A DARK ARCANA

Subverting harmful normative High Fantasy Character Tropes in Table-Top Roleplaying Games

An exegesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Research Question

How does concept design for a table-top roleplaying game communicate the socio-cultural and economic paradigms of the speculative world it is based in?

How can concept design be used to subvert harmful normative fantasy genre tropes and stereotypes regarding characters and cultures in a table-top roleplaying game?

Abstract

Concept design can be used as a vehicle to deliver and enhance the subversion of harmful normative tropes and stereotypes of fantasy tabletop role-playing games. Through reimagining character genre tropes, concept designers can construct a unique, refreshing and more socially relevant high fantasy setting. By using principles of layered engagement and rehabilitating some of the less harmful tropes the designer can ensure that the setting remains easily accessible to audiences and package the subversion of the most harmful tropes in an acceptable manner for easy audience consumption. The designer proposes to demonstrate and test these ideas through the creation of an illustrated handbook, which serves as a vertical slice of the larger setting guide for the *Dark Arcana* table-top roleplaying game, an original IP of their own design. This guide will introduce the audience to the intellectual property and explore the creation of a subversive and more socially conscious fantasy tabletop roleplaying game setting. By focusing the vertical slice on the creation of conceptual designs of characters and their cultural placement within the setting, the designer can use principles of worldbuilding to establish a broader set of paradigms for this speculative world. By guiding this creative practice in genre ethnography and an understanding of the socio-cultural politics of post-colonial and feminist theory, the concept designer will explore the subversion of harmful normative genre tropes in the creation of a more socially conscious high fantasy setting for *Dark Arcana*.

Ethics Approval

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director (Research Ethics), email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Acknowledgements

Contents

1 Introduction

This project is informed by my personal experiences; both as a tabletop role-player (games master and player); and a digital artist and art director working videogames and multimedia. This research attempts to discuss, synthesise and expand on our understanding of character tropes within tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGS). This project seeks to understand how a designer can use worldbuilding, particularly through concept design to disrupt and subvert established and harmful genre tropes within character design. Although the focus of this project is on tabletop roleplaying games, their broader role as transmedia games is important from a historical and research perspective (Deterding & Zagal, 2018). Roleplaying games have a strong historical association with broader speculative fiction, in particular fantasy worlds and settings, and character tropes from roleplaying games affect this transmedia deeply (Nikolaidou, 2018).

The literature review discusses tabletop roleplaying games, through the lens of transmedia studies and fantasy worldbuilding in general. This will establish the contextual underpinning of fantasy genre tropes, and how they can contribute to the creation of harmful portrayals of real-world character identities in transmedia fantasy (Byers & Crocco, 2016; Hardy, 2015). Importantly this will look at the changing nature of audiences for transmedia fantasy and tabletop role-playing games and how it applies to the creation of more socially inclusive fantasy transmedia, particularly for tabletop roleplaying games. The final component of the literary research will be a synthesis of techniques and studies that look at creating more socially conscious and accessible fantasy tabletop roleplaying games. This research project also initiates a quantitative survey about fantasy TRPG and transmedia tropes in order to validate the ethnographic and qualitative conclusions. Provided to TRPG players broadly online, the survey provides this project with quantitative data about what intuitive understandings TRPG players have of the tropes within fantasy transmedia. The research culminates in a synthesis of this data into design criteria for the conceptual design of the project.

The designer will use this new framing of fantasy genre and transmedia tropes to create conceptual designs for a group of key player character types with the goal of subverting the existing tropes identified. This will take the form of a 'vertical slice', a booklet which demonstrates the narrative, character and setting illustrations that would be part of a tabletop roleplaying game. The vertical slice will develop and expand on my intellectual property, *Dark Arcana* (n.d)*, which is an original TRPG I am developing (Gerritsen, n.d.). With the rules for this game already codified this provides opportunity for the research to focus on the conceptual design aspects of the game, providing a framework for the creation of new conceptual designs for other character tropes. By subverting fantasy genre tropes, it is the desired outcome of the designer to create a more compelling and socially conscious TRPG.

2 Literature

2.1 Fantasy Tabletop Roleplaying Games

A tabletop roleplaying-game (TRPG) is a form of world and character exploration based on a set of rules. Defined in a player's handbook, the game is played by a group of people, usually with miniatures and dice or other technical stand-ins or chance mechanisms. Byers and Cocco (2016) state that RPGs are made of a rubric of "roleplaying, narrative, quests, statistical systems, collaboration and specialisation, levelling up and experience points, and the game master" (Byers & Crocco, 2016, p. 5). It is the aim of various ludic and chance devices to create a collaborative gaming and narrative experience, with players using their imaginations to fill in the blanks (Deterding & Zagal, 2018). RPGS are a form of interactive narrative play which is historically important for the development of the broader paradigms of the videogame, fantasy literature and fantasy transmedia in general (Byers & Crocco, 2016; Deterding & Zagal, 2018; Nikolaidou, 2018).
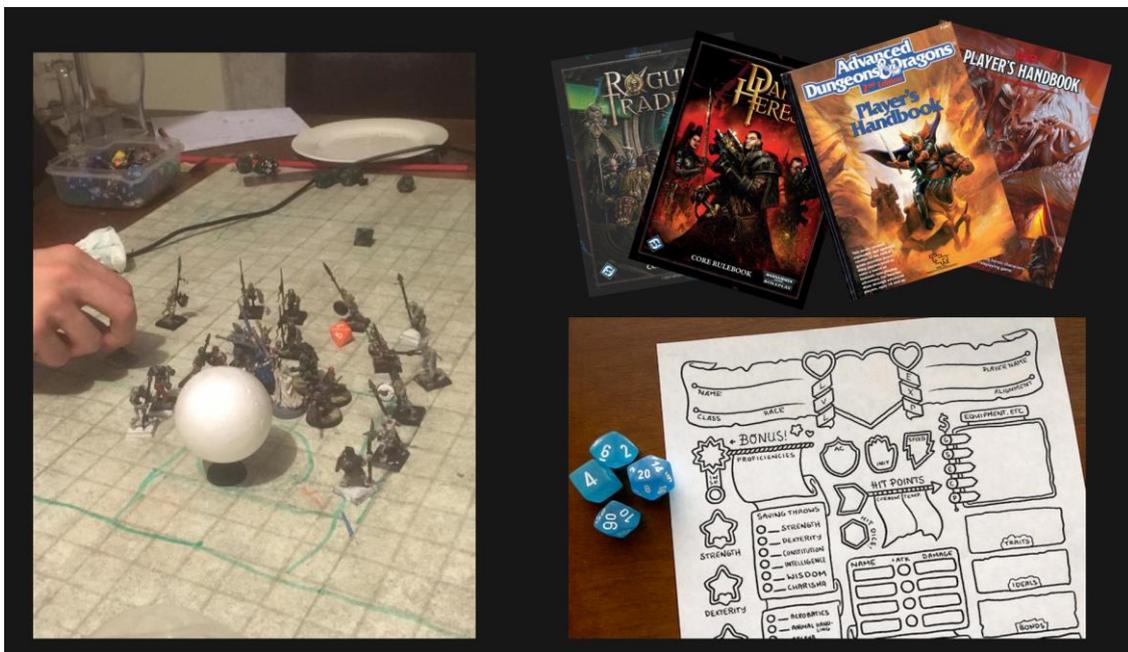
Image 1: Collage of Roleplaying Game Artifacts and Ephemera (Gerritsen, 2020)

The evolution of TRPGs can be traced all the way back to the early miniatures wargaming of the 60s and 70s. Gary Gygax is credited with forming the first TRPG rules out of existing miniatures wargaming, which was based on medieval and Napoleonic mass combat (Byers & Crocco, 2016). Owing to the popularity of *The Lord of the Rings (1955)*, Gary used many Tolkienian devices including themes, cultures and assumptions when creating the first TRPG, *Chainmail (1971)* which would later become *Dungeons & Dragons (1974)* (Byers & Crocco, 2016; Gygax & Arneson, 1974; Gygax & Perren, 1971; Tolkien, 1955). Historically, the TRPG was created by synthesising of Fantasy literature with miniature wargaming (Byers & Crocco, 2016).

With the rise of collaborative tools via the internet and video streaming, TRPGs are going through a renaissance empowered by digital immersion and the expanding market share of fantasy and science fiction media on mainstream platforms (Byers & Crocco, 2016). This is due to the immersive advantage of TRPGs in storytelling and imagination compared to any of their related digital offspring or media. The computer RPG (or CRPG) was initially a vehicle for the direct translation of as much of the TRPG experience as possible to a digital interactive medium, which has diversified into the popular medium

we know today. CRPGs are distinct from, but grounded in the framework of TRPGs, including the same fictional assumptions. This is evidenced in the commercial dreadnaught of *World of Warcraft (2004)* and modern critical successes like *The Witcher III: The Wild Hunt (2015)* (Pardo et al., 2004; Tomaszkiewicz et al., 2015)*.* However, compared to most TRPGs, CRPGs still lack many of the indeterministic elements of imagination and collaborative narrative that defines the TRPG experience. The most advanced CRPG still require a determinist and pre-programmed approach to storytelling, and cannot harness the unpredictability, possibility and imagination of a TRPG (Deterding & Zagal, 2018). Even some of the most critically and popularly applauded CRPGs, direct translations of *Dungeons & Dragons*; such as *Baldur's Gate (1998)* and *Baldur's Gate 2: Shadows of Amn (2000)* lack the imaginary collaboration inherent to their inspiration (*Baldur's Gate*, 1998; Ohlen, 2000)

The same advances in computing technology that make increasingly complex and deterministic RPGs possible and popular, are also responsible for revitalising the TRPG genre. Internet tools such as video streaming, voice sharing, and screen sharing have dramatically expanded the audience of TRPGs. Additionally, these tools which were originally designed for workplace collaboration and sharing are perfect for the interactive and collaborative nature of TRPGs.

2.2 Transmedia relationships and the importance of Fantasy RPGs

The link between TRPGs and Fantasy literature is exemplary of the broader effects that TRPGs have had on speculative fiction in general. TRPGs and their influence can be felt broadly across fantasy and science fiction genres and intellectual properties (Harvey, 2015). Successful games such as *The Witcher, World of Warcraft,* and *Baldur's Gate* stand with others such as *Divinity 2: Original Sin (2017)* and *The Elder Scrolls 5: Skyrim (2011)* in acting as a media bridge between TRPGs and CRPGs (*Baldur's Gate*, 1998; Howard, 2011; Ohlen, 2000; Pardo et al., 2004; Tomaszkiewicz et al., 2015).

A case study of note is *Malazan: Book of the Fallen (1999) a* growingly popular fantasy literature series (Erickson, 1999, 2010)). Based on their *General-Universal-Roleplaying-Game (1986)* campaign *Malazan* and other novels in its setting by Ian C Esselmont and Steven Erickson are directly reflective of their collaborative TRPG gaming (Erickson, 2010; *GURPS: Generic Universal RolePlaying System*, 1986). Erickson states:

> The role of *AD&D* [*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*] is seminal to modern fantasy fiction. If anything, its influence is so vast it can be hard to get a handle on it. As for me, why, I miss gaming. But I found, during the writing of the *Malazan Book of the Fallen* series, I could not quite both game and write. They drew from the same well, I think. The same narrative impulse, the same thirst for adventure, the same delight in characterization (Erickson, 2010).

Scholars have also identified the links and influences fantasy TRPGs have made on fantasy fiction. Nikolaidou (2018) states that "TRPGs are connected with, and have become a factor, both in the evolution of the speculative genre, as well as the evolution of the culture of the fantastic" (Nikolaidou, 2018, p.39). Deterding and Zagal (2018) crystallise this notion in suggesting that that TRPGs are at the cutting edge of transmedia authorship and have an unexplored historical legacy with more study being needed (Deterding & Zagal, 2018).

TRPGs have become transmedia licences, which makes it important to study how they propagate tropes and stereotypes across media genres. This phenomenon remains understudied despite the already significant, and growing influence media culture at large of TRPG tropes (Deterding & Zagal, 2018). Designers and scholars understand that TRPGs are an exemplary site for the study of tropes, including of discrimination and stereotyping in fan cultures. With these broad influences in mind

character tropes within TRPGs have become an important nexus for socio-cultural and political interactions between players and the fantasy worlds they participate in.

2.3 Normative fantasy tropes and real-world sociocultural politics

The worldbuilding of TRPGs, particularly of culture and character, and what social or cultural politics these reinforce or create in players is influenced by the normative social politics in the player's world. The roleplaying game "transforms into a milieu for the existence and recreation of inherited cultural information" (Illieva, 2013 p. 31). As a result, the narratives they produce will be an amalgam of their various experiences, codes, and cultural language (Illieva, 2013; Nikolaidou, 2018). Nikolaidou (2018) outlines the history of the effects of Eurocentric fantasy such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia (1950)* on the development of TRPGs and fantasy in general:

> However, while the landscape was alien to the characters, it remained familiar to the players who controlled them: the places described in the game text were a pseudo-medieval Europe, complete with castles, hereditary monarchies, robed spellcasters reminiscent of Merlin, etc. The list of references included in nearly all editions of the game, from the *Original Dungeons & Dragons* (1975) to the fifth edition (2014) points to staples of fantasy fiction. The monsters and fantastical creatures were seemingly drawn from mythology but as Peterson notes, their actual roots were to be found in pulp fiction and not in the myths that provided the imagery (84) (Nikolaidou, 2018, p. 244).

The early medieval European influences on the genre have since become normative and proliferated throughout fantasy transmedia (Deterding & Zagal, 2018; Di Tommaso, 2006). It is technology-based societies, which possess substantial reflective time that have indulged in the creation of fantasy media and TRPGs (Rutledge, 2001). As a result, TRPG's have been built on the normative foundation of the mythologies and cultural context of these societies. As such we can expect, and see that they have proliferated patriarchal and Eurocentric tropes, with treatments of the other likely to have been inaccurate, superficial and insensitive (Nikolaidou, 2018).

The use of myth and simple tropes is a design shorthand and is very important to TRPGs. Players and audiences quickly recognise these signifiers and symbols and from this recognition make conclusions about the worldbuilding and can extend them as needed (Nikolaidou, 2018). Di Tomasso points out that using tropes means a designed doesn't need to build *ex nihilo* but rather "allowed the imagination of [their] readers to shoulder most of the burden" (Di Tommaso, 2006, page 112; Lissauer, 2014). The liberal use of these normative clichés and tropes in fantasy TRPGs and their inspired media assists in its digestion and consumption (Lissauer, 2014; Nikolaidou, 2018).

It is only via the use of problematic or exclusive mythologies that this sort of worldbuilding exercise becomes problematic. Fifty years of the TRPG industry has embedded harmful politics into its tropes and understandings of the genre writ large. In their study of fantasy transmedia Di Tommasso (2006) found a congruence with the "depiction of the eastern (or south-eastern) lands as 'despotic'; the location of sprawling kingdoms or empires ruled by whimsical sadists" (Di Tommaso, 2006 p. 114). As paraphrased by Hardy:

> These eastern states represent the great bogeyman of Western civilization since the Persians, a role that has been subsequently filled, depending on the perspective consulted, by the Parthians, Huns, Arab Muslims, Mongols, Turks, Russians, or Chinese". (Di Tommaso, 2006, p. 115, Hardy, 2015, p. 412)

We see the earliest form of this othering and characterisation of oriental inspired cultures and motifs as evil in the *Lord of the Rings* from which TRPGS and by extent, much 'high fantasy' was based. For

Tolkien the Easterlings and Southmen corsairs are evil devil-worshippers (Morgoth and later Sauron) imported to fight against the European, usually Anglo Germanic heroes (Tolkien, 1955).

It's easy to see these problematic ethno-cultural tropes across many other transmedia properties including *A Song of Fire and Ice (1996)* and *Dungeons & Dragons* settings (Gygax & Arneson, 1974; Martin, 1996; Wyatt, 2014). The norm by this stage is a focus on western civilisation with steppes to the east and jungles and desert to the south (Di Tommaso, 2006; Gygax & Arneson, 1974; Hardy, 2015; Martin, 1996; Wyatt, 2014). Eastern and southern cultures are projected on bestial or non-human races in savage orientalist appropriations of indigenous cultures (Di Tommaso, 2006; Hardy, 2015). Prominent examples include the Japanese projections onto Orcs in *Dungeons & Dragons: 4th Edition (2008)*, Aztec and Mayan themed Lizardfolk and Mongolian themed Ogres in *Warhammer (1983)* (Heinsoo, 2008; *Warhammer: Age of Sigmar*, 1983). The most prominent trope is the broad ranging stereotyping of Orcish and Goblinoid peoples as savage, evil and barbarous (Gygax & Arneson, 1974; *Warhammer: Age of Sigmar*, 1983; Wyatt, 2014).

We can lift some further examples from *Game of Thrones*. Whilst the names of the main characters have "European analogues of Westeros eg: Robert, Jon, Catelyn, as we head east these shift to "more alien concoctions replete with Z's, Q's, X's and harsh gutturals" (Hardy, 2015 p. 414). This is a common trope used across worldbuilding in fantasy transmedia. If we look to more modern editions of RPGs or worldbuilding such as Matthew Mercer's *Tal'Dorei (2017)* or *Dungeons & Dragons: 5 Edition (2014)* we see the same use of Z's, Q's and X's used for the names of beasts, dragons, the orient and any denomination of 'otherness' required by the broader transmedia tropes of Eurocentrism (Mercer & Haeck, 2017; Wyatt, 2014). This may be something with which many persons of non-European descent may identify in fantasy in TRGPS and transmedia, the continuation of centuries of their names and cultures being marked primitive or evil (Rutledge, 2001).

The harmful construction of non-western cultures can manifest in diverse ways across society and media. Stieg Larsson brings this to our attention in *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo (2010)* with the subversive suggestion from the protagonist Lisbeth that she always felt more in common with the Orcs from the *Lord of the Rings* than the heroes (Larsson, 2010). There is a broad consensus among design and worldbuilding that the use of these normative tropes allow the game and media to "flow easily, since familiarity with the setting allows for easier communication and the use of pre-existing codes"(Di Tommaso, 2006; Illieva, 2013; Nikolaidou, 2018, p.39). Yet this may impose a normative harmful coding of other, race, culture sexuality or gender based on the historical and cultural attitudes that construct those signs and codes. (Di Tommaso, 2006; Illieva, 2013; Nikolaidou, 2018)

2.4 Analysing and subverting harmful tropes

A theoretical avenue to guide the disruption of problematic tropes or stereotypes lies in adopting modern postcolonial and feminist theory. Intersectional and postcolonial theory gives a designer a framework with which to identify problematic tropes or rework outdated fantasy conventions (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2014). Through postcolonialism we are encouraged to revaluate our knowledge and ideas of people and cultures, and to be conscious of how western power and knowledge structures have influenced our understanding of those people (Kohn & Reddy, 2017). With feminist theory, particularly intersectional feminism, we look at power, economic and sexual relationships between genders and sexes and how these have shaped and are shaped by society (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2014). Intersectional theory and an understanding of how power and repression may affect people differently based on a range of socio-cultural and economic factors, is an important linking factor between our lenses of feminism and postcolonialism (Crenshaw, 1989). These

combined theoretical avenues are especially important in this analysis of tropes in fantasy TRPGs and their inspired media.

This research is part of a wider body of exploration into how to apply the lens of feminist and postcolonial theory to our understandings of the genre. As mainstream popularisation of fantasy TRPGs was occurring in the 80s and 90s, critical voices had identified many of the tropes within these fantasy worlds as problematic. Authors such as Ursula Le Guin have (1979, 1969) critiqued this through published essays and memoirs on the topic of fantasy. Additionally, Le Guin's famous work, the *Left Hand of Darkness (1969)*, shows us the fantasy need not be limited by its heteronormative and Eurocentric origins with the depiction of an ambisexual alien race. (Guin, 1969) This work has become seminal in the development of 'feminist science fiction'' (Guin, 1969, 1979). If we look to the original editions of *Dungeons & Dragons,* published during the discovery and rise of Le Guin's career, we see that the basis of what became normative tropes in fantasy transmedia today paid little attention to the 'academic' speculative fiction of the time. In *Dungeons & Dragons w*omen were often depicted bare-breasted and mainly as spellcasters, and were significantly fewer than the male heroes (Nikolaidou, 2018). Additionally the described social structures mimicked medieval European hierarchies with little equality of genders (Nikolaidou, 2018). If we look to the first two editions of *Dungeons & Dragons "*people of colour were rare, and, despite the claim that there were no sexual taboos inherent in the setting, homosexuality was not depicted or mentioned in the game text" (Nikolaidou, 2018, p. 226). These examples highlight many of the normative worldbuilding issues facing the TRPG industry today. Even when the creators aim for diversity, subversion, and representation, their sources are often rooted in material one could call offensive by today's standards. (Nikolaidou, 2018)

If we return to the present games similar to or inspired by TRPG material, such as *The Witcher* and *Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014)* provide a better framing for diversity of characters with varying gender roles and sexualities (Laidlaw, 2014; Tomaszkiewicz et al., 2015). Both series deploy a complex understanding of moral choice, and in many cases nuanced understandings of intersectional power structures. Disenfranchised or repressed peoples, particularly Elves and Dwarves in both settings, have the Tolkienian constructions flipped to repress them within a broadly human society. The player frequently may become involved in liberation or in assisting those people (Laidlaw, 2014; Tomaszkiewicz et al., 2015). These games avoid simplistic saviour or victimisation narratives with characters from either end of their racial power spectrums being complicit in various acts of moral turpitude (Laidlaw, 2014; Tomaszkiewicz et al., 2015). Additionally, both series should be commended on creating strong and diverse female characters throughout. However, their female characters still conform to harmful visual standards set by early pulp fantasy of the 'bare breasted sorceress' (Nikolaidou, 2018). Iconic and much loved characters such as Yennefer in the *Witcher*, and Morrigan in *Dragon Age* whilst empowered in their capacity to effect the setting are both characters structured on Morgan le Fae from Arthurian legend, and The Morrigan of ancient Celtic mythology (Sharpe, 1998). Both characters arguably still invoke the cautionary tales on the mysterious power of the sexual woman (Laidlaw, 2014; Tomaszkiewicz et al., 2015).

2.5 Towards socially conscious Fantasy TRPGs

TRPG authors have made attempts at escaping Eurocentrism and building more socially conscious mythologies. The 90s TRPG setting for *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Dark Sun(1991)* broadly disrupted the tropic power dynamics of race and culture and introduced many more alien races such as the Aarakocra, Dray, Thri-kreen, Kenku, Ssurran, and Tarek (Brown & Denning, 1991). A huge component of Dark Sun's social consciousness was in its mechanics and worldbuilding around desertification and desolation as a metaphor for pollution and climate change (Brown & Denning, 1991). *Dark Sun* also

pushed outside Eurocentric medieval worldbuilding, looking to Ottoman, Persian and Roman influences for the structures of its magisters and city states. In the same time period *Dungeons & Dragons* pursued similar subversive and creative engagements of their character cultures and settings, such as *Spelljammer (1989)* and *Planescape (1994)* with less effect. (Grubb, 1989; D. "Zeb" Cook, 1994). While these novel settings made strong incursions into the genre, they remain less popular or commercially viable than the *Dungeons & Dragons* staple Eurocentric settings of Faerun and Eberron (Baker et al., 2004; Wizards RPG Team, 2015).

Potentially the companies that manage and develop these properties see a loss of profit from publishing material that would be more subversive or difficult to produce and market - choosing to update existing Eurocentric settings for the increasingly liberal gender and sexual politics of the 21st century without addressing the problematic core cultural and political roots of those settings.

An exception of note is *Swordsfall: Legends of Tikor (2020)* an Afropunk fantasy TRPG that was funded online through Kickstarter in 2019 (Dixon, 2020). *Swordsfall* is a futuristic take on fantasy set on an alternative African continent with its characters being ethnically African and have their cultures based on a diverse cast of African ethnicities and traditions. Whilst it's not yet released the information available seems positive and has some interesting depictions of an African themed science fantasy (Dixon, 2020; *Swordsfall | Worldanvil*, 2019).

Erickson states that the adaption of the understood tropes within fantasy are important to the creation of successful fantasy material (Erickson, 2010). With the target market of most fantasy material being broadly engaged in fantasy transmedia, at the very least playing into these tropes is perceived to lower the barrier for entry for many potential audience members and consumers (Deterding & Zagal, 2018; Harvey, 2015). As Erickson puts it succinctly on his blog:

> Intense gaming sears the tropes into the brain, even when you're working against them. The patterns of recognition are set: one can either slide right in and do nothing new, or one can take the whole mess by the throat and give it a shake. (Erickson, 2010)

Erickson's point also references the playing of TRPGs. The adverse conceit is that ideas in fantasy, particularly in TRPGs need to be universally recognisable. This is due to the underpinning language of archetypes, tropes and stereotypes which give writers and players a framework to explore new ideas that couldn't be done without them Additionally, as Lissauer states "these tropes and clichés and archetypes of fantasy made fantasy what it was… Without them, it wouldn't be a fantasy novel" (Lissauer, 2014). Therefore, a designer who wishes to shake up these tropes needs to both use them as well as disrupt them. Breaking the fantasy worldbuilding convention outright can leave a reader feeling alienated, or make the writing or game harder to understand (Lissauer, 2014).

This research suggests that this is a core reason for why there are few mainstream TRPG fantasy worlds that are truly socially conscious.

Erickson's series *Malazan* and Dixon's *Swordsfall* both follow the existing template in establishing more diverse fantasy, a template broadly set by early attempts at diversification such as *Dark Sun*, *Spelljammer* and *Planescape.* This template is to remove the traditional Elf, Dwarf, Orc and Human ethnic and racial characterisation and move towards one that is more exotic, and alien, and usually accompanied by a shift in economic or historical era. For Dixon in *Swordsfall* this is African humans and a science fantasy futurism. For Erickson in *Malazan* it's based on his experience as an anthropologist, creating various species of humans, and near cousins such as the Andii, Teblor, Jhagut and Trell, set in an multi-ethnic iron-age empire reminiscent of north-African Rome, Persia and Imperial Japan (Erickson, 1999). While this does suggest a move away from pre-existing codifications

of ethnicity in high fantasy, it creates more work for the author to bring the player into the world with the same broad appeal as tropic depictions of Elves and Dwarves. The research suggests that an approach to creating a socially conscious TRPG suggests a more pivotal role of the designer and artist, as both the world writer and visualiser (Lissauer, 2014).

An important conclusion we can take from the research so far is that any subversion of harmful tropes in TRPG or fantasy material comes from a skilful and nuanced understanding and use of fantasy tropes in general.

2.6 Changes in Fantasy TRPG Audiences

New social and collaborative technologies have led to a resurgence in TRPGs. The rise of streaming and social media has led to new ways of play and engage with this traditional medium. Examples of incredibly popular TRPG media include *Critical Role (2015)*, an ongoing series of recorded play sessions of Matthew Mercer and his group of friends and colleagues; Will Wheaton's *Table Top (2012)*; and Dan Harmon's *Harmon Quest (2016)* (*Critical Role*, 2015; "HarmonQuest," 2016; "TableTop," 2012). These examples of nouveau TRPG media reinforce the discussion raised earlier regarding the importance of TRPGs to fantasy transmedia. Byers and Cocco (2016) cite the growing mainstream inclusion and acceptance of *Dungeons & Dragons* in popular culture, entertainment and education over the last forty years (Byers & Crocco, 2016). They include the tv show *The IT Crowd (2006)* to which we can now ad *Community (2009)* the *Big Bang Theory (2007), Stranger Things (2016)* and *Sex Education (2019)* (Byers & Crocco, 2016; Harmon, 2009; Lineham, 2006; Lorre & Prady, 2007; Nunn, 2019; The Duffer Brothers, 2016).

This mainstream inclusion has assisted in the contemporary diversification and accessibility of TRPGs. This diversification is in part due to feminist and intersectional critiques of fantasy tropes, but also from the diversity and inclusion of both new designers and audiences for TRPGs and fantasy. When *Vampire: the Masquerade (1991)*, a gothic punk fantasy TRPG launched, it's publisher White Wolf was limited to a middle class American white design team (Nikolaidou, 2018; Rein-Hagen et al., 1991). As a result the product demonstrated the limited information and research conducted by the team; "the materials at our disposal were often inaccurate, superficial, and generally offensive" (Nikolaidou, 2018, p. 227). As the global culture of TRPG design has become interconnected through online communication, both access to source material and diversification of designers working on these licences, and subsequently the audiences, have evolved. The design pipeline has evolved to become more agile and inclusive of a two-way discourse with the players within the design process (Nikolaidou, 2018). Keeping in touch through participatory and open forms of production has enabled TRPGs to diversify with their changing audience (Nikolaidou, 2018). But the core economic maxim, which is also espoused across transmedia production is that making things more attractive to women and international audiences' benefits sales (Nikolaidou, 2018). As such the evolution of TRPGs towards more diverse and socially conscious settings comes in part to this diversification of audiences (Nikolaidou, 2018).

Frequent inclusions of diverse characters in official material from *Dungeons & Dragons* is now seen as normal to mainstream audiences. 40 years later *Dungeons & Dragons*, written by two Christian identifying white males, is trying to accommodate everyone (D'Anastasio, 2017). Although there are more socially conscious stories and characters being published for TRPGs the evolved design process is still not completely implemented. We can look to *Tal'Dorei* and *Critical Role*'s use of broadly Eurocentric and orientalist tropes and characters despite contemporary gender and sexual liberalism. New editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* use a variety of inclusive characters and character depictions. However, these characters are still broadly deployed to traditionally Eurocentric and popular worlds

and settings. These remain rooted in the harmful normative tropes that began their construction and evolution.

There remains work to be done in the design and creation of socially conscious TRPG worlds from the ground up.

3 Methodology

3.1 Ethnography

A large portion of the methodology of this project will fall to Ethnographic research. This is due to the designer's position as both a TRPG player, and the creator of *Dark Arcana*. Using Ethnography in this way should allow the designer to collect useful data and refine their design project to meet its academic goals and create strong conceptual design for *Dark Arcana*.

Ethnographic research will be used in the following forms:

- Research through reading RPG player and designer internet forums, communities and groups.
- Feedback from members RPG players and designers on rules, designs, processes and literature.
- Review, deconstruction, adaption and reformulation of rules, designs and stories in other published and published RPG products.

Given *Dark Arcana* is a complex work and developing a setting and conceptual design for this project is complex and difficult, ethnography is a useful method for unpacking with the complexity of the synthesis of the guiding literature to the design work.

3.2 Quantitative Data Collection

As part of this study validation of the ethnographic and literary information was carried out by gathering data through a survey. The survey is based on the tropes and stereotypes identified through ethnographic analysis. Questions were framed around important design, cultural, political and social considerations for character archetypes, and themes that could be extracted for the world building design process and was structured around the five-character races of *Dark Arcana*, reformatted as necessary to be more recognisable to players. Evocative descriptions and comparative questions were used to try and illicit an intuitive or subconscious response from respondents, as tropes are normally subconsciously projected.

The survey intended to generate responses that could be used to create conceptual direction for the design of the character races, and the development of design briefs.

3.3 Roleplaying Game Vertical Slice

A vertical slice is a prototype or feature complete strip of a much larger project done to demonstrate, usually the commercial viability and risk of a product (Clinton, 2011; @tiedtiger, 2012). The final design will take the form of a smaller and more compact version of the Players Handbook for Dark Arcana. In this case the designer chose to focus on a specific portion of the setting, including character designs, props, costumes and a key-scene location. This handbook will test the concept design techniques and principles of concept design and the subversion harmful genre tropes in creating the setting for Dark Arcana at a smaller scale as a model for the larger books and products of the genre.

The production of this handbook is a vehicle to test the designer's process and research in subverting the expected character tropes in a natural and expected context for the audience. A mock-up is shown below.

Image 2: Concept Image of what the Dark Arcana Book could look like (Gerritsen, 2019)
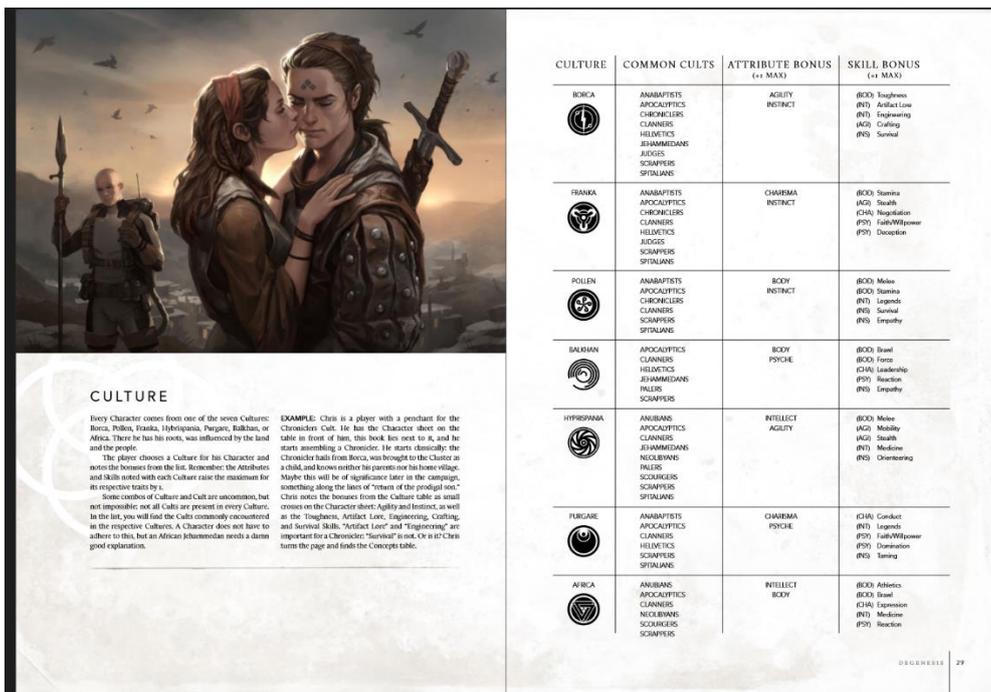

Image 3: A player's handbook spread from *Degenesis*: *Karthasys* (Günther & Djurdjevic, 2014, https://fiction.live/stories/Degenesis-Awakening-nbsp-/evn3kvEGQ4WRJfybh/home)

A key component of building this vertical slice will be the use of a key scene. Most TRPGs use a 'key scene' in promotional art or as key art to describe and present the mood and themes of the game. They pose several characters as examples of characters players may choose to play in an evocative and dynamic way, usually in a heroic situation. Creating a key scene will be the primary methodology for the illustration component as it involves the development of many characters and their cultures to fit the scene, an environment and various other props (example shown over).

Image 4: *Pathfinder* Key / Splash Artwork, (Reynolds, W, Paizo, 2018,
https://www.rollpg13.com/game/pathfinder-1e/)

The vertical slice will also provide a short prose outline for each character, which provides their in-game characteristics to help determine their accoutrements and costume. Each character's gender, appearance and profession in the party aids in the subversion of the tropes most expected by players. By focusing on one key scene with multiple characters each character can be separated out into a character portrait to go along with the description of their ethnicity and culture. Supporting designs and graphics will be created and extrapolated out from work done to complete the finished designs as well as the results of the survey.

3.5 Concept Design Methods

3.51 Integrated 3D Workflow

The use of a strong multiple staged pipeline to create designs for this project is key in its success. In order to reconcile these parts, as well as work most efficiently and accurately, I have utilised an illustration pipeline using both modern 3D visualisation workflows as well as modern illustration techniques. By building posable 3D maquettes as an anatomic model for each race, I have created a pipeline that can quickly be repurposed as well as deliver high quality custom reference imagery for illustrations and paintings. In parallel to this 3D development I have worked on the costume and character designs of each race in an abstract and illustrative manner using digital 2D art. Combining both avenues of inquiry have allowed for well thought out designs with a high quality with maximal time for feedback and for the delivery of survey results. The blending of 3D and 2D illustration techniques is championed across the modern concept design and illustration industry as a highly effective tool for commercial design delivery for fantastic or speculative properties (*Concept Art is Dead*, 2018). This practical methodology will enable the delivery of a design product with a high

production and illustration quality with maximum time for changes and feedback or necessary reprioritisations from unexpected survey results or changes in scope to the project.

The tools I have used for this workflow are ZBrush for sculpting and Blender 2.81 for rigging, layout and rendering. Both are industry standard and as a designer I have a high familiarity with each. Photoshop has been used for rendering and painting, and InDesign for the layout of the handbook. Additional software used to help with the pipeline include Substance Designer, Substance Source and Substance Painter for generating and acquiring textures.

3.52 Layered Design Engagement

Layered engagement is a design process used in entertainment design but not well documented outside it. It primarily is the principle of using multiple vocabularies of design within each other to transfer the intended messages to the audience as they become more involved in the media. In order to effectively and subtly deploy subversion of the harmful tropes of TRPGs I have 'wrapped' the subversion in layers of more palatable, expected and stereotypical design motifs that are not harmful, and the audience will respond too. I have deployed a 3-layer strategy to help my designs to engage their audience and subvert the harmful tropes identified by the other aspects of this methodology. These layers are referred to as 'reads' being the order in which aspects are viewed or consumed by the audience, with lower number reads being immediate or before others. I have also ordered these layers according to the complexity of delivered information.

- First Read: colour, materials and shape language. The designer intends to work within established paradigms and expectations to create designs that are recognisable immediately and don't cause cognitive dissonance or effort for engagement.
    - Example: A dwarven warrior in bulky heavy armour of brass, gold and maroon.
- Second read: profession, class and character. This incorporates aspects that are expected and prolific in the transmedia for those characters but also aspects that are unexpected and challenge dominant harmful tropes for that character. This read signposts the fact that the viewer should expect that the work will be different or challenging, but also provide some structure to them in that it is still trying to be what they expect.
    - Example: This dwarven warrior wears typical blocky plate armour and scales, but it's shaped more after eastern and antique armours than the typical western depictions of dwarven plate. They wear jewellery inspired on Mayan, Aztec and African, rather than Nordic artefacts.
- Third read: postcolonial and structural hierarchies. In the final and most subtle read the designer will package subversion of the most dominant and harmful tropes. This read blends into the prose of the fiction that accompanies the design work done and is mostly identifiable in subtle aspects of each character. I had anticipated that the prose is the clearest place where subversion can be done well, so this layer is the package and link to the prose and worldbuilding. An example is using artefacts or props as a signposting mechanism for subversive but complex world building tackled in the written fiction.
    - Example: The dwarven warrior is coded as a female body and bald yet has no outward depictions of her gender identity. She has metallic implants in her body, scarification and wears a runestone necklace. All of these aspects identify her relation to her tribe and class in dwarven society and are a link to the most subversive material deployed in worldbuilding to directly undercut harmful TRPG narratives.

4 Design

4.1 Case Studies

4.11 Degenesis: Rebirth

Image 5: Degenesis: Rebirth Book (Günther & Djurdjevic, 2014,
https://shop.sixmorevodka.com/en/degenesis/23-degenesis-rebirth-premium-edition.html)

Degenesis: Rebirth (2014) is a 'primal punk' TRPG set in a post-apocalyptic and decaying real world Mediterranean. (Günther & Djurdjevic, 2014) For *Dark Arcana* it is directly relevant based on the similarity of themes and its dark tones as well as its beautiful illustrations and high production value and design work across the entire product. Additionally, it mirrors the separation of ethnicity, culture and profession for player character creation and within the worldbuilding. *Degenesis* demonstrates how characters can progress from any culture into any profession. It is how the creators of *Degenesis,* and the illustrators design these characters and present them that is of direct relevance as a case study for this project.

Image 6: Degenesis Purgare Tribe page (Günther & Djurdjevic, 2014,
https://shop.sixmorevodka.com/en/degenesis/8-degenesis-rebirth-premium-edition.html)

Image 7: Degenesis culture composite image (Gerritsen, 2020 and Günther & Djurdjevic, 2014))

The success and relevance of *Degenesis'* character designs come from an evolving subtlety of signposting of cultural influence, ethnic motifs and cultural artefacts and shapes. Props and tools are also used to indicate the profession of any character within *Degenesis*, which helps to reinforce the character and item based TRPG gameplay. *Degenesis'* character designs use a unique framework of shapes, iconography, colour and material to indicate profession and importantly, historical culture.

Unifying aspects of the product's art direction help to establish worldbuilding paradigms with recurring motifs of the chakra, spore, and circuit being incorporated into character designs. *Degenesis* owes its design success in part because it works with extant cultures and influences which allow Marco Djurdjevic and the other artists to adapt, remix and reinvent cultures that have clear symbols and signifiers they can use to signpost and undertake visual worldbuilding.

The comparative Image 7 (previously) is of several of the Degenesis cultures (a player background, distinct from a player's profession). We can use these as case studies to analyse the design of culture deployed in *Degenesis* and how this is signposted. Broadly the designs show how the artists use areas of advanced materials and construction, with more modern shape language and tools to ensure the audience reads the cultures as post-industrialisation or apocalyptic. Even tribal cultures in Degenesis are shown to be living in the ruins of a post-industrial world from the inclusion of modern clothing, building and engineering materials into their costumes.

However, if we compare the African (bottom row) cultures to the European cultures (top row) there are some stark and problematic differences. All the African characters have exposed skin, horns, natural materials and fetishes, clearly signposting them as 'primitive' or 'animist'. Except for the rugged Pollen, the Borca and the Franka are fully clothed and have advanced equipment and garb. The only technology the Africans are shown to have are rifles, with their look suggesting rebel African fighters and warlords. We see here a problematic visualisation of African cultures and history in the game. This harmful structure is further enhanced by the far fewer African cultures and professions a player can choose. There is only one African culture available, being a pan-African cultural background compared to the 6 far more specific European cultures a player can choose. Similarly, there are only 3 African themed professions, compared to 9 European ones.

This is broadly indicative of how non-European cultures are shown in TRPGs. Both through the designs, gameplay and worldbuilding there are harmful limitations and stereotypes.

4.12 Numenera

Image 8: Numenera Cover and Key Art from (M. Cook, 2015)

Numenera (2015) is a science fantasy TRPG from a previous *Dungeons & Dragons* author Monte Cook. It takes place on a far future version of Earth which bears little to no resemblance to our known world (M. Cook, 2015). The theme of the setting revolves around fusing elements of magic and technology, and not clearly defining either. As a science fantasy setting that tries to tackle the depiction of magitech and techno magical devices as well as construct cultures for a new TRPG, *Numenera* can be used as a case study for *Dark Arcana*.

The character designs within *Numenera* provide little overarching or linking design language. Whilst they are quite successful in blending visual languages of technology and magic, the designs themselves have little grounding in a constructed or extant culture. In Image 9(Over) we see that of these characters the third (far right) has the most distinct feel to its culture, but this is mostly due to their design as a mutant or changed human. On a whole these three images present their ludic class archetypes clearly and signpost how they might play in a game with equipment and props, but no unifying shape language, graphic design, costume or colours indicate the makeup of their cultural backgrounds or socio-political connections. In terms of magitech design, the left-hand character's fusion of organic shapes with metal is the most compelling and unique with the shapes and materiality of the organic living metal prosthetics.

In Image 10 (over), we find further examples of how signposting magitech but little in the terms of cultural constructions again. The left-hand character has the clearest indication that he perhaps belongs to a distinct culture. His armour, colours and the complex angular shape language seem to indicate an advanced warrior guild, his armour reading as a uniform. The lightning mage on the right-hand side also seems to have a priestly design which also indicates an important socio-political association. By contrast the typical leather rogues costume with hood of the central female character implies little cultural or political group association.

None of these three characters have any ethnic or cultural signposting beyond their profession and ludic class archetype.

Image 9: Numenera Classes 1. (Yanner, K (2015) in (M. Cook, 2015))

Image 10: Numenera Classes 2 (Yanner, K (2015) in (M. Cook, 2015))

We can look to *Numenera* therefore as a moderately successful example of fusing technology and magic. We know that organic metals, glowing materials and magical prosthetics and implants strongly type characters as both magical and technological. We can also determine that in terms of cultural construction or ethnic associations that *Numenera* is largely unsuccessful only demonstrating ludic professions or player classes. Beyond these gameplay aspects the characters lack details, props, symbols or graphic design that would make them stand out as inhabiting a world with living cultures and hierarchies - rather one that reads as a 'kitchen sink' world or a *tabula rasa* engagement - but problematically built on a core of Eurocentric and white normativity.

Image 11: Swordfall Splash Art (Dixon, B, 2019,
https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/swordsfall/welcome-to-tikor-the-swordsfall-rpg-setting-and-ar/description)
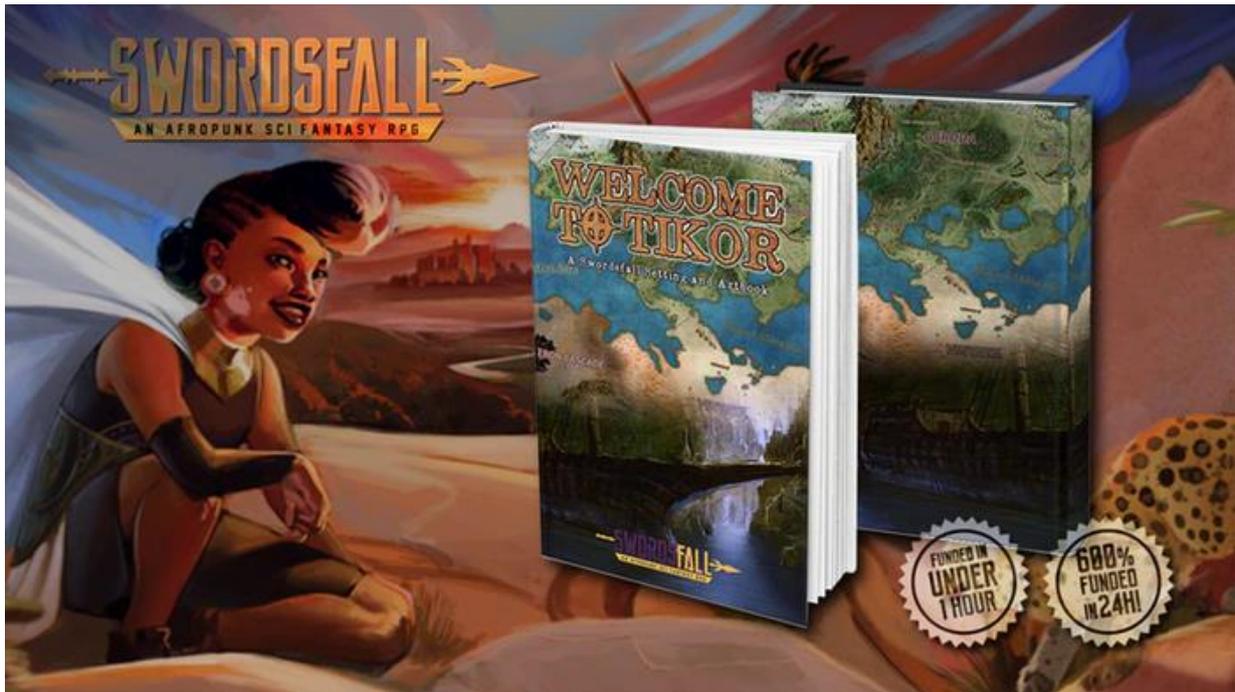
Swordsfall (2020) is an Afropunk and Afrofuturist science fantasy TRPG that was successfully kickstarted and is yet to be fully published (Dixon, 2020). It shares similarities to *Degenesis* in that it is based on some aspects of existing cultures; and similarities to *Numenara,* in its fantastic treatment of the science fiction aspects of its setting. It is set in a fantasy continent reminiscent of Africa and takes inspiration for its cultures, professions and classes and stories directly from African, and some middle eastern mythology. Identified earlier as a potential sign of the diversification of TRPG intellectual properties and settings; *Swordsfall* is useful as a case study to see how their artists have gone about embedding non-European design and mythology into their character design.

Although there is limited artwork currently viewable of *Swordsfall*, the provided artwork demonstrates how the designers are tackling African influenced fantasy cultures. In the rough concept art panels for the Dihoma tribes (images 14 and 15 later) we see some unifying visual motifs used to signpost the African-ness of the designs and resist euro-centric designs. Chiefly among these motifs are the use of angular shapes, particularly diamonds and triangles that broadly reference African textile patterns such as the cloaks of the Maasai and Zulu shield designs (images 12 and 13). These triangular and diamond shapes and patterns are reinforced and echoed in the clothing silhouettes as well as in inflated or exaggerated leg and arm coverings. Bare or exposed skin particularly shoulders is used to demonstrate similarities with African tribal clothing and implies a hot, dry and tropical climate as the norm. The colour palettes being used reference traditional ochre and darker African tribal palettes and the spot colours of red, purple and blue like again reference important African cultural garb. It is also important to notice what is missing from these designs that one would typically expect from African or southern coded designs in fantasy RPG material. Whilst the shapes may be indicated these designs are all missing feathers, teeth or other organic tribal materials or totems. These are eschewed in favour of creating a more modern and industrialised feel, which is key in these designs' success at creating distance from pre-colonial African tribal garb. This is in direct contrast to the design work of *Degenesis* which whilst it denigrates many European cultures to primitivism, without exception uses organic, animal and existing African tribal garb and motifs in the designs of its African

cultures. Incorporating these aspects, whilst true to the garb non-European persons when colonised and usually an important part of their cultural legacy, is not necessarily indicative of what African people wear day-to-day today, nor is it speculative of what African culture's garb would look like had there been no vast and destructive European colonisation of the continent.

While it is still early in *Swordsfall's* production, the techniques used to signpost and ground the characters within African culture provide a useful design precedent Of particular reference is how the art of *Swordsfall* uses graphic design, materiality, silhouettes and shape language to ground and unify a cultural depiction in a character.

Image 12: examples of the Masai Shuka (Haung, N, 2018, http://www.noirguides.com/massaishukakenyatanzania.html)

Image 13: Zulu Nguni shield (Unknown, 2019, https://www.africancraftsmarket.com/history-of-the-zulu-shield.html)

Image 14: Dihoma Tribe concept art 1 (Mere, T, 2019)
https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/swordsfall/welcome-to-tikor-the-swordsfall-rpg-setting-and-ar/description)

Image 15: Dihomar Tribe concept art 2 (Mere, T, 2019,
https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/swordsfall/welcome-to-tikor-the-swordsfall-rpg-setting-and-ar/description)

Image 16: Minos Profession concept art (Mere, T, 2019,
https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/swordsfall/welcome-to-tikor-the-swordsfall-rpg-setting-and-ar/description)

4.2 Survey Analysis

The results of the survey were both interesting and validating to the premise of the research. Based on the results we can confidently conclude that TRPG audiences are conservative in the tropes, stereotypes and design language they expect for character races in TRPGs. The survey helped me to understand the biases inherent in the broader player and that I underestimated the strength of certain normativity for several of the subject races. Useful design information was extracted from the survey, such as identification of key motifs and design language associated with each character race.

The results clearly show a strong bias and association between specific concepts and character races in the audience. The results show the strong stereotypical associations of character race and character class and governance, specifically that Dwarves are fighters and Elves are rangers or mages. The lesser known races (Lizardfolk and Beastfolk) have a weaker correlation but are both associated with primitive or barbaric classes. Humans and Dwarves are assumed to be martial and aristocratic, Elves as elitist and the minor races as barbaric or despotic. Adding gender structures to this balance also yields expected results. Dwarves and Humans are strongly patriarchal, Elves are gender neutral or swing towards matriarchy, and Beastfolk and Lizardfolk have soft correlation to patriarchy and matriarchy respectively. Other questions about egalitarianism, technological advancement, society age, magic and multiculturalism also validate most if not all bias and stereotypes in transmedia fiction about these races. Other more esoteric and conceptual questions such as planet, insects and animals and concepts also broadly align with ethnographic or the designers assumed expectation. All this data can be seen in Appendix 8.22.

The survey also asked participants to see character tropes as shapes, colours and patterns, to generate a direct correlation to the design process. The results for colour and shapes show typical tropic associations between each race. The survey shows incredibly strong associations with colour and shapes are for both Dwarves and Elves and some comparatively less strong associations for the others.

Image 17: Graphic using pictures of craftsmanship qualities by character race. (Gerritsen, 2019)

Image 18: Graphic of most associated shapes and colours by character race. (Gerritsen, 2019)

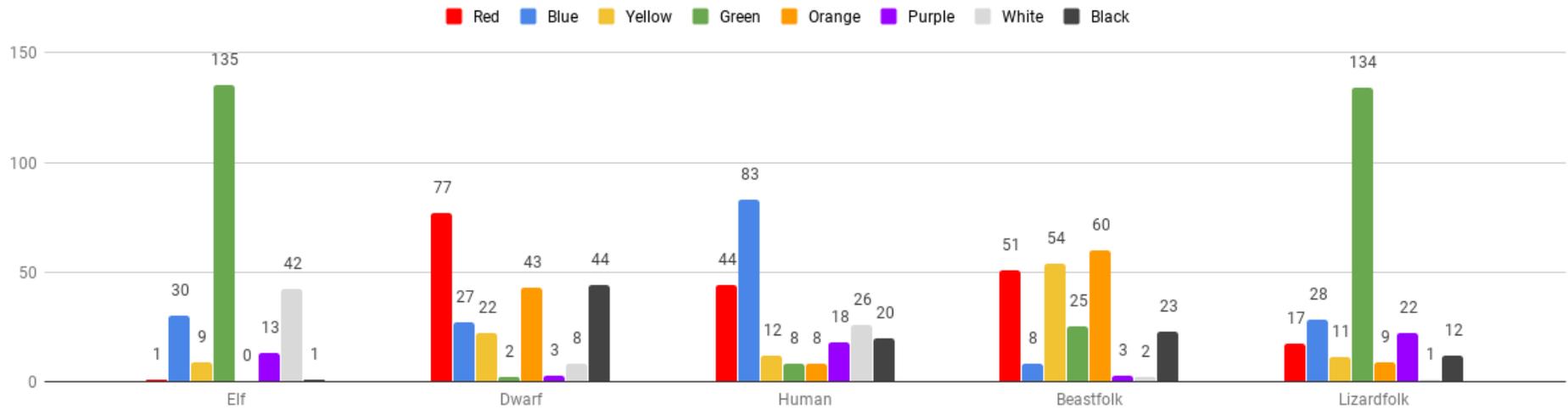What colour is most associated with each Race?

Image 19: Colour by character race (Gerritsen, 2020).
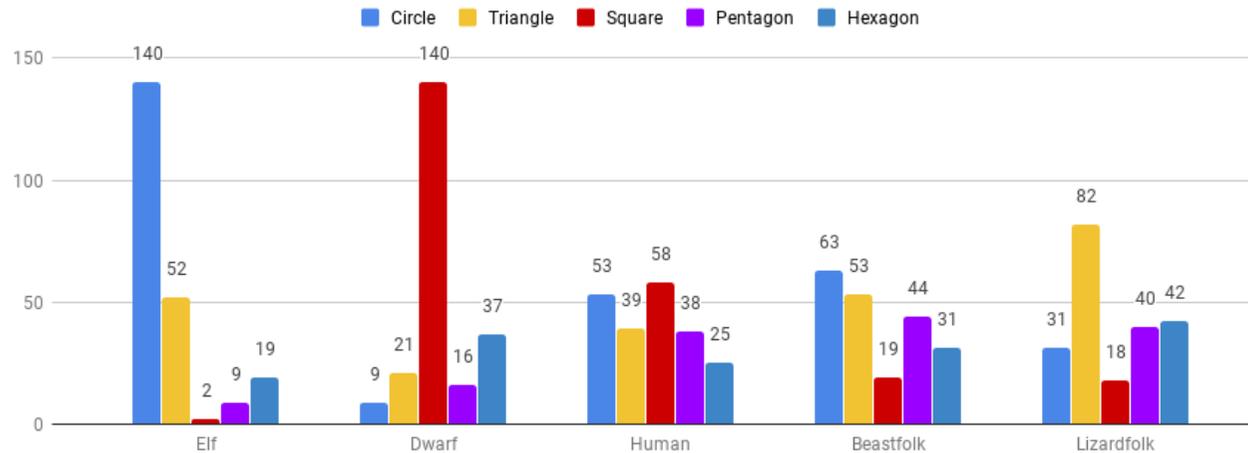
What shape is most associated with each Race?

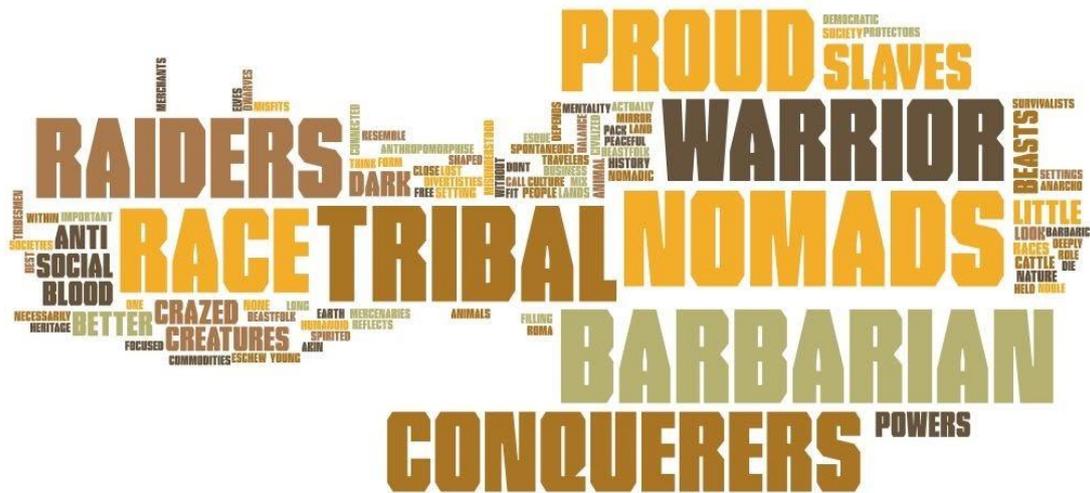
Image 20: Shape by character race (Gerritsen, 2020).

A few questions at the end of the survey proved tricky to extract value from on their own. These were literary and wordy questions seeded with tropes by the designer. From these the designer generated a word cloud as a way of approximating the data, which gives a general understanding of the mood of the tropes around each race.

Image 21: Human word cloud (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 22: Elven word cloud (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 23: Dwarven word cloud (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 24: Beastfolk word cloud (Gerritsen, 2020)
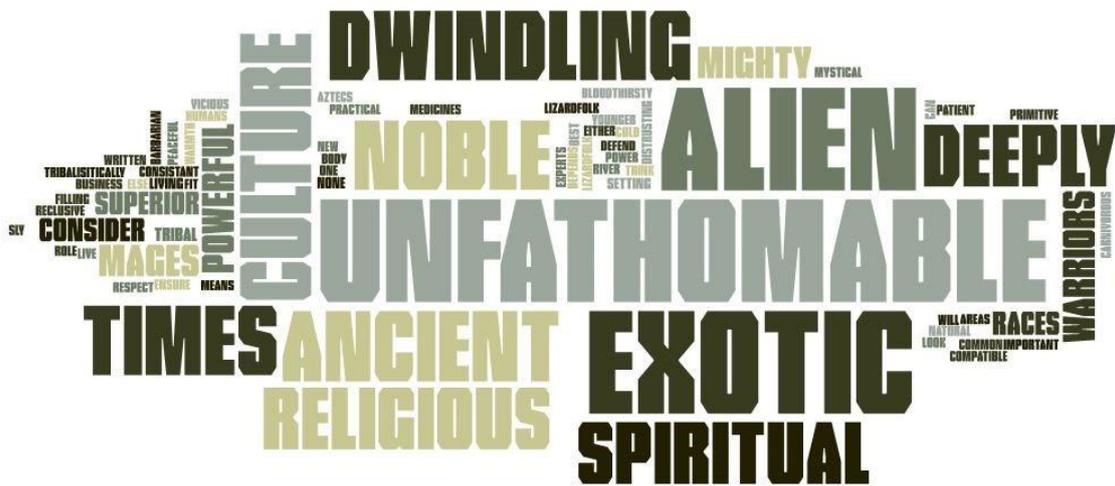
Image 25: Lizardfolk word cloud (Gerritsen, 2020)

A couple of conclusions can be very quickly drawn from the survey results. Firstly, the biases surrounding certain keystone tropic aspects of a races culture are the strongest, such as Dwarves being technological and Elves magical. Each race has a few of their own keystone tropes that players most strongly expect or identify with and are recognisable across most media to include them. Secondly for most questions, except for their keystone tropes, players have much stronger biases regarding Elves, Dwarves and Humans than Beastfolk or Lizardfolk. This indicates a lack of proliferation of settings with Beastfolk and Lizardfolk as playable races, but also that when they are included their cultures have unclear, foreign or unmemorable constructions. Furthermore, the biases about Lizardfolk and Beastfolk are more often problematic than for Elves and Dwarves, indicating that these races are used as a dumping ground for 'unattractive' cultures or tokenism. Thirdly and finally that the visual design and conceptual design biases are usually stronger across all races than the social and worldbuilding questions. This in part validates the need for a visual design deployment or response in addressing harmful tropes, or in interrogating or playing with an audience's expectations.

4.3 Design Process
4.31 World Outlines and Explorations

The design process began with identifying the areas of *Dark Arcana* to be developed into concept art. Identifying these components was done by writing outlines and extracting information from the game rules and setting notes. This process included creating several draft iterations of the handbook and working from the top down on artwork for the setting. In the early stages of development, a location in the setting called Meridian, is chosen as the focus for the vertical slice.

Image 26: Collage of early world building art and reference images for Meridian (Gerritsen, 2020)

I used the draft prose and game design to Determine the designs of the anatomy of each of the 5-character races of *Dark Arcana*. This started by doing a comparative visual analysis of existing depictions of *Dark Arcana's* race analogues in other settings (particularly from TRPGS). I used these comparative studies to develop and compare the anatomy of *Dark Arcana*'s races to other products' analogues.

Image 27: Comparative mood board for the Thrope character race (Gerritsen, 2020)

After collating this reference material, I defined a set of silhouette studies and anatomical orthographics for each race. These serve as a guide to the creation of 3D maquettes. Image 28 and 29 (over) show this process.
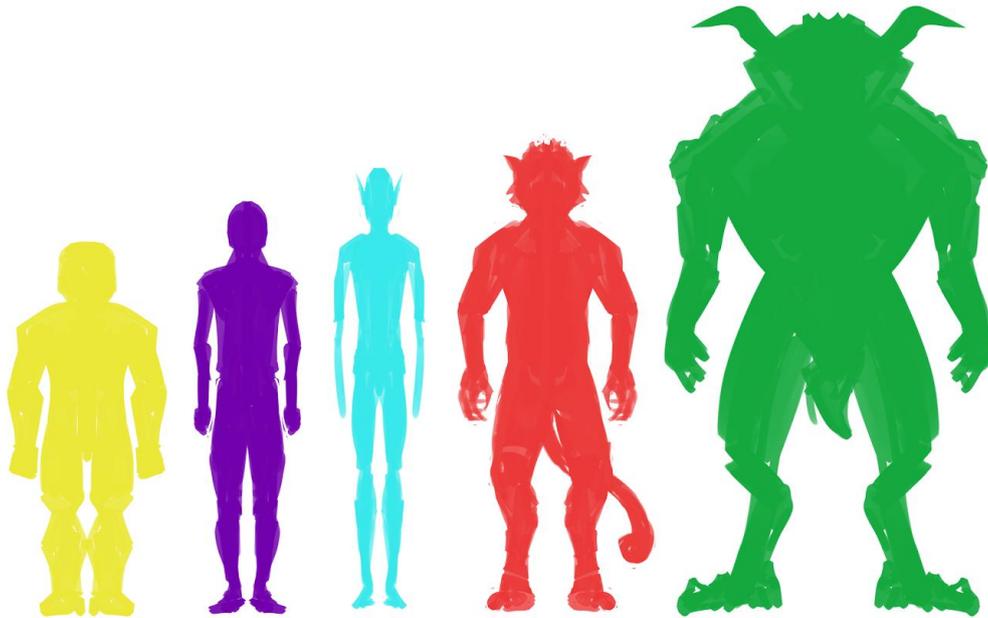
Image 28: Silhouette study of the character races (Gerritsen, 2020)
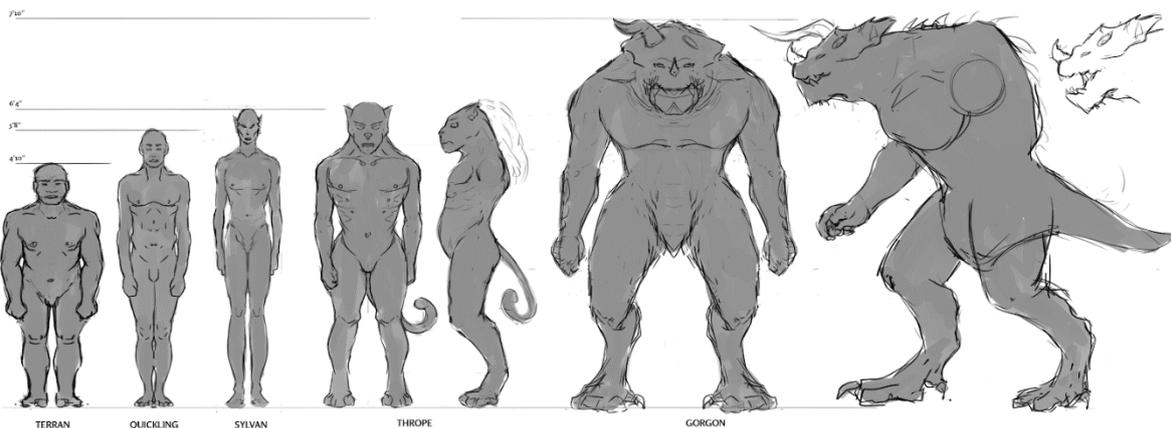
Image 29: Anatomical sketches for all races. (Gerritsen, 2020)

The anatomical and silhouette studies helped to guide the initial design phase and informed the development of new mood boards and reference material which referenced mood, tone and feature details for each of the character races. Research and medium tests in 3D help to pinpoint the best way to pursue building a virtual model of each race so that they can be posed and customised during the design process. I used a plug-in for ZBrush called ZBuilder (Georgiev, 2017; *Human Zbuilder v2*, n.d.) to develop layered blend shapes, and to customise the humanoid base meshes to create custom designs that were diversely non-human. Experimenting, and reverse engineering the tool somewhat by breaking out its base components allowed me to create a more custom mesh for each character race of *Dark Arcana.*
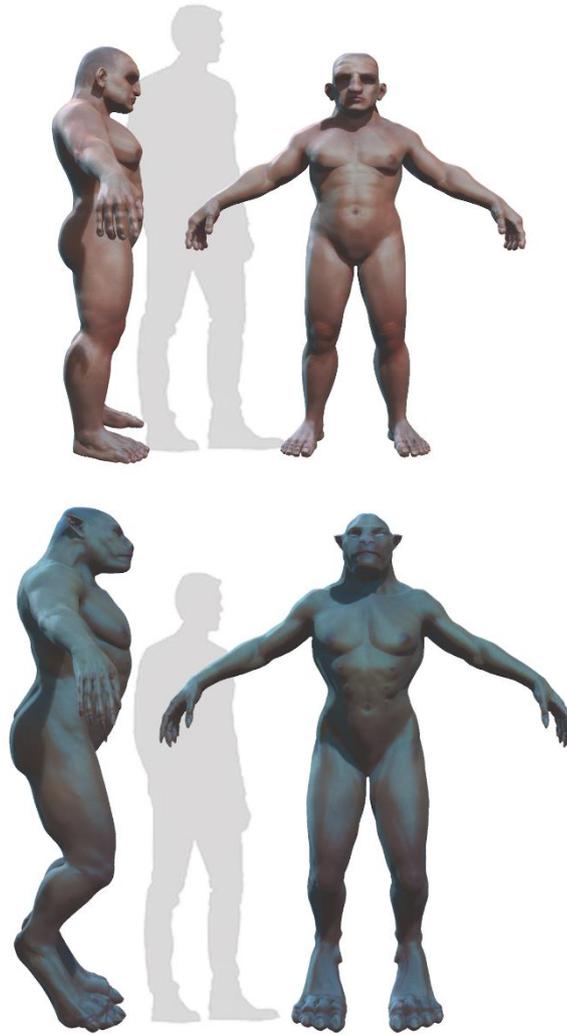
Image 30: Terran and Thrope Maquettes with human silhouette for scale.

Image 31: very basically posed maquettes for each character race.

4.32 Brief Creation

Once this in-setting location of the work and the anatomy maquettes were created I created a list of briefs for the characters I would develop to this setting. With the location in the setting broadly being unknown some literary work was first done to expand the general description of the setting. Extracting information from these notes then allows for the creation of appropriate briefs. A raft or characters and ideas were generated with the intention of pairing these back as timeline, scope or project deliverables was needed or required.

Initially briefs for characters were created around an adventuring party in Meridian with the aim of having several key scenes and accompanying character renders. This plan was far too ambitious and had the intent of fleshing out Meridian at a more environmental and narrative level.

Image 32: Screenshot of working exegesis documentation (Gerritsen, 2020)

Reduced to 5 characters and a key scene, each character received a brief written about them that explained their professions, culture and backgrounds. Each character was specifically designed to be in some manner subversive. By referring to the ethnographic research and the survey decisions were made for the characters genders, cultures and professions that would be unexpected. Examples of this are having the Thrope and Gorgon characters be technological, the Sylvan be heavily armoured with an axe rather than a sword and the Terran and Quickling characters be female.

Party Character - <u>Quickling Aeromancer</u>

- Female Dark ashin like skin, white hair, blue eyes (Gehenar origin Meridling)
- Kineblades (gripless levitating telekinesis blades)
- Robes that are similar to modern webbing, lots of pockets across chest for easy access to equipment.
- Blue poncho type shortcape that indicates her tribal allegiance. Something between a Palestinian posha and a gaucho's poncho.
- Dressed utilitarian and with more equipment than just the battle knives (jill of all trades)
- Gear is a bit bedraggled and unkept.
- Some sort of magical totem charge that allows her to use magic without accessing the archon (a scrawl totem?).

Image 33: original brief for Zoe the Aeromancer (Gerritsen, 2020)

To expand out the briefs each character was generated using the rules of *Dark Arcana* to ground their equipment and props in the game rules. This doubled as a method for determining equipment appropriate for their profession as well as resolving unknowns about their costumes.

Quickling Blademage
- Female Dark ashin like skin, white hair, blue eyes (Gehenar origin Meridling)
- Kineblades (gripless levitating telekinesis blades)
- Robes that are similar to modern webbing, lots of pockets across chest for easy access to equipment.
- Blue poncho type shortcape that indicates her tribal allegiance. Something between a Palestinian posha and a gaucho's poncho.
- Dressed utilitarian and with more equipment than just the battle knives (jill of all trades)
- Gear is a bit bedraggled and unkept.
- Some sort of magical totem charge that allows her to use magic without accessing the archon (a scrawl totem?).

Quickling, Noble (Mercantile), Mage, (Wanderer, Plain)

Str	Dex	Con	Int	Per	Cha
9	9	11	11	11	12

Traits: Medium, Unrecognisable (+1DD)
Abilities: Linguistics (Gehenese, Trade Terran, Old Terran, Nexus Creol), Spell Lore (+2)
Skills: Arcana (+1 Arcanology), Charm, Deceive, History, Literacy, Logic, Nobility, Ride, Spellcraft (Aeromancy +3) Streetwise,
Equipment: Light Weapon, MQ Clothes, Leather Shirt (**Cloth BA1SE weight 2**), Leather Leggings (**Cloth L1SE weight 1**), Light weapon, Gehenese Clan Cape, Gehenese Nobles Pendant, Components Pouch (20sp), Mages Robes,

- Aeroblade Harness with 2 x MQ Aeroblades (+2 to hit)

Spells:
Minor Telekinesis, Levitation, Unseen Force,
Force Armour (4d6), Telekinesis (4d6), Force Grip (4d6), Magic Weapon (4d6)

Image 34: character brief with rules and statistics (Gerritsen, 2020)

It was clear that some work on visual design and art direction for magical technology and for the network of planes was needed to push the art direction and design further. Reference imagery was collated to create a list of and excluded and included motifs and signs. These are chosen to specifically enhance the subversive aspects of the character designs and project, to support the magepunk aesthetic direction. It is important that the magepunk art direction remains core and is distinct from high fantasy and science fiction as this unusual blend is part of the layered engagement strategy signposting to the audience that they should be prepared to receive subversive rather than conventional content.

Image 35: Collage of excluded motifs, options and props for the art direction (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 36: Collage of included motifs, options and props for the art direction (Gerritsen, 2020)

Through visual research based on the paradigms already identified, the runic circle is determined to be the most important motif to carry through the graphic design of the project and its layout. 3D tests are done to look at the creation of 'magic rune stones' that capture ideas of circuit boards and magical circles seen below. The circle and rune board become the key unifying visual motif for *Dark Arcana*

separating it from the usually angular design language common in science fiction and fantasy. Later I will use this language and technological language to guide the design and creation of the Tokamak key scene environment and props and additional props and elements for the characters.
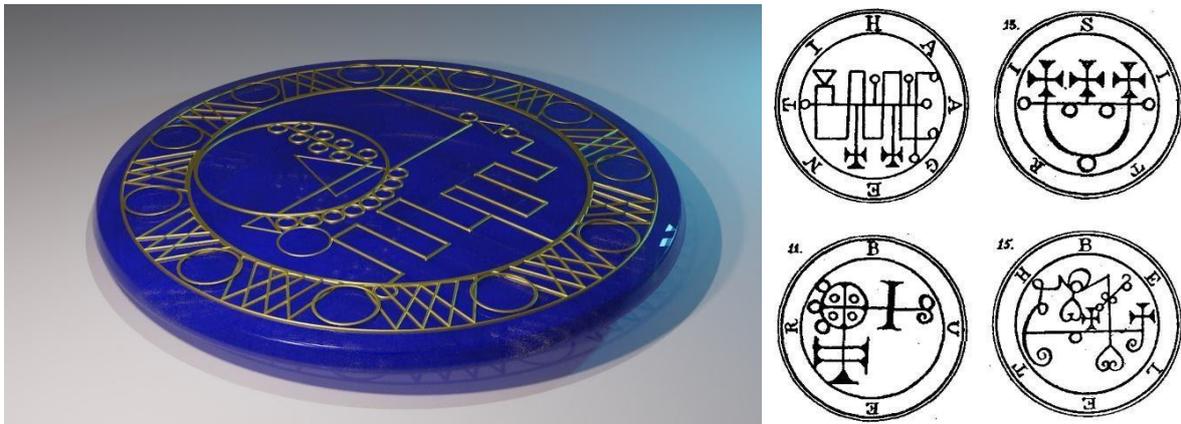
Image 37 (left): 3D Runestone mockup (Gerritsen, 2020)
Image 38 (right): Goetia demonic seals (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Goetia_seals.jpg)

From these art direction paradigms, briefs and the results of the survey I synthesised a set of shapes, colours, textures and graphic design elements that serve as a palette for each race. Image 39 shows this, the shapes on the left indicate the shape language and the icons on the right are finalised graphic design elements for each race and each race's culture.

Image 39: Design palette for each race (Gerritsen, 2020)

4.33 Costume Explorations

Costume development occurred across the project and the work done in setting the art direction and shape language. Costume design started in block shapes and colours over simple posed characters. Costumes were designed race by race initially to determine general cultural attire and motifs which could then be channeled into the artwork of the specific characters. As part of the attempts to subvert

tropes and expectations reference and inspiration was sourced from cultural attire of non-European origins. Specific effort was made to avoid medieval European looks. A key resource in the collection of broad cultural reference was the photography of Jimmy Nelson, especially from his book *Before They Pass Away.* (*Before They Pass Away*, 2015; Nelson, 2018). This book contains a wide range of impressive photos of cultures and tribes in traditional attire, particularly of rare and isolated cultures. Other key source material is avant-garde fashion and modern sporting weapons.

Two phases of drawings were done for each culture: an ideation and a refinement the refinement streamlining the ideas from reference of the first phase and applying the developing art direction.

Image 40: 1st Pass Terran Costume exploration (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 41: 2nd Pass Terran Costume (Gerritsen, 2020)

Completing these sketches reinforces a broad idea of the costume language and elements of each character's racial design direction. I conducted a render and media test on a single design as a case study for the process. The Terran Slavemaster below represents this media test completed in photoshop without the use of the maquettes which were still in development. This render is based on the 4th Terran design from the previous image.

Image 42: Early Terran Illustration / Concept completed as a sample spike (Gerritsen, 2020)

Individual elements that are interesting and appropriate from the first round of sketches are kept and ported into new designs. Examples include several variations of shape language and certain props and shapes that work or resonate with the character designs (eg; the Nbdele tribe inspired metallic jewellery present on the Terran Nobles). A comparative analysis of the visual designs against the survey parameters helps to resolve and strengthen aspects that are rehabilitated stereotypes or subversive.

Image 43: 3rd pass Terran costume concepts and options (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 44: Thrope Fur Pattern investigation (Gerritsen, 2020).

The Thrope and Gorgon both receive an additional design pass to try and determine skin and texture patterns.

These costume designs and information provides the inspiration and style reference for designing the costumes for each particular character based on their briefs. The same method of designing flat line and colour costumes is followed with 3 variations of the character being explored and aspects being incorporated from survey results and cultural designs. These are based on the final poses for the characters in the key scene layout with the intent to reduce time spent rendering later.

Image 45: Costume options for the Thrope Gunslinger, Atraxia (Gerritsen, 2020)

From the 3 options for each character a final design is composed of the most successful elements or with incorporation of new features to strengthen the design. Below is the final design for Atraxia that was taken to the rendering phase, though not all elements for the design could be included in the render due to time constraints. The design is an attempt to blend the expected martial aspects of Beastfolk culture and the expected shapes and costumes, with more sophisticated technology, undercutting normative barbaric or orientalist assumptions about Beastfolk. Modern military armour, hunting gear, and webbing is used with more typical swords and sorcery elements to try and create an urban hunter look that subverts harmful expectations of a Beastfolk but doesn't cause dissonance or jar expectations in the audience.

Image 46: final costume design for Atraxia (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 47: Lineup of all character designs loosely composited to scale and position in environment (Gerritsen, 2020)

4.35 Vertical Slice Layout and Writing

Concurrently to the design work a draft handbook layout was completed to determine and understand the pages and content that would be required as well as where various aspects of the design work would fit and where additional graphics would need to be created.
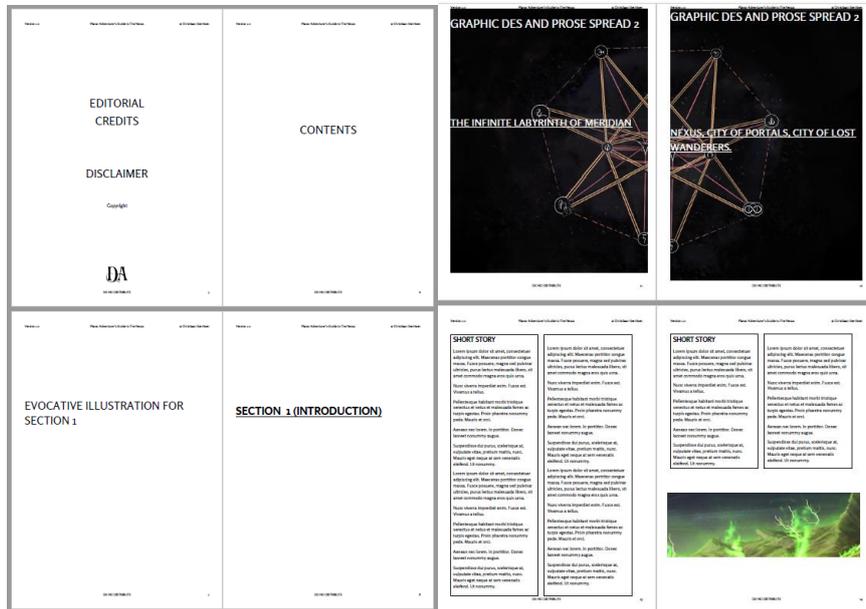
Image 48: screenshots of draft PDF from word with placeholder graphics (Gerritsen, 2020)

A working design layout in InDesign is created for the handbook now using the first word layout as a guide. Font options are considered, and the vertical slice begins to take shape with areas that need extra graphics being identified. This document becomes the working book for the vertical slice.

Image 49: Screenshots of the iterated handbook layout now in InDesign (Gerritsen, 2020)

Work on the manuscript for the planar guide is extensive and is iterated on several times over the course of the project. This is not finished by the end of the project but comes to about 14 thousand words with only some minor items at the end of the copy being unfinished.

The core section of this copy on each race and the culture that inhabits Meridian became the key literary component for the worldbuilding and design. The rest of the copy is rested for future development and iteration on *Dark Arcana*.

4.35 Key Scene Design

Originally, I intended the maquettes to be posed and rendered in ZBrush using its native tools, but this proved limiting. With the key scene and environment components becoming more important I chose a production rigging plug-in to rig maquettes in Blender. Linking this with the ZBrush files and some quick texture work in Substance Painter and Designer allowed me to non-destructively make additions or edits to the maquette meshes at any time and allows me to ad prop and armour parts to the meshes for the final render.

For the key scene I chose a magical version of a Tokamak, the central core of a nuclear reactor. This helps with the magepunk and techno-magical feel, as well as echoing archetypal key scene locations such as a castle, chapel, tomb or dungeon. It is also provides a clear and appropriate compositional shape for the key scene and character hierarchy. Such a device is also appropriate to the part of the setting the vertical slice was to be set in, with such magitech devices common on Meridian. Paintovers and annotations on the shots taken from the work in progress scene help to identify storytelling and compositional issues.

The characters are rigged and dropped into the scene a soon as it is blocked out. Blenders offline render engine Cycles and their real time engine EEVEE are both tested and ultimately EEVEE's speed and comparative fidelity is superior.
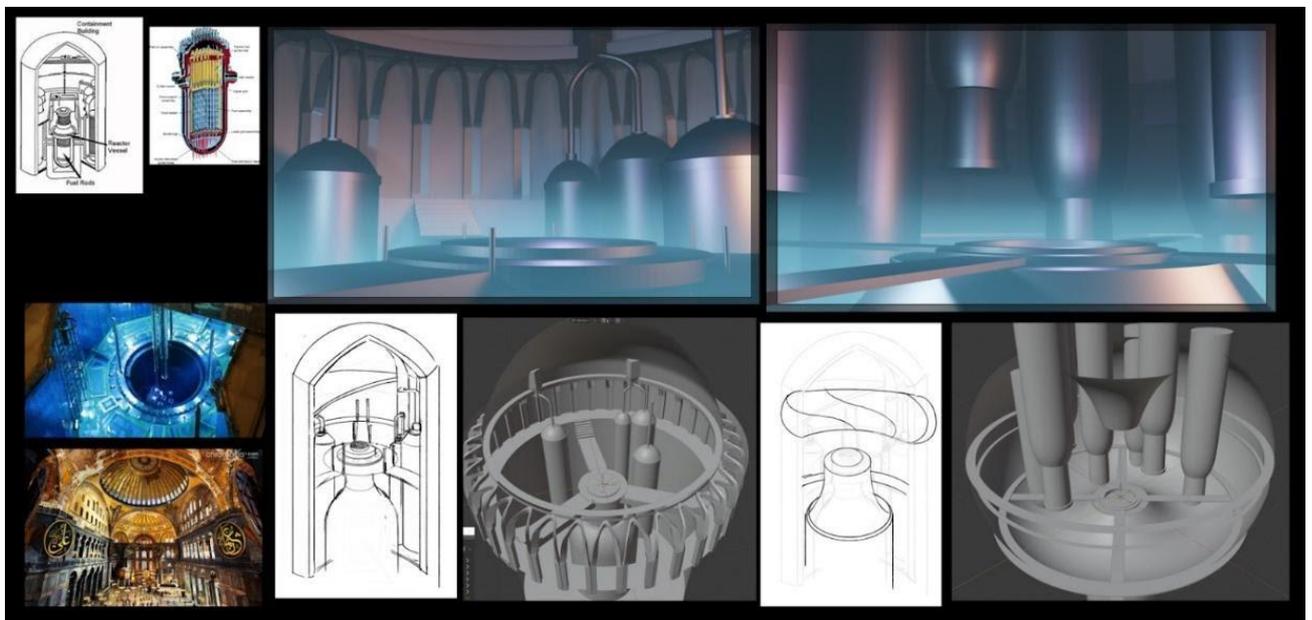
Image 50: Tokamak reference, sketching and block outs. (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 51: Characters posed with Zbrush and tested with Blender Cycles renderer (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 52: Compositional paintover in black and white with guides and planning (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 53: Updated poses with new production rigs being used (Gerritsen, 2020)

Working in 3D allows blockouts to be created of aspects of the scene or variously modelled as needed to help create reference or lock in perspective. To this effect designs for props and the environment are investigated and blocked out. The Tokamak control rods are pursued further, and the environment receives a texturing pass as it will form the basis of the final rendered image. Images below and over.
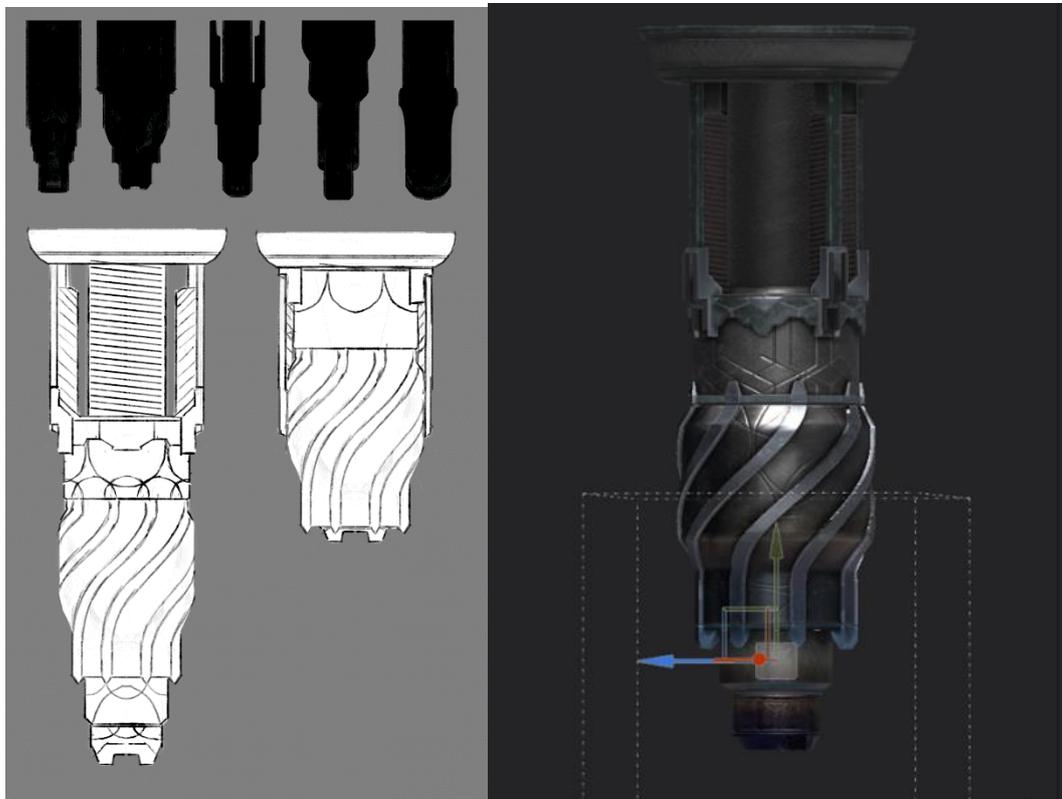
Image 54: Tokamak thumbs and texturing on 3D model (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 55: Environment textures and some lighting and volumetric effects (Gerritsen, 2020)

The final scene is updated and edited beyond this with additional props and work. Work is done to update the scene and make it more interesting after a several paint overs. The final environment becomes a destroyed Tokamak with the characters salvaging magical fuel from the central core.

Ultimately due to time constraints the environment and key scene do not receive a final render as the vertical slice becomes only the character and culture pages of the intended handbook. I linked the character renders into the key scene early as I worked them up which allowed me to determine that the key scene would take more time than available to finish, and thus to focus on the characters and layouts only.

Image 56: Lineup composition and paintover with final character designs and poses (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 57: the final tokamak environment rendered out with some painting over being completed (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 58: updated and finessed block-out environment (now destroyed) with updated meshes poses, props and textures (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 59: where the key scene makes it to before being retired from the final body of work (Gerritsen, 2020)

4.35 Final Character Illustrations

As part of completing the final illustrations for each character several props are designed and built. The designing and building of many of these props is also an important design avenue with the potential for these illustrations to become supporting designs and graphics in the handbook.

Ultimately these props do not get their own treatment in the handbook, as the slice is scaled down to presenting the only the character pages. However, they are used to in the final character designs and illustrations.
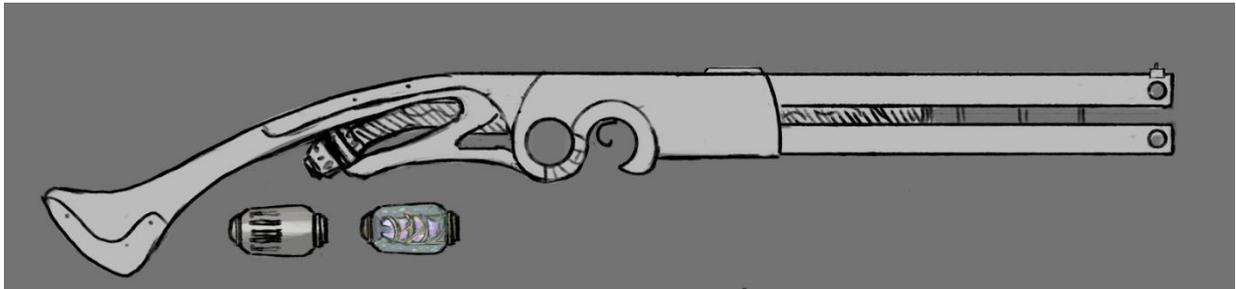
Image 60: Mana-rifle design for the Thrope gunslinger (Gerritsen, 2020)
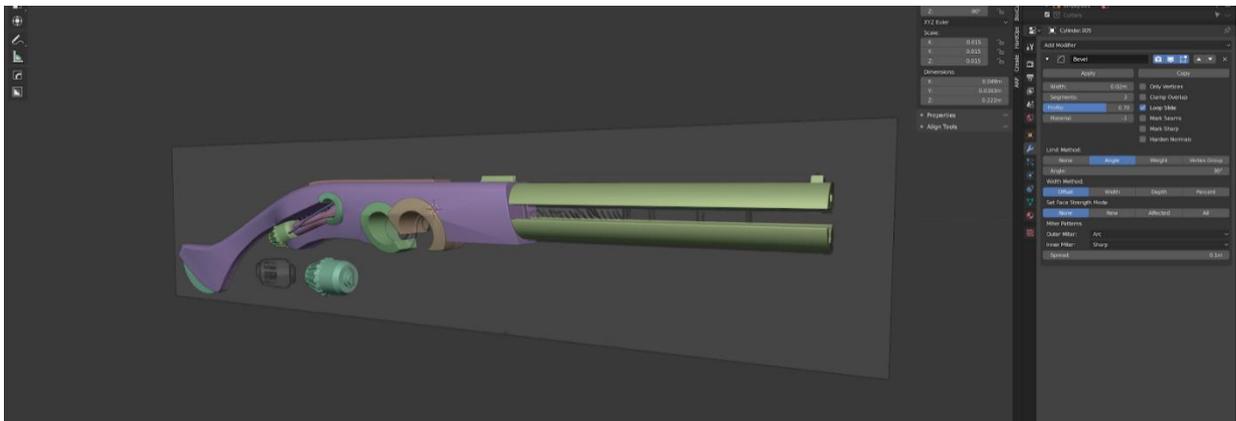
Image 61: 3D Blockout for the Thrope's rifle (Gerritsen, 2020)
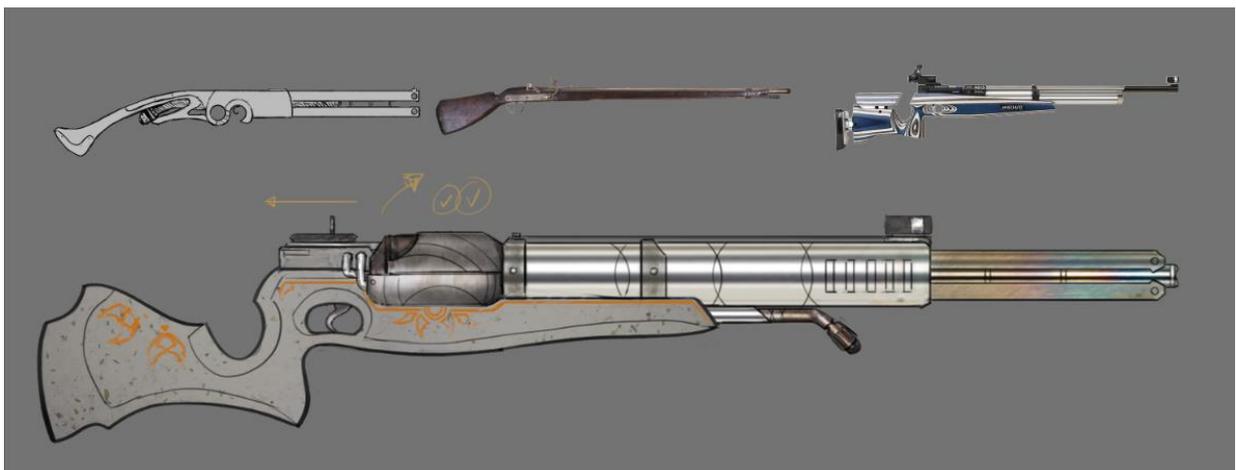
Image 62: Improved Thrope mana-rifle design (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 63: mana-rifle mesh in blender (Gerritsen, 2020)

With the necessary props and 3D models completed a few other smaller elements are created and added to the characters and scene. Examples are a welding mana-torch, the fuel cores, various armour plates and straps for the characters.

Texture fidelity on all the character models is updated with normal and roughness maps combined from Substance Painter and the ZBrush models vertex colour. The Gorgon has its maquette updated with appropriate reptilian scales and texturing in Zbrush and then Substance Painter (Image 65 over).

During the rendering process a simulation of the Sylvan's cloak is done using Marvellous Designer to create accurate reference for the folds of the clothing. The mail vest of the Terran is also created and rendered out. This 3D work is some of last work to be done usually as the final illustrations are being created.

Image 64: Sylvan Cloak and Terran Mail renders (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 65: Gorgon Textures (Gerritsen, 2020)

5 Conclusion

5.1 Design Output

5.11 Character Illustrations

Image 66: Boris, Gorgon Artificer (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 67: Zoe, Quickling Aeromancer (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 68: Sonoria, Sylvan Justicar (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 69: Glira, Terran Stonewife (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 70: Atraxia, Thrope Gunslinger (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 71: Gorgon page (Gerritsen, 2020)

Image 72: Quickling page (Gerritsen, 2020)

SYLVAN
MERIDYR GREY

SYLVAN

Possibly the most ancient surviving race are the Sylvan, fey, alien, and inherently magical. Almost as tall as a Gorgon's shoulder but nary weighing more than a moderately built Quickling, Sylvan are graceful, deceptively quick, and agile. They have shining eyes, hair, and fey, upswept features and ears. Sylvan are often aloof, proud and equal parts enchanting, beautiful, morose, and bitter. The Sylvan are the origin of most knowledge that makes up the basis of civilisation today. Millenia ago, in the vast interplanar War in Heaven, their ancestors warred with the folk that would become the Terran. This led to the destruction of their homeworld, Sylvannar, and their God-Trees, a divine life form their race is entangled with.

Having long ago removed the necessity of physical birth and gestation from their reproductive cycle, the Sylvan are both admired and feared by all other races. Sylvan reproduce by combining the genetic material of two or more adults of their kind in a Spellbirthing ritual inside special Soulpods, with which the Sylvan are able to comingle. Soulpods were once the fruit and seeds of an ancient God-Tree symbiote, but they are now incredibly rare, if not extinct.

Once placed in a Soulpod, a Sylvan embryo gestates for 19 years. During this time, the Sylvan grows to maturity. Their gestation is magically induced, with dreams, memories, and traits placed into their mind. This is known as the Dreaming. It is in this unborn state that an immature Sylvan learns and is mentored by the spirits and souls of their Ancestor Beings.

Once ready, the Sylvan germinates from their pod and enters into the Wakeworld a fully functioning adolescent, capable of language, thought math, and basic vocations. They are streamed into final professional and vocational training, guided by the divinations of Dreamseers. Dreamseers are a class of Sylvan mage who interface with the Dreaming and converse with the Ancestor Beings who instruct their race and proliferate their culture. Understandably, due to this spiritual and magical reproduction cycle, Sylvan society is seen as odd by other races. Nearly all Sylvan regard sex, biology, gender, and attraction as fluid and recreational, rather than necessary for reproduction. However, there are some outlying individuals who take on more 'mundane' attitudes towards these phenomena.

The link a Sylvan maintains to the Dreaming is lifelong. Appropriately trained Sylvan, such as Dreamseers, may re-enter it on sleep or at will. Upon the death of a Sylvan, if part of their body is returned to the physical site of their ancestral Dreaming, their soul will flow into the Feylands and become part of the Dreaming. If heroic or learned enough, they may retain individuality and become an Ancestor Being, and contribute to the development of their race in gestation.

Rarely, Sylvan copulation leads to fertilisation, which produces Trueborn offspring who must be raised naturally. Trueborn offspring are considered both doomed and blessed, for their only experience of the gestalt Dreaming will be upon entry at the end of their lifetime.

GREY SYLVAN

Grey Sylvan are seen as tragic and dour, even by the standards of their own race. Having resided in the Inverted Forest for less than a millenium, they are the only composite Sylvan society. All other Sylvan civilsiation's have Dreamline that dates to The Fall. They are steely-skinned with glinting argent or golden eyes, and pale or metallic hair. Their gene line is made from expatriate Sylvan from every other extant Sylvan culture, and some extinct ones. As with other Sylvan ethnicities, their colouring comes from the manner of their gestation.

As a composite and entirely displaced society, it is the tragedy of the Grey Sylvan that they retained no Godseeds when they settled the vast Argentform Fronds. It is said that the first High Mages of the Grey Sylvan pleaded and bargained for centuries to purchase hybridised or Soulpod biomass from the other Sylvan cultures, with which to develop a reproductive cycle. Eventually, with enough biomass and ancient magic, they successfully established a Dreaming of sorts. This allowed them to gestate Sylvan embryos in metallic Soultubes made from an arcane biometal synthesis of Meridian alloy, Argentform, Sylvan and Soulpod genemass.

Even with this success came tragedy, as more than three quarters of gestating Grey Sylvan mutate ghoulishly, and have to be euthanised in order to return their biomass and fragment spirits to generate new offspring. The Soul-Tubes of the Grey Sylvan only sporadically connect to the Dreaming, located on the very edges of the Sylvan gestalt consciousness in fragmented racial memories. Entire generations can pass without the Soul-Tubes properly connecting to the Dreaming.

Some of the Sylvan of Meridian join the Dreaming to shepherd and then return new Grey Sylvan to the places of instruction and back. Placed into a deathlike stasis, these Dreamguides either mentally carry generations of Sylvan to and from the Dreamgrounds, or rear and instruct them personally if the offspring are unable to arrive at the Dreaming. Becoming a Dreamguide is an honour and responsibility that many Grey Sylvan of requisite rank and appropriate knowledge seek to do at least once through their life. Commonly, only Dreamseers will undergo the lengthy hibernation required to train a whole generation during a Dark Time.

Many Grey Sylvan take an ancestor pilgrimage to seek out other Sylvan sites of the Dreaming, in their attempt to strengthen the mental bonds of their culture with the larger webs of their racial memory.

20

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Image 73: Sylvan page (Gerritsen, 2020)

TERRAN
NEXUS TRIBUNES

TERRAN

An ancient race of squat, strong, and clever artificiers and mages, the Terran lost their homecraft over a millennium ago during the War in Heaven. Most Terran, particularly the un scholarly maintain a racial animosity towards the Sylvan, still aggrieved by millenia old

A magically reproducing humanoid race, Terran are sturdy and more resistant to magic, especially weaker cantrips and small spells. Their heads may only reach chest-height on a Sylvan or shoulder on a Quickling, but they are much sturdier than either, with Terran of average size easily doubling the weight of a Quickling of similar build. They have wide, blocky features, and broad, pronounced brows and noses. Their abundant hair is thick and wiry. All Terran grow facial hair, although female Terran hair tends to be constrained to chins and sideburns. Both hormone-fuelled breeding Queens or Matriarchs and breeding Princes are endowed with hormone-fuelled beard growth, with Princes sporting long braided beards.

All Terran in a community are born from a single Queen, or several ruling fertile Matriarchs. Forming in fast familial- and ancestor-linked communities and cities, nearly all Terran are usually infertile until they undergo the appropriate rituals to become a consort or Queen. When a Terran is born, the tiny stone-sized child is a premature embryo by most standards. Once a lengthy two year long pregnancy is carried to term by a Queen, she may give birth to two to five terran Earthlings. The Earthling are left attached to their placentas which are implanted with ancestral seed material. The Earthlings are then submerged under the magical Living Earth of the Heartchambers of the Clan-Hold. After year of gestatation in the Living Earth a newborn Terran wakes and is pulled from the rock. Their plancenta will have been used up and crystalised into a dense thumb sized crystal, their Stoneheart a holy phylactery that will accompany them for their entire life.

Most Terran are born male, an evolutionary population control mechanism. This and their introspective and isolationist culture can cause uneducated folk to question the existence of female Terran, who may at first appear male to other races, especially when in armour. Breeding Matriarchs remain sequestered and protected by Stonewifes and Queensblades deep in the centre of the Clan's Heartchamber. For all of these reasons, the Terran form industrious societies in the deep earth and mountain wildernesses where other races are uncommon. Here, their breeding rituals incorporate Living Earth grown from the bones of Terran Ancestors, and the ground or stone of the very planes the new Earthlings will germinate in.

Terran are considered somewhat isolationist and xenophobic by some, due to their highly stratified, collective, and controlled societies. All Terran have a role determined at birth by their ancestry and the nature of their Stoneheart. Terran see their society as a vast living organism with Queens at the centre and all members of that community linked by close bonds of blood, industry, and ancestors.

TRIBUNITES

There are three Great Terran Clans on Meridian. These form the Tribunes, a collective informal political and cultural organisation that is the major Terran cultural influence on Meridian. Having been living on Meridian since before the Archon coalesced in its systems, the Terran houses paid tribute to Lystria and now pay political fealty to the Archon, but keep their economic and military independence.

Many Terran from these Tribunes adopt the ways of the Archonites, and Terran Archonites are the most common of the non-Quickling races in the Archon's hierarchy in the large planar city. Their oral histories source their origins from refugees of the failed colony on the exotic Far-Plane of Niffen, sometime after the War in Heaven. The Tribune houses have been forced to adapt, due to the lack of regularly suitable rock for their breeding rituals on Meridian.

With their remnant Niffen Stonehearts, the Tribunes bred a new form of Living Earth, incorporating the dark iron and meridite alloys of their new environment. It is rumoured that to complete this new synthesis, the Tribunes had to trade with evil Duergar from the bowels of Stygia and Tartarius. The Three houses are known to have slightly different Live-Earth cultures, perhaps representing three Duergar trades or alternate trading arrangements of genetic rock-flora from other Clan-Holds.

Tribunite skin is typically a lustrous metallic colour with a slight unnatural sheen, and their eyes fiery metallic shades. This has earned them the moniker of "Void-Kin" among the other Terran Colonies. Like all Terran, they are known for their grudgingly stoic adherence to traditional working garb in colours of iron, brass, and burgundy. Gold, lazurite, and amethyst are generally reserved for the frivolities of royalty.

Image 74: Terran page (Gerritsen, 2020)

THROPE
MERIDIAN ARGENTFURS

THROPE

Thropes are an ancient race of beastfolk humanoids arising from the blending of Lycanthropic viruses with humanoid tribes in the distant past. They are tall, gangly, and muscular, with distinctive talons, teeth, and covered in patterned fur. The only race retaining civilisation on their homeplane, Thropes are endemic to the Shol planar system, where they arose on the various coterminant plane-spheres of the Silver Star. Unlike true Lycanthropes' magical origins, Thropes breed true, and their genetic lines are as stable and diverse as other races.

Thropes usually breed in creches of one to three cubs every few cycles of Shol (or their adopted star), when the stars and astral portents align. During this time most fertile female Thropes will go on heat, and conception and fertility festivals are common. A year later, entire Thrope communities will welcome new litters together. Despite their limited celestial breeding seasons, Thrope cubs mature fast, matching Quickling growth speeds despite their own longevity. Thrope lifespans are half as long again as a Quickling, but they rarely reach the venerable double centuries that most Terran achieve.

Twins or triplets are the most common litter sizes for Thropes, with most of offspring being non-identical. A litter size of one is considered unlucky; those Thrope cubs can be seen as pariahs and runts in more traditional fringe Thrope cultures. Litters of five cubs are seen as particularly blessed, as five remains a holy number for nearly all Thrope cultures. There are five plane-spheres orbiting Shol that can be reached through coterminant bleeding in the vast wilderness of the Shol planes. Each plane-sphere takes its name from an ancient God-Beast said to have been the progenitors of the Thrope race, the Five. Many highborn Thropes in the Shol system strive to keep their bloodlines and ethnicities pure, as these Thropes directly resemble the God-Beast progenitors they claim as ancestors.

Thropes, despite their known origin and extant homeplane, are now endemic to all planes. Once a unified civilisation throughout the Shol plane-spheres, Thrope civilisation was conquered and dismantled by an elder civilisation over ten millennia ago. The denigrated remnants of their once proud society were then discovered half a millennium later by the Sylvan and Terran at the height of their empires. Hundreds of thousands of Thropes and their tribes were then spread further to the planes as slaves and janissaries. Many Thrope cultures have lived beyond Shol for long enough that only myths of their origins are known.

Adapting to many new ecologies for thousands of years and incorporating new Lycanthropic genes, Thrope ethnotypes are now much more diverse. Many modern Thropes now resemble a mix of their ancient forebears, with only the strictest-bred or most isolated tribes resem-

bling a particular carnivore beast or one of The Five. The single unifying feature of most Thrope civilisations is the ritual silvered honour blades carried by all adult Thropes. With their Lycanthropic resistance to mundane steel or its effects, silver weaponry has an important place in Thrope-on-Thrope clashes, where even their talons, formidable to unarmoured combatants, are largely uesless against their own kind. Ritual duelling with silvered blades or silvered spells is a common way of settling disputes among many martial Thrope cultures.

ARGENTFUR THROPES

The Thropes of Meridian are a mostly diverse ethnogroup. Various familial lines trace their origins from Gehenese Barghest, Tartarian Flinds or Charonic Wendigos. Their common unifying visual feature tends to be a lighter silvery fur with pale stripes, rosettes, or mottling. It is unclear whether this appearance came through natural or magical adaptation to the intraverse world they live in, but it has become the moniker used throughout to refer to Thropes from Meridian. Geneticist Carnymancers and Biomancers have theorised that some of the metallic energies of the Labyrinth Plane have altered the Argentfurs appearance, perhaps in combination with an original or ghost population of pale or albino Thropes.

Argentfurs have no unified hierarchy or political culture on Meridian. They gather in a loose collection of alliances, coalitions, or tribal groups as their socio-proximity, or out of necessity and convenience. Perhaps because of this, Argentfurs are arguably the most mercantile and industrious of their race. Among the teeming throngs of Nexus, they focus on artifice, construction, and industry. Argentfurs can be found in any of the major settlements on Meridian to an equal degree. It is believed that the original tribes spread out from the Inverted Forest after a period of alliance with the Grey Sylvan. The extant populations and communities of Argentfurs in the hanging city are pale and brightly eyed for their ethnogroup, validating this historical migration theory, as well as lending credence to magical evolution arguments.

Image 75: Thrope page (Gerritsen, 2020)

5.2   Findings

The findings from this project aren't broad or unexpected but it does serve to crystallise our understanding of tropes in TRPGS and fantasy. It serves as strong indicator on the strengths of a concept design pipeline using both 3D and 2D elements as well as through the projects process, showing the importance of early work and production of high-level briefs and unifying language and motifs. It also shows the importance and necessary link between both visual design and literary worldbuilding in creating cultures and characters for TRPG material.

Starting with the conclusions about tropes; this project suggests that most players expect conservative and usually normative tropes and genre stereotypes. We also found that the visual design motifs and conceits that players expect are in many cases stronger than the cultural and worldbuilding ones. I would suggest that breaking these expectations would probably cause more cognitive dissonance than using them as expected. From the data gathered in this project we now have some understanding of the strength of the subconscious biases of audiences in this genre as well as some specific sites to subvert and engage with. More research and follow up work about in these areas is an area of future investigation.

The importance of tropes is also identified in the literature and validated in the survey. This is the necessity and importance of tropes as signposting and worldbuilding shorthand. Tropes themselves are neither good nor bad and a designer must work within tropes as both literary and visual mechanisms for efficient and effective worldbuilding (Erickson, 2010; Illieva, 2013). As such the need to rehabilitate or appropriate tropes that aren't harmful to the intended purpose is important for a designer when world building for a TRPG.

Further testing of whether a visual designer can use tropes to subvert without having to world build *ex nihilo* or alienate their audience is needed. I believe that my design output for this project is too limited in scope to prove whether this synthesis of subversive worldbuilding and rehabilitated design stereotypes is achievable. Additionally, without yet deploying the artwork and worldbuilding to a folio, website or product; it is hard to determine the success of the design or not. Where the designs are very successful however is in building a library or assets and art direction motifs and styles that I can use to build the foundations of future iterations of *Dark Arcana*. In this sense the vertical slice, even in its more limited output, has become important to the worldbuilding of *Dark Arcana* even if it is largely inconclusive at this stage on the subversive aspects of the designs. This core of style, motif and costuming has the potential to achieve the goals of this project even if the current designs are inconclusive.

From the research surveyed and the final design output I believe that literary world building is a more efficient mechanism in direct subversion of tropes and stereotypes. However, this can be far more effective when it is helped in its delivery by support visual designs of characters and cultures. Visual design plays a huge part in selling a world as believable to a player, and we know that players make assumptions about the world and what's in it from these design elements and signposts (Nikolaidou, 2018). Visual components such as race, gender, profession can all be quickly sold or delivered through design mechanisms. However, it is much more difficult to show behavioural aspects of character and culture such as complex literary, linguistic, economic or political aspects without depicting the acts in themselves as key scenes. In subverting harmful tropes, they must be replaced by new ideas or designs and forgoing either the literary or visual component of this process leaves space for players to bring their subconscious harmful biases into the worldbuilding, particularly in a collaborative storytelling genre such as TRPGS. An example of this is in comparing *Malazan* to *Swordsfall*. In *Malazan* it is not apparent that the main characters are all dark skinned as there is limited visual

material; where as in *Swordsfall* this is obvious (Erickson, 1999). The opposite is also true that without seeing the full literary worldbuilding of *Swordsfall* we can't be sure as to what or how subversive the constructions of gender politics, economics or various other 'hidden' cultural phenomena that aren't over race, gender or costuming will be (*Swordsfall | Worldanvil*, 2019).

Further work and research can be done on the data gathered by the tropes survey. An in-depth discussion of the literature surveyed here, and the tropes survey data is a strong engagement point for potential journal article or post graduate paper.

In conclusion, tropes are not evil though some are harmful. To subvert the harmful ones we must understand the genres expectations so we can appropriately manipulate those to achieve the "skilful twist" of fantasy genre storytelling in our worldbuilding (Illieva, 2013). The most effective way to do that is by letting visual design and literature world building work together in a layered manner.

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8 Appendixes

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8.1 Ethics Approval

8.2 The Fantasy Race Tropes Survey

8.21 – Detailed Methodology

8.22 – Graphed data
Cleaned and anonymized data from the tropes survey presented in graphs. Full spreadsheet data may be obtained in a digital form from Massey.

Not Included in this document

8.3 Sample of the Draft Dark Arcana Game Rulebook

A small sample cut from the draft rulebook of Dark Arcana. For intellectual and environmental reasons, the whole rulebook (which is about 150+ pages) will not be provided. You can contact the designer at christiaangerritsen@gmail.com if you wish to obtain a full digital copy.

8.4 Draft Copy for the Adventurer's Guide to Nexus and Meridian

The written material of the vertical slice created as the practical component of this project.

8.5 Conceptual Design Workbook

A collection of loose sketches, designs, working ideas and various parts of the practice and creation of the illustrations for the vertical slice.

8.6 Final Illustrations

The final key frame and character illustrations used in the vertical slice.

8.1 Ethics Approval

Human Ethics Notification - 4000021030

humanethics@massey.ac.nz
Fri, 24 May 2019, 15:30
to Christiaan.Gerritsen.1, T.Marriott, Tanya.Marriott.1, humanethics

HoU Review Group

Ethics Notification Number: 4000021030
Title: Fantasy RPG Character Races and Tropes Survey

Thank you for your notification which you have assessed as Low Risk.

Your project has been recorded in our system which is reported in the Annual Report of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

The low risk notification for this project is valid for a maximum of three years.

Please note that travel undertaken by students must be approved by the supervisor and the relevant Pro Vice-Chancellor and be in accordance with the Policy and Procedures for Course-Related Student Travel Overseas. In addition, the supervisor must advise the University's Insurance Officer.

A reminder to include the following statement on all public documents:

"This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.
If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Professor Craig Johnson, Director (Research Ethics), email humanethics@massey.ac.nz. "

Please note that if a sponsoring organisation, funding authority or a journal in which you wish to publish require evidence of committee approval (with an approval number), you will have to complete the application form again answering yes to the publication question to provide more information to go before one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. You should also note that such an approval can only be provided prior to the commencement of the research.

You are reminded that staff researchers and supervisors are fully responsible for ensuring that the information in the low risk notification has met the requirements and guidelines for submission of a low risk notification.

If you wish to print an official copy of this letter, please login to the RIMS system, and under the Reporting section, View Reports you will find a link to run the LR Report.

Yours sincerely

Professor Craig Johnson
Chair, Human Ethics Chairs' Committee and
Director (Research Ethics)

↩ Reply   ↩ Reply to all   ➡ Forward

8.2 Fantasy Race Tropes Survey
8.21 The Fantasy Race Tropes Survey Detailed Methodology

The survey was released online and targeted specifically towards players engaged in TRPG play. As it was an on-line survey through Google Sheets, and limited to 16+ via a gating question, ethics considerations were limited, and approval was received from Massey University. No participant had to answer any question, and any could be left blank. Many questions had 'other' where the respondent could write their own answer if they felt none applied, particularly with the demographic questions at the start of the survey.

A disclaimer based on the Massey standard research disclaimer for online surveys and information about the survey was provided to all respondents through the survey. Results from the survey are kept privately attached to the designer's Google account. Demographic was data taken using New Zealand standard conventions but was cleaned against the Australian Bureau of Statistics cultural and ethnographic guidelines. This decision was made by the designer as the Australian Bureau of Statistics scaffolding is more rigorous with a useful tiered hierarchy of ethnic groupings and relationships.

The survey was open from the 01/06/2019 to the 01/07/2019. It was shared on the designer's twitter account, their personal Facebook and to the following pages and subreddits:

- The RPG Subreddit: https://www.reddit.com/r/rpg/
- The RPGOpinions Facebook Group: https://www.facebook.com/groups/rpg.opinions

It was also shared indirectly by others through their networks or private messages. The designer's supervisor also shared the survey to their relevant classes. 249 responses were received: 193 of whom identified as male, 40 as female, 6 as non-binary and 10 preferred not to say (see below). Respondents overall rated their familiarity with TRPGs and fantasy transmedia highly – with 60% or more of respondents claiming they were familiar or very familiar with TRPGs, CRPGs, fantasy film and tv and fantasy literature.
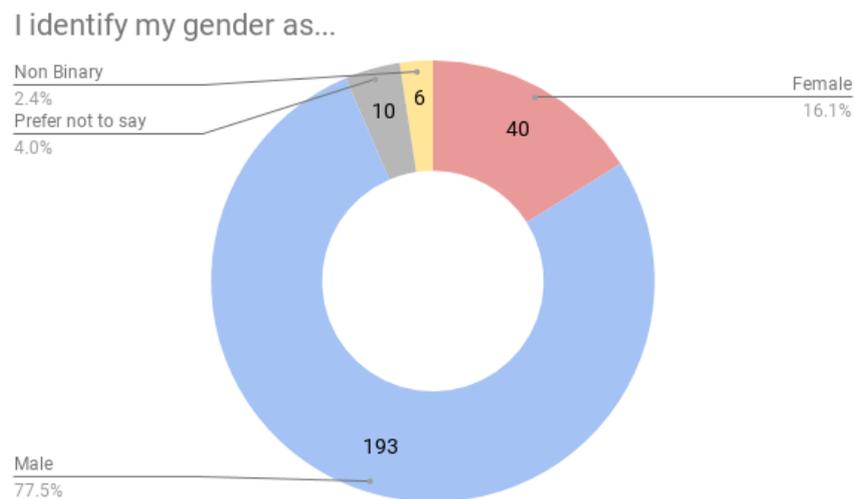
Image: Survey demographics (Gerritsen, 2019)

These races were re-formatted slightly to map them to common fantasy archetypal races, particularly by *Dungeons & Dragons: 5E* context (Wyatt, 2014). Additionally, the study provided contextual information to ensure the respondents could relate and understand the questions being asked, including picture reference and descriptions of each character race. *Dungeons & Dragons: 5E* images were provided that ensured that a consistent portrayal of character races was shown to respondents from a consistent selection of familiar and highly popular source material (see overleaf).

Image: Character leading race images.
(1,2&3. Keller, *Hobbit: the Desolation of Smaug,* 4. Miller, *Magic: The Gathering,* 5. Llorens, *Total War 2: Warhammer*)

Image: Which most represents a Elf?
(1. Keller, *Hobbit: the Desolation of Smaug,* 2. Reynolds, *Pathfinder,* 3. (Unknown) Games Workshop, *Warhammer*)

Image: Which most represents a Dwarf?
(1. Keller, *Hobbit: the Desolation of Smaug,* 2. Reynolds, *Pathfinder,* 3. (Unknown) Games Workshop, *Warhammer*)

Image: Which most represents a Human?
(1. Keller, *Hobbit: the Desolation of Smaug,* 2. Reynolds, *Pathfinder,* 3. (unknown) Bethesda, *The Elder Scrolls: Legends*)

Image: Which most represents a Beastfolk?
(1. Miller, *Magic: The Gathering,* 2. (unknown) Bethesda, *Elder Scrolls Online,* 3. Reynolds, *Pathfinder)*

Image: Which most represents a Lizardfolk?
(1. Llorens, *Total War 2: Warhammer,* 2. (unknown) Bethesda*, The Elder Scrolls: Legends,* 3. (unknown)
Paizo, Bethesda, *Pathfinder*)

After these visual quantitative questions the survey provided quantitative questions based on social
and cultural assumptions about each race. The substantive survey questions were comprised of three
different types (examples provided below and over):

1. Multiple choice questions with the respondents ranking the character races from 1 (Least) to 5 (Most) in response to a question.
2. Multiple choice questions with respondents selecting which option they most associated with each character race.

Image: Society question 1 (Gerritsen, 2019)

Image: Artwork question 1 (Gerritsen, 2019)

Image: Society question 11 (Gerritsen, 2019)

A final section of multiple-choice questions allowed qualitative answers, but also provided a more 'speculative' measure of ascertaining tropic information. A series of literary prompts were created to provoke an intuitive response about each character race. The responders were then asked to select which they thought was the most important characterisation that applied or write their own response (image below).

Image: Qualitative trope question 1 (Gerritsen, 2019

8.22 Graphed Survey Data

Survey Response Ages

- 56-65: 0.4%
- 46-55: 9.3%
- 36-45: 16.1% (40)
- 26-35: 43.5% (108)
- 16-20: 10.1% (25)
- 21-25: 20.6% (51)
- 23

I identify my gender as...

- Non Binary: 2.4%
- Prefer not to say: 4.0% (10)
- 6
- Female: 16.1% (40)
- Male: 77.4% (192)

I identify my ethnicity as

- New Zealand European: 1.2%
- Pacific People: 1.6%
- Latin: 3.6%
- Prefer not to say: 6.9% (17)
- 9
- Other European: 81.4% (201)
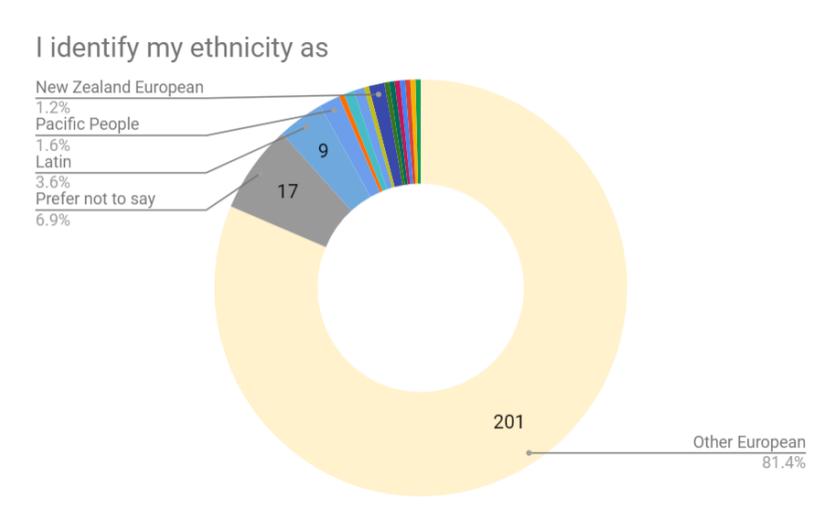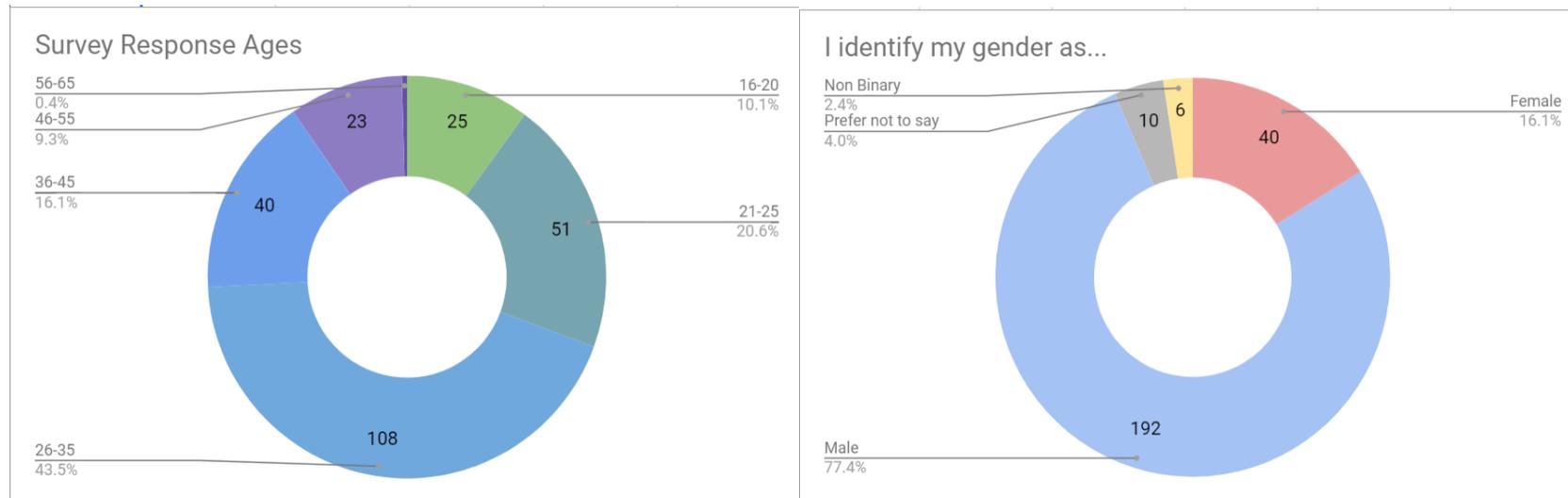
If you play RPGs or Video-games what Character Race do you prefer to play as?

Other 7.2%
Half-Elf 1.1%
Lizardfolk 6.6%
Beastfolk 6.6%
Elf 23.8% — 43
Dwarf 11.0% — 20
Human 43.6% — 79
13
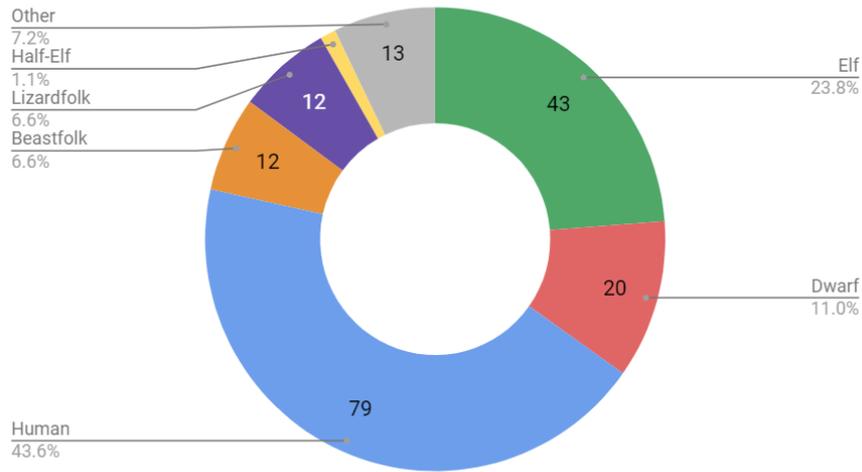
If you play RPGs or Video-games what Character Class Archetype do you prefer to play as?

Paladin 2.5%
Barbarian 2.5%
Druid 2.1%
Ranger 7.8%
Bard 4.1%
Cleric / Preist 14.8% — 36
Rogue 16.9% — 41
Warrior 14.8% — 36
Mage / Sorcerer 32.5% — 79
5 6 6 3
19
10

Male Character Race Preference

Other 7.2%
Half-Elf 1.1%
Lizardfolk 6.6%
Beastfolk 6.6%
Elf 23.8% — 43
Dwarf 11.0% — 20
Human 43.6% — 79
13
12 12

Male Character Class Preference

Paladin 2.5%
Barbarian 3.0%
Druid 1.5%
Ranger 6.1%
Bard 2.5%
Cleric / Preist 17.3% — 34
Rogue 15.2% — 30
Warrior 17.3% — 34
Mage / Sorcerer 33.5% — 66
6 5
12
5

Female Character Race Preference

Other
5.1%
Lizardfolk
5.1%
Beastfolk
10.3%
Human
25.6%
Elf
46.2%
Dwarf
7.7%

Female Character Class Preference

Hybrid
3.2%
Druid
6.5%
Ranger
22.6%
Bard
12.9%
Mage / Sorcerer
32.3%
Rogue
22.6%

NB + Non Specified Character Race Preference

Other
13.3%
Lizardfolk
6.7%
Beastfolk
33.3%
Elf
13.3%
Human
33.3%

NB + Non Specified Character Class Preference

Hybrid
6.7%
Warlock
6.7%
Paladin
6.7%
Bard
6.7%
Cleric / Preist
13.3%
Warrior
13.3%
Mage / Sorcerer
20.0%
Rogue
26.7%

What RPG Character Classes are most associated with each Race?

In each Race's society, who is most likely to control or rule?

How long has each Race's society existed?

Legend: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

- Elf: 14, 1, 9, 46, 177
- Dwarf: 1, 31, 41, 139, 35
- Human: 94, 66, 68, 13, 6
- Beastfolk: 70, 84, 61, 21, 10
- Lizardfolk: 29, 52, 79, 36, 51

How militaristic is each Race's society?

Legend: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

- Elf: 81, 69, 63, 21, 11
- Dwarf: 9, 23, 59, 88, 66
- Human: 5, 30, 73, 53, 83
- Beastfolk: 44, 48, 55, 53, 44
- Lizardfolk: 30, 56, 69, 57, 33

How much crime is in each Race's society?

Legend: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

- Elf: 119, 76, 30, 17, 3
- Dwarf: 53, 101, 67, 23, 1
- Human: 9, 5, 31, 64, 136
- Beastfolk: 26, 40, 86, 61, 29
- Lizardfolk: 43, 45, 81, 50, 24

How religious is each Race's society?

Legend: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

- Elf: 44, 45, 54, 55, 44
- Dwarf: 35, 36, 62, 64, 46
- Human: 20, 29, 86, 61, 47
- Beastfolk: 51, 66, 58, 46, 21
- Lizardfolk: 43, 37, 57, 42, 64

How egalitarian is each Race's society?

Legend: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

- Elf: 53, 40, 37, 49, 61
- Dwarf: 38, 55, 62, 54, 30
- Human: 44, 61, 87, 30, 18
- Beastfolk: 39, 50, 50, 54, 47
- Lizardfolk: 51, 56, 58, 49, 26

How magical is each Race's society?

Legend: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

- Elf: 7, 3, 5, 32, 198
- Dwarf: 90, 61, 51, 38, 5
- Human: 30, 61, 92, 59, 3
- Beastfolk: 50, 77, 70, 42, 6
- Lizardfolk: 31, 50, 78, 70, 16

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How technological is each Race's society?

How diverse is each Race's society?

In each Race's society, which gender is more likely to hold the most power?

In each Race's society, what other races might live there?

For each Race's craftsmanship is it blocky and rigid or swirly and organic?

For each Race's craftsmanship is it jagged and spiky or smooth and polished?

For each Race's craftsmanship is it practical and utilitarian or elaborate and decorative?

What shape is most associated with each Race?

Circle | Triangle | Square | Pentagon | Hexagon

	Circle	Triangle	Square	Pentagon	Hexagon
Elf	140	52	2	9	19
Dwarf	9	21	140	16	37
Human	53	39	58	38	25
Beastfolk	63	53	19	44	31
Lizardfolk	31	82	18	40	42

What colour is most associated with each Race?

Red | Blue | Yellow | Green | Orange | Purple | White | Black

	Red	Blue	Yellow	Green	Orange	Purple	White	Black
Elf	1	30	9	135	0	13	42	1
Dwarf	77	27	22	2	43	3	8	44
Human	44	83	12	8	8	18	26	20
Beastfolk	51	8	54	25	60	3	2	23
Lizardfolk	17	28	11	134	9	22	1	12

What metal is most associated with each Race?

Gold | Silver | Steel | Iron | Bronze

	Gold	Silver	Steel	Iron	Bronze
Elf	39	188	5	1	2
Dwarf	94	3	77	47	16
Human	37	9	141	40	7
Beastfolk	13	16	23	88	88
Lizardfolk	32	20	20	51	105

What fabric is most associated with each Race?

Linen | Wool | Leather | Silk | Furs

	Linen	Wool	Leather	Silk	Furs
Elf	30	4	11	189	2
Dwarf	24	66	103	2	41
Human	84	81	55	4	11
Beastfolk	13	24	40	4	152
Lizardfolk	34	12	127	18	34

What feline is most associated with each Race?

Tigers | Lions | Jaguars | Puma | Leopards

	Tigers	Lions	Jaguars	Puma	Leopards
Elf	22	17	57	49	61
Dwarf	39	92	14	45	9
Human	50	106	14	11	21
Beastfolk	48	66	42	18	33
Lizardfolk	38	8	63	41	50

What herd animal is most associated with each Race?

Horses | Deer | Bison | Goats | Camels

	Horses	Deer	Bison	Goats	Camels
Elf	26	195	0	1	2
Dwarf	7	1	89	117	6
Human	183	12	2	20	10
Beastfolk	19	20	77	56	42
Lizardfolk	19	30	24	61	73

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What bird is most associated with each Race?

Eagles, Peacocks, Albatross, Cranes, Vultures

Race	Eagles	Peacocks	Albatross	Cranes	Vultures
Elf	54	94	9	58	0
Dwarf	87	7	75	14	18
Human	107	28	31	20	19
Beastfolk	64	15	25	28	74
Lizardfolk	28	25	22	35	95

What insect/arachnid is most associated with each Race?

Wasps, Mantises, Spiders, Centipedes, Dragonflies

Race	Wasps	Mantises	Spiders	Centipedes	Dragonflies
Elf	9	39	37	1	123
Dwarf	29	16	59	89	4
Human	80	23	61	16	14
Beastfolk	61	45	30	43	15
Lizardfolk	30	55	28	42	50

What concept is most associated with each Race?

Life, Death, Order, Chaos

Race	Life	Death	Order	Chaos
Elf	149	7	61	16
Dwarf	16	7	204	5
Human	66	31	49	76
Beastfolk	69	24	4	134
Lizardfolk	38	85	48	57

What planet is most associated with each Race?

Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, Pluto

Race	Mercury	Venus	Mars	Jupiter	Saturn	Uranus	Neptune	Pluto
Elf	24	92	0	17	33	2	13	8
Dwarf	27	5	85	39	15	5	4	9
Human	20	18	76	40	10	9	5	7
Beastfolk	27	18	40	26	22	15	20	16
Lizardfolk	28	14	13	9	32	22	39	27

What environment most associated with each Race?

Desert, Ocean, Tundra, Swamps, Scrubland

Race	Desert	Ocean	Tundra	Swamps	Scrubland
Elf	18	69	17	23	90
Dwarf	34	1	126	10	44
Human	41	76	29	4	66
Beastfolk	48	8	37	32	101
Lizardfolk	45	11	2	165	6

Whhich element is most associated with each Race?

Fire, Water, Earth, Air

Race	Fire	Water	Earth	Air
Elf	9	46	27	148
Dwarf	34	2	197	1
Human	134	34	41	13
Beastfolk	83	22	104	16
Lizardfolk	56	128	38	8

16/03/2020