Baldur's Gate and History: Race and Alignment in Digital Role Playing Games

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ABSTRACT

Games studies today are characterised by both the novelty of interpreting the unfolding digital revolution, and insecurity about where the discipline stands in terms of other academic fields of inquiry. The ludology/narratology debate exhibits two important features: anxiety about the proximity of the discipline to the games industry, and a formalist bias that dominates the field. Focussing on race and alignment in role playing games, this paper addresses this bias by asserting the relevance of cultural materialist and postcolonial modes of critique to commercially-produced computer games. It is argued that games like *Baldur's Gate I* and *II* cannot be properly understood without reference to the fantasy novels that inform them. When historicised, the genre of fantasy reveals an implicit reliance on notions of race and moral alignment. The ways these notions re-appear in digital role playing games is shown to be relevant to current political and social realities of the West.

Keywords
Ludology, narratology, role playing games, race, alignment, cultural materialism

New technologies generate new forms of cultural production, and these in turn demand new vocabularies, new languages for furthering the old critical tasks of explication, debate and critique. The current and emerging generation of cultural critics is uniquely privileged to witness the unfolding of a technological revolution whose social energies have scarcely begun to make themselves felt. It is appropriate, therefore, that the incipient literature on digital games should be marked by freshness, the thrill of discovery, even, at times, a streak of hubris. This much is clear in Gonzalo Frasca's assertion, cited by Stewart Woods, that games are a "representational form that could help us to understand the reality that surrounds us and, above all, what it means to be human" [14], or in Espen Aarseth's claim that for him and his colleagues "games are already a phenomenon of greater cultural importance than, say, movies, or perhaps even sports" [1]. At the same time, game studies also bears the signs of insecurity, manifest in the ongoing need to mark out its academic turf and to define key terms and methods with repetitive intensity.

The dangers for game studies of both this novelty and its attendant crisis of identity are several. Despite the best efforts of interdisciplinarians, the structure of the university continues to direct

intellectual inquiry into artificial channels. Exacerbating the situation are competition for jobs and funding, increased bureaucratisation of teaching and research, careerism and even the birth of academic celebrity cults. The result is specialisation and the construction of what Edward Said calls "affiliative orders" – small guilds of scholars with their own rites of inclusion and exclusion, their own in-group jargon [11]. Said is very clear that self-perpetuating affiliative networks represent a betrayal of the role of the intellectual because the intellectual necessarily has a responsibility to the public. That responsibility, in Said's view, involves remaining as independent as possible of institutions and "worldly powers" and "speaking the truth to power" [12]. Said's comments suggest to me a need for games theorists to take more seriously the task of interpreting not just how games work, but what they mean as signs and signifiers of our times. In one sense, the standard has been set by Gonzalo Frasca, whose work stands out as an admirable example of the ways political conscience, game theory and public presence can productively be blended.

A second danger of specialisation is that crucial similarities between games and other cultural products, specifically films and prose narrative, may be overlooked. Consequently, the nascent discipline of game studies may not avail itself of the productive modes of critique developed to understand these related genres. Much effort has been devoted to showing how games are not films or narratives, but have a logic and an identity of their own. There is much that is useful about these approaches, but they suffer from a crucial shortcoming in that they depend on a formalism that blurs their critical potential. In this regard, I part company with the perspectives of Frasca and many of his colleagues. Focussing on race and alignment in role playing games, in this paper I shall attempt to articulate the relevance of historicised, cultural materialist modes of analysing commercially-produced computer games.

Before doing this, I would like to comment on two aspects of the so-called ludology/narratology debate – or non-debate – that are relevant to this paper. Ignoring for the moment the false binarism that underpins the contest, and taking it as given that ludologists have epistemological doubts about the capacity of narrative theory to illuminate the nature of games, I would like to highlight the aspect of ludological scepticism that derives from a fear about the co-optability of stories by the games industry. For example, Markku Eskelin's claim that "stories are just uninteresting ornaments or gift-wrappings to games, and laying any emphasis on studying these kinds of marketing tools is just a waste of time and energy" [2] is less interesting as an assertion of "radical ludology" than it is as a partially-articulated anxiety about the proximity of games studies to the voracious multi-billion dollar games industry. Critics who feel inclined to resist rather than reinforce the permeation of capital into every corner of modern subjectivity would do well to channel this kind of anxiety in critically-productive directions, and I shall attempt to show one such direction in this paper.

The second striking feature of the ludology/narratology debate is the almost obsessive attention to the logic of form and mechanism that characterises both approaches – whether they purport to interpret games or narratives. When Frasca sets out the differences between representation, narrative and simulation, for example, he does it by demonstrating the ways meanings are generated in the interaction of image and viewer [3, 4]. His conclusion, that narrative and simulation are very different things, is irrefutable, but only on a formalistic level. From a wider point of view it must surely be just as incontestable that technical, aesthetic and other innovations in gaming arise from contexts given by historical processes. It is strange therefore that narratology – a useful, but now rather obscure school of literary studies – should be taken as

the paradigmatic example of what other humanities disciplines have to offer game studies. Games, like films, novels, poems, and theatrical performances, are expressions of the culture that produces them. They are similarly enabled, informed and circumscribed by conditions of possibility given by the material and discursive structures of society. Materialist and postcolonial modes of cultural criticism therefore promise to provide necessary complements to the formalism that seems currently to dominate the field.

I would like to make these issues clearer by examining some of the defining features of digital Dungeons and Dragons (D&D)-based role playing games, specifically the Bioware games, *Baldur's Gate I* and *II* (*BG I* and *II*). For reasons of space, I shall not be considering *Neverwinter Nights* or any MMORGs, which make available far more room for user input in the construction of purpose and narrative than do the earlier games. (These features complicate but do not contradict the argument being put forward here.) It is a point too infrequently emphasised that the nature of games theory often depends on the nature of the games studied. One reason why Frasca is so keen on simulation is that he is partial to games like *SimCity*, *The Sims*, and even *Flight Simulator*. The *Baldur's Gate* games, unlike these examples, depend heavily on a pre-determined adventure-style storyline. Frasca's point, that games are simulations not narratives, thus seems of less relevance to these games than the ones he studies. Indeed, both *BG I* and *II* are available in quasi-novel form. Rhys Hess created a character called Rolanna, then, with the assistance of Bioware, pursued the main and side quests of both games through 229 pages in the case of *BG I*, and a whopping 514 pages in the case of *BG II* [8]. But let us assume for the moment that Frasca is correct, and that *BG I* and *II* are not narratives, but simulations. The crucial question then becomes: what on earth can these games be simulating? The answer is of course, nothing: they are simulating other, imagined worlds. Anyone who has read Moorcock, Vance or Tolkien knows that the other worlds of these games are only partially dreamed up by Bioware programmers. What the games are mostly simulating, then, are the fantasy novels that inform the D&D genre. A historicising approach to digital D&D must therefore start by historicising the genre of fantasy itself. The place to begin is with the medieval romance.

Baldur's Gate I and *II* show many formal similarities to the popular literature of the Middle Ages and can productively be thought of examples of digital romance. The games are set in typically (and sometimes stereotypically) romantic locales: the keep, the castle, the walled city, the feudal estate, the mountain, the forest, the cave, the inn and of course, the dungeon. They are stories of adventure, involving heroes who set out on quests to find wealth, fame, lost souls, spiritual succour, and ultimately their own selfhood. They involve dragons, and trolls, and giants, wicked knights, honourable paladins, and wizards of dubious moral alignment. Characters may earn, steal or win in combat a bewildering array of enchanted weapons and armour: swords, maces, war hammers, spears, quarterstaffs, flails, axes, halberds, bows, and shields, and so on. Magic, healing and harmful is sacred lore contained in scrolls, potions, and the memories of practitioners. While *BG II* makes an effort to incorporate techno-science fictional elements, on the whole these games represent the most refined point of conjunction between technology and romantic nostalgia. Is it not a paradox deserving of lengthy reflection that every last technical resource of the most advanced commonly available machines of the digital age have been made to strain towards the re-creation of the pre-industrial, the medieval, the magical?

To appreciate this paradox one has to look to the origins of medieval romance itself, which turn out also to be the origins of fantasy. Medievalist Geraldine Heng tells us that Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britannie*, created roughly between 1130 and 1139, is the first

major work of romance [7]. In Heng's account this text is a response to First Crusade, "a transnational militant pilgrimage during which Latin Christian crusaders did the unthinkable – committing acts of cannibalism on infidel Turkish cadavers in Syria, in 1098, with the attendant traumas of shock, pollution and self-denaturing that accompany the violation of horrific taboos." For Heng, romance, at its point of origin, serves the purpose of cultural rescue: "cultural fantasy was instantiated in order that the indiscussible, what is unthinkable and unsayable by other means, might surface into discussion". Fantasy is therefore an elaborate response to the trauma that brought about by religious imperialism; indeed it is a means by which narrative is able to "transact its negotiations with history". Zooming into the present, it may seem to the sympathetic that the only issues D&D-style fantasy causes to "surface into discussion" have to do with the game itself: questions about characters, locations, strategies and so on. Are there any ways in which *BG I* and *II* can be said in any meaningful way to "transact" any "negotiations with history"? I propose that at the heart of D&D lie questions profoundly related to history: questions that have to do with the very construction of characters and character, from which all else flows. These issues are those of race, class, gender and alignment, to which I shall return after a brief digression into the history of fantasy writing. Furthermore, it is likely that all games, of whatever genre, can be productively analysed through the asking of similar questions about their origins, and about the ways they interact with the contexts from which they emerge.

Heng's link with imperialism is crucial, for empires, in important senses, *are* fantasies. It will never be possible, as Thomas Richards observes, for any nation to 'close its hand around the world; the reach of any nation's empire always exceeds its final grasp' [10]. John McClure makes clear the process by which non-western regions of the world were (and still are) seen as a source of the "raw materials" of romance for a rationalising, secularising Europe rapidly being disbursed of its stock of magic, mystery and enchantment [9]. Thus, where Sir Walter Scott exploited the potentials of history as a place of romance, for later writers like Kipling, Haggard and Conrad otherness was sought primarily in geographical rather than temporal spaces. The problem, of course, as McClure makes clear, was that imperialism was "the continuation abroad of the very modernising or rationalising processes that had eradicated adventure, magic, providential mystery, and Otherness at home". And in the late nineteenth century, these processes were achieving "global reach".

Thus it is that in 1894 we find Sir Henry Rider Haggard lamenting that "soon the mystery of Africa will have vanished" and wondering "where will the romance writers of future generations find a safe and secret place, unknown to the pestilent accuracy of the geographer, in which to lay their plots?" [9]. I would like to suggest that Haggard had already answered his own question, for between 1885 and 1886, his writing underwent a shift highly relevant to our understanding of the filiation of modern fantasy from romance. These dates represent the dates of publication of *King Solomon's Mines* and *She*, respectively. *King Solomon's Mines* is an example of imperial romance, but it is also what McClure calls a "romance of rationalisation" because there is no case of the supernatural in *King Solomon's Mines* that is not explained away as mistake, superstition or deception. Thus, Gagool, witchdoctor to the erstwhile king of the Kukuana (a fictional version of the Matabele of Zimbabwe), claims to be hundreds of years old, but it later turns out that she is lying. Compare *She* with its image of Ayesha – She Who Must be Obeyed – bathing in the flame of eternal life: strikingly attractive, terrifying, enchanting. Gagool is a malicious, repulsive, violent hag; 'She', as represented by Ursula Andress in the 1965 film of the same name, is iconically beautiful. Gagool claims to be immortal, but gets her just deserts for lying by being crushed to death by thirty tons of rock; 'She' appears genuinely to exceed the

boundaries of the rational.

It is as if in *King Solomon's Mines* Haggard wanted to allow the supernatural equal ontological status to the natural, but was constrained by the rationalistic norms of Victorian society and by the biological racism of his times. Following the runaway success of the novel, in *She* he was emboldened to represent the supernatural without inhibition. Unconsciously lamenting colonialism's abasement of Africa, Haggard found his "safe and sacred space of romance" in his own imagination, his own fancy, and, through *She,* became gatekeeper of a certain school of fantasy that was to follow him. This school, tellingly referred to as "lost-race fantasy", includes the pivotal figure of Tolkien who, like Haggard, found the writing of fantasy to be a meaningful way of reconciling youthful memories of South Africa with the grey and grim realities of life in Britain. The example of Haggard illuminates one crucial dimension of D&D games: their insistence on race as determinant of character. Ayesha is, of course, pale-skinned; Gagool is black. At the founding moment of this strand of fantasy questions of race, intimately related to the experience of colonialism in South Africa, surface as problems – perhaps traumas – from which fantasy proposes cultural rescue. From Haggard to Edgar Rice Burroughs to Tolkien and on to the Bioware games, race, like setting, is represented as innocently escapist, harmlessly entertaining. But properly historicised, elves, dark elves, gnolls, dwarves, halflings and gnomes can be seen to depend for their fictional existences on cultural conditions of possibility enabled by colonial encounters with otherness. Race is more than just the material of certain games. Its transference from the realm of the real to that of the imaginary is part of the method of cultural fantasy identified by Heng, causing to surface in mediated and consoling ways difficult questions about ongoing oppression and inequality, and about the fluid identities of most modern societies.

There is another aspect of the D&D games that intersects yet more dramatically with history, one that is particularly relevant to the present moment. Characters in D&D must choose an alignment: good, neutral, or evil. This principle works well within the game. But what kind of world view does it suggest? My answer is one very similar to that of George W. Bush, who, on September 12th, 2001 expressed his understanding of the geopolitical consequences of the bombing as follows: "This will be a monumental struggle of good versus evil. But good will prevail" [13]. The overlaps between these two contexts are considerably more complex than I have presented them here, and I am not suggesting a straightforward process of reading one context off against the other. But the presence of Manichean moral systems is relevant to the revival of romance signified by games like these (as well as by films like *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy). This revival must in turn be related to the observations of Heng, who claims that, following the events of September 11, 2001, "the Middle Ages have returned with a vengeance". The most dramatic and important expression of this process is the blurring of politics and religion currently taking place in the United States. For an emblem of the return of the Middle Ages one has to look no further than the cross of twisted steel rising as if naturally out the devastated remains of the north tower of the World Trade Centre in New York. The multiple significations of this space – 'Ground Zero' – are now compacted into the most loaded sign of the religious/imperial ideology of *crusade*. The recurrence of this very term in the language of Bush, Rumsfeld and Powell, as well as in the title of a recently-released computer game, serve to confirm the point.

It is unlikely that many players of games of this level of complexity actively uphold such morally simplistic world views. However, it takes a naivety of a different kind to assume that no link exists between these varied contexts. Critical discourse is far from understanding the nature of

the connections between historical crusades, their contemporary incarnations (Afghanistan, Iraq, but also as "jihad") and the choices game designers make, but by contrast squabbles about narratology and ludology should seem somewhat trivial. The task for criticism is to elaborate the nature of such discursive continuities, thereby granting us a better understanding of the relationships between economic and political power and the digital tools we use to console ourselves and to escape our tortured present. I have merely touched on the issues of race and alignment here; there is far more that can be said about the real nature of interactivity – not that which takes place between game and gamer, but that which always already exists between games and history.

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