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SEXY 16-YEAR-OLD BABY-EATER

Gendered, Sexualized, and Racialized
Discourses in Exalted, Second Edition

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Abstract

Previous research finds roleplaying games, as well as the wider spectrum of geek culture that they exist within, to be defined by discourses favoring a white, heterosexual, cis-male viewpoint, drawing up and reproducing stereotypes and tropes that are inherently misogynist, homophobic, and racist. Heretofore, research into discourses of gender, sexuality, and race in roleplaying games has focused overwhelmingly on market leader *Dungeons & Dragons* (1971-ongoing), largely neglecting to scrutinize other well-established titles that may adhere to or break from the same tendencies. This thesis attempts to bridge part of that gap by looking at the fantasy roleplaying game *Exalted* (2001-ongoing), a game with a reputation for challenging conventions of the genre and the medium. Scrutinizing a dataset of 31 sourcebooks making up the majority of the material published for the second edition of the roleplaying game, the thesis uses a method of multimodal feminist post-structural discourse analysis to unpack dominant discourses within the roleplaying game text. Putting findings in context with theory, the thesis finds that the second edition of *Exalted* reproduces many of the same discourses found in roleplaying games and in wider geek culture: In text and images, women are constructed as normatively young and beautiful and as adhering to a pre-set, limiting and commodified set of roles matching Irigaray's (1985) virgin, mother, and prostitute; women who fail to adhere to these roles are routinely Othered as are racial, sexual, and gender minorities. This is entirely in line with similar findings for other roleplaying games, suggesting that even active attempts to subvert genre tropes and discourses may result in reproducing said tropes and discourses. This extensive study of a major roleplaying game edition may provide a significant launching point for research into the continued evolution of roleplaying games and geek culture.

Keywords

Roleplaying games, *Exalted*, feminist post-structural discourse analysis, representation, geek culture, race, gender, sexuality, *Dungeons & Dragons*, discourses, White Wolf, misogyny, fantasy, genre subversion, social constructivism, media tropes, monstrous women, monstrous motherhood, infantilization, trans representation, sexualization, animalization

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1 Introduction

In a 2018 interview, roleplaying game (RPG) creator Troy Denning recalls how an entire game world was designed for *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*, 1974-ongoing) to justify all the “girls in chainmail bikinis” omnipresent in the artwork for the fantasy RPG (Adduci and Chang, 2018, 16:30). While the anecdote may have been told tongue-in-cheek, it is symptomatic of the well-documented issues of problematic female and minority representation found in RPGs as well as in wider geek culture (see **2.2** and **2.3** below).

Pop cultural representation plays a significant role in how consumers form identity and understand gender roles (Cocca, 2016: 3-4; Cunningham, 2018: 10; Talbot, 2017: 604), but while RPGs use many of the components of other narrative media, they set themselves apart in having left out the main characters, leaving those roles to be filled by the players (Gellis, 2007: 167-168). RPGs allow participants to co-create emergent narratives (Coe, 2017: 2846) through narrative performances within virtual diegetic worlds (Szatkowski, 2006; Sørensen, 2006). Engaging in a continuous process of frame-switching (Fine, 1983: 196), players go back and forth between being themselves in the primary reality outside the game and engrossing themselves in their characters inside the secondary reality of the game (Schallegger, 2018: 130). Commenting on the unique nature of the medium, RPG creator Malik Hyltoft asserts that playing RPGs is an inherently revolutionary act that reminds participants of their power when the world tells them that they have none (Helfer, 2020: 52:03). In research, a similar idea of RPGs as norm resistance is highlighted as being actualized in small, independently published feminist RPGs (Cross, 2012), but these indie RPGs are notably outliers (73), and most traditional RPGs from established publishers do not engage actively with gender, sexuality, or race (Punday, 2005: 117).

The two major companies of the RPG industry are Wizards of the Coast and White Wolf (Schallegger, 2018: 140; Schneider and Hutchison, 2015: 182). While the former owns and publishes *D&D*, which is generally accepted as the urtext of the RPG genre, the latter is given credit for having created the “watershed moment between ‘fantasy wargaming’ and RPGs as a playable, narrative medium” (Schallegger, 2018: 110-111). In a 2008 marketing push for the second edition of their fantasy offering *Exalted* (2001-ongoing), White Wolf took a provocative jab at their main competitor, offering fans to exchange their *D&D* sourcebooks for copies of *Exalted* alongside diplomas proving their “graduation” into an implicitly more mature fantasy RPG (Chambers, 2008).

This marketing ploy was not the first attempt at establishing *Exalted* as something different from the market leader. From its 2001 inception, *Exalted* have positioned player characters as extremely powerful compared to starting-level characters of *D&D*. Solar Exalts do not have to follow the rules of “repressive social systems”, but are instead empowered with magical abilities to “rock the foundations” of a world ruled by a decadent empire (Thomas and Grabowski, 2001: 10, 14, 23). Concomitantly, the RPG deliberately drew upon world mythology and anime to skew away from the more traditional “Tolkienesque” influences of *D&D* and other fantasy RPGs (Snow, 2008: 65). This determination to be different also influenced how creators approached character design and representation, reflected in this quote concerning the development of female signature characters:

Arianna’s femininity was dictated because one of my main concerns in writing **Exalted** was redressing a lot of the gender imbalance I'd seen in RPGs. I'd been really, deeply offended by the things like 'hooker' templates in recent, allegedly heroic games. [...] Harmonious Jade initially came about because I wanted a strong, dark-skinned female as the lead signature character for the game. That was cool and all, but then I needed to fill in the rest of the details. I wanted someone stealthy who wasn't a thief - especially since I wasn't very interested in having a character fill a common negative stereotype. (Thomas and Grabowski, 2001: 14-16)

Despite the intention to do better in regards to problematic female and minority representation, *Exalted* creators have later conceded to knowingly using “sexist” cover art in the first edition (Chambers and Glass, 2009: 151; see **Image 1**). Further, describing the design process of *Exalted*'s primary villains, creators explicitly evoke “Fu Manchu” and “Shiwan Khan” (Thomas and Grabowski, 2001: 23), both anti-Asian racist caricatures (Frayling, 2014: 228; Kang, 1997: 332). In a 2020 podcast, queer women and RPG creators Monica Spica and Rai Witter Cole praised *Exalted* for having “aggressively been showing gay people as centered and existing [...] since 2001”. Providing several examples of positive female and minority representation from the RPG’s current third edition, they acknowledged that, historically, White Wolf has been “progressive in a very transgressive way” (Spica and Cole, 2020: 11:16-14:59). Certainly, representation in *Exalted* appears multifaceted.

This thesis will perform a feminist post-structural discourse analysis (FPDA) of the second edition of *Exalted* through a multimodal analysis of 31 *Exalted* sourcebooks, seeking to unpack how gender is discursively produced within the RPG including when it intersects with other identity markers such as age, race and sexuality.

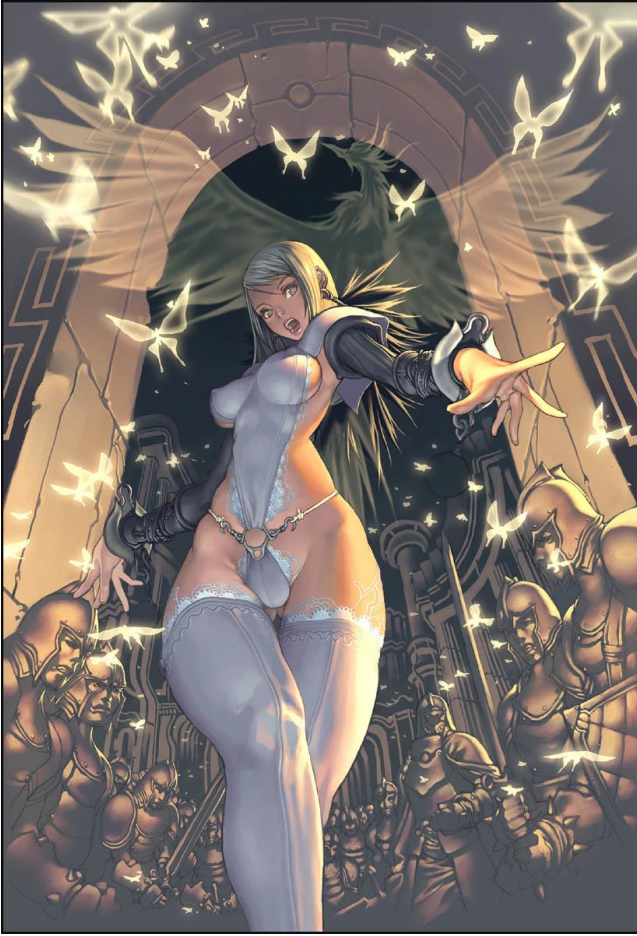


Image 1: Unnamed sorcerer on the cover of *Savant & Sorcerer* (2004) (Chambers and Glass, 2009: 150-151).

Written from a feminist and social constructivist position, this thesis subscribes to the idea that discourse forms the collective understanding of truth within a given society and shapes the individuals subjected to it (Foucault, 1972 and 1980). Gender is understood to be complex rather than binary or biologically dictated as are the identity markers that gender intersects with, and the intention is not to imply otherwise through the terminology used here. Acknowledging that gender is performance (Butler, 1990) and that identity cannot be accurately discerned from depictions, but concomitantly taking into account the conventions of the medium and genre, some characters without stated gender pronouns have been assumed to be the gender that they perform.

Going forward from here, the paper will establish existing literature relating to the topic at hand in a literature review, explaining first how RPGs create discursive meaning generally and how they create gendered, sexualized, and racialized discourses specifically. Subsequently, this will be put in context with wider geek culture. The methods section will establish the method of FPDA and the process of sampling and coding as well as laying out concerns regarding ethics and limitations of the research found in this paper. The analysis will follow a two-pronged structure, first establishing existent discourses within the second edition of *Exalted* through a diachronic macroanalysis before following up with a synchronic microanalysis, scrutinizing individual characters representative and illustrative of the discourses established via the first prong of analysis. Finally, the findings and their implications will be discussed, establishing specific contributions to knowledge and the possibilities of further research.

2 Literature review

Reviewing the state-of-the-art research on the topic of gendered, sexualized, and racialized discourses within RPGs, this section is divided into three sections, each of which builds upon what comes before it. First, it will be showcased how RPGs can be understood as a medium of discursive meaning-making, providing a necessary foundation for the second and main part of this section, i.e. understanding how discourses are produced and exist within the medium. Finally, demonstrating that the discourses established to exist within RPGs are symptomatic of a wider geek culture that RPGs exist within, the final section of the literature review broadens the scope a little to review said culture, providing context that can be argued to be tangential for the topic at hand, but which is crucial for full understanding.

2.1 RPGs as discursive meaning-making

Playing RPGs allows for a “process of *becoming*” grounded in a player’s exploration of self while learning with others in a safe social space (Coe, 2017: 2857-2858, original emphasis). RPGs have the potential to expand the minds of the players (Cross, 2012: 85), engaging participants on “four levels of reality, namely the character, player, person, and human being, which can be associated with four dimensions of learning: knowing, doing, being, and relating” (Daniau, 2016: 423). With very few external reference points if any, this process is overwhelmingly diegetic in nature, existing primarily in conversation between participants (Hendricks, 2006: 40).

This collective exercise in discursive meaning-making is aided by sourcebooks providing settings and rulesets to establish context, ensure playability, and enhance creativity (Daniau, 2016: 430), each RPG giving participants a “toolset for group production of cultural artifacts, narratives, and expressions of agency” (Garcia, 2017: 232). Hindmarch and Tidball (2008) distinguish between theme and rules, i.e. “what the game is apparently about” and “what the game is actually about” (65), and emphasize that rules need to support the intended themes (124). Though rules perceived to be detrimental to the narrative are often set aside (Waskul, 2006: 22), rules also inform of authorial intent (Garcia, 2017: 242). Outlining what is possible and what is not, rules shape the narrative experience (Beattie, 2007: 479). Every player is “empowered” to interpret and manipulate the text (Nephew, 2006: 120) as a shared understanding of the secondary reality is negotiated and adjusted continuously through discourse in both primary and secondary realities (Hendricks, 2006:

43), with the goal being a shared vision of the secondary reality. The evocation of mutually understood references to popular culture may enhance this shared interpretation (50) and both RPG performances and sourcebooks are often heavily influenced by other narrative media and their tropes (Schallegger, 2018: 227; Tosca, 2009: 130). Even if discursive power can be argued to be transferred from game designers to participants during play, the published sourcebooks are central to forming a shared point of reference (Schallegger, 2018: 220-221) and encouraging gameplay (Stang and Trammel, 2019: 2-3). Cross (2012) elaborates:

Despite the malleability, sourcebooks exist for a reason. They provide an authoritative voice that allows players to start from a professionally designed setting and rule set, sparing one the trouble of having to start from a blank slate [...]. This authoritative voice can encourage or discourage certain kinds of play—even if players are free to ignore such suggestions in theory. (81)

Sourcebooks establish the secondary realities, but, ultimately, the secondary realities created, regardless of how fantastical, are interesting and intelligible because they resemble and reflect our own primary reality and its norms (Cross, 2012: 75; Nephew, 2006: 125; Schallegger, 2018: 227) and participants want to be able to act appropriately (Waskul, 2006: 23) according to the “socio-cultural, historical and psychological characteristics” of the secondary reality (Hendricks, 2006: 41).

It is common for characters of the secondary reality to have more power and agency than the players enjoy themselves in the primary reality (Nephew, 2006: 125). In granting the possibility of “immersion”, “agency”, and “transformation” (Sørensen, 2006: 37), RPGs allow players to actualize themselves through narrative performances (41). This freedom to challenge established norms and co-author truth within the secondary reality represents an “emancipatory possibility” for players (Tosca, 2009: 134) as they are “empowered to take back their voices, to exert free will constrained by social necessities” (Schallegger, 2018: 224) and RPGs “become platforms for socio-cultural debates” (226). The idea of an “emancipatory potential” in RPGs is echoed by Cross (2012: 73), who, speaking of experimenting with gender roles and sexuality specifically, suggests that the games may give players “more power to use the norms that surround them, rearrange them, transcend them, and potentially create something new” (75). This freedom extends beyond the secondary reality, as identities are continuously renegotiated both inside and outside the game (Hendricks, 2006: 40), potentially transforming the participants in the process (Tosca, 2009: 130).

As “games about the power of the social contract, the power of language”, RPGs are “inherently and irreducibly *political*” (Schallegger, 2018: 232, original emphasis). They thematize power and abuse of power (228), often favoring marginalized perspectives (231), giving characters a chance to transgress without risk in a secondary reality of make-believe that mirrors the primary reality of the players (Daniau, 2016: 439; Schallegger, 2018: 227-228). In this, RPGs serve the same function as Bakhtin’s carnivalesque (Schallegger, 2018: 231; Tosca, 2009: 134).

2.2 Gendered, sexualized, and racialized discourses in RPGs

Representation of gender, sexuality, and race in traditional RPGs tends to be shaped by “fantasy tropes, pseudo-historical background, and the work of biased writers”, encouraging narratives that “disempower women either by masculinizing them or by positioning them in the roles of devalued and extraneous non-player characters” (Nephew, 2006: 132). While some indie games target diverse audiences explicitly (Cross, 2012: 82), the implied readers¹ of traditional RPGs have historically been and continue to be well-educated, straight, white, middle-class males (Fine, 1983: 47; Garcia, 2017: 240; Nephew, 2006: 127; Schut, 2006: 117; Stang and Trammel, 2019: 13).

Early editions of *D&D* erased women both as players in the primary reality and as characters in the secondary reality: In the game’s meta-text, female play-testers were omitted and female players were exoticized. Further, once the option of playing a woman was introduced four years after the game’s inception, the rules enforced a numerical limitation of physical strength for female characters (Garcia, 2017: 237-238), making female characters a subpar choice. Citing a wide spectrum of traditional fantasy and horror RPGs, Nephew (2006) documents how some traditional RPGs routinely omit or discourage the option of female characters entirely, while other games require female characters to formally renounce womanhood and assume the social role of men to participate. Alongside other examples of in-game racism, misogyny, and bigotry, such practices are normalized and justified by claims of “historical” accuracy (128-130).

In a comprehensive quantitative study of female representation across more than 40 years of *D&D* sourcebooks, Garcia (2017) observes that women have continuously been underrepresented, sexualized, and robbed of agency in the artwork; though the numbers have improved, this remains

¹ The ideal reader figure projected by the text (Fludernik, 2009: 23).

the case in the current edition (239-240). Speaking broadly of *D&D* as well as other fantasy RPGs, Schut (2006) outlines how the accompanying artwork lends itself to negotiations of gender roles, and how it overwhelmingly favors “ideals of rough masculinity” (109-110). In the secondary realities of fantasy RPGs, “men are ‘real’ men: old and wise wizards with flowing robes, lean and athletic thieves or bards, or (best of all) ridiculously powerful, muscled warriors” (112), while women more uniformly fill the role of “eye candy” (109). For legitimately powerful female characters, the “functional empowerment [...] is undercut by the swimsuit-model artwork that appeals to masculine sexual fantasy” (112).

According to a qualitative study by Stang and Trammel (2019), *D&D* “deliberately and routinely” depicts women as “deceitful, and wicked” adversaries “through tropes of monstrous motherhood, deception, violence, and an insidious sexuality” (13). Associating women with monstrous creatures (2), the authors argue, *D&D* normalizes a culture of misogyny through “matter-of-fact naturalistic descriptions complete with tables, pictures, and statistics” detailing that “women are monsters and the female body is horrifying” (14). Conflating a woman’s sexuality with her reproductive abilities and casting both as inherently horrific are similarly highlighted by Nephew (2006) as examples of how RPGs inherit misogyny from the literature and culture surrounding the games (129-130). Stang and Trammel (2019) posit that the Othering observed in *D&D*’s approach to monsters is systematic (8) and that it reaches beyond misogyny to include a racism that the authors find to be informed by a “hypermasculine and xenophobic vision of the human ‘hero’” (13-14). “[R]acism is *built* into” *D&D*, Garcia (2017) argues, citing that, in the secondary reality of the game, essentialist assumptions are factual and supported numerically by the rules (240-241, original emphasis). *D&D*’s embrace of essentialism, i.e. the prejudiced belief that members of a given race or culture have inherent qualities (Fischer, 2011: 769), is also noted by Nephew (2006), who establishes how it both encourages and justifies murdering and robbing sentient creatures as long as they belong to an “Evil” race (126). Additionally, the racism argument is supported by sourcebooks such as *Oriental Adventures* (1985) and *Al-Qadim* (1992) which exoticize the Far and Middle East, respectively (Garcia, 2017: 241).

Bearing in mind the implied readers of traditional RPGs, Rilstone (1995) suggests that playing in “archaic” worlds of “politically incorrect values” and “heterosexual male friendships” may be the very appeal of RPGs (5). The games can be seen as mimicking the Freudian understanding of day-

dreams in that they provide gratification for feelings of ambition of power as well as erotic desire (Nephew, 2006: 126) and male participants get to “indulge their sexual fantasies by playing as powerful men interacting with pin-up girls” (Schut, 2006: 113). RPGs facilitate gender inequality and indulge in female objectification, allowing participants to act out both social taboos and their own resistance to disempowerment (Nephew, 2006: 127). Through their characters, male participants get to assert physical and social superiority to Othered women, minorities, and monsters (131); at least historically, this assertion of superiority has been documented to be expressed through in-game rape (Fine, 1983: 69; Gold, 1995: 104). Thus, while RPGs present the potential for emancipation from normative discourses (cf. Tosca, 2009; Cross, 2012), so does it present the possibility to express and reinforce said narratives and discourses.

2.3 Gendered, sexualized, and racialized discourses in geek culture

Taking a step back, RPGs are a part of a wider geek culture encompassing various ludic and narrative media and their associated, interlocking fan cultures. United by themes of fantastical worlds, extraordinary characters, advanced technologies or magic, and elements from history or foreign cultures (McCain, Gentile, and Campbell, 2015: 2), these media include RPGs, videogames, and miniature wargames alongside comics, fantasy, and science fiction. As with RPGs specifically, women are underrepresented generally as characters in artefacts of geek culture such as videogames (Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess, 2007: 423; Cunningham, 2018: 10), miniature wargames (McConnaughy, 2016), and comics (Cocca, 2016: 315; Orme, 2016: 405). Similarly, the same artefacts find women routinely sexualized (Burgess, Stermer, and Burgess, 2007: 425; Cocca, 2016: 138; Cunningham, 2018: 10; Orme: 2016: 404) and portrayed as monstrous (Buckley, 2020; Jones, 2013).

While numbers prove the presence of women and minorities within geek culture (Cunningham, 2018: 5; Orme, 2016: 403; Tomkinson and Harper, 2015: 627), discourse overwhelmingly frames geek culture as being the domain of white males (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016: 172; Blodgett and Salter, 2018: 136; Marwick, 2017: 180; Massanari, 2017: 332; Willey and Subramaniam, 2017: 25). Outsider status is a central identity marker for geek culture (Kohnen, 2014: 75; Marwick, 2017: 180), which is characterized as being “informed by fragility” (Blodgett and Salter, 2018: 136). Perhaps due to a self-image centered on marginalization, white male geeks are resistant

to suggestions that geek culture itself fosters marginalization, sexism, and oppression (Blodgett and Salter, 2018: 137; Massanari, 2017: 332).

In geek culture, individuals who are not straight white males are often met with pushback (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2016: 173; Cunningham, 2018: 20-21; Tomkinson and Harper, 2015: 620) and women in particular are often viewed as “either objects of sexual desire or unwelcome interlopers or both” (Massanari, 2017: 332-333). Rebuked for their perceived potential to ruin geek spaces (Kohnen, 2014: 76) and contaminate geek artefacts (Proctor, 2017: 1122), women are routinely characterized as illegitimate and decried as “fake geek girls” (Hurley, 2016: 229; Orme, 2016: 412; Tomkinson and Harper, 2015: 618; Willey and Subramaniam, 2017: 20). Similarly, openly queer individuals and their allies have been cast as “disruptive and harmful interlopers” in geek forums and positioned in contrast to so-called real fans (Condis, 2015: 199). In extreme cases, the reluctance to include women and minorities in geek culture has been expressed through coordinated online campaigns of misogynist and racist harassment that included threats of murder and sexual violence (Blodgett and Salter, 2018; Braithwaite, 2016; Pitts, 2018, Proctor, 2017).

3 Methodology

This section will describe the method of multimodal FPDA that was used to analyze the dataset before going into how the data was sampled and coded. Finally, this section will lay out the ethical considerations of the paper at hand as well as the limitations of the research.

3.1 Multimodal FPDA

Existing discourses within RPGs as well as wider geek culture overwhelmingly favor a straight, white male viewpoint. *Exalted* has always positioned itself as a response to dominant discourses, trying to diverge from them while inherently existing within them. To account for the complexities of intersecting identity markers in a fantasy RPG literally about empowerment, FPDA has been chosen as the most apt tool given its merger of a feminist outlook with a post-structuralist grounding (Baxter, 2015). Feminist activism is embedded in FPDA (Baxter, 2003: 54), but so is a skepticism to singular understandings of gender identity and gender relations (Baxter, 2015). Gender, power, and the interplay between the two are understood to be complex, and FPDA seeks to actively avoid polarization that cast women as powerless victims and men as powerful aggressors (Baxter, 2008:

248). FPDA assumes that power is context-specific (Baxter, 2015) and that women exist within a number of conflicting discourses simultaneously, each of which they may potentially suffer under or benefit from and each of which may be resisted, challenged, and overturned (Baxter, 2003: 55). These discourses in which the individual examples exist are identified and named through a process of diachronic macroanalysis, a process that is inherently subjective and interpretive (Baxter, 2008: 250-251). Being subjective is a common criticism of qualitative research as is a supposed difficulty to replicate research (Bryman, 2012: 405); this thesis aims to counter these criticisms through a provision of transparency.

The diachronic macroanalysis is followed by a process of synchronic microanalysis (Baxter, 2008: 246) that is both denotative and connotative (251), i.e. engaging with both the explicit elements presented and the implicit associations that said elements evoke (Barthes, 1977). This is central as a text's indirect communication may reveal the underlying ideology of the text (Van Dijk, 2001: 104). Connotations place elements within discourses (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 32), but, importantly, the specific denotations and connotations of an element are always dependent on context and must be seen as such. Given this, it may be beneficial to consider connotations as meaning potential, i.e. context-specific rather than absolute (50-51). As visuals play a significant part in establishing the secondary reality of an RPG, the analysis of *Exalted* will be multimodal, incorporating both text and images.

On a basic level, the textual analysis will engage in lexical analysis to determine how word choices contribute to explicitly and implicitly to the construction of various social realities (30). Attributing value to one concept can be used to establish so-called structural oppositions, implicitly attributing reverse value to opposing concepts, e.g. if light is good, it follows that darkness is bad even if it is not explicitly labeled as such or even mentioned in the text at all. When the opposing concept *is* present in the text, it is called ideological squaring (39-40). Lexical choices analyzed here also include how characters are named as part of representational strategies, unpacking how differing aspects are made salient through their description (77) as well as how some elements are suppressed through omission, guiding the connotations (85). The intention is to use close textual analysis to discern what is foregrounded, backgrounded, and excluded, helping reveal the underlying ideologies and determining which practices, ideas, values, and identities are naturalized through discourse (2-3).

The same principles extend to analysis of visual elements (31), which, additionally, looks at which discourses and associated ideas and values are connoted through physical objects as well as the settings in which characters are depicted (51-52). Also scrutinized is how individual elements are given salience through size and foregrounding in the image (54-56). Similarly, elements from gestalt psychology such as *proximity* and *similarity* are used to explain how associations are created between different depicted characters and objects through physical closeness or resemblance in the images (Bateman, Wildfeuer, and Hippala, 2017: 264). The use of potent cultural symbols guides viewers in reading an image (Machin, 2007: 132) as does the positioning of the viewer, i.e. the distance and angle from which the visual elements are positioned create their own connotations for the viewer (Machin and Mayr, 2012: 97-98). Finally, the analysis will also take into account how characters are presented discursively as individuals or collectives, textually as well as visually (80-81, 100-101).

3.2 Sampling and coding

Given its explicit feminist outlook, no research using FPDA as a method is entirely inductive. Regardless, *Exalted* represents a rich data set and while feminism informs the research question and both stages of analysis, the concepts established through macroanalysis inform the microanalysis and their frequency determines the emphasis and scrutiny they receive (Bryman, 2012: 409). This approach is akin to theoretical sampling as data is allowed to generate theory in an iterative sequence. As with all purposive sampling, the process is ultimately directed by the research question, and data variety is emphasized (416-419); this interplay between data and theory is inherently inductive (380).

To answer the central question of female representation in the second edition of *Exalted*, female-presenting characters named in text were sampled and analyzed in a flexible coding process focused on identifying thematic commonalities suggestive of discourses. Identified themes were placed in hierarchical categories that emerged and evolved dynamically through the coding process. For example, reading through the dataset it became evident that there was a pattern of highlighting the youth of female characters that was not present for the male characters. This theme was named and then taken into account both going forward with the characters not yet scrutinized, but characters already sampled and analyzed were also returned to in order to determine whether the

characteristic had been overlooked. As the process moved forward, some themes were renamed, redefined, or split into smaller categories. Themes of *Infantilization* and *Sexualization*, for example, were originally merged with themes of *Youth* and *Beauty*, respectively, but they are separated from these themes and placed under a common headline of *Dangerous Bodies* as a fuller picture emerged, suggesting new implications for each of the characteristics.

Sampling was discontinued once categories were well-established and no new and relevant data emerged, suggesting data saturation (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006: 61); at this point, more than 200 female-presenting characters had been sampled from a dataset of 31 sourcebooks, representing the overwhelming majority of material published for the second edition of the RPG. In the interest of transparency, full lists of sourcebooks and female characters are included as **Appendices A** and **B**, respectively, and the coding manual is included as **Appendix C**.

3.3 Ethical considerations

When performing discourse analysis, FPDA or otherwise, it is crucial to keep in mind that to equate language with deliberative discourse, i.e. assuming that the words communicated reflect the opinions and intentions of the person communicating, “places limits on the possibility of democratic communicative action” (Roderick, 2018: 160). This is perhaps especially true when dealing with a dataset composed of several books each of which have several authors attached to them even before developers and editors are counted. While the dataset does represent the second edition of *Exalted*, which itself stretched across several years, and the discourse analysis found in this paper does unpack the discourse of said edition, it is meaningful to bear in mind that this discourse does not necessarily reflect a singular vision of one company, one developer, or one author. Instead, it only reveals what was said and what ideologies are reflected in what was said. It says nothing about the intentions of the creators involved or of the fans enjoying the games.

Striving to unpack the hidden ideologies existing within discourses, it is important to acknowledge that discourse analysis does not itself exist in a superior position outside the realm of social, economic, or political ideologies (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 7). For the paper at hand, this means acknowledging that the feminist post-structuralist nature of the chosen method will inform both the approach and, consequently, the results. While FPDA purposefully aims to not contribute

with a new will to truth (Baxter, 2008: 244), the emancipatory project of discourse analysis, broadly, risks imposing new normativity (Roderick, 2018: 165).

3.4 Limitations

As suggested in the reflection upon ethics (see **3.3** above) some limitations are inherent to this particular research. It should go without stating, but this paper focuses solely on the second edition of *Exalted*, and the findings cannot and should not be extrapolated to say anything about other RPGs or, importantly, other editions of *Exalted* beyond instances where other RPGs or other editions are explicitly mentioned. The same caveat applies to discussions of geek culture that *Exalted* exists within. Further, it is beyond the scope and interest of this paper to say anything definite about the mindsets, motivations, or intentions of creators or fans of *Exalted* or members of geek culture broadly.

4 Analysis

The dataset was subjected to two levels of analysis of which the findings will be presented here. First, **4.1** will present the diachronic macroanalysis undertaken to establish the discourses existing across *Exalted*, second edition, as a whole. Subsequently, **4.2** will delve into the findings of the synchronic microanalysis, going into further detail with selected individual characters found to be representative and illustrative of the wider discourses established in the macroanalysis.

4.1 Discourses in *Exalted*

The coding process revealed several different intertwining discourses of gender, sexuality, and race in *Exalted*. Here, the findings are arranged in hierarchical categories illustrating how women and minorities are constructed and Othered within the sourcebooks. This process of macroanalysis will establish the foundation for a microanalysis of individual characters (see **4.2** below).

4.1.1 What defines women

4.1.1.1 Youth and beauty

A large portion of female characters are described explicitly as young or youthful in their write-ups (e.g. SB19: 148; SB27: 92). Others are described implicitly so with narrative details allowing for the extrapolation of youth such as characters having recently come of age (SB27: 22, 138). Similarly, a majority of female characters are also described as attractive or even beautiful (e.g. SB12: 136; SB19: 72), something which is supported by their visual depictions (see **Image 2**) as well as by them having higher than average Appearance traits, the game mechanic indicating physical attractiveness. Notably, youth and beauty are often conflated and thus Shalrina is described as an “attractive young woman” (SB16: 149) and Shining Flower as a “gorgeous young woman” (SB18: 120), while Raia and Anja Silverclaws are both described as a “beautiful young woman” independently of each other (SB04: 148; SB27: 52). In the case of a few characters, this conflation is made obvious through ideological squaring with the alternative:



Image 2: Unnamed Solar Exalt (SB01: 157)

Though she can give herself a body as beautiful as any girl's, Ogime travels among mortals as a warty crone. (SB08: 123)

[The Pale Mistress] may also appear as an old, toothless crone, a young, beautiful blind woman or a wounded, sickly dog. (SB19: 133)

In the structural opposition of youth and age, youth is presented as the desirable option. At least the appearance of youth is as Mnemon, Ayesha Ura, and Lilith are all described as looking like women in their 20s despite them being more than 400, 1,500, and 2,000 years, respectively (SB23: 38; SB27: 60, 44). While female characters of any disposition may be presented as looking young, the embodiment of old age seems reserved for volatile witch-like characters (SB08: 52-54, 55-56).

This is not the case for male-presenting characters; whether established through text or through visual indicators such as grey hair, advanced age is more likely to suggest experience and wisdom (see **Images 3** and **4**). Concomitantly, female ugliness, whether real or perceived, is something found exclusively in pitiful or dangerous characters (SB20: 148-149; SB27: 132-133).

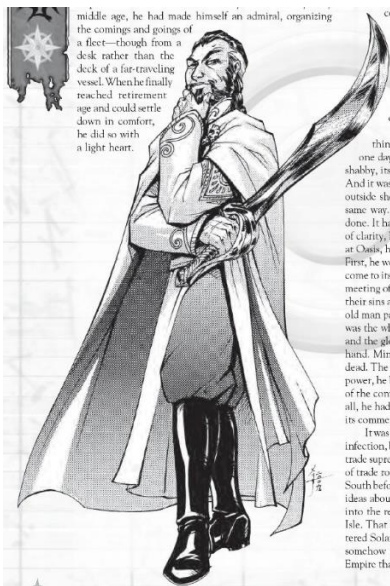


Image 3: Solar Exalt Admiral Sand (SB27: 32)

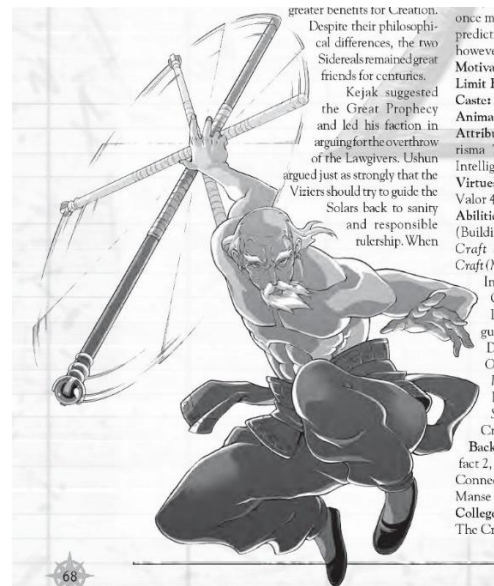


Image 4: Sidereal Exalt Chejop Kejak (SB27: 68)

4.1.1.2 Suffering and men

At its core, *Exalted* is a game about powerful individuals using their agency to shape the world to their will and, as a whole, the women presented in the sourcebooks are powerful individuals. In some cases, though, this power is put in contrast with prior powerlessness. Before receiving Exaltation, the text reminds readers, the sorcerous matriarch Mnemon was a “quiet, insecure slip

of a girl” (SB27: 88) and the fearsome and beautiful Maiden of the Mirthless Smile was a “gawky teenager” (SB27: 115). For a large swathe of female characters, their past powerlessness is made even more explicit in descriptions of suffering, usually at the hands of men, occasionally slave owners or commanding officers (SB27: 28, 109), but more often fathers and husbands (SB27: 20, 56). When not presented as actively abusive, absent fathers of female characters are occasionally given salience as mysteries waiting to be unraveled (SB04: 154; SB14: 110). In *Exalted* female empowerment is highlighted as overcoming suffering, and female identity is constructed in relation to men. In Western discourse, Irigaray (1985) posits, women are constructed in three archetypal roles that are all commodified by the patriarchal social order: Virgin, mother, and prostitute. The *virgin* has value in her untarnished potential for marriage and motherhood and the *mother* has value for fulfilling this potential (see also **4.1.3.3** below). The *prostitute* has no such potential, but this lack of worth makes her ideal for providing sexual pleasure, something that all three archetypes are themselves denied. This discourse that implicitly tolerates prostitution while explicitly condemning it (185-187), is also seen in *Exalted*.

On one hand, sex work is normalized throughout the sourcebooks: In the corebook alone, there are references to courtesans in the realms of both the living and the dead as well as in Hell and Heaven (SB01: 28, 54, 310, 334) and “courtesan” is listed among the sample concepts that players might consider for their own characters (SB01: 84). On the other hand, sex work is also used to illustrate the lowest points in the lives of the female characters, providing a humiliating contrast to the power they have attained or to the power they have lost (SB16: 108; SB27: 54, 118).

4.1.2 Dangerous minds

4.1.2.1 Uncontrollable emotions

Whether described as “hot-tempered” (SB13: 129) or “vindictive” (SB10: 121), several female characters are presented as highly emotional, weeping and raving (SB20: 138; SB24: 22). The RPG’s



Image 5: The demon Lyphthymie (SB14: 123)

capable of inflicting strong emotions on any she passes (SB14: 122-123).

Fitting with the above-mentioned theme of women being defined by the men in their lives, the identity of the character Scarlet Whisper revolves entirely around her relationship with the stoic, albeit physically and emotionally abusive male god-king known as the Perfect (SB19: 148-149, 153-154). The relationship is mostly an amicable working relationship, but they

do have disagreements, and sometimes her frustrations boil out and she weeps and rages for hours before anyone can soothe her. One such eruption ended with her sharing the Perfect's bed, a development with which neither person is entirely comfortable. (SB19: 149)

With no further details presented, the stoic male character's complete absence of responsibility is notable. Uncontrollable female emotions caused this unfavorable situation for both of them. As the only character of any gender in any of the sourcebooks, Scarlet Whisper is given a rules-enforced, debilitating trait called *Dramatic Hysteria* (SB19: 44). Calling women hysterical to

most powerful war god is “an angry woman” who “often seems to take offence at nearly anything said to her” (SB26: 68). Often, these shows of strong emotion are noted for the consequences they have on their surroundings. Sometimes, these consequences are delivered with agency as ugly women torture women more beautiful than themselves (SB01: 299) or revel in punishing those who treat them poorly for their ugliness (SB08: 123). Other times, the consequences are incidental as strong female emotions cause strange weather phenomena (SB23: 37) or “random disasters” (SB20: 131). It is not surprising, perhaps, that in the world of *Exalted*, melancholia is embodied as a beautiful young girl (see **Image 5**); a demon

suggest that their emotionality is inherently unwarranted and overblown is a common misogynistic attack (Jane, 2014: 533); by enforcing this narrative with a rule, the sourcebook underscores that this suggestion is objectively true.

Due to this construction of them being more emotional, women are commonly constructed as using power-deferent language (Hargie, 2017: 376-377; Mulac, Bradac, and Gibbons, 2001: 142-143), which includes an expectation to suppress emotions generally (Murnen, 2000: 323; Poynton, 1985: 80), and anger in particular (Krems, Neuberg, Filip-Crawford, and Henrick, 2015; Tufail and Polletta, 2015); failing to do so may make a woman look less competent (Brescoll and Uhlmann, 2008). While women in *Exalted* are described as powerful, their emotions also make them potentially incompetent or even dangerous.

4.1.2.2 Deception

Deception is a common theme for women in *Exalted* with several characters noted for their lies, scheming, and insincere seduction (SB04: 148; SB27: 34, 60, 72). While deception is not exclusively the realm of women in *Exalted*, it is striking that when male and female characters otherwise filling the same role are juxtaposed, it is common for the female character to be insidious and for the male character to be direct; this is the case with the servants of both the sentient swamp Mother Bog and the Deathlord called Eye and Seven Despairs (SB16: 159; SB21: 66). For a number of female characters, deception is expressed as them hiding monstrousness. One character is described as “an attractive young woman, with jet-black hair that would continue to the small of her back if she didn’t have it waxed or shaved” (SB27: 145), while another is described as having “perfect skin” before revealing that a “naked rat’s tail sometimes peeks from the back of her robes” (SB09: 47). For others, female monstrosity is hidden behind veils, masks, and magic (SB09: 57; SB27: 57, 132).

4.1.3 Dangerous bodies

4.1.3.1 Sexualization

Using a working definition of sexual objectification as occurring “when a woman’s body or body parts are singled out and separated from her as a person and she is viewed primarily as a physical object of male sexual desire” (Szymanski, Moffitt, and Carr, 2011: 19), it is immediately obvious that women are routinely sexually objectified in both text and images across the sourcebooks. Text

examples include descriptions of characters being famous for their “sexual nature and lustful stamina” (SB01: 305) as well as characters “typically” looking like they have “just consumed qat or had a momentous orgasm” (SB26: 66). For images, examples were coded as sexually objectifying when attention was drawn to women’s bodies such as when acrobatic characters Harmonious Jade and Faka Kun are both depicted scantily clad in mid-air, their groin areas clothed, but visually exposed and centralized (see **Images 6 and 7**).



Image 6: Solar Exalt Harmonious Jade (SB07: 74)

Individuals who are sexually objectified are often perceived as both less likeable and intelligent, comparatively (Murnen, 2000: 326): The millennia-old Lilith may be described as undeniably powerful (SB27: 44), but when readers are continuously fed close-up images of her barely-covering panties (SB02: 42; SB26: 90), this power is systematically undercut (cf. Schut, 2006). Both villainous and heroic women are sexualized in the sourcebooks, but the manner in which this happens differs: Several female characters are depicted topless with nipple piercings, for example



Image 7: Solar Exalt Faka Kun (SB27: 28)

and Faka Kun is presented as incidental and passive on part of the characters.

This referential strategy is not unique to *Exalted*, but mirrors a good girl/bad girl dichotomy present in wider societal discourse (Hamilton and Armstrong, 2009: 604; Tolman, 2002: 12). For women to embrace and embody sexuality openly is considered “unfeminine, unattractive, and unacceptable” (Hirschman, Impett, and Schooler, 2006: 8) and in male-dominated societies, there is a strong historical precedent for casting women who do so as monstrous (Santos, 2017: xv), constructing a “disciplinary gaze” for “unruly women” (Buckley, 2020: 378). And good girls are not inherently exempt from becoming bad girls: Two arguably sympathetic characters, Seven Devil Clever and Madame Vert, are both shown not topless, but with visible nipples through their

(see **Image 8**), but these are all dangerous women such as powerful gods, demons, ghosts or pirates (SB08: 51; SB09: 58, 101; SB17: 99). While antagonistic characters often flaunt nudity explicitly and gratuitously with powerful confidence (SB02: 4; SB24: 56; SB28: 52), it is comparatively rare for a sympathetic character to be depicted as even implicitly nude and for sympathetic characters, nudity comes with connotations of vulnerability (SB02: 64; SB25: 94). While villainous characters are shown to be complicit in their own sexual objectification, the sexualization of heroic characters such as Harmonious Jade



Image 8: The pirate Bloodstained Pinion (SB04: 85)



Image 9: Lunar Exalt Seven Devil Clever (SB21: 34)



Image 10: Lunar Exalt Madame Vert (SB25: 119)

clothes (see **Images 9** and **10**). Remarkably, both images show the women in their hybrid forms, animal heads on sexualized human bodies, making concrete the suggestion that a woman’s embrace of sexuality is bestial (Jones, 2013: 530).

Finally, engaging sexually with powerful sexualized women also comes with a risk for men who may die in the process (SB04: 148; SB14: 121) or “go mad from the sometimes deranged and excessive sensuality” (SB08: 49). This exemplifies the succubus archetype, a cross-cultural motif of promiscuous women tempting men with their sexuality and destroying them (Santos, 2017: xvii).

4.1.3.2 Infantilization

For a number of powerful characters, the descriptions of youth extend to outright infantilization. Contexts differ, but a recurring theme is the juxtaposition of immense personal power and girlishness (e.g. SB20: 140). For sinister characters like the deathknight titled the Shoat of the Mire (SB21: 62) or the ghost Unwanted Whisper (see **Image 11**), the fact that each of them looks like a prepubescent child makes their Otherness salient: A child’s body placed in a situation where one would expect adult bodies is read as “unfinished” and “creepy” (Germano, 2018: 44). Unwanted Whisper, for example, “speaks in a soft, little-girl voice, sounding timid and uneducated” (SB13: 137), but knowing that she is, in fact, an old and powerful ghost, this feature only makes her more uncanny, i.e. her contrasting properties render her both appealing and repulsive (Royle, 2003: 34), and this marks her as a threat, sociologically (Douglas, 2002: 197). On a similar, but more disturbing



Image 11: The ghost Unwanted Whisper (SB13: 138)

note, a few of the infantilized characters are also sexualized. In text, the demon Alveua is described as looking like a “thin, beautiful mortal girl” (SB09: 55), and in images her small frame is highlighted by the comically large hammer she carries and her apparent youth is underscored by hairstyles connotative of girlhood. Her clothes are extremely sexualized when she does not forego them entirely, appearing topless (see **Images 12** and **13**). The humanoid form of another demon, Ipithymia, is described as appearing “young, usually a bit too young for her highly sexualized dress and

manner” (SB14: 85); by actively embedding this judgment in the text, agency and responsibility are transferred to the character, absolving onlookers for sexualizing a young body.

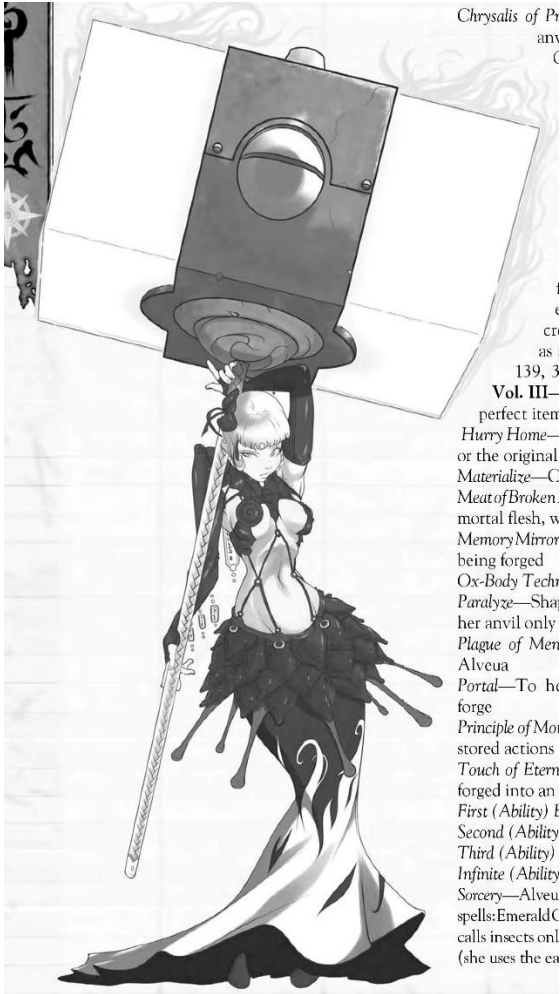


Image 12: The demon Alveua (SB09: 58)

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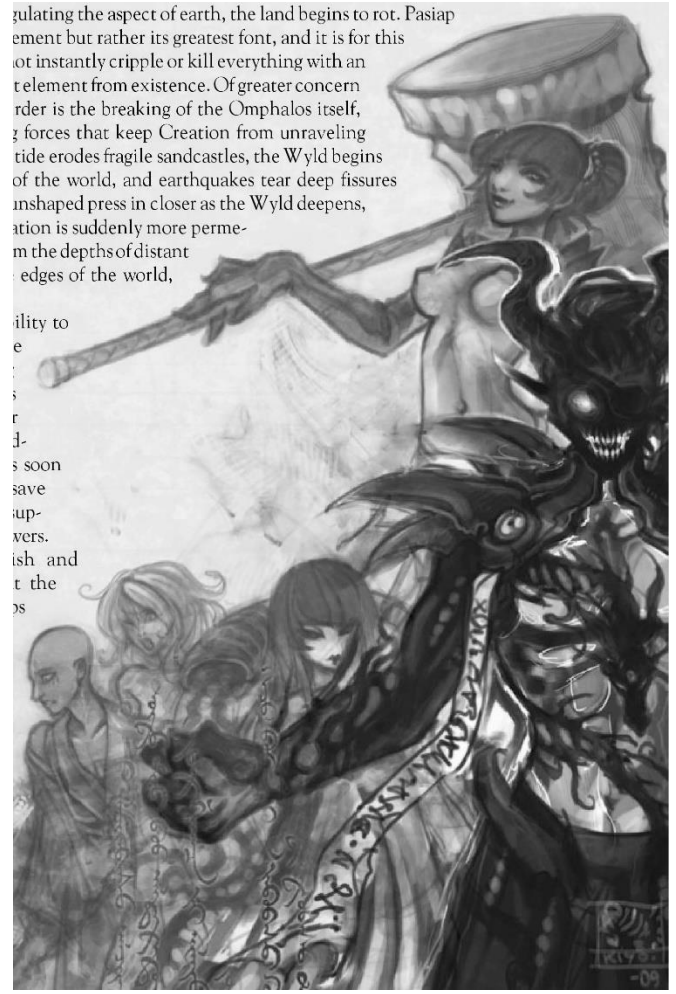


Image 13: The demon Alveua (SB04: 199)

ulating the aspect of earth, the land begins to rot. Pasiap
ement but rather its greatest font, and it is for this
ot instantly cripple or kill everything with an
t element from existence. Of greater concern
rder is the breaking of the Omphalos itself,
g forces that keep Creation from unraveling
tide erodes fragile sandcastles, the Wyld begins
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This sexualization of young female characters may owe to *Exalted* drawing inspiration from Japanese manga and anime, in which the Lolita archetype is comparatively common (Kinsella, 2002: 224-226), though media representations conflating childhood with sexuality has become increasingly mainstream in Western media as well (Durham, 2009: 114). Curiously, in what may be a case of self-aware parody or unintentional intertextuality, one character is depicted in a pose associated with the literary namesake of the Lolita concept (Almbjerg, 2020), mirroring a famous scene from the 1997 film adaptation (see **Images 14 and 15**).



Image 14: Actress Dominique Swain as the titular character of *Lolita* (Lyne, 1997: 9:20)



Image 15: Lunar Exalt Anja Silverclaws (SB27: 52)

4.1.3.3 Motherhood

Several characters are defined by motherhood whether biological (SB27: 97), adoptive (SB08: 63), or national (SB28: 11). While not all of these motherhoods are presented negatively, a discourse of monstrous motherhood is prevalent across the sourcebooks with some negligent mothers

abandoning their infant children to fend for themselves (SB01: 310; SB08: 126) and others demanding child sacrifices (SB01: 299), exemplifying infanticide (Santos, 2017: 80-81). In some cases, pregnancy itself is presented as horrific as mothers give birth to monstrous children (SB08: 135) and others are eaten alive from the inside by their monstrous progeny (SB09: 67; SB14: 109). Both of these are media tropes reflecting real-life reproductive anxieties themselves fueled by media tropes (Almond: 2010: 119; Santos, 2017: 70). Even when the child is not itself monstrous, miscarriage runs the additional risk of accidentally summoning a demon (SB01: 311).

Discursively, motherhood has been used to highlight women as “reproductive instruments” and in this, mothers are constructed as pillars of the social order. But they are concomitantly threats to said social order should they fail to remain loyal to the men whose “private property” they represent (Irigaray, 1985: 185); in *Exalted*, this threat is exemplified through a mother deliberately hiding her reproductive ability and producing children in secret (SB12: 134). Historically, motherhood has been conceived as Othering not just because it marks a woman as empowered and sexually active, but also because it highlights the mutability of the female form (Santos, 2017: 60); as established, this trope of monstrous motherhood is prevalent in both geek culture broadly and RPGs specifically (cf. Hendricks, 2006). Beyond the potential to create life, the bodies of mothers are themselves visually monstrous in *Exalted*: The Pale Mistress is a “massive, grotesque thing” whose “breasts dangle nearly to the ground” (SB19: 133), while Corr’Dall is “sluglike” and “cannot move on her own” (SB20: 148). For Lillun, motherhood has made her both physically grotesque and driven her insane (SB24: 22).

In a few disturbing examples, grotesque motherhood is actively weaponized. The entities dubbed the Stillborn and the Mother of Suffering, respectively, are both undead monsters resembling pregnant women. In the case of the Stillborn, the fetus can attack by leaping from the torn-open belly of its mother (SB13: 157). More grotesquely and casually dehumanized, the Mother of Suffering is described as a “morbidly obese dead woman [...] crawling on *its* hands and knees” (SB21: 210; emphasis added), attacking by giving birth to babies with such force that they are sent flying up to ten yards before exploding. In addition to the vile concept of pregnant women metaphorically forcing fatherhood upon men by literally launching infants at them, the naming of both entities is also interesting. In the case of the Stillborn, the mother is erased completely: She is

but a vessel for the child. The Mother of Suffering, arguably, names both mother and child, implicitly equating parenthood with suffering for either parent.

Finally, providing rules systems for terminating or restricting pregnancies through magic, (SB08: 125; SB19: 22), *Exalted* makes pregnancy and abortion central game features (cf. Hindmarch and Tidball, 2008).

4.1.4 Intersectional themes

4.1.4.1 LGBTQ themes

Homo- and bisexuality do not feature very prominently in the discourse of second edition *Exalted*. Among the Autochthonians and the Mountain Folk, homosexuality is stated to be as common as heterosexuality (SB15: 14; SB28: 18), but those are exotic otherworld and underground societies, respectively, separated from the setting proper as it is presented in the sourcebooks. The one notable exception is a sidebar explaining that same-sex relations are both “common and accepted” in the setting’s dominant culture. The sidebar goes on, though:

“What is *not* accepted in Dynastic culture, though, regardless of sexual orientation, is weakness in women or effeminate behavior in men. Such softness is never tolerated, and is often harshly ridiculed and even punished. Whatever else they might be, the [Dragon-Blooded] are warriors, and there is no room for those who assume effete mannerisms or deliberately portray themselves as ‘soft’ in any way.” (SB23: 21)

Equating femininity with weakness and normalizing punishment of gender nonconforming behavior, the excerpt reiterates a common cultural construction that is both misogynist and homophobic (Russo, 1987: 4). In terms of actual representation through characters, there are very few explicitly homo- or bisexual characters named, and except for Ma-Ha-Suchi (see 4.2.2 below), all of them are women (SB12: 56; SB15: 76; SB23: 21; SB27: 54).

Part of this discourse is also the lack of discourse, and here it warrants mentioning that a number of named characters who were presented as homo- or bisexual in *Exalted* first edition reappear in the RPG’s second edition with no indication that this is still the case: Two male characters who were presented as lovers-turned-enemies are now “former compatriots” and one has a wife (SB21: 74 and 80), a married couple of a gay man and a lesbian woman are now referred to simply as a married couple (SB05: 110), and the same-sex lover of one character is omitted from

the text and instead a child is introduced (SB04: 57). Without stating heterosexuality outright, all of the examples arguably imply it.

In the secondary reality of *Exalted*, there are two cultural phenomena whose members would be recognized as transgender in the primary reality outside the game, the Dereth and the Tya. The Dereth are transmen and transwomen in a society with otherwise rigid gender norms and the text makes explicit that members of their parent culture are expected to treat them as the gender they identify with and use the correct pronouns. The text also mentions, though, that while members of the parent culture will defend the Dereth from biased outsiders, they also consider the Dereth odd and make jokes at their expense (SB19: 30). The Tya are transmen sailors, but while the text makes clear several times that the Tya consider themselves to be men, the sourcebooks undercut their transgender status by continuously referring to them as women and using female pronouns (SB17: 38-41; SB26: 43). Most egregious, perhaps, is an illustration of Tya Atrisa (see **Image 16**): Wearing feminine eye make-up and an outfit that draws attention to the character's hourglass figure, bare midriff, and pointy nipples, Tya Atrisa is clearly gendered as female and sexualized for the male gaze (Durham, 2009: 34).

While not common, the sourcebooks for *Exalted* present ways for individual characters to physically change their birth-assigned sex with magic (SB07: 97; SB25: 136), making themes of gender identity further salient by providing rules to explore them (cf. Hindmarch and Tidball, 2008). Three Exalts are noted as changing sex or gender habitually:



Image 16: Captain Tya Atrisa (SB17: 41)

For Silver Python, this happens every twenty years and the character notably claims to not be able to remember whether they were born male or female (SB25: 55). In what may also be the RPG's clearest example of a deceptive character, the Green Lady is a spy serving four different masters, changing both identities and gender identities in the process; the text states that she has long gaps in her memory and that "she genuinely believes she is a man" when assuming a male identity (SB21: 81). Finally, foregoing an actual physical change, Shards of Basalt switches between a male and a female personality, one of whom is not aware of the other; the text ties this fluidity to childhood

trauma (SB21: 79). Associating themes of gender dysphoria with amnesia, confusion, and even trauma-induced mental illness is an extremely unfortunate trend with a long tradition in popular culture (Holtz, 2019).

Drawing attention to the harassment of the Dereth and effeminate homosexuals, the text reminds readers that non-normative gender performances may “cast doubt on a person’s competence, social acceptability, and morality (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe, 2003: 91). But in creating and “propagating stories and images of cultural deviants” through more or less problematic representations, the sourcebooks themselves establish discourses about what is culturally normative not just within the frame of the RPG, but also outside of it (Gross and Woods, 1999: 5).

4.1.4.2 Race

To showcase the different types of characters available for players, the corebook for *Exalted* second edition features five signature characters. Of these, Panther and Harmonious Jade are a Black man and a Black woman, respectively. Panther’s backstory involves a “prostitute” mother, crime, slavery, and drug abuse (SB27: 16), while Harmonious Jade was sold to slavery as a baby to become an assassin (SB01: 345); in another instance, she is shown using her newfound power to stop another Black woman from selling her child into slavery (SB29: 24). While the RPG does feature Black characters with less stereotypical backgrounds (e.g. SB27: 60-61, 78-79), the prominence of signature characters should not be discounted. While the characters are powerful, they are presented as powerful because they have overcome stereotypical Black suffering of their early lives. It is worth noting here that while slavery is prominent across the nations described in the sourcebooks of *Exalted*, it is presented as generally independent of race except for the Djala, a made-up race of panda-spotted humans (SB29: 100-104) of whom the only featured character, Faka Kun, also has a slave background (SB27: 28). For the most part, *Exalted* does not engage actively with race, instead, arguably, doing so passively, creating a discursive link between race and marginalization that reflects stereotypes of the real world and limits options for players.

Another aspect of race that is featured passively in the discourse of *Exalted* is the privileging of whiteness in the physical descriptions of characters as several of the RPG’s beautiful women are described as having skin that is “pure” or “delicate” like white porcelain (SB08: 65; SB12: 143; SB13: 136). Women of color are also described as beautiful, as are most women in *Exalted*, but they are

ascribed with a certain exoticness, being described as having “dark good looks” (SB10: 118) or “exotic good looks” (SB08: 116).

Finally, a more indirect way *Exalted* deals with race is through its representations of colonialism and themes of civilization. The sourcebooks present a flat world at the edges of which lies only unshaped chaos called the Wyld. At the center of the setting is a colonialist empire called the Realm and everything between the Realm and the Wyld is called the Threshold (SB01: 26). The default gameplay of *Exalted* positions one in opposition to imperialist powers (SB02: 8), and the RPG portrays colonialism as exploitive, corrupt, and ineffective (SB23: 30). Concomitantly, the sourcebooks offer a narrative in which the further one goes from the civilized center of the world, the more likely one is to encounter barbarians (SB25: 224). While one sidebar explains that the term barbarian is inherently subjective and potentially reflects more negatively upon the speaker than anyone else (SB25: 32), the RPG also leans heavily into tropes made popular in colonial-era gothic fiction, populating the outskirts of the world with feral cannibals and what literary theorists dub abhumans, i.e. people who are “not-quite human” (Hurley, 2004: 3). Most notable of these are the so-called beastmen, animal-human hybrids created by interspecies mating in the proximity of the Wyld, i.e. a taboo practice that the rules of the RPG only allow to bear results when done far from civilization (SB25: 29). Writing of similar animal-human hybrids in gothic fiction, Hurley (2002) explains:

[T]hese texts describe human bodies that have lost their claim to a discrete and integral identity, a fully human existence. They are in contrast liminal bodies: bodies that occupy the threshold between two terms of an opposition, like human/beast, male/female, or civilized/primitive, by which cultures are able to meaningfully organize experience. By breaking down such oppositions the liminal entity confounds one’s ability to make sense of the world. (190)

Labelling most of the world the Threshold further reinforces this theme of liminality in *Exalted*, highlighting the border between ordered civilization and senseless chaos and contributing to the Othering of those on the outskirts of civilization proper. While these portrayals of barbarians are not explicitly racialized in *Exalted*, the tropes that the sourcebooks reproduce in their presentation of the themes emphatically are: In a strategy of ideological squaring, colonial-era children’s literature reproduced colonized subjects through “degrading animal imagery”, legitimizing colonial rule through implications of superiority and inferiority (Daithota, 2017: 90). Correspondingly, in gothic fiction, descriptions of monstrous barbarians reflected colonial-era fears of and fascination

with taboo practices among colonized subjects. This specifically included miscegenation, which was constructed as happening between white women and non-white men, and which was implicitly and explicitly conflated with bestiality (Paravisini-Gebert, 2002: 230-231). Here, the underlying and inherently racist fear is that of racial contamination through propagation (Levy, 1988: 56-57).

Similarly replicating tropes created by turn-of-the-century Darwinian anxiety (Hurley, 2002: 195), even being in the presence of the untamed Wyld risks twisting one's body and mind (SB11: 144). One character embodying this is Echinna the Faceless (see **Image 17**), a Lunar Exalt corrupted by the Wyld.

Presenting Echinna more like a sick animal than an actual person, the opening paragraph of the character's write-up states that a "pack of young Lunars will need all their skills and ingenuity to put Echinna down". The text emphasizes, though, that Echinna once was a person, alternating between the female

pronoun *she* and the dehumanizing *it* before and after the character's transformation, respectively (SB25: 205-206), reminding readers of the possible consequences of continued exposure to the foreign. Notably, while there is very little recognizably human in Echinna's visual depiction, the character's gender is made both salient and grotesque with a feminine mouth and three bare



Image 17: Lunar Exalt Echinna the Faceless (SB25: 205)

breasts that arguably serve to both Other and sexualize Echinna, amplifying the catharsis experienced when the uncanny creature is eventually put down (Hurley, 2002: 198)

4.2 Characters in context

In this section, individual characters will be subjected to microanalysis and placed in context with the discourses established in *Exalted* (see 4.1 above), examining how said discourses are expressed in prominent characters.

4.2.1 The Deathlords

Deathlords are among the most significant antagonists in *Exalted* and nine are given write-ups in the material, three of which are explicitly female: The Princess Magnificent with Lips of Coral and Black Feathers, the Lover Clad in Raiment of Tears, and the Dowager of the Irreverent Vulgate in Unrent Veils. A fourth Deathlord, Eye and Seven Despairs, is constructed linguistically as male, but switches between one male and two female identities throughout the material. Going forward, all Deathlord names will be abbreviated.

With a name that denotes the absence of a husband, the Dowager experiments with creating a family of monsters, stealing children from people she murders and making them call her “Mother” (SB21: 61-62). The Lover is a “woman of sensual beauty” viewed by most of her peers as a “whore” and her most potent weapons is her sexuality: No one survives sex with her, and she is described seducing religiously celibate men and women, notably deceiving them by falsely assuming the “virginal” form of a young refugee (SB21: 70-71). Finally, with a name connotative of youth, the Princess is described as unreasonably beautiful, but notable she is “no voluptuous temptress like the Lover”. Her defining narrative characteristic is that she is the unruly property of another, male Deathlord, a punishment for moving into the world before she was ready to do so (SB21: 75-76).

Remarkably, while the five male Deathlords fulfill arguably patriarchal roles as either religious, military, or political leaders, or combinations of these, the three Deathlords that the sourcebooks construct as women match the archetypes of mother, prostitute, and virgin (cf. Irigaray, 1985), respectively, albeit in twisted forms defying social norms: The Dowager is a mother without a husband, the Lover is a prostitute enjoying pleasure, and the Princess is a virgin who is not obedient to her male warden. This failure to conform to their assigned subordinate gender roles is what

makes them dangerous, but it is also what makes all three of them targets of scorn from their peers. Interestingly, the incompetence of the Lover and the weakness of the Princess are stated to be exceeded only by those of Eye (SB21: 70, 75), the unfortunate implication being that the one thing worse than a woman failing to adhere to her assigned role is a man playing at being a woman. Regardless of gender, the artwork tends to show the Deathlords as frightening with the Princess being the single exception (see **Image 18**). She kneels submissively, the angle of the image inviting the viewer to look down upon her. Her shadow suggests that she is facing light, and the distinct lack of a second shadow coupled with the distance between her and the viewer highlights her isolation. More so than the immensely powerful and agentic villain she ostensibly is, the Princess is presented visually as a sexualized damsel in distress, further contributing to her narrative role of showcasing another, male, Deathlord's power.



Image 18: The Deathlord known as Princess Magnificent with Lips of Coral and Black Feathers (SB21: 76)

Eye alternates between two female identities that enforce the ideological squaring of female youth and beauty against age and ugliness. Similar to other gender-switching characters in the RPG, Eye has a background defined by trauma, and the character is described as emotionally and mentally

unstable. Eye is explicitly cowardly in combat, and the character's modus operandi relies mostly on deception, including a sadistic and complicated scheme against two lovers unaware of the character's shifting gender identities. Unrelated to this love triangle, one person has made the connection between Eye's male and female identities and this man now "brims with contempt toward his master/mistress" (SB:63-67). In addition to the unfortunate linking of gender dysphoria and trauma (cf. Holtz, 2019), the drama surrounding Eye's gender identity mirrors a common and often lethal real-life construction, imagining a transwoman "tricking" partners to have sex with her by "pretending to be a woman" (Lee and Kwan, 2014: 111), i.e. the Deathlord is scary and deserving of contempt given the uncertainty inspired by the character's gender identity.

4.2.2 Raksi and Ma-Ha-Suchi

Raksi, the Queen of Fangs, is a prominent female character mentioned across sourcebooks. Thematically, the male character she has the most in common with is Ma-Ha-Suchi: Both are ancient Lunar Exalts who were once distinguished members of civilization before each of them was driven into exile in the Eastern wilderness. Here they were twisted mentally and physically by the Wyld, before they set themselves up as monstrous leaders of beastmen cultures (SB25: 53-55). In this, each of them embodies the racist idea of "going native" (Griffith, 1995: 125), i.e. the colonial-era fear that a civilized person might turn barbaric through exposure to cultures perceived as such (Hurley, 2002: 195). Here, the similarities mostly stop as Ma-Ha-Suchi is a "Kurtzian" monster (Griffith, 1995: 127), while Raksi has more in common with the trope of the innocent white jungle girl growing up to become a "goddess-queen" of the natives (Garrett, 1998: 2). Notably, said natives are animalized (cf. Daithota, 2017) as various races of apemen, thus mirroring a common racist construction equating Blacks with apes (Kang, 1997: 302). Ma-Ha-Suchi is a monster inside and out: He is described as a physically imposing, fearsome "bestial freak" filled with hate and rage (SB27: 46). Raksi may be equally monstrous, but what sets her apart is that she hides her monstrosity, "maintaining the form of a perfect, innocent princess" (SB25: 55) or "the sweetest, smartest, most delightful girl anyone ever met" (SB18: 146); the lexical choices emphasizing her youth and gender while spelling out their connotations. While the danger of a large ugly man is presented as expected, the danger of a beautiful girl is far more insidious. Raksi is more than 1,500 years old, but her deceiving young looks informs much of her vilification:

Before her monstrous turn as the Queen of Fangs, Raksi was notably a child prodigy, attaining immense personal power at a record-breaking young age. In addition to arguably acknowledging a maturity and capability that exceeded her young age, the text holds it implicitly against her, noting that in her contact with the Wyld she was exposed to things that “no one, least of all a rather naïve young sorceress, should be made to see” and that she was faced with “shapeless lovers who came to [her] in the night to tempt her with impossible pleasures” (SB25: 55). While no explicit details are given for how Ma-Ha-Suchi was corrupted in the Wyld, Raksi’s fall from grace has connotations of a child paying the consequences for placing herself in a vaguely sexual situation that she was not adult enough to handle. Throughout the material, the infantilization of Raksi is intertwined with her sexualization: One sourcebook describes her as having the “body of a nubile, 16-year-old girl who will never flower into full womanhood” (SB25: 55), while another describes her as an “unimaginably beautiful, redhaired girl of 16 [whose] grace and raw sexuality dominate any scene in which she is present” (SB18: 146). Ma-Ha-Suchi is also sexually dangerous, but this is because he is an unrepentant rapist, a detail that is doubly unfortunate as he is also the only explicitly homo- or bisexual male that this paper was able to identify in the dataset (SB25: 53-54). In comparison, Raksi is dangerous not because she forces her sexuality upon others, but because she gives it away freely, making the fear of miscegenation concrete as she breeds prolifically in orgies with abhuman apemen (SB18: 109), and because she is a temptress stringing her victims along, threatening their moral integrity (SB18: 146). Bearing in mind the connotations of her youthful demeanor, Raksi embodies the full spectrum of virgin, mother, and prostitute, neither of which grants her the right to pleasure culturally (cf. Irigaray, 1985), and yet she is the only one enjoying the eponymous pleasures of the City of a Thousand Delights (SB18: 108). The most common visual depiction of Raksi in the sourcebooks is her sexualized, youthful body languishing on a throne surrounded by armed apemen. Two of the images show her with exposed nipples; in one case her dangerous sexuality is underscored with nipple piercings (see **Image 19**), while the other shows her gesturing seductively with a hand for the apemen as well as for the reader to come closer (see **Image 20**). The same two images showcase her diet of wailing human babies that the sourcebooks reference repeatedly (SB18: 146; SB25: 44), exemplifying the infanticide trope of monstrous motherhood (cf. Santos, 2017).



Image 19: The Lunar Exalt Raksi (SB25: 211)



Image 20: The Lunar Exalt Raksi (SB18: 109)

The third image shows a similar situation, but portrays Raksi looking with unfazed defiance at an armed adult male; his back is mostly turned against the reader and marked with a Solar Exalt symbol, both of these elements suggesting that his is an insert for a player character. On the floor next to her is the severed head of an adult male, making obvious that she is a real physical threat even if she does not look the part (see **Image 21**). Comparing the images to one of the few of Ma-Ha-Suchi (see **Image 22**), both characters are shown individualized and in contrast to their collectivized offspring (cf. Machin and Mayr, 2012), the association to which is established through gestalt principles (cf. Bateman et al., 2017). While passive in the image, the visual similarities underscore that Ma-Ha-Suchi is every bit as monstrous as the rampaging beastmen he is overlooking; for Raksi, the connotations of the brutal-looking abhuman apemen are transferred to her through proximity, providing a contrast to the connotations of her gender and race.



Image 21: The Lunar Exalt Raksi (SB18: 146)



Image 22: The Lunar Exalt Ma-Ha-Suchi (SB01: 328)

Some of the stranger details of Raksi's descriptions exemplify how her gender is salient both as a threat to the implied male reader as well as a weakness for them to exploit. One sourcebook notes that the shape-shifting Raksi

enjoys torturing male captives while wearing the shape of the captive's mother. When the victim begs for death, she laughs even harder. (SB25: 55)

Another sourcebook makes explicit that she suffers from hallucinations, which

usually manifest as people and monkeys laughing at her. When she is alone, however, her father comes and beats her for being such a stupid child. (SB18: 148)

In addition to emphasizing the scary Otherness of mother figures, the first quote embodies the concept of ridicule as a central male fear (Atwood, 2000: 413). The second quote seems to assume that this fear extends to women as well and it empowers the implied male

reader through a reminder that despite her advanced age and immense sorcerous power, the monstrous goddess-queen leading an army of beastmen is an inherently silly girl-child deserving of a scolding.

5 Conclusion

Exalted is an RPG about empowerment, positioning characters against authority and against imperialism, and from its inception, *Exalted* was a product intended to challenge and subvert discourses found in other RPGs, most notably *D&D*. RPGs have the potential to be emancipatory, to be revolutionary, to remind participants that they have power. But ultimately, RPG sourcebooks provide a frame for the imagination through their authoritative voice (cf. Cross, 2012), and as laid out in the findings above, the second edition of *Exalted* reproduces many of the gendered, sexualized, and racialized discourses found in other RPGs (see **2.2** above):

In *Exalted*, a woman's beauty is conflated with youth in both text and image. Further, women are commonly constructed in regards to men; they are commodified in the roles of virgin, mother, and prostitute (cf. Irigaray, 1985), and they are Othered and vilified when failing to adhere properly to these roles. This Othering includes women who openly embrace sexuality, women whose monstrous motherhood is beyond the control of men, and women whose youthfulness is explicitly child-like. Racial, sexual, and gender minorities are exoticized, Othered, and occasionally outright vilified, and imperialist ideals are reproduced implicitly. Instead of effectively subverting harmful tropes and discourses, *Exalted* ends up reskinning white male power fantasies common in the medium as well as in broader geek culture.

This failure to subvert tropes is not limited to *Exalted*: Once established, tropes and discourses are difficult to subvert even in mediums and genres that inherently lend themselves to doing so. Despite offering the possibility to imagine entirely new worlds, both the fantasy genre and the RPG medium tend to produce "derivative facsimiles of our own. This includes reproducing the scourge of systemic racism" (Dhar, 2020). Different explanations are given for this: That the fantasy genre has been defined narrowly since the 1960s and consumers tend to reject fantasy that tread new ground (Grant, 2000: 22, 25), that some speculative writers hope to "deal with touchy issues without the hassle of the messy real world power politics" (Hopkinson, 2007: 105), and that writers include these elements to achieve realism (Hurley, 2016: 51). The final point, of course, mirrors the

conception that the secondary reality of an RPG must reflect the primary reality outside the RPG (cf. Cross, 2012; Nephew, 2006; Schalleger, 2018). Feminist critics counter this notion, asserting that writers should interrogate stereotypes, take responsibility for problematic stories, and work to do better (Hurley, 2016: 52-53). One effort made by *Exalted* to challenge the discourses established in other RPGs is to draw upon non-Western sources of inspiration. The challenge here is that “Western critics, readers and publishers don’t understand [such sources] as fantasy,” classing them instead as “magical realism” (Young, quoted in Dhar, 2020). It appears that readers as well as writers are set in the discourses surrounding them.

Garcia (2017) states that his research may be interpreted as a condemnation of the racism and misogyny inherent to *D&D*, but asserts that it is “also a promising reminder that like people, cultural constructions, and systems change” (242). Future research may find the same to be true for *Exalted* as well. For example, while the second edition of the RPG erased much of the LGBTQ representation established in *Exalted*’s first edition (see 4.1.4.1 above), the current third edition of the RPG, in particular, has been praised as an RPG embracing queer themes (cf. Spica and Cole, 2020). This has been attributed to a development staff with three quarters of people identifying as queer (Spica and Cole, 2021: 01:01:05). It is beyond the scope of this discussion to conclude generally whether a plurality of voices in developmental and authorial staffs is the definite key to unlock the emancipatory potential of RPGs more broadly or even if this can be achieved beyond smaller indie games such as those cited by Cross (2012), but they are questions worth researching further. Additionally, future research will do well to separate the discourses related in sourcebooks from the play experience of participants and scrutinize the relationship between these in ethnographic studies.

Despite pushback from white, heterosexual cis-males, geek culture is more diverse now than it has probably ever been (see 2.3 above). Consumers do not adopt pop-cultural discourses passively (Talbot, 2017: 618), and for RPGs, “individuals’ agency can function as a positive disruption to the stereotypes built into systems” (Garcia, 2017: 244). Observing and scrutinizing the interaction between, and evolution of, RPG systems and participants going forward will likely be worthwhile. This account of the well-intentioned missteps of one major RPG publisher may prove a stepping stone in that context.

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Appendix A: Sourcebooks sampled

Table 1: Sourcebooks sampled		
Reference	Title	Bibliographic details
SB01	<i>Exalted Second Edition</i>	Alexander, A., Borgstrom, R., Bowen, C., Bush, Z., Carricker, J., Chambers, J. Cogman, G., Elliot, D., Goodwin, M., Hubbard, C., Schaefer, P., Snead, J., Watt, A., and Wulf, W. (2008 [2006]). <i>Exalted Second Edition</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB02	<i>Exalted Second Edition Storytellers Companion</i>	Alexander, A., Bush, Z., Carriker, J., and Schaefer, P. (2006). <i>Exalted Second Edition Storytellers Companion</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB03	<i>Graceful Wicked Masques: The Fair Folk</i>	Alexander, A., Bowen, C., and Sheppard, S.L. (2008). <i>Graceful Wicked Masques: The Fair Folk</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB04	<i>Return of the Scarlet Empress</i>	Bowen, C., Goodwin, M.A., Shearer, H., Shomshak, D., and Snead, J. (2010). <i>Return of the Scarlet Empress</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB05	<i>The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I: Wonders of the Lost Age</i>	Alexander, A., Blackwelder, K., Goodwin, M., and Snead, J. (2006). <i>The Books of Sorcery, Vol. I: Wonders of the Lost Age</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB06	<i>The Books of Sorcery, Vol. II: The White and Black Treatises</i>	Carriker, J., Laurenson, L., Schaefer, P., Shampel, D., and Sheppard, S.L. (2007). <i>The Books of Sorcery, Vol. II: The White and Black Treatises</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB07	<i>The Books of Sorcery, Vol. III: Oadenol's Codex</i>	Hubbard, C., Laurenson, L., Schaefer, P., Shampel, D., and Snead, J. (2007). <i>The Books of Sorcery, Vol. III: Oadenol's Codex</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB08	<i>The Books of Sorcery, Vol. IV: The Roll of Glorious Divinity I</i>	Brennan, E., Brooks, D., Hubbard, C., Laurenson, L., Shampel, D., and Sheppard, S.L. (2007). <i>The Books of Sorcery, Vol. IV: The Roll of Glorious Divinity I</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB09	<i>The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V: The Roll of Glorious Divinity II</i>	Alexander, A., Bowen, C., Carriker, J., Chambers, J., Hubbard, C., Laurenson, L., and Sheppard, S.L. (2008). <i>The Books of Sorcery, Vol. V: The Roll of Glorious Divinity II</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.

SB10	<i>The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. I: The Blessed Isle</i>	Bowen, C., Carriker, J., Hartley, J., and Snead, J. (2006). <i>The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. I: The Blessed Isle</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB11	<i>The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II: The Wyld</i>	Cogman, G., Schaefer, P., Snead, J. (2007). <i>The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. II: The Wyld</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB12	<i>The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. III: Yu-Shan</i>	Alexander, A., Brennan, E., Cogman, G., and Sheppard, S.L. (2007). <i>The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. III: Yu-Shan</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB13	<i>The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. IV: The Underworld</i>	Alexander, A., Dover, D., Elliot, D., and Shomshak, D. (2008). <i>The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. IV: The Underworld</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB14	<i>The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V: Malfeas</i>	Minton, E., Norris, J., and Shomshak, D. (2009). <i>The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. V: Malfeas</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB15	<i>The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. VI: Autochthonia</i>	Goodwin, M., Minton, E., Mørke, J., Price, N.R., Shearer, H., and Vance, R. (2011). <i>The Compass of Celestial Directions, Vol. VI: Autochthonia</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB16	<i>The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. I: The Scavenger Lands</i>	Blackwelder, K., Cogman, G., Dover, D., Kessler, M., and Watt, A. (2006). <i>The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. I: The Scavenger Lands</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB17	<i>The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II: The West</i>	Alexander, A., Brennan, E., Cogman, G., Hubbard, C., and Schaefer, P. (2007). <i>The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. II: The West</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB18	<i>The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. III: The East</i>	Alexander, A., Cogman, G., Dover, D., Kessler, M., Shampel, D., Snead, J., and Watt, A. (2008). <i>The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. III: The East</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB19	<i>The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. IV: The South</i>	Kessler, M., Norris, J., Shomshak, D., Snead, J., and Stiles, C. (2009). <i>The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. IV: The South</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.

SB20	<i>The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. V: The North</i>	Kessler, M., Kim, P., Minton, E., Shomshak, D., and Snead, J. (2009). <i>The Compass of Terrestrial Directions, Vol. V: The North</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB21	<i>The Manual of Exalted Power: Abyssals</i>	Alexander, A., Bowen, C., Dover, D., Goodwin, M., and Shampel, D. (2008). <i>The Manual of Exalted Power: Abyssals</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB22	<i>The Manual of Exalted Power: Alchemicals</i>	Alexander, A., Goodwin, M.A., Price, N.R., Shearer, H., and Ullmann, P. (2009). <i>The Manual of Exalted Power: Alchemicals</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB23	<i>The Manual of Exalted Power: Dragon-Blooded</i>	Alexander, A., Blackwelder, K., Schaefer, P., and Taylor, S. (2006). <i>The Manual of Exalted Power: Dragon-Blooded</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB24	<i>The Manual of Exalted Power: Infernals</i>	Alexander, A., Bowen, C., Goodwin, M.A., Minton, E., and Price, N.R. (2009). <i>The Manual of Exalted Power: Infernals</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB25	<i>The Manual of Exalted Power: Lunars</i>	Alexander, A., Cogman, G., Hubbard, C., and Schaefer, P. (2007). <i>The Manual of Exalted Power: Lunars</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB26	<i>The Manual of Exalted Power: Sidereals</i>	Alexander, A., Bowen, C., Carriker, J., Schaefer, P., Sheppard, S.L., and Shomshak, D. (2007). <i>The Manual of Exalted Power: Sidereals</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB27	<i>The Scroll of Exalts</i>	Alexander, A., Bowen, C., Chambers, J., Goodwin, M.A., Shearer, H., and Shomshak, D. (2010). <i>The Scroll of Exalts</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB28	<i>The Scroll of Fallen Races</i>	Kessler, M., Shampel, D., Snead, J., Stiles, C., Taylor, S., and Watt, A. (2008). <i>The Scroll of Fallen Races</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB29	<i>The Scroll of Heroes</i>	Alexander, A., Cogman, G., Norris, J., Price, N.R., and Watt, A. (2009). <i>The Scroll of Heroes</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB30	<i>The Scroll of Kings</i>	Goodwin, M., Shomshak, D., and Taylor, S. (2007). <i>The Scroll of Kings</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.
SB31	<i>The Scroll of the Monk</i>	Bowen, C., Laurenson, L., Schaefer, P., Shampel, D., and Shomshak, D. (2006). <i>The Scroll of the Monk</i> . Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing.

Appendix B: Characters sampled

Table 2: Individual female characters		
Name:	Character type	Primary write-up(s)
Ayesha-Ura	Sidereal Exalt	SB26: 40-41 SB27: 60-61
Ahn-Aru	Sidereal Exalt	SB01: 335-337
Alveua	Demon	SB09: 55-57
Amalion	Demon	SB14: 116-118
Anja Silverclaws	Lunar Exalt	SB27: 52-53
Arianna	Lunar Exalt	SB27: 20-21
Arilak the Unseen	God	SB18: 129-131
Arris Sharkfang	Mortal	SB17: 40
Ashivol Hanged-Tree	Mortal	SB18: 105-106
Asna Firstborn	God	SB12: 134
Autumn Frost	God	SB20: 126-127
Benezet	Demon	SB14: 118-119
Berengiere	Demon	SB09: 57-58
Birana	God	SB17: 140
Biriketh	God	SB12: 57
Bisorum	Mortal	SB15: 56
The Blood Queen	Akuma	SB24: 55-56
Bloodstained Pinion	Demon-Blooded Mortal	SB04: 84-85
Burning Feather	God	SB08: 49-50
Caltia	God	SB18: 131-133
Carrion Crow	God	SB20: 130-131
Cathak Mae	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB23: 31
Cathak Sijip	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB19: 56
Chorus at Midnight	Abyssal Exalt	SB21: 66
Cynis Elisa	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB04: 153-154
Cynis Megara	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB01: 327
Corr'Dall	Demon	SB20: 148-149
Darako Moonrise	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB23: 34-35
The Dowager of the Irreverent Vulgate in Unrent Veils	Deathlord	SB02: 88 SB21: 60-63
Ebon Siaka	Abyssal Exalt	SB13: 129-130
Echinna the Faceless	Lunar Exalt	SB25: 205-206

Erembour	Demon	SB09: 47-48
Eryan	Mountain Folk	SB28: 11
Eset	Ghost	SB13: 36
Eye and Seven Despairs	Deathlord	SB02: 88 SB21: 63-67
Faka Kun	Solar Exalt	SB27: 28-29
Flashing Peak	God	SB10: 150-152 SB12: 136
Fovek	Mortal	SB15: 76
Gemstone Jade	Mortal	SB10: 111
Gemstone Opal	Mortal	SB10: 112
Grala	God	SB08: 50-52
Gracious Shaia	Sidereal Exalt	SB26: 42-43
Grandmother Bright	God	SB08: 52-54
Green Lady	Sidereal Exalt	SB13: 131-133 SB21: 81 SB26: 41
Harmonious Jade	Solar Exalt	SB01: 345-346
Holly	Mortal	SB10: 115
Hu Dai Liang	God	SB12: 140
Ingenious Flame	God	SB30: 11
Ipithymia	Demon	SB14: 84-85
Iron Siaka	Sidereal Exalt	SB27: 64-65
Ivrieine	God	SB20: 134-135
Iyutha	Demon	SB14: 128-129
Janequin	Demon	SB14: 129-131
Jasara	Solar Exalt	SB27: 22-23
Jagalza	God	SB12: 56 SB10: 152-153
Jaxar	Mortal	SB20: 146
Jetazuro	God	SB12: 51-52
Jupiter	God	SB26: 69-70
Kajeha Lef	Lunar Exalt	SB27: 40-41
Kallaberse	God	SB17: 38-39
Karal Fire Orchid	Solar Exalt	SB27: 14-15
Karal Linwei	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB27: 96-97
Kidilos	God	SB20: 135-136
Kireeki	God	SB08: 54-55

Lady Chimney Draft	God	SB20: 127-129
Lady Hishinia	Fair Folk	SB11: 116
Lady of Darkness in Bloodstained Robes	Abyssal Exalt	SB27: 118-119
Laktor	Mortal	SB15: 54
Leaping Orca	Mortal	SB30: 74
Ledaal Catala Gamam	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB23: 36
Ledaal Cysel	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB23: 36
Ledaal Kebok Coren	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB23: 37
Leeayta	God	SB18: 119
Lieutenant Risa	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB27: 108-109
Lilia	Mortal	SB16: 108
Lilith	Lunar Exalt	SB27: 44-45
Lillun	Mortal	SB24: 22-24
Lissome Avid Engineer	Alchemical Exalt	SB27: 154-155
Livilla	God	SB12: 142
The Lover Clad in Raiment of Tears	Deathlord	SB21: 70-73
Luna	God	SB25: 20-21
Luxana	God	SB12: 142-143
Lypothymie	Demon	SB14: 122-123
Madame Marthesine	God	SB08: 55-56
Madame Vert	Lunar Exalt	SB27: 56-57
Madelrada	Demon	SB14: 123-125
Maiden of the Mirthless Smile	Abyssal Exalt	SB27: 114-115
Manosque Cyan	Infernal Exalt	SB27: 144-145
Mara	Demon	SB14: 131-132
Marilaq A'Lam	Demon-Blooded Mortal	SB12: 146
Mars	God	SB26: 67-68
May Blossom	Sidereal Exalt	SB27: 72-73
Melkin Fool in Red	Abyssal Exalt	SB21: 72
Mercury	God	SB26: 63-64
Mnemon	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB23: 38 SB27: 88-89
Mnemon Duhalva	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB10: 116
Mnemon Harasa	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB23: 39-40
Mirror Flag	Solar Exalt	SB27: 34-35
Mistress with the White Hands	Ghost	SB13: 136-137

Mother Bog	Mother	SB16: 155
Mother Transgression	Ghost	SB13: 142-143
Munaxes	Demon	SB09: 52-53
Nasri	Elemental	SB12: 147-148
Nebthys	Ghost	SB13: 36
Nellens Siviri	God-Blooded Mortal	SB23: 41
Nysala	Mutant	SB11: 108
Ogime	Elemental	SB08: 123-124
Orchid Coral	Mortal	SB10: 124
Pale Mistress	God	SB19: 133-134
Peleps Aramida	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB27: 100-101
Princess Magnificent with Lips of Coral and Black Feathers	Deathlord	SB21: 75-77 SB02: 88
Prism Flame	Mortal	SB10: 124
Pruina	God	SB17: 140
Quicksilver Queen	Elemental	SB08: 100-102
Ragara Feria	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB10: 110
Ragara Szaya	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB05: 110
Raia	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB04: 148-149
Raksi	Lunar Exalt	SB18: 145-148 SB25: 55
Raneka	Elemental	SB20: 31-32
Rarata Sernasha	Mortal	SB15: 93
Relza	God	SB18: 119
Reshan of the Inward Breath	God	SB20: 138-139
Righteous Tsunami	God	SB26: 43
Rudhira	God	SB17: 140
Ruvona	Mortal	SB15: 93
Ryzala	God	SB12: 149-150
Samea	Solar Exalt	SB20: 106-112 SB20: 140-141
Sagarduia	Demon	SB14: 111
Sahlak Janissa	Mortal	SB19: 72
Sain the Throtter	Fair Folk	SB11: 129
Sarelle	Mortal	SB17: 40
Saturn	God	SB26: 71-72
Sawyer Shadow	Mortal	SB10: 118
Scarazan	God	SB12: 150

Shards of Basalt	Abyssal Exalt	SB21: 79-80
Sorrowful Leaf	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB10: 116
The Scarlet Empress	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB04: 213-215
Scarlet Whisper	Solar Exalt	SB19: 148-149
Sesus Rafara	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB27: 98-99 SB23: 47
Seven Devil Clever	Lunar Exalt	SB01: 331-332
Seventh Amethyst	Elemental	SB08: 111-112
Shalrina	God	SB16: 149-150
Shield of a Different Day	God	SB16: 142-144
Shining Flower	God	SB18: 119-120
Shoat of the Mire	Abyssal Exalt	SB21: 62 SB02: 88
Siakal	God	SB30: 36-39 SB17: 138-139
Sikunare	God	SB01: 299-300
Simla of Jadebrook	Mortal	SB30: 69
Silver Python	Lunar Exalt	SB25: 54-55
Sondok	Demon	SB14: 134-135
Spring Snowfall	God	SB20: 136-138
Stanewald	Demon	SB14: 136-138
Stern Ashakawa	Mortal	SB16: 108-109
Sulumor	Infernal Exalt	SB27: 138-139
Sunipa	God	SB18: 139-141 SB30: 82-84
Taru-Han	God	SB12: 42-43
Tehona	Mortal	SB17: 40
Ten Stripes	Lunar Exalt	SB25: 66-72
Tepet Chaio	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB10: 121
Tepet Ejava	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB23: 48 SB27: 110-111
Tepet Lisara	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB01: 326
Thousand-Faceted Nelumbo	Alchemical Exalt	SB27: 158-159 SB22: 43-44
Tien Yu	God	SB16: 146-147
Translucent Alabaster	God	SB08: 62-63
Tribbua of the Outward Breath	God	SB20: 138-139
Tya Atrisa	Mortal	SB17: 41

Tya Edralneth	Mortal	SB17: 38
Ulito Swan	God	SB19: 140-142
Unwanted Whisper	Ghost	SB13: 137-138
V'Neef	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB23: 48
V'Neef Aliset	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB23: 49
Venus	God	SB26: 65-66
Vitali Proseria	Dragon-Blooded Exalt	SB27: 92-93
Weaver of Dreams of Victory	God	SB16: 141-142
Weeping Raiton Cast Aside	Abyssal Exalt	SB27: 132-133
White Shale	Mountain Folk	SB28: 10-11
Wun Ja	God	SB12: 154
Yali Vektat	Mortal	SB15: 93
Zannanza	Behemoth	SB14: 109-110
Zsofika	Demon	SB09: 67-69
Zutaka	Elemental	SB12: 51

Table 3: Collective female characters		
Name:	Character type	Primary write-up
Angyalkae	Demon	SB09: 72-74
Arc Tender	Elemental	SB22: 67-68
Beastmen	Beastman	SB01: 282-283
Artisan	Mountain Folk	SB28: 44-45
Criminal	Mortal	SB29: 42-43
Daughter	Monster	SB16: 159
Demjen	Demon	SB14: 143-144
Djala	Mutant	SB29: 100-104
Dream Fly	God	SB08: 35-36
Dryad	God	SB08: 36-38
Entertainer	Fair Folk	SB03: 105-106
Firmin	Demon	SB09: 78-79
Flame Duck	Elemental	SB08: 116-117
Glasswalker	Mutant	SB15: 124-125
Graced Chayan Monk	Mortal	SB18: 152-153
Hawkman	Beastman	SB18: 149-150
Heketa	Elemental	SB08: 125-126
Hura	Monster	SB13: 150
Hushed One	Monster	SB20: 150-151

Lintha Demon-Blood	Demon-Blooded Mortal	SB17: 150-151
Mortal	Mortal	SB01: 278-282
Mother of Suffering	Undead	SB21: 210
Neomah	Demon	SB01: 310-311
Nymph	Elemental	SB01: 305
Oilkin	Mutant	SB15: 125
Person of the Air	Mutant	SB29: 78-83
Person of the Dunes	Mutant	SB29: 84-88
Priest	Mortal	SB29: 38-39
Pelagial	Monster	SB17: 155-156
Siren	God	SB08: 43-45
Sobeksis	Elemental	SB08: 126-127
Stillborn	Monster	SB13: 157
Symnelra	Automaton	SB05: 99
Storm Mother	God	SB17: 27
Tya	Mortal	SB17: 38-41
Warrior	Mountain Folk	SB28: 42-43
Yozi-Kin/Hellspawn	Demon-Blooded Mortal	SB14: 156

Appendix C: Coding manual

Table 4: Coding manual: Level 4 coding: What makes a woman			
<i>Level 3</i>	<i>Level 2</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
Appearance	Youth	Female characters described as young	“Seven Devil Clever is a very young Lunar. That’s what everyone keeps telling her.” (SB01: 331)
	Beauty	Female characters described as beautiful	“When she takes a humanoid guise, Sagarduia favors the form of a beautiful woman who appears to be made of freshly blown glass.” (SB14: 111)
Background	Suffering	Female characters whose background is defined by suffering	“Rafara was forced to watch as her mother drew a knife across the cheeks of both of her doting nannies before pushing them overboard.” (SB27: 98)
	Men	Female characters whose backgrounds are overwhelmingly defined by one or more male characters	“Physical abuse was the least of his cruelty. Lilith also suffered mental torture from her husband.” (SB27: 44)

Table 5: Coding manual: Level 4 coding: What makes a woman dangerous			
<i>Level 3</i>	<i>Level 2</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
Dangerous minds	Uncontrollable emotions	Female characters thematized as uncontrollable and dangerous due to their emotions.	“While Ivrieinen never issues a fatal punishment, victims of her personal, extremely creative wrath often wish they were dead after she rips their lives apart.” (SB20: 134)
	Deception	Female characters thematized as being deceptive	“[Jaxar] leads a gang of child-thieves, mostly from middle-to-upper classes, who have no idea how much power she has over them” (SB20: 146)

Dangerous bodies	Sexualization	Female characters sexualized through visual and textual representations as well as the explicit and implicit dangers of embodied female sexuality	"[Ipithymia] has taken and destroyed more lovers than any can remember, and she shows no signs of ceasing." (SB14: 85)
	Infantilization	Female characters who are given childlike behavior or appearance in images or text	"The Maiden of Endings typically manifests as a young girl, wise beyond her years, clad in violet funereal shrouds, with white hair and a somber expression. Her daiklave, Gentle Caress, brings instant death with the slightest scratch." (SB26: 71)
	Motherhood	Motherhood thematized as dangerous	"Lucky or powerful bargainers suffer only an unshakable melancholy bringing the children to term. Others find themselves slowly wasting away as they're devoured from within." (SB09: 67)

Table 6: Coding manual: Level 4 coding: Intersectional themes			
<i>Level 3</i>	<i>Level 2</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Example</i>
LGBTQ	Bi- or homosexuality	Descriptions of same-sex relationships	"Her wife has stood by her through all the years since then, but she worries as Fovek grows colder and more distant" (SB15: 76)
	Gender identity	Descriptions of gender change	"Autumn Frost changes appearance and even gender." (SB20: 126).
Race	Attractiveness	Race as a component of attractiveness	"Some flame ducks capitalize on their exotic good looks and charm, becoming high-class courtesans," (SB08: 116)
	Marginalization	Race as a component of marginalization	"[The Djala] are known in Creation today as a comparatively small

			and delicate race of people, frequently seen as slaves or servants” (SB29: 100)
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