

“Masters of the Wild”: Animals and the Environment in *Dungeons & Dragons*

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Abstract

This essay will engage in detail with the environmental aspects of fantasy role-playing games—particularly *Dungeons & Dragons*—from the perspective of contemporary ecocriticism and animal studies. In their eclectic cannibalization of various cultural others, these games instantiate the forms of late capitalist, postmodern culture. Nature plays an important part in this exotic simulacrum. Within fantastic worlds, druids, rangers, and other nature-oriented characters engage a multitude of animals, monsters and humanoid creatures, as described in the animal catalogue of the *Monster Manual*. This bestiary pairs an assortment of exotic images with a rigorously quantified set of biopolitical rules. Through violently mastering this state of “bare life,” player-characters can advance in prestige and power. The proliferation of hybrid creatures means, however, that the “human” is not uniquely privileged—thus provoking the question of the position of the “animal” amid this seemingly subversive mélange of monstrosity.

Keywords

fantasy role-playing games, *Dungeons & Dragons*, animals, monsters, biopolitics,
bare life, becoming-animal, mastery, hybridity, agency, holding-to-form

For all its magic and otherworldliness, its historical grandness and militarism, the literature of fantasy is kindled by nothing so much as the natural world. However mythologized or modified they become, animals and the environment—or rather, the history of human engagements with them—are the source from which fantasy draws much of its material. The ecological dimensions of that fountainhead of modern fantasy—J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*—recently have been the subject of renewed interest. This paper will examine the role played by animals and the environment in the distinctive genre of fantasy role-playing games, in particular the classic example of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Fantasy role-playing games (FRPGs) are interactive nonscripted performances, negotiated within highly quantified rule systems. Under the direction of a gamemaster, players control and enact characters within a shared fantastic world. To occupy these worlds, gamers appropriate a multitude of images from sites “other” to the modern west—not only the “medieval” (in all its variety), but also the “pagan,” “Eastern,” “occult,” and “native.” This material is assembled in a manner that tends toward exoticism, nostalgia, eclecticism, and superficiality—the typical marks of “escape” from the regimen of urban, bureaucratic life. But at the same time, FRPGs operate according to a very technocratic spirit: they are structured by systems of calculated rules in which even magic is governed by numerical laws; they fetishize entrepreneurial advancement and the disciplinary and governmental classification of people and objects. FRPGs are distinctively the artifacts of a postmodern and consumerist late capitalism characterized by both rationalizing structures and exoticizing fantasies. The original FRPG, *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), perfectly exemplifies this duality: it offers a broad and pervasive rules system which enables the generic medieval setting to be endlessly supplemented.

The cultural dimensions of these games have been documented using the resources of cultural studies, performance studies, and sociology (Chrulew “Limitation”; Mackay; Fine). Building on this work, the present essay will engage FRPGs from the standpoint of ecocriticism and zoocriticism. Ecocriticism has quickly become a significant field within literary and cultural studies, comprising wide-ranging, ecologically committed studies of textual representations of nature. However, animals typically have been underrepresented within ecocriticism’s focus on human/environment relations. The allied (but smaller) field of animal studies has concentrated on the representation of animals.

As Michel de Certeau argues, a society’s games are one place in which “the formal rules which its practices obey” (21-22) are made manifest. FRPGs give us a unique snapshot of notions of humanity, monstrosity, and animality in contemporary

(capitalist and postcolonial) "Western" culture, and also provoke interesting questions regarding environmental and posthumanist theory. In FRPGs, the environment and the numerous creatures that inhabit it function similarly to the other cultural material: as fantastic challenges to be overcome by the characters. Moreover, they are defined and quantified according to the game mechanics in methods that reflect and fetishize the technocratic operative modes of late capitalist societies; the same modes by which the "environment" is administered and regulated. But many other relationships to nature are also expressed, in tropes including animal familiars, druidic shapechanging and ranger "bioregionalism." And nature itself is comprised of a multitude of hybrid species so that the centrality of the human is dislodged. Thus the proliferation of "nature" begets a world that is thoroughly "monstrous"; this interplay might shed light on the status of ordinary animals within a theoretical domain that favors hybridity.

Simulating Nature

In *D&D*, the Dungeon Master (DM) is responsible for controlling the game. Making use of information in core rulebooks such as the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (*DMG*) and other supplements,¹ DMs narrate events, administer the rules, and oversee all of the player-characters' (PCs) interactions with the game-world. While pre-established campaign settings are available, DMs often create this world themselves. Whether they devise their own dungeons from scratch or make use of the notes on creating random dungeons in the *DMG*, the DM is the omnipotent and omniscient creator of his or her world—and in many cases, this creation takes a lot more than seven days. Diverse material is combined, whether congruous or pastiche, historical or fantastic. Ideas of nature play an important part, culled from the literary, mythological and scientific imaginations of various cultures. Once the world-building is done, the DM takes players through it on a "campaign" composed of many interlinking adventures.

There are all manner of natural sites for the characters to explore. The classic setting for an adventure is, of course, the dungeon: a dark, abandoned site where the urban environment blends into the dangerous space of the underground, overgrown and deteriorated, now occupied by poaching creatures. The dungeon merges artificial constructs with natural locations: along with caves and chasms, "underground streams,

¹ References to Monte Cook, Jonathan Tweet, and Skip Williams' *Dungeon Master's Guide* are abbreviated as *DMG*; *Player's Handbook* as *PH*; and *Monster Manual* as *MM*. References to David Eckelberry and Mike Selinker's *Masters of the Wild* are abbreviated as *MW*.

cisterns, sewers, and moats are all part of the dungeon environment” (*DMG* 85). As well as more powerful creatures, dungeons contain their own flora (such as slimes, molds, and fungi) and fauna (such as insects, rats, and bats) which interact in a kind of “dungeon ecology” (*DMG* 116).

Also common is the wilderness, which in opposition to the lawful space of the *polis* is marked as a site of the threatening unknown. FRPG worlds contain vast uncharted or unsettled regions, from deserts and mountains to forests and marshes. These often harsh and dangerous climes teem with predatory creatures, feral and cunning. It is also here where barbarian and savage peoples subsist. Instead of lurking behind walls and doors, monsters “cross the sky,” “drop from the trees,” and even “burst forth from the earth” (*DMG* 132).

As well as monsters, animals and other beings, these worlds are populated with humanoid races from whose ranks PCs are created. While the often lascivious images of the rulebooks make gender anything but a nonissue, the game rules ensure that males and females are created equal. But PCs are otherwise differentiated according to two other central categories of contemporary thought: race and class.

D&D incorporates a racialized ontology inherited from Tolkien’s Middle-Earth: as well as the various monsters, the world is populated by a variety of biologically distinct intelligent races. These “humanoids”—whether actually human, or elf, dwarf, halfling, gnome, or even hybrid half-elf or half-orc—share the dominance and intelligence required to be PCs, but are also physically and ethnically differentiated, as detailed in the *Player’s Handbook* (11-20). As in Tolkien, the races embody different spectrums of humanity: the more natural, spiritual, and aesthetically gifted elves “are well known for their poetry, dance, song, lore, and magical arts” (*PH* 15); the gruff and hardy dwarves “for their skill in warfare, . . . their knowledge of the earth’s secrets, their hard work, and their capacity for drinking ale” (*PH* 14); while half-orcs, born of “the wild frontiers, [where] tribes of human and orc barbarians live in uneasy balance,” can be “short-tempered and sullen” and have no time for “[r]efined enjoyments such as poetry, courtly dancing, and philosophy.” These tribal, chaotic beings, with “grayish pigmentation, sloping forehead, jutting jaw, prominent teeth, and coarse body hair,” as well as numerous scars, are typically unintelligent and uncharismatic (*PH* 18-19). Within these categories, the *DMG* lists further subraces which can be used to customize a campaign, most based on relationship to place: “climate can change culture and race to create a subrace better suited for the environment in which it lives” (*DMG* 21), such as mountain dwarves, wild elves, and forest gnomes.

“Class” is the most important category by which a character is defined. Each class manifests an historical or literary archetype, such as the fighter, wizard, cleric, and rogue. The three most environmentally inclined classes are the barbarian, the druid and the ranger (given further amplification in the guidebook *Masters of the Wild*). Between them, they cover three prominent ways for a subject to engage with nature.

Barbarians epitomize all that is antithetical to “civilization”: rage, disorder, naked passion, and brute strength. These illiterate, chaotic berserkers “can fly into a screaming blood frenzy” (*PH* 25) which amplifies their combat prowess. Typically either human or half-orc, they are “wild” at heart, closer to the “animal” side of human nature. Rangers, on the other hand, are not so much savage as rugged—cunning woodland hunters after the archetype of Tolkien’s Aragorn. They protect tracts of wilderness in a form of bioregionalism, and commonly have animal companions. These powerful fighters have particular skill against certain foes, their “favoured enemy”—the hunting ethos of this class makes a virtue of a racially/biologically motivated hatred and expertise in tracking and killing a particular type of creature (*PH* 44-46; *MW* 16-18).²

Druids most closely embody the neopagan spirit of FRPGs. Based on representations of Celtic shamanism—as *MW* is keen to highlight, they derive more from fantasy literature than historical fact (8)—druids have extensive knowledge of nature, and with their animal companions move through the woods without leaving a trail. These protectors of life wield holly and mistletoe in casting spells drawn “from the power of nature, not from gods,” and “avoid carrying much worked metal with them because it interferes with the pure and primal nature that they attempt to embody” (*PH* 33). They can even make use of a “standing stone,” a “massive stone obelisk,” activated by sacrifice, which “increases a druid’s ability to cast a single spell when in contact with it” (*MW* 30). At higher levels they are able to metamorphose into animal forms.

Masters of the Wild augments these three principal types with numerous other nature-oriented classes (43-79). Some refine the adversarial character of the ranger’s “favoured enemy” ability: the “foe hunter” “has but one purpose in life: to kill creatures of the type she hates” (56); the “bloodhound” is hired to bring wrongdoers to justice; while the “bane of infidels” leads “a xenophobic tribe” (46)

² *D&D* caters for all forms of xenophobia: while normally a “good” (as opposed to evil) ranger cannot select his own race as favored enemy, variant rules in *MW* allow the choice of a subtype (such as wild vs. dark elves, orcs vs. half-orcs, etc.); “[t]his variant also allows the ranger to choose others of his own race who come from a hostile country as a favored enemy” (Eckelberry and Selinker 18).

and sacrifices enemies (or scapegoat followers) in order to gain power. However, most cultivate a more intimate relationship with the natural world. Both the “animal lord” and the “tamer of beasts” develop a special bond with an animal group; the “king or queen of the wild” is uniquely adapted to a certain form of terrain; while the “geomancer” uses “ley lines” to channel “magical energy . . . through the land itself” (60). The “verdant lord,” who possesses the ability to take plant form, is “the final defender of the forest” (73), while on the other hand the “blighter” is an ex-druid, now devoted to the destruction of the land, who draws power from deforestation.³

These classes share numerous ways of engaging with and manipulating nature. There are many religious options. The generic Greyhawk setting which the core *D&D* rulebooks describe offers, within a pantheon that also includes gods of the sun and the roads, two opposed gods of nature: Ehlonna, the beneficent “goddess of the woodlands” who “watches over all good people who live in the forest” (*PH* 91), and Obad-Hai, the neutral “god of nature” who “is a friend to all who live in hamony with the natural world” (*PH* 92). Ehlonna’s clergy “are quick to protect the woodlands against all threats” (*DMG* 159) while Obad-Hai’s “keep to the wilderness and to themselves, rarely getting involved in society” (*DMG* 160). These correspond to two opposed modern conceptions of “nature,” contrasting the values of environmentalism with a perspective more in line with deep ecology. Druids follow the latter path more explicitly: while some may worship nature gods, most in fact avoid institutional religion and instead “pursue a mystic spirituality of transcendant union with nature” (*PH* 33).

Knowledge of the natural world is important for many of the character classes. Their skills include “knowledge of nature” and “wilderness lore,” as well as the ability to track foes through difficult terrain. Other skills involve the manipulation of natural ingredients to create powerful alchemic or herbal substances. Rangers and especially druids focus on spells which make use of nature, whether to detect, calm, summon, entrance or enlarge animals; to communicate with animals or plants, or even awaken them to sentience; to endure the elements; to entangle foes in plants or afflict them with swarms of insects; to find food, direction or dangerous snares; to change form into stone, tree or animal; or even to call on lightning, sunbursts, whirlwinds or earthquakes (*PH* 166-68).

³ In addition, race and class overlap in specific ways, conforming to oppositions of civilization to the natural, savage, and primitive. It may be the case that “humanoid societies exist at all levels of cultural development, from primitive to advanced, so the barbarian class is open to all races,” but nevertheless, “[o]rcs are savages, it’s true. So, it’s no real surprise that many half-orc heroes are barbarians” (Eckelberry and Selinker 5-6).

Arrayed against the PCs and their powers is an enormous heterogeneous collection of natural and monstrous foes. These are detailed in what is a standard text for FRPGs: a creature catalogue modeled on the bestiaries of medieval antiquity. The *D&D* version is the *Monster Manual*, an encyclopedia of fantastic denizens providing "over 500 fearsome foes" from which to choose in populating a world. In keeping with *D&D*'s eclectic iconography, the *MM* includes a pastiche of creatures compiled from innumerable sources. Mythology, fantasy literature and science, both past and present, Western and other, all provide monsters to fill this bestiary's pages—as do medieval bestiaries themselves—while many other creatures are original to *D&D*.

The *Monster Manual* thus contains a number of different—even inconsistent—categories of animality. Traditional monsters such as griffons, dragons, pegasi, and werewolves mix with undead such as zombies and many other chimeras. Real, ordinary animals are present, though they comprise their own, somewhat less interesting subset. Even dinosaurs are included—those most scientific of creatures that W. J. T. Mitchell calls "the totem animal of modernity" (77)⁴—though they are categorized not as animals but "beasts." There is also another split from the "animal" category—wasps, spiders, and centipedes (albeit "huge" or "monstrous") occupy their own familiar class: "vermin." Alongside these "naturally" occurring creatures are more magical and occult types such as demons and vampires.

Even having focused only on the "natural" dimensions of *D&D* adventure sites, character races, classes and skills, and creature types, the sheer breadth of possibilities is overwhelming. Images proliferate in a classic postmodern pastiche, in which all possible constructions of "nature" are available for simulation. Myriad creatures and other natural tropes coexist, with little attempt at reconciliation according to any criteria of aesthetic or thematic consistency.

According to the orthodox reading, this endless retrospective recreation discloses an underlying void—a *lack* of history, of life, of nature, of the real—that impels this drive to simulation. Jean Baudrillard describes the return of history as myth in cinema:

⁴ Mitchell in fact explicitly contrasts the fantastic dragons of *D&D* with the scientific dinosaurs of palaeontology, only to then complicate the discursive purity of both. Gaming is peculiarly technical: *D&D*'s "catalogues of weapons and armor and intricate rules and strategies rival the Byzantine complexity of dinosaur taxonomy"—while dinosaurs are a strangely mythical modern totem: "a creature that unites modern science with mass culture, empirical knowledge with collective fantasy, rational methods with ritual practices" (Mitchell 90-91).

Anything serves to escape this void, this leukemia of history and of politics, this hemorrhage of values—it is in proportion to this distress that all content can be evoked pell-mell, that all previous history is resurrected in bulk—a controlling idea no longer selects, only nostalgia endlessly accumulates. (44)

FRPGs revisit the medieval past and other exotic sites of otherness in a similarly eclectic, neocolonial manner, rearranging a multitude of material according to a circular economy of desire (Chrulew, “Limitation” 225-31). Anything might be encountered in the fantastic *D&D* worlds: “everything is equivalent and is mixed indiscriminately in the same morose and funereal exaltation, in the same retro fascination” (Baudrillard 44). Lacking their own “authentic” experience, but forever desiring it, FRPGs plunder history, literature, science, and mythology, portraying and playing with all. In a bureaucratized world of risk-free alientation, nature has been lost: everyday contact with animals; the life-or-death stakes of exploration and hunting; a sense of connection with the vital processes of our own bodies and with the ecological pathways in which they are enmeshed. In its absence, nature is simulated.

Baudrillard himself describes the process by which animals have been liquidated and then “made to speak” (129-41); vanished from everyday life, animals resurface in our simulations. This thesis is common in discussions of the animal in postmodernity. John Berger points out in a celebrated essay that “[z]oos, realistic animal toys and the widespread commercial diffusion of animal imagery, all began as animals started to be withdrawn from daily life” (24). Absent real contact with animals, we incessantly resurrect them, in wildlife parks, in our homes, on screen and in our games. But though “animals maintain a compulsory discourse,” Baudrillard also maintains that “[n]owhere do they really speak, because they only furnish the responses one asks for” (138). This vanquished nature is only resurrected as a puppet of its captor, made to speak a thoroughly human language. And this language, in FRPGs, is the rigorously quantified idiom of biopolitics.

Biopolitics

As I have argued elsewhere, FRPGs are simultaneously characterized by pastiche and order, fantasy and quantification, adventure and discipline—a seeming opposition which in fact precisely demonstrates the cannibalistic drive of consumer capitalism (Chrulew, “Limitation”). As Mackay puts it, “the content of the games’

narratives seem to run perpendicular to the structural reality of the games themselves” (96). This hyperreal fusion of fantasy and calculation registers plainly in the setout of class descriptions: the *PH* first describes the tropes and ideas that make up a class—supplemented by an illustration—before moving on to the game mechanics. No aesthetic or evolutionary systematization harmonizes the conflicting images of nature and animality in FRPGs; rather, they are made to cohere through a system of economic definitions. Through quantified rules, fantasy is measured, diversity is defined, and life-or-death risks are thoroughly calculated.

The nature of the game-worlds is defined firstly through the disciplines of modern social science—geography, demographics, economics, politics—as well as in terms of war, religion, and magic (*DMG* 153-64). DMs draw up maps, demographic charts, class structures and pantheons that detail the specific characteristics of their world. The created world can consist of varying topographic regions, defined by climate (cold, temperate or warm) and terrain (aquatic, desert, plains, forest, hill, mountains, marsh or underground) (*DMG* 154). The “ecology” of the zone delineates what sort of creatures are encountered and how they interact with the environment and one another. Overlaying these natural elements, the DM draws borders and places within them communities and networks of people who are then organized into political systems (monarchy, tribal/clan, feudalism, republic, magocracy or theocracy) (*DMG* 156-57).

Thus FRPGs are to be firmly situated within the classical politico-epistemological axioms of the social sciences. Their fantastic locales are assimilated according to the discipline of geography: living places are framed in terms of cartographically organized space, demarcated and made amenable to territorial control. Within these terrains, bodies and populations can be known and taxonomized by means of sociological techniques, and thereby effectively administered. In Michel Foucault’s terms, this “governmentality” ensues from the disciplinary gaze of panopticism, making possible the knowledge, power and spatial control of individualized subjects.

Intelligent humanoids—“people”—are defined according to the familiar paper trail of social scientific governmentality. For all their fantastic variety, character races and classes are democratically equalized according to a common set of numerically evaluated categories. This heavily regulated system reflects the “examination,” which positions the individual within “a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 189)—a bureaucratic archive that establishes a subject’s identity within a grid of statistical possibilities. It is this “archived individuality of the player-character” (Mackay 94) that is subjected to discipline

through a system of reward and punishment.⁵ This definition is what in fact enables the variety of exotic differences, and reveals their superficiality.

Most central to each character are the fundamental attributes, such as strength, intelligence, and dexterity. These physical characteristics locate characters within a system of normalized comparison, measuring the distance from the average for their species or race. In addition to these basic traits, PCs record their hit points, armor class, attack bonuses, skills, feats, spells, experience points, and numerous others characteristics. The PCs are here defined according to what Foucault calls the “*anatomo-politics of the human body*” (*The Will to Knowledge* 139; italics original). This mode of biopower is “centred on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces,” allowing the PCs to maximize the productivity of their racially and occupationally defined bodies—although not in Foucault’s sense of the docile worker integrated “into systems of efficient and economic controls” (*The Will to Knowledge* 139), but rather the active sense of the individual entrepreneur.⁶

The other-than-human is anything but exempt from this discourse. As many have argued, the natural sciences can be situated on a continuum (rather than a disjunction) with the human sciences at least in so far as animals and the environment have also come to be regulated according to governmental techniques (Rutherford). This “environmentality” defines animal populations and their ecological interrelations as objects to be managed by human organizations, and this real-world regulation is repeated in the FRPG definition of monsters according to the discourse of biopolitics.

The *Monster Manual* is more than merely a “viewing gallery of weird and wonderful creatures”; just as Yamamoto writes of the medieval bestiary, it “is a text that speaks vitally about bodies of all kinds—ours included—and that lays down the ground rules for that intercourse between human and animal worlds” (17). Despite the incongruity of the collection, the *MM* is no Chinese Encyclopedia—while some of the creatures might very well “from a long way off look like flies” (Foucault, *The Order of Things* xvi), any laughter provoked by the assortment is quickly contained by the rationality of its classification. The traditional essentialism found in Genesis and medieval bestiaries organizes the flux of nature through a catalogue of names: “and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name” (Gen. 2:19).

⁵ For more on this aspect, see Mackay 92-99; Chrulew, “Limitation” 231-36.

⁶ “That PCs mainly interact with the economy in gold pieces [as opposed to common silver pieces] represents the fact that they, as adventurers, take much larger risks than common folk and thus earn much larger rewards if they survive” (Cook, Tweet, and Williams 155).

As do medieval texts, these postmodern bestiaries imagine a book of nature in which the flesh is word, exhaustively known by an omnipotent creator. But like modern science, their discursive control is wielded not through naming, but rather through a much more extensive web of definitions.

As with the PCs, the creatures are firstly depicted by an exotic image before being defined according to abilities that facilitate interaction with the quantified game-world.⁷ Steve Baker has argued that “the visual image of the animal, however minimal or superficial the degree of its ‘animality’, invariably works as a Derridean supplement to the narrative . . . it disturbs the logic and consistency of the whole” (*Picturing the Beast* 139). But in *D&D* the ideological work is performed by text and image in tandem. Throughout the *MM*, fantastic illustrations sit beside detailed charts and tables, and both conform to a logic of consumption and control. The images are certainly supplementary to classification, but hardly disturbing of it.⁸ The difficulty level of any particular creature—and thus the degree of alarm or terror it ought to instill in PCs—is signaled not so much by the often gothic artwork as by its numerical data, distilled in the single integer of the “Challenge Rating.”

D&D deploys a large but final set of creature types to impose some order on its melange: aberrations, animals, beasts, constructs, dragons, elementals, fey, giants, humanoids, magical beasts, monstrous humanoids, oozes, outsiders, plants, shapechangers, undead and vermin (*MM* 4). Each creature is then circumscribed as a species according to the techniques of the “*bio-politics of the population*” (Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge* 139; italics original). The distribution of creatures obeys zoogeographic rules—particular monsters belong to different bioregions, defined by climate and terrain. Charts link creatures to environments (*DMG* 132-36) in order to maintain this modicum of ecological realism. Of course, DMs should be selective in assigning a beast to any given wilderness area: they should choose creatures from the “comprehensive” lists in the *DMG* in order to create “a workable ecosystem” (*DMG* 133). After all, “one area of mountains” could maintain “either dire lions or dire tigers but not both” (*DMG* 133). Population density is reflected in the percentage chance of encountering any particular creature. However the most immediately relevant categories are again those of the anatomo-politics of the (here nonhuman) body. Most creatures are encountered as a challenge to be overcome in combat, and thus their statistics outline the physical impacts and abilities of their

⁷ This structure is repeated in other fantasy genres from computer games to trading-card games—an alluring fantastic image paired with a defined set of strategic operations.

⁸ On the auxiliary nature of the images, see the anecdote in Mackay 95.

bodies: hit points, damage, speed, and skills. Most fundamentally, the language these fantastic natures are “made to speak” is that of biopolitics.

Mapping and Mastery

As the appellation “Dungeon Master” suggests, mastery is a central aspect of FRPGs. The DM possesses a control of the game elements that is distinctively panoptical: maps and other information are hidden behind a screen, while the DM enjoys uninhibited access to all of the PCs’ details; the DM watches yet is not watched, while the PCs must bare their quantified souls (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 201-02). Edward Said and other postcolonial theorists have shown that the penetrating diagram of power that Foucault describes also operates within European imperialism’s knowledge of and power over the Other—and this conquest of people and land bears a fundamental ecological dimension. All of these elements of this all-powerful gaze are present within the discourse of mastery of *D&D*.

Perhaps the most central tool DMs use to negotiate the interactions of PCs with their world and its inhabitants is the map. The map is a principal trope of modern fantasy fiction and FRPGs: accompanied by a detailed, descriptive key, it delineates the contours of the imaginary world, imparting both knowledge and mystery. Following the archetype of Tolkien, the task of writers, DMs and other masters of “sub-created” worlds is to maintain allure through the sense of something unknown yet certainly not unknowable beyond the map’s edges (Chrulaw, “Sub-Created Earths” 27-37). The freedom of PCs to travel and explore the game-world varies, but all is finally determined by the pathways and delineations of the map. Adventures are often based around a site:

If you create an adventure based around some place—a dungeon, a ruin, a mountain, a valley, a cave complex, a wilderness, a town—then you have created a site-based [as opposed to event-based] adventure. Site-based adventures revolve around a map with a key, detailing important spots on that map. Encounters in the adventure are triggered when the PCs enter a new location at the site. (*DMG* 97)

In demarcating spatial structures, maps are really defining the functionality of a site—relations of causality triggered by PCs’ movements and actions. The *DMG* provides this definition: “a dungeon is an enclosed, defined space of encounter areas connected in some fashion” (*DMG* 105). The dungeon “facilitates the flow of

the game" and "grants players a feeling of control" (*DMG* 106). Thus, "[a] dungeon is really nothing but an adventure flowchart"—a collection of interconnected encounters—which "becomes a model, in this way, for all adventures" (*DMG* 106). Diegetically at least, FRPGs thereby approach the utopia of postmodern hyperreality in which map and territory are indistinguishable (Baudrillard 1).

The dungeon as flowchart is an archetypal schema for FRPGs, instantiating what Michel de Certeau calls a "strategy" (xix). As opposed to a tactic of resistance, a strategy is a territorially defined system of power which operates through mapping, classification, and the manipulation of movement and action. FRPGs equate ontology with strategy: only those things which can be defined, quantified and controlled according to game rules *matter*; all else is epiphenomenal adornment. The PCs themselves certainly do not engage with the game-world tactically (nor could they), but through their own active manipulations of that rule-bound world, most intensively in combat. Seemingly subversive approaches—invisibility, deception, and other ruses—themselves operate according to the quantification of PC attributes, task difficulty modifiers, and random dice-rolls ("saving throws"). In contesting the functional territory of an adventure, PCs must deploy their own strategies, and do so both despite and through their disciplined, normalized status; they are masterful subjects who seek to conquer the deployments of power they penetrate. This is not subsistence but supremacy. Living, making do, getting by—these are for peasants (and animals), not entrepreneurial adventurers.

The natural world itself also conforms to this fundamentally calculative structure. Nature is first and foremost a "hazard" for the adventuring PCs, posing a threat to their safety or an obstacle to the achievement of their goal. A section on "The Environment" (*DMG* 85-89) describes the natural world as a challenge, where environmental factors (such as natural disasters, water, starvation and thirst, heat and cold, visibility, terrain and weather) combine with attributes of the characters and monsters (such as hearing, vision, speed and so on) to affect strategic dimensions of gameplay including travel and combat.

But the most common and frequent threat is that of monsters: the myriad creatures, whether hostile or friendly, who populate the fantastic world. Some are insignificant: just as with harmless outdoor fauna such as toads and ponies (*DMG* 133), the animals and plants which poach amid the dungeon environment are only worthy of strategic definition when they become "dangerous"—a potential problem for adventurers. Most creatures, however, do represent a challenge for the PCs to overcome—sometimes through problem-solving, but mostly through violence. Enemies can occupy strategic sites of a dungeon or appear randomly: such

“wandering monsters” may emerge at any time, and this panoptic principle serves to keep adventurers on their guard. At the same time, PCs can feel confident that they will be able somehow to meet whatever challenge is thrown up, as a central role of the DM is to ensure that encounters are evenly matched: a monster’s Challenge Rating denotes the appropriate difficulty for PCs of a particular level. This serves to enforce a democratic (and multicultural) modality: a variety of superficially different options, all equalized on a numerical level. In addition, each monster’s range of potential treasure ensures that, if the PCs defeat their (fortunately evenly matched) foe, they are duly rewarded.

This is the entrepreneurial structure of FRPGs: in completing their tasks, characters gain experience, treasure and items, and advance in ability levels, power and prestige.⁹ At a transactional level, a combat, encounter or adventure functions to transfer value from a site (and its occupants) to the adventuring party—PCs diminish the “hit points” of an enemy in order to gain “experience points” of their own. As Fine points out, FRPGs possess an implicit ideology of unlimited treasure—there is rarely any scarcity of adventures to be had, sites to be plunged, monsters to be killed and rewards to be earned (76). This myth of infinite availability can also be extended to world-creation: FRPG worlds generally lack any notion of ecological limit; what limits exist merely become a further challenge for the PCs. Scarcity certainly exists—it is the condition in which all creatures compete—but its answer is never an economy of sustainability, always one of more effective competition. Worlds can be restocked, and new worlds can be made; the driving force of role-playing is the desire for new images to cannibalize. This infinitely renewable character means that sites are only ever there to be plundered. Nature is to be mapped and conquered, and its bounty reaped: the masculinist and colonial posture widely critiqued by feminist and postcolonial theory. As with the ever more mobile and extractive capitalism, the world, its people, creatures, and land (whether active or passive) are framed as resources to be explored and exploited—and then, again—as each is always replaceable by another fantastic image.

Bare Life

This mastery, however, is always under threat. One thing that the varied images of nature in FRPGs have in common is their inviting treacherousness.

⁹ The built-in weaknesses of each character class means that teamwork and cooperation within one’s party are required, but only in order to succeed amid a hostile environment, so that individual PCs can fulfill their own desire for advancement. Please see [Mackay 9](#).

Gaming often exhibits a frontier mentality of exploration in places of omnipresent danger. Dark woods to be penetrated, scorching deserts to be crossed, abandoned mines and moldy dungeons to be delved: in opposition to the (in principle) safer sites of towns and cities, these liminal or exterior zones are characterized by danger and unfamiliarity, but also the potential for plunder. In these preindustrial worlds, nature is not merely a resource but a powerful and often cunning threat. Outside of civilized areas, adventuring parties are subject to random encounters with hostile creatures. PCs are heavily—indeed overly—racialized, primitivized, and animalized; they might especially be the subject or mark of xenophobic targeting. In *D&D*, “[t]he world is a predator-heavy one,” in which all manner of creatures violently “compete for resources” (*DMG* 154). The adventurers participate in this hyper-Darwinian food-chain—but they do not always occupy the pinnacle.

What is imagined, then, in this profusion of “natural” sites in FRPGs, is a “state of exception.” Everything is a threat—including nature, animals, monsters, and people—and in general all can be killed without recriminations of law. The lives of these worlds’ inhabitants are imagined as what Giorgio Agamben calls “bare life,” “which dwells in the no-man’s-land between the home and the city” (*Homo Sacer* 90). In these medieval and colonial worlds of adventure, the social and natural overlap, and the threat of death is everywhere.

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben describes the juridical condition that has accompanied the political economy of capitalism in the last century. The institution of sovereignty has always demanded, throughout history, the possibility of a state of exception in which law is suspended, a “*zone of indistinction between nature and right*” (*Homo Sacer* 21; italics original)—war, bare life, emergency, the concentration camp. But modernity is distinguished by the relentless extension of the state of exception into the norm as a result of biopolitics: “[w]hen life and politics—originally divided, and linked together by means of the no-man’s-land of the state of exception that is inhabited by bare life—begin to become one, all life becomes sacred and all politics becomes the exception” (*Homo Sacer* 148). “Species” is treated as a political unit, and politics and biology, race and animality, overlap.

This intersection is evident in FRPGs. The classical structure of political exclusion—in which the suspension of law *really was* an exception—positioned the border-zone of “bare life” between clearly defined oppositions of inside and outside, *polis* (city or castle) and wilderness, friend and enemy. The political arena of juridical safety was opposed to the external domain of natural (or barbarian) threat. Colonial maps articulated this structure: on the edges of the demarcated regions, *here be monsters*. Though it might seem that such oppositions pervade FRPGs, the

omnipresence of both threat and calculation serves to disseminate the normally liminal state of bare life throughout the created worlds. For indeed, as well as outside its walls, the city itself is a perilous domain. Death waits in the shadows of every dank alley and the eyes of every shady diplomat. And at the same time, as we have seen, the danger that lies outside these walls is not an uncalculated or unknown realm—indeed, just the opposite. The perilous zone is eminently knowable. Bare life and calculation coincide in the binding of the *fantasy* of medievalized “war against all” to the *diegetic structure* of the calculation of all. FRPGs thereby express the modern indeterminacy and overlap Agamben describes between juridical citizenship and “mere violence in the form of the state of nature,” (*Homo Sacer* 20) in which the state of exception becomes the norm. In fantasy role-playing games, *everywhere be monsters*.

It is telling that the expression of this condition in FRPGs operates through representations of the medieval. The Middle Ages have always been a privileged figure of bare life for modernity—one need only think of notions of the “Dark Ages” or colloquial uses of the word “medieval” (for example, to disparage non-Western legal systems). Agamben himself refers to Walter Benjamin’s medievalist image of a village at the foot of a castle as exemplary of the state of bare life (*Homo Sacer* 53-55). The supplementation of Orientalist and primitivist tropes to the generic medieval setting of *D&D* is also revealing—in the fantasy of (post)modernity, all of these “others” can figure a site of untrammelled violence. But the core figure of bare life, in FRPGs just as implicit throughout *Homo Sacer* and indeed history itself, is the natural world—whether “red in tooth and claw” or immanently unaware of death and therefore justice, nature is by definition excluded from the political. Animals constitute the living beings who may be killed *par excellence*; nonhumans have rarely been incorporated in the legal and moral codes of Western societies except as exclusions or exceptions. As Agamben argues in *The Open*, animals are the figure of “natural life”—the living as reducible to its biology—to which the human citizen must be reduced in order to constitute bare life.

Despite its presence in a “medievalized” world, the notion of “animal” here is not at all the medieval one of a shared legal and moral universe but a thoroughly modern one, in which the closeness of sacrifice and symbolism has been replaced by the brutality of industrial utility. As Baudrillard puts it, “the monstrosity of beasts” is today characterized by their subjection to “the sentimental or experimental violence that is one of distance” (135). Of course, this is not produced indiscriminately—the class of “animals” is riven by numerous other cultural taxonomies. As opposed to

more humanized animals such as pets, the category *within* animality that is most animalized and subject to violence is that of "vermin": before all other creatures, pests figure the abject and excluded. In *D&D*, vermin such as "giant spiders" and "monstrous centipedes"—along with "undead" such as skeletons and zombies—represent most clearly a bare life that may be killed without hesitation; violence against such wholly other creatures is completely deproblematized. But nonetheless, these categories are hardly exceptions; they are simply the most palpable figures of a highly mobile logic of exclusion, which also threatens bestialized humanoid races (such as orcs and half-orcs). But in fact *all* creatures, whether intelligent or unthinking, anthropomorph or insectomorph, might be targets. In FRPGs we therefore find a widespread animalization of the political, as PCs struggle to succeed amid the everpresent peril of a state of exception.

Of course, FRPGs only offer a *fantasy* of bare life: for the bureaucratically competent Western subject, playing games of leisure within a privileged urban bubble of insured, risk-free existence, FRPGs betray a libidinal investment in the possibility of bloodshed and freedom.¹⁰ Longing for the exotic and fantastic, in its non-modern and natural simplicity and brutality, their players dream of at times "when *at least* there was history, at least there was violence . . . when at least life and death were at stake" (Baudrillard 44). The relationship of such violent imaginings and enactments to real-world violence has long been a matter of dispute, in which animals have played their familiar mediating function.¹¹ But whether inciting or cathartic, what FRPGs disclose, in tying this violence to a calculative, biopolitical discourse, is the actual operative mode of the capitalistic culture which dreams up these games. Gamers dream what it would be like to feel the precariousness of life, to live amid scarcity, peril, insecurity. To be medieval, to be primitive, to be other—to be animal. But given the animals' mute mutability, "[t]he question they raise for us would thus be this one: don't we live now and already . . . according to this brute, symbolic mode, of indefinite cycling and reversion over a finite space?" (Baudrillard 139-40). Is not capitalism established upon the finally indifferent exploitation of people and life? Is not the postmodern simulacrum

¹⁰ Like the characters, the players of these games are of course differentiated according to race, class, gender, and other social categories. While Fine's (dated) sociological data indicates that the majority of players are (or were) male upper-middle class professionals and students, an investigation of user-groups and practices, and particularly of different ways that gaming subcultures engage with the power structures in FRPGs, would make an interesting study. In the present essay, whose focus is restricted to the official published *D&D* texts, I can only consider an "ideal player" presupposed (or created) by the games themselves.

¹¹ See Bleakley 109-10.

precisely characterized by an omnipresent state of exception, by a universal animal immanence of the human?

Nonetheless, the ubiquitously biopoliticized life-worlds of twenty-first century globalized capitalism are marked by distinct structures of differentiation. The brunt of this indeterminacy is not borne equally, but distributed unevenly between (and within) the First and Third Worlds along well-worn lines of stratification. In relation to the FRPG worlds of exception and bare life, I suspect the position of most DMs and players is not at all ambiguous: they are privileged (citizen) subjects who seek through control of the game to discursively master these worlds—indeed, who actively seek death and adventure in the frontier zones of indeterminacy and danger. Perhaps they recognize in FRPGs something of their own subjection to capitalist hegemony. But in all cases, while their characters may at times be prey in the “predator-heavy” (*DMG* 154) worlds of *D&D*, PCs oppose such threats with their own voracity; while they indeed “compete for resources” (*DMG* 154), they respond to scarcity with not restraint but antagonism. Was evolution ever a better metaphor for capitalism?

The Great Encyclopedic Labyrinth of Being

Despite the comprehensive exposure to the threat of the wild, the result of this intersection of humanity and animality in a state of exception is not the production of bare life as an undifferentiated biological mass, but rather the proliferation of innumerable different forms and subjects. And this diversity of species in fact threatens radically to undermine, if not the discourse of peril, calculation and mastery as such, then at least the centrality of the human in its elaboration. For in *D&D*, the “great chain of being” is a tangled web, both labyrinthine and encyclopedic. Humanoid races proliferate, blending with monstrous races and other creatures, who overlap with beasts and animals. Of the variety of medieval bestiaries passed on to us, the *MM* most resembles not the earlier types, which collected a limited range of rather more mundane animals as preaching *exempla*, but those bestiaries of the later Middle Ages which incorporated numerous semi-human “monstrous races” such as skiapods and cynocephali and reflected, according to Joyce E. Salisbury, an increased anxiety over the boundaries of human identity.

D&D is not ordered according to the orthodox criteria said to divide humanity from all other creatures, but distributes speech, technology, politics, agency and so on throughout a proliferation of beings. While there are humanoids who dominate the “civilized” world (humans most populous among them), they are not the only

beings to use equipment (that is, *technics*)—fey, giants, some outsiders, shapechangers and undead also make use of tools. Nor is speech the domain of a privileged few—many creatures can speak, although their language, as with Wittgenstein’s famed lion, may be indecipherable. *D&D* creatures exhibit multiple abilities which, while they might in combination mark the uniqueness of the human, are nonetheless spread out across an enormous variety of hybrids.

Nor are these abilities in themselves the supreme *telos* of all nature; rather, humanoid creatures can also radically be modified and expanded beyond the normal biological limitations of the “human” (*DMG* 71-83). Such special abilities are characterized as either “extraordinary, spell-like, or supernatural” (*DMG* 71), and are often drawn from the nonhuman world. Characters and monsters can have normal eyesight, low-light vision, darkvision, or even the bat-like “blindsight,” which enables a being “to operate effectively without vision. Such sense may include sensitivity to vibrations, acute scent, keen hearing, or echolocation” (*DMG* 73). Some creatures have elemental properties based on environmental adaptation: enhanced resistance, or even acclimatized immunity, to energy forms such as cold or fire. This transferral of biological capabilities serves to destabilize the singularity of the human.

In fact, humanoids are overwhelmed by the enormous powers that are possessed by nonhuman creatures. DM willing, players can choose to create a character from the “monstrous races” such as grimlocks, lizardfolk, orcs, kobolds, centaurs and others, whose extra limbs, amphibiousness, or other special capacities are to be envied. Such decisions must always be calculated—while these changes may unbalance the campaign, they can always be dealt with by the appropriate numerical adjustments (“level equivalence”)—but at the same time they are only possible because the monsters and animals are defined according to the *same* normalized characteristics as the humanoid races. In the biopolitical matrix, human privilege is erased. Species difference is profuse but never absolute. The world is populated by creatures in all combinations of “man” and “beast”—theriomorphs, anthropomorphs, and everything in between—and all are comprehended within the same system of classification, connected to everything else—economically, but also in a sense ecologically. There is no wholly Other here, only a variety of creatures both similar and different to the human.

For many, this posthuman overabundance of life represents a powerful challenge to the hegemony of the masterful human subject. In fact, it is something of a postmodern orthodoxy that the fragmentation and multiplication of human subjectivity reflected by these games encourages an awareness of connectivity,

fragility, and embodiment, and fosters a certain freedom and polyvalence of identity, challenging exclusions based on gender, sexuality, race, class, and species. The archetypal figure of such hybridity is Donna Haraway's cyborg, an entity that destabilizes the binary between organism and machine; and *D&D* creatures are indeed a strange composition of technical definitions and animal images. But, at least on the level of representation, these organisms, who generally inhabit technoscience-free worlds, are more aptly figured by the related notion of the "monster," a "mythic, organic, textual, technical, political" (Haraway 303) chimera pregnant with the promise of difference.

But Haraway's refigured notion of monstrosity sits uneasily with the traditional characterization of the monstrous as an aberration to be eliminated, a threat to human life (but more, to the sure borders of the human subject) that must be expunged—a notion that might seem a better fit with FRPG creatures. In an ecocritical essay on popular monster films—which generically play out this ideological drama in which the impure is expelled—Stacy Alaimo takes up this question:

Monstrous natures pose challenges not only for environmental politics but also for ecocriticism and theory since the very thing these creatures embody as horrific—the collapse of boundaries between humans and nature—is what many theorists, such as . . . Haraway, promote. (280)

The human/animal border is volatile: while underlying anthropocentrism, and thus in need of "monstrous" disruption, it is at the same time central to the political safeguarding of excluded humans (too often monstrously reduced to "animals").

For Agamben, it is precisely the overlap of the "human" with the "animal" that characterizes the political danger of defining a "bare life" who may be killed—exemplified by the figure of the werewolf. This excluded "man without peace" of Germanic antiquity occupies a place of indistinction between human and animal (*Homo Sacer* 107). Agamben describes the monstrous implications: "The transformation into a werewolf corresponds perfectly to the state of exception, during which (necessarily limited) time the city is dissolved and men enter into a zone in which they are no longer distinct from beasts" (*Homo Sacer* 107). But if, in *D&D*, the necessary limitation on this time of indistinction has been lifted—all, in a sense, are werewolves—it is also the case that the monstrous conversion into animal is no longer simply a descent. While in *D&D* the werewolf (like the ghoul and

minotaur) does retain the connotation of "man" degraded into "beast," many of the other creatures express their chimerical nature more positively than as bare life. In the nobility of dragons, the artistry of lillends, and the music of satyrs, human/animal hybrids exemplify cherished aspects of human and other-than-human life. And in taking on extrahuman augmentations, PCs do not degenerate but rather transcend their specific finitude.

What the proliferation of difference in *D&D* makes clear is the impossibility of maintaining a single border whose violation threatens the wholeness of the "inside." Biopolitics, in dissolving the political in the natural, opens the "human" not only to the abjection of bare life—which as Agamben shows is the *product* of human culture, what he calls the "anthropological machine" (*The Open* 37-38)—but in fact to the reality of multiple borders and connections that put the lie to any simple distinction of human and animal. FRPGs exemplify this pattern: while PCs are defined according to numerous categories, none of these operates as a fundamental base. The flipside of the ubiquitous normalization is that there is no wholly "other" not incorporated into the regime of calculation. All differences are relative: while humans may acquire animal characteristics—positive and negative—the characteristics of humanity are simultaneously distributed outside their traditional realm. In FRPGs race, class, gender, and species are not fundamental definitions to which each individual is reduced; rather, they are articulated in relation to many other categories of difference.

A similar dispersal occurs in the case of Baudrillard's simulacrum, whose collapse of the distance between referent and representation coincides with that between human and animal in the state of exception. Verena Andermatt Conley argues that "Baudrillard becomes the spokesperson for a system that indeed would *like* to work as smoothly and efficiently as he claims. He is seduced by his own model" (29) instead of interrogating where the closed system of simulation is defied by the surplus of difference. On the other hand, Haraway's "artifactualism," while recognizing the technoscientific decontextualisation of the contemporary world that Baudrillard takes as his theme, insists on the production of nature as

a co-construction among humans and non-humans. This is a very different vision from the postmodernist observation that all the world is denatured and reproduced in images or replicated in copies. That specific kind of violent and reductive artifactualism, in the form of a hyper-productionism actually practiced widely throughout the planet, becomes *contestable* in theory and other kinds of praxis [once we

recognize the existence of] a world full of cacophonous agencies, . . . [a] commonplace nature . . . [and] a public culture, [which] has many houses with many inhabitants which/who can refigure the earth. (Haraway 297)

Baudrillard does not recognize such “cacophonous agencies”; for him, animals resist human production only through *lack*. The mimicry by which animals only utter human discourse “is their way of sending the Human back to his circular codes, behind which their silence analyzes us” (Baudrillard 138)—and such denials of the animal’s ability to signify are endemic to discourse on animals, however zoophilic. But the “humanimal” profusion of capacities in fact serves to undermine the *centrality* of silence (or signification) as definitive of identity. However much we might construct animals according to our “circular codes” of biopolitical statistics, they still “speak” like they always have—in the bestiary and in science—of the sheer preponderance of difference, of the manifold wondrous natures of life, forcing us to confront the multiplicity of subjectivity.

As Baker puts it, in postmodernity “the classic dualism of human and animal is not so much erased as *rendered uninteresting* as a way of thinking about being in the world” (*The Postmodern Animal* 17)—not because it has been dissolved or ignored, but because it has *exploded*. The singularity of the human is swept up in a proliferation of sites of similarity and difference, of capabilities and identities, of ways of being. It is in this register of complex, interrelational difference (over the traditional mirror of the absolute Other) that Trinh Minh-ha places those she calls “inappropriate/d others,” a term which Haraway takes up in relation to nonhumans: “To be inappropriate/d is not to fit in the *taxon*, to be dislocated from the available maps specifying kinds of actors and kinds of narratives, not to be originally fixed by difference” (Haraway 299). For Haraway and many others, such a notion of hybridity undermines the preeminence of the human and allows the nonhuman to be made visible.

Polymorphous Identity and Becoming-Animal

But does this hybridization of human and animal in fact offer any challenge to the masterful subject that posthumanist theory identifies with the primacy of the “human”? Such polymorphous fracturing of human identity is often celebrated as the hallmark of postmodernity. For many, animals play an important role; in their alterity, they aid the human flight from conventional forms of life. In *The*

Postmodern Animal Baker takes up the triumvirate that Jean-François Lyotard calls expert-thinking, hierarchy-thinking, and identity-thinking, and discusses "how the animal figures in their elaboration and in their undoing" (19). But rather than the lauded figure of the monster, Baker prefers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's notion of "becoming-animal," in which by entering into a relationship with the animal other, the human is transformed (99-102, 32-34):

in contrast to some recent theoretical work on cyborgs, hybrids and monsters, it describes an experience of the world which does not *dissolve* bodily identity, but which means that identity is not the thing to which the participants in the alliance of becoming-animal attend. (132-33)

It offers not a "transgression of human identity"—which, in all its polymorphous perversity, is still *about identity*—but "an alternative to it," a sober but "uncompromising sweeping away of identities, human or animal" (*The Postmodern Animal* 102). Baker perhaps overemphasizes the difference between Haraway's monster and cyborg figures and the notion of becoming-animal. Haraway, too, seeks to ground politics not in identity but affinity and alliance, and for her "monstrosity" does not figure dissolution or simple transgression but precisely the kind of "botched" and multiple animal embodiments that Baker elsewhere espouses. What they share is a belief in the ability of human-animal alliances to destabilize the supremacy of humanistic subjectivity.

As I have argued, *D&D* fosters precisely the form of masterful subject being contested by these thinkers. The ideal PC possesses a will-to-power that is both predatory and entrepreneurial; they are dedicated to advancement and expertise through the symbolic control and consumption of numerous exotic others. But might the nature-oriented PCs of *D&D*, in their own "wild" closeness to nature, in their participation in an ecology of predation and an economy of use, or in the fluidity of their identity, undermine the calculative domination inherent in these games? In *D&D*, such potential challenges are expressed in two main modes: biophilic identifications (PCs' *relations with* nature) and biomorphic changes (PCs *becoming* nature).

Many aspects of *D&D* give the impression of encouraging ecological engagement. Particularly with druids and rangers, players create, imagine, and perform a character that is "close to nature." For example, *MW* provides the option for naturalists to create "infusions" (31-33). These herbal brews contain potent

magic sourced in botanical vitality and activated by consumption. Industrious druids may wish to collect or even grow their own herbs—as unadventurous as this may be—and so *MW* provides rules for such tasks, to the extent of providing a table detailing 81 specific herbs required to infuse different types and levels of spells. But only the semblance of actual botanical knowledge is required; and in fact this effect of detailed engagement—a typical example of the FRPG obsession with lists and categorization—exemplifies the discursive mastery of “expert-thinking.” Likewise, while rangers and druids will inhabit and often protect a particular tract of land—a “bioregion”—these and other modes of environmental knowledge are simulations of expert knowledge and control.

D&D also includes a distinctly zoophilic emphasis on the development of human/animal relationships with steeds, companion animals, and familiars. Many characters ride horses or other more exotic mounts, and can indeed specialize in such abilities (*MW* 77-79). Skills such as “animal empathy” are used to “improve the attitude of an animal” (*PH* 63), while “handle animal” involves rearing a wild animal, or training a domesticated one to do all manner of tasks (*PH* 68-69). Druids and other characters can befriend companion animals (*DMG* 46), who “can be at her side in a moment” (*MW* 8). Once successfully trained, they can assist PCs in tasks from tracking to combat; they can even be trained to wear armor, and bestowed with magical collars and other prostheses to augment their abilities (*MW* 18-19, 29). Wizards and sorcerors can summon a familiar, with whom they share a deep bond—these can be useful in the role of spy or messenger (*PH* 51).

Superficially, these relationships might resemble the undermining of human dominance integral to what Alan Bleakley calls an “animalizing imagination.” But for all its fantasy, *D&D* envisions nothing of the “paradoxical mixture of the familiar and the terrifying” (Bleakley 60) found in the erotic and affective animal initiations of shamanistic experience. Rather, this postcolonial pastiche of nonindustrial modes of apprehending the animal world falls into the pitfalls that even Bleakley himself is at times unable to avoid: “the traps of New Age ‘neo-shamanism’ (appropriation, simplification and personalizing [sic])” (Bleakley 60). Indeed, beneath their exotic aura, these zoophilic relationships are most reminiscent of the sentimental institution of pet-keeping. The class pathways of animal lord and tamer of beasts might resemble “a shamanic initiation—an erotic but suffering encounter with a fantastic animal Other, that defines a vocation and a character” (Bleakley 92), but whereas in shamanic ecstasy one is not in control but shaken to the core by the sensual violence of the call, PCs always choose and control their professional progression. Their titles give them away: “animal *lord*,” “*tamer* of

beasts," "*king* or *queen* of the wild." Interactions with animal friends proceed under the sign not of vulnerability but of mastery.

A more formidable challenge to PC mastery lies in their metamorphoses into nonhuman form. A degree of fluidity is already manifest in the very structure of FRPGs as quasi-theatrical performances which allow for the enaction of multiple selves.¹² The creation and playing of such hybrids shares much with what Baker calls "botching," "a creative procedure precisely because of its provisional, playful, loosely experimental operation" (*The Postmodern Animal* 64).¹³ And just as the players might be seen to "become-elf" and "become-monk," many characters *within* the game share this mutability in their ability to "polymorph." Though characters such as wizards can use spells to alter their own or others' physical form (*PH* 236-37), the prime example is the druid's theriomorphic ability of "wild shape," by which they can transform into ever-stronger animals and, later, can take on the powers of the elements (wind, earth, water, fire) (*PH* 35; *MW* 11-12). Many of the nature-oriented prestige classes also involve the PC "becoming-animal" in some manner: the animal lord gains species-appropriate special abilities (such as brachiation for an apelord or water breathing for a marinelord); geomancers experience "drift," "a gradual devolution" by which they "gain attributes of animals and plants" (*MW* 62) in a haphazard fashion; while, most radically, the "shifter" is able to shapeshift into any other external form.

These neoshamanistic metamorphoses, however, possess little of the potency of becoming-animal. For Deleuze and Guattari, only particular animals are capable of disrupting human arrangements: the "demonic" creatures whose pack and swarm modalities hold the affective capacity to deterritorialize human control. Other types of animals—individuated and anthropomorphized pets, and the symbolic or mythical beasts of heraldry and state ideology—are too tightly bound within systems of cultural classification and order (Deleuze and Guattari 240-41). But it is into these latter categories that *D&D* monsters largely fall. Though creatures such as elementals, oozes, and "gibbering mouthers" may possess the vagueness of form that might open up, for Deleuze and Guattari, a line-of-flight, even becoming-ooze

¹² Although, for Mackay, it is not such malleable performativity but rather remembered, crystallized narratives that designate FRPGs as artforms capable of escaping their disciplinary constraints: "It is the depth of the aesthetic dimension of the role-playing game that thwarts the potential for the game to be a mere reiteration of society's structures of power" (Mackay 131).

¹³ Though it hardly promotes an acceptance of organic identity, as the process of strategic decision-making in character creation renders inherited biological traits truly arbitrary: "The physical frailty of an elf (-2 penalty to constitution) is a slight disadvantage, but one that most elven druids are willing to accept" (Eckelberry and Selinker 9).

would not entail being taken up in a multiplicity, but rather the strategic manipulation of set characteristics.

While a “becoming” is, for Deleuze and Guattari, to be seen as a “flight” or “escape,” *D&D* shapeshifting offers instead another form of control. Polymorphism is a change of purely *physical* form in which, “[t]he druid acquires the physical and natural abilities of the creature whose form she has taken while retaining her own mind” (*MW* 11). The identity of the character is at all times retained. Becoming-animal, here, is not the creative play of “botching” but the manipulation of expert knowledge. Any disadvantage (such as the loss of speech or opposable digits) or loss of control (such as disorientation) can be overcome through abilities or special items designed to retain their usefulness for a PC in animal form. The only nonhuman features desired—most often forms of physical prowess (such as combat strength or flight) or other uniquely useful capabilities—are those which could provide a strategic benefit toward pre-conceived objectives. Animal otherness does not disturb; it is too easily and usefully commandeered. Taking animal form does not undermine but augments mastery.

The “wild” characters are thus as disciplined as any other. Diegetically, their intimacy with nature does not differ from the myriad other fantastic masks a player may choose to don. While each class performs this differently—barbarians rage, rangers hunt, druids cast spells and shapeshift—it is, in each case, the well of nature (or animality) from which one draws (or which one renounces) in order to unleash *power*, or it is the creatures or forces of nature that one controls or manipulates. The *PH* makes clear that these powerful PCs’ self-denying devotion to nature barely even registers as a contradiction: “The druid gains her power not by ruling nature but by being at one with it. To trespassers in a druid’s sacred grove, to those who feel the druid’s wrath, the distinction is overly fine” (*PH* 33). As with all other classes—whose strength might lie in combat, magic, or stealth—the druid’s eco-power improves with experience, and counts as a concrete numerical advantage to be wielded against the differently imagined powers of other characters and creatures. While “[b]ecoming-animal is a human being’s creative opportunity to think themselves other-than-in-identity” (*The Postmodern Animal* 125), the various becomings of FRPGs consist rather in the human being’s ultimately uncreative attempt to think themselves in-any-other-identity.

In these biophilic and biomorphic becomings-animal, “nature” is conceived in distinctly discursive and representational terms. PCs’ engagements with flora and fauna generally lack affective, erotic or earthy dimensions. Even the consumptive dimensions of FRPGs are opposed to the material—PCs interact with nature not

according to an alimentary economy but one of symbolic exchange. "They must compete for resources" (*DMG* 154), but this neo-Darwinian food-chain has nothing to do with food; creatures are killed for survival, not subsistence. The other is incorporated not as sustenance but as power, defined through the economic fetishes of experience and treasure. Any recognition of embodiment, it seems, must intrude from outside this diegetic situation. Daniel Mackay offers a suggestion regarding such a possibility: taking up Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the "carnavalesque," he argues that the bodily dimensions of social interaction undefined by the FRPG rules ("the sexual, the emotional, the affective") can often overflow the quantified world: "the moist, viral, unnamable world of the unquantified infected the role-playing game system and character recordsheets, seeping between the digits and possessing the players to act out in nondiegetic moments of release" (104). Could this "'leakage' of affective humanity from between the numbers and statistics" (107) be extended to affective inhumanity? Perhaps only in this manner might life overflow the quantification of life in FRPGs.

Non-monstrous Animals, Dire and Ordinary

Becoming-animal is often discussed as an attempt to refigure or flee from the constraints of human identity through an encounter with animal alterity. But what of animals themselves, when considered not as a foil for the human but irrespectively, in all the infinite separation that their otherness implies? The two are of course interconnected: if human becoming-animal fails, as I have argued it does in *D&D*, one reason may be that the animals themselves are too territorialized. How are they thought and portrayed in *D&D*? Particularly, what becomes of ordinary animals within texts such as *MM* dominated by an exaggerated hybrid monstrosity? The explosion of species difference does paint the picture of a world of cacophonous agencies in which the human (or at least the human form) is not singly privileged. This does not mean, however, that human-centered mastery has been expunged; on the contrary, it permeates the whole of the great encyclopedic labyrinth of being.

While the creatures in the *MM* seem in some ways to reflect Haraway's notion of "monstrosity" and Baker's concept of "botched taxidermy," "where things again appear to have *gone wrong* with the animal, as it were, but where it still *holds together*" (*The Postmodern Animal* 56), these hybrid creatures all occupy a set position within *D&D*'s system of biopolitical definitions. The monsters of FRPGs are in some ways hardly "monstrous" at all. They may upset certain categories of form, but each is in itself completely formed. Rather than seeking unavailability and

incompleteness, approaching “a visual ambiguity which loses all sight of taxonomic propriety” (*The Postmodern Animal* 95), each different FRPG creature is complete and available, ultimately, as a fully realized and defined entity, knowable by the game’s strategic discourses. The strangeness of their bodies—whether of multiple limbs or heads, form of movement, incorporeality or otherwise—while complex, is never impenetrable to anatomo-political definition. FRPG monsters are not “inappropriate/d” precisely because they *do* “fit in the *taxon*” and “the available maps specifying kinds of actors and kinds of narratives” (Haraway 299). Unlike a botched taxidermy animal, which is “[n]either species, nor genus, nor individual” (*The Postmodern Animal* 75), *D&D* creatures can always be exhaustively categorized. The *MM* seeks not disorientation but to return the creatures’ images to an order of classification.

Furthermore, this array is always available for players’ consumption. As Haraway is exceedingly aware, the critical edge of the cyborg as a figure for hybrid subjectivity is double-sided, and risks being compromised by its connection to the military-industrial complex. So too with the monster: the supposedly subversive nature of the fluidity of identity is in keeping with the dissolutions of capitalism. FRPG monsters (and PCs as “monstrous”) make this connection clear—their deconstruction of borders expresses nothing so much as the dissolving character of a consumerist capitalism forever in search of a new fetish. As has been repeatedly demonstrated, any difference to the system is incorporated and sold back to its instigators. Monsters, whether threatening or dissident, become commodities for the PCs in their animal performances.

Not all theorists have been convinced of the usefulness of monstrosity as a figure for animal representation. Baker, too, acknowledges that botching can always be botched (63-64); and thus, in aversion to the emphasis on monstrosity in theory, he insists that the uniqueness and singularity of animals remain visible. He argues that becoming-animal is a much more useful concept in relation to animals as “it usefully avoids casting the animal, as an instance of the non-human, as automatically ‘monstrous’” (Baker 101). Animals, too, require “becomings” to flee from the constraints of human frames, both representational and material; but they are already too minor, too marginalized, so that the disruptions which challenge the “human” might decompose them altogether. Thus Baker elaborates the concept of “holding-to-form”: amid the withdrawal, misrecognition and botching necessary to contest the security of familiar representations and conceptions, the animal must still maintain its integrity through an “awkward but tenacious holding-together, holding-to-form, holding to visibility and recognizability *as some kind of animal*”

(*The Postmodern Animal* 135-36). Baker's succinct formula—"[t]he animal holds-to-form; the human does not" (*The Postmodern Animal* 142)—expresses a complex response to conflicting pressures and questions of identity and representation across the species borders.

When applied to the genre of fantasy, Baker's concept raises interesting questions. How do actual animals figure in relation to the monstrous domain of fantasy? Amid the proliferation of monstrous forms, of agency and power in alarming creatures, "real" and "ordinary" animals might seem to pale. Opposing this perception, there is a strand of environmental thought that rejects the wonder of fantasy and its fabulation of nature in favor of more real marvels: "Forests are enchanted enough without elves or hobbits. Did you ever see a ruby-throated hummingbird?" (qtd. in Shepard 3).

This opposition of "fantasy" and "reality" is complicated by the fact that fantasy monsters are themselves inspired by the history of engagement with animals. Monsters take place in exoticized and amplified tales of encounters with the natural world. The wondrous abilities of magical creatures are often magnifications of natural animal abilities—and therefore, like the biometric technologies used in science and documentary making, in fact serve as aids in recognizing what is distinctive (though most often difficult to see) about animals.

What does it mean, in FRPGs, to hold-to-form? It is certainly not a matter of exacting correspondence to an actual, real-world animal or species: confounding such scientific expertise, lines-of-flight could equally be to "become-vampire, become-dragon or become-dodo" (Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* 121). Rather, holding-to-form means resisting the manipulations of animals for human purposes; it means not losing sight of what is specific in animals' alterity.

In *D&D*, it seems, the amplification of the animal as monster goes hand in hand with a containment of the animality that inspired it. According to a strange but explicable torsion, the monstrosity that challenges the uniqueness of the human fails to alter the marginalized position of the animal. *Within* the proliferation of monstrous difference, of theriomorphs and anthropomorphs, one still encounters creatures categorized simply as *animals*, and this basic category retains all the limitations with which we are familiar: unlike monsters, animals do not speak or use technology; they are amoral and relatively weak; they are not magical, spectacular or intelligent. Despite being the source of species alterity and monstrosity, it is animals themselves who are most "originally fixed by difference" (Haraway 299).

Within the druid's transformative *wild shape* ability, the human(oid)/animal border is still policed in terms of language: "She loses her ability to speak while in animal form because she is limited to the sounds that a normal, untrained animal can make. (The normal sound a wild parrot makes is a squawk, so changing to this form does not permit speech)" (*MW* 11). Similarly, the use of technology by animals is restricted, as it requires not only intelligence (theirs is uniformly low) but the use of opposable digits to *grasp*—an ability that, according to Heidegger's reification, is uniquely human. Moreover, animals conform to the distinctly modern (as opposed to medieval) understanding of animals as amoral. While "[a] character's or creature's general moral and personal attitudes are represented by its alignment" (*PH* 87) along two axes—from lawful to chaotic, and from good to evil—with animals, no moral or legal "alignment" is possible. They must always be "true neutral": "[i]t is part of their nature" (*PH* 88). Neither good nor evil, they exemplify the possibility of depoliticized violence that so concerns Agamben: "Animals and other creatures incapable of moral action are neutral rather than good or evil. Even deadly vipers and tigers that eat people are neutral" (*PH* 88). A similar (nervous) caveat is given for the order axis, for the anthropomorphizing pet-lovers among us: "Dogs may be obedient and cats free-spirited, but they do not have the moral capacity to be truly lawful or chaotic" (*PH* 88).

Indeed, animals are boring. The *DMG* provides the following advice for determining random wilderness events:

The chance for an encounter assumes a significant encounter—not an encounter with a bluejay or squirrel. (The DM is free to ad lib these as desired.) A significant encounter is one that is worthy of your and the players' attention—a monster, a threat, or a challenge of some sort (132)

In comparison with monsters, animals are neither powerful nor interesting enough to constitute worthwhile challenges for the PCs, or anything more than neat allies. In the strategic ontology of FRPGs, "a bluejay or squirrel"—or "a ruby-throated hummingbird"—are invisible, "tactical" creatures, and thus insignificant. Other, less attractive bucolic creatures are not mentioned at all: beasts of agriculture and labor have no place in *D&D*. The *MM* is a pictorial zoo, not a farm, and like real-world zoos the biggest drawcards are the charismatic megafauna. What "ordinary" animals are included are still relatively powerless. They may have uses—*MW* gives tips on what animal form it is best to assume for a particular purpose, such as

detecting, escaping, fighting, impressing foes or other animals, scouting, training animals and traveling (*MW* 12)—but they are only summoned by low-level spellcasters, and only beginner druids shapechange into animals proper. As if to highlight the inadequacy of regular animals, *MW* provides rules for creating “dire” and “legendary” animals of magnified power—through a multiplication of their ability scores (37-43). Only in this way might they provide a significant challenge or aid.

Animals here hold not to “form” but to weakness, and in doing so merely confirm traditional conceptions of animals as passive objects. This robs them of their agency at the same time as it fetishizes a monstrous power drawn from nature. *D&D* thus instantiates a familiar contradiction in regard to nature, vacillating between marvel and domination. Nature’s vitality is projected onto fantastic creatures—powerful, predatory monsters—while simultaneously its passivity is retained for “real” animals. Paradoxically, the imagination of fantasy is inspired by the animal world, only to recontain, within these fabulations, the insignificance of nature itself; while ironically, it is precisely the animals’ “weakness” that might subvert the widespread emphasis on power and vitality—though it is not enough, of course, simply to reverse the polarity of this binary.

This theme of agency is integral to the philosophical reconsideration of animals and of human animality. As we have seen, Haraway accentuates the role of a trickster, “coyote” nature and its multiple “actants.” Jacques Derrida offers a different emphasis: as opposed to the virility of the typical “carnophallogocentric” subject, animals remind us of the “nonpower at the heart of power” (Derrida 396). But each seeks to oppose the arrogation of agency solely to humans—to maintain, without resolution, the agency and passivity inherent in all life, human or animal.

In comparison, Alaimo risks emphasizing only a single dimension when she argues in relation to monster films that “[a]s these creatures run, rampage, and scheme, they dramatize nature as an active, purposeful force . . . perhaps monstrous natures are born from an identificatory desire to see nature not as pathetically damaged but as vigorously alive” (Alaimo 293). But the importance of affirming animals’ agency should not be allowed to obscure the fact that, in the vast majority of “co-constructions” of nature, the senior partner is exclusively human. In all the imagination of nature as a monstrous threat, an immersion that makes humans either predator or prey in a state of exception, what is left unimagined—and is perhaps most threatening—is the fundamental *weakness* and incapacitation of the nonhuman world in the face of human technoscientific domination. Deconstructing the binary of activity/passivity requires more than simply imagining nature as an “active”

subject like us, particularly a ferocious, competitive threat; we must also retain something of the passivity of animals. How can we see them (and therefore, perhaps, ourselves) in both their weakness and wonder? Why must we only marvel at strength, seek only to identify with power?

In FRPGs, vigorous, exotic creatures are privileged and idealized. “The world is a predator-heavy one” (*DMG* 154), and to an ecologically outrageous degree. There are not many creatures at the bottom of the food-chain—while an inordinate amount compete at the top. It is thus a Nietzschean opposition that describes *D&D* most accurately: only wild, powerful, noble animals have a place in the *MM*; gregarious, domesticated, servile animals are excluded. The depiction of nature as “passive” and “pathetic” that Alaimo resists is what most characterizes the “real” animals that are included, as opposed to the vigor and strength of the monsters that surround them.

It is only this predatory vitality of nature that is appropriated by the PCs. For Alaimo, “[p]erhaps the horrific but pleasurable sense of the ‘melting of corporeal boundaries’—the visceral remembrance of a wandering snout—can catalyze some sort of resistance to the desire to demarcate, discipline, and eradicate monstrous natures” (294). But in *D&D*, the multiple, fluid PC subjects celebrate only the most Nietzschean of animals (such as eagles, lions, serpents, and their monstrous kin); any “corporeal identification with . . . monstrous natures” (Alaimo 294) occurs on the condition that the creatures being identified with are, indeed, monstrous in the powerful, predatory sense. This selectivity is itself a demarcation of animal alterity. Even when not “becoming” but seeking to destroy these monsters, in this very act PCs join them. These becomings-animal do not involve “letting the animal’s otherness be” (Baker, *Postmodern Animal* 94) but making their otherness one’s own. The encounter with the animal provokes not an engagement with weakness, nor an estrangement of the power and identity of the human, but rather the emulation of ardently competitive beings; the “nonpower” of regular animals is recognized but spurned. Amid a menagerie of noble animals, PCs emulate the vitality of their foes as they strive for the status of *Übermenschen*. While they may at times become-animal, or indeed become-plant, the structure of the capitalistic-evolutionary worlds of *D&D* ensures that such becomings are always in the service of the PCs’ own will-to-power.

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