racism in Fantasy. <https://headgum.com/three-black-halflings/lets-hamilton-this-guy-systemic-racism-in-fantasy#player>

Galesong

D&D Beyond. (2022a, December 14). *Galesong: Before the Storm | Prelude Game | D&D Beyond* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0E8bLmHQ78>

D&D Beyond. (2022b, December 14). *Galesong: Before the Storm | Prelude Game | D&D Beyond* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H0E8bLmHQ78>

D&D Beyond. (2022c, December 17). *Galesong Homebrew & Disabled Perspectives in D&D / D&D Beyond* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIAfMLRokdM>

Rivals of Waterdeep

Dungeons & Dragons. (2018a, June 18). *Episode 1 - Rivals of Waterdeep* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvgcnOu7bQA>

Dungeons & Dragons. (2018b, June 25). *Episode 2 - Rivals of Waterdeep* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6zrD0stQUHw>

Dungeons & Dragons. (2018c, July 2). *Episode 3 - Rivals of Waterdeep* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkPiNS6WpxU>

Dungeons & Dragons. (2018d, July 16). *Episode 4 - Rivals of Waterdeep* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h6S0l1E7naI>

Dungeons & Dragons. (2018e, July 30). *Episode 6 - Rivals of Waterdeep* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_G_D7xLwIs

High Rollers

High Rollers DnD. (2020a, April 13). *High Rollers: Curse of Strahd #1 | The Mists of Barovia* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKp_OhRpzZw

High Rollers DnD. (2020b, April 20). *High Rollers: Curse of Strahd #2 | Wrath of Fire & Death* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JR4E27_a7cg

High Rollers DnD. (2020c, April 27). *High Rollers: Curse of Strahd #3 | Fortunes of the Vistani* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmADXdZaFG4>

High Rollers DnD. (2020d, May 4). *High Rollers: Curse of Strahd #4 | The Flour Children* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQ4WdR3z_jY

High Rollers DnD. (2020e, May 11). *High Rollers: Curse of Strahd #5 | On the Road* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TTidRd3Z_-A

Lost Mine of Phandelver

Roll20. (2020a, June 10). *Lost Mine of Phandelver | Episode 0 | Character Creation* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xn8JecJwGq4>

Roll20. (2020b, June 16). *Lost Mine of Phandelver | Episode 1 | Ambush!!!* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PgfQwlabovE>

Roll20. (2020c, June 23). *Lost Mine of Phandelver | Episode 2 | Cragmaw Cave* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Op577eBJync>

Roll20. (2020d, June 30). *Lost Mine of Phandelver | Episode 3 | Tresendar Manor* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJR2n52UuVI>

Roll20. (2020e, July 7). *Lost Mine of Phandelver | Episode 4 | Redbrand Hideout* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ee7qB9qc7Is>

Transplanar

Transplanar RPG. (2020a, June 30). *[PILOT] with the first labor pains / suddenly the sun goes pale // CAMPAIGN I* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JGi5-F4uxA>

Transplanar RPG. (2020b, July 14). [*A1E2*] *my hands were daylight all through the night* // *CAMPAIGN I* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEu4Ao6Wh94>

Transplanar RPG. (2020c, July 30). [*A1E3*] *like god's hand off the sun* // *CAMPAIGN I* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-8JCrVE-Qg>

Transplanar RPG. (2020d, August 20). [*A1E4*] *a garden disguised as ferns* // *CAMPAIGN I* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fokNwYweM0>

Transplanar RPG. (2020e, September 3). [*A1E5*] *hope is what disarms/the bomb* // *CAMPAIGN I* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TFVeXGlk55Q>

Transplanar RPG. (2020f, December 5). [*A1E13*] *hunger prays to rage* // *CAMPAIGN I* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zcPhJhcNQc>

Transplanar RPG. (2020g, December 17). [*A1E14*] *the mountain shrugs* // *CAMPAIGN I* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLheXZ7EI5U>

Dungeons & Dragons. (2021b, January 21). Transplanar RPG | Dragon Talk [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pdqV5WChNEc>