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Presentist Fantasies of the Middle Ages: A Case Study of Two Pen-and-Paper Role-Playing Games Based on Medieval Literature

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1. Introduction

Role-playing games are among the most popular (neo)medievalist cultural practices. David Mackay defines role-playing games as rule-bound, episodic, participatory narrative systems, in which players and gamemasters[1] collaboratively generate narratives through descriptions and performative representations of events, characters and actions (Mackay 4-5). Generally speaking, narratives in role-playing games are world-based rather than story-based. According to Ryan (2015) and Wolf (2012), world-based narratives offer frames for the continuous generation of new narratives which, in turn, function as gateways into the respective storyworlds. Within a storyworld, individual stories may exist independently and/or converge at certain moments, provided the storyworld retains its inner consistency. To facilitate improvisational play, storyworlds in role-playing games often rely on already existing narrative constituents (for example setting, character types, or plot patterns) from either cultural products (e.g. texts, movies or video games), myths or even history.

(Neo)medievalist elements have informed pen-and-paper role-playing game systems from the very beginning of the genre. J. R. R. Tolkien's works served as a core reliance for Gary Gygax when devising the first edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*; see Tresca 61). The collaboration of players in a fellowship of characters representing different races and classes is unmistakably indebted to Tolkien. So are the typical adversaries, such as orcs, goblins, or dragons; even if the scope of antagonistic characters and creatures has quickly expanded.

If most pen-and-paper role-playing games are set in pseudo- or neomedieval fantasy worlds, occasional systems emphasize more decisively a connection to medieval literature. My chapter is going to scrutinize two recent systems explicitly alluding to medieval epics: *The Green Knight: A Fantasy Role-Playing Game* (2020) and *Beowulf: Age of Heroes* (2021), exploring the various strategies of transforming their medieval literary models into the medium of pen-and-paper role-playing games. The individual analyses will gauge in how far the systems are informed by genres, tropes, plot elements or characters of their medieval reference points. How do the systems transform narrative and poetic features into game mechanisms? How do they relate the medieval past to the players' experiential world in

[1] Other terms may be dungeonmaster, storyteller or referee, depending on the specific profile this hub player is taking (see also Schallegger 72-84).

terms of alterity or/and continuities? In other words, this essay seeks to explore the cultural work those pen-and-paper role-playing games are engaged in when re-presenting and re-visiting medieval literature.

2. *The Green Knight: A Fantasy Role-Playing Game* (2021)[2]

My first example was produced as ancillary material to David Lowery's eponymous movie adaptation (A24, 2021; starring Dave Patel) of the anonymous Middle English verse epic *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The medieval epic contains numerous features suitable to an adaptation for role-playing games. Its overt narrative voice foregrounds a storytelling performance, as it comments on characters, plot, or the narrative situation of oral traditions. Characteristic for this oral tradition is the epic's episodic structure and formulaic language. Moreover, the protagonist and the reader are both confronted with puzzles, and the hero is, of course, tasked with a quest after being challenged by a mysterious stranger. Magic also plays a role, even if only as an illicit sort of interference.

The key topic raised in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* revolves around chivalric ideals of honour and modesty – two virtues Sir Gawain eventually fails to fulfil. Although he survives the fatal blow by the Green Knight because he secretly wears a magic belt, he is only verbally chastised for his cheating. The humiliation to realize and admit his disloyal, dishonourable behaviour suffices for Sir Gawain to be reconciled with Bertilak de Hautdesert, who had been enchanted into the Green Knight by the sorceress Morgan Le Fay. Having learnt his lesson, the knight returns to King Arthur's court, keeping the girdle to remind him of his committed failures and thus to prevent a future one.[3]

The movie is far less lenient with its protagonist. Susan Aronstein and Taran Drummand perceive the topics "fame and legacy, narrative and destiny" in the movie, which is, to them, mostly "a film about stories" (92), full of metanarrative elements. Tison Pugh focuses on "duality and the contradictory meaning of signs" (43). Kevin J. Harty concludes that Lowery's movie is "intriguingly subversive" (51), without elaborating on the subversions in detail.[4] Amber Dunai, finally, highlights the movie's ambiguities, tracing them back to the director's engagement with Arthurian criticism and its unearthing of subtexts to the epic. Most notably, she hints at Geraldine Heng's reading of the epic "arguing that Sir Gawain contains within it a feminine text, which is perceivable 'at the limit of the

[2] Hence abbreviated as *GKRPG*.

[3] "This is the sign of sore loss that I have suffered there / For the cowardice and coveting that I came to there; / This is the badge of false faith that I was found in there, / And I must bear it on my body till I breathe my last" (*Sir Gawain* 65, ll. 2506-09).

[4] Harty sees the post-credit scene, for instance, as "a feminine antidote and alternative to the toxic masculinity of Arthur's court by having her [Morgan's] granddaughter place the crown on her own head" (50).

masculine narrative' Heng (1991) (500-1)" (Dunai 458). The movie's challenge to the concept of the hero is central to its subversive quality, for Dave Patel's Gawain is a flawed hero, whose 'heroism' ultimately consists in taking responsibility for his flaws and losing his life as a result. The movie's ending offers to Gawain only the choice between cowardice (leading to infamous death after temporary glory) or instant, yet honourable death. *GKRPG* capitalizes on the issue of honour raised in the movie, deploying it as a key mechanism.

Unlike *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the role-playing game splits up the singular hero into a cliché fellowship group of characters. Players can choose between the character classes of hunter, knight, noble, bard, and sorcerer. None of them can compare with the prowess of the knight of the Round Table. They rather represent the flawed heroism of Lowery's movie. The game's emphasis on virtues still reminds players of the idea of chivalric virtue and honour. The latter is, in fact, central to the role-playing game's mechanism (as I shall explain below). However, as the range of characters is expanded to non-chivalric character classes, the uniqueness of the chivalric hero in the original is levelled. On the one hand, the honour code is no longer exclusive to the knight. On the other hand, the levelling renders some character classes inconsistent because they typically would not follow an honour code.

As far as the adventure's context is concerned, there are only one adventure and a single story arch, divided into several episodes – very much like in the game's literary and filmic models. The episodes cursorily allude to some scenes in the movie, but only via topical cues: an encounter with robbers, an encounter with a magical fox, and rescuing St. Winifred's skull. In the medieval *Sir Gawain*, the episodic structure largely patterns Gawain's stay at Bertilak's castle, the host's hunts and Gawain's challenges by the lady. The journey is condensed in less than a hundred lines (*Sir Gawain* 21-23, ll. 691-784), summarizing valiant fights and encounters, yet none of them surfaces in the movie or the role-playing game. Although the game's episodes may help the players to props supporting them in the final encounter with the Green Knight, none of these props is in itself powerful enough to ensure the heroes' victory – quite unlike the belt in the poem. Lacking intrinsic connection and refusing the typical function of plot-constituting episodes in pen-and-paper role-playing games, the episodes in the Green Knight role-playing game achieve little in the creation of story and remain equally deficient with regard to their plot-solving potential.

The role-playing game's content-related link to the medieval epic largely rests on the eponymous figure of the Green Knight, who is both motivation and goal of the characters' quest. It also generates the characters' backstories, in which players must relate to each other, in the introduction to the session, how their characters once met the Green Knight, did damage to him, and what they expect as a

prospective retaliation. The figure of the Green Knight is, therefore, the constant element in this transmedial cluster, whereas Sir Gawain is replaced by the player characters.

Unlike most pen-and-paper role-playing games, where adventure stories are played in an elaborated storyworld, world building is irrelevant for *GKRPG*. The entire game is a one-shot adventure (i.e. to be played in one session only), with a linear story demanding strong railroading from the gamemaster, who decides on the honourability of the characters' actions. Like the story and its episodes, characters' actions are largely determined. So is the ending, although players and gamemaster are offered three options for possible outcomes of the adventure: if the characters decide to flee, their lives will be saved but their cowardice will spoil their happiness in the future – very much like the first ending in the movie. If the characters fight the knight victoriously, this standard ending for fantasy role-playing games assumes a bitter taste, since the gamemaster will then describe how everything in the Green Chapel is beginning to rot and die. The only ending leaving the players at least in a state of spiritual satisfaction occurs when they allow themselves to be beheaded. In that case, their dead bodies will merge with nature, granting the characters an eco-esoteric afterlife fusing human existence with nature.

None of these endings has been narratively prepared for in the previous episodes, nor does it bear any intertextual relation to the role-playing game's models – the rejection of the cowardly solution excepted.[5] The ending of the epic, with Gawain surviving the encounter a chastised and wiser man, is rejected by both movie and role-playing game. The Green Knight is transformed from an enchanted knight into a mythical incarnation of nature, visually reminiscent of the Celtic Green Man, whose association with the Wild Hunt may also underlie the hunting scenes and their implications. Whereas deviations from the model(s) are by no means problematic in adaptation, a severe point of criticism in the role-playing game concerns the potential dissatisfaction with the endings among those players who may have believed the game to follow the conventions of fantasy role-playing games, which typically reward players who fight victoriously, defeating the so-called 'endboss' in the last stand. In *GKRPG*, however, all the victorious players may take from the Green Chapel is a stone with some moss on it.

Equally disappointing is the central game mechanism: characters do not have life points or hit points indicating their level of physical health. The essential coinage in the game is (dis)honour: on a scale from 0 (impeccably honourable) to 20 (so utterly depraved that the adventure ends immediately if one character reaches this score), characters begin with a dishonour score of 10. Responding to an encounter

[5] The movie ends with Gawain's death but without the ecological apotheosis.

automatically entails one point of dishonour, for the characters allow themselves to be distracted from their progress to the encounter with the Green Knight.

At first sight, the honour system has an intriguing appeal because it forces players to consider the moral implications of their actions. Since role-players sometimes tend to act like riotous murder hobos, revelling in vice and slaughter, the honour system may prevent such excesses. However, the game mechanism actually counters such a moral impulse, for by treating honour like a commodity, the moral value of honour and the concomitant ethical decisions are superseded by utilitarian considerations. Honourable decisions are not taken because of their moral quality, or to increase characters' ethical depth. They tend to be motivated predominantly by the wish for profit on the honour scale. Although the honour system may invite players to discuss the possible moral implications of their choices, at least in the play sessions I have attended so far, *GKRPG* turned out to be a thoroughly agonistic game, encouraging players to simply focus on defeating the Green Knight. If players decided on honourable actions, they did so because they hoped to profit from them, reaching the story's ending with as little as possible dishonour, because this would give them an advantageous position in the final battle. Nevertheless, the plotline of *GKRPG* eventually thwarts all competitive aspirations because none of the predetermined endings offers any reward for the players – unless they were, indeed, satisfied with their characters' deaths. Although the description of that death imagines a transcendental, ecological fusion with nature, one may well doubt whether such an esoteric reward meets the taste of agonistic pen-and-paper gamers.

The obligatory loss of honour whenever players decide to engage with the adventure's episodes strictly contradicts the usual logic of pen-and-paper role-playing games, where the encounters structure and propel the plot, allow the players' agency to unfold, and reward players with loot and experience points. Since players lose honour when choosing to engage with an encounter, while they also risk to (and generally do) lose honour during the interaction, the motivation for narrative investment in the encounter dwindles considerably. Worse, both the inevitable loss of honour and the railroaded endings almost entirely deprive players of their agency. Their actions do not affect the predetermined plot. Since agency is important for immersion in a role-playing game, one may draw the paradoxical conclusion that the potential for immersion in this adaptation of a movie adaptation of a medieval epic is quenched by precisely the mechanism that was supposed to spark interaction.

In a character-driven pen-and-paper system, based on negotiating players' moral decisions, the honour system may have contributed to developing a thoughtful narrative collaboration. As a merely mechanical, utilitarian tool within an otherwise agonistic role-playing game that supports a gameist attitude among players

rather than role-playing or socializing, the honour system of the *GKRPG* fails to evoke the intricacies of the chivalric honour code of the medieval epic. It does not achieve Lowery's critical subversion of these values, either. The function of *GKRPG* as an ancillary product, hence, adds nothing to the engagement with the movie, nor does it fulfil such a purpose for the epic. And with its flaws as a game (such as railroading, inconsistent game mechanics, lack of reward, small replayability value), it hardly helped to increase sales profits, either.

3. *Beowulf: Age of Heroes* (2021)[6]

The setting of my second example tries to capture the atmosphere of an early medieval epic, which the authors of the role-playing game consider "the original source of so much in fantasy adventure" (Hodgson et al. 7). This claim probably alludes to references to the Old English epic in Tolkien's works. Arguably the most famous among them is certainly the encounter with Smaug in *The Hobbit*, which refers to an episode in the final part of *Beowulf*, where a thief steals an object from the hoard of a dragon, who vents his anger on a nearby village.[7] Moreover, the pattern of the superhuman hero who singlehandedly defeats marauding monsters has also become a generic element of fantasy narratives.

During the Covid pandemic, the creators of *BAH* sought to adapt the group-oriented game mechanics of the fifth edition of *D&D* for a role-playing game for just one player and one gamemaster. The Old English epic of *Beowulf* appealed to them as a template for this project because the epic centres on one single hero. The player will step into the role of that hero and will also control a group of followers (side characters with individual attributes, who may interfere with the action but whose character will not be elaborated or deepened).

The setting of *BAH* is determined by literary rather than political history, for the authors were particularly intrigued by the conditions of early medieval storytelling, especially the idea of a scop telling stories to a community by the fireside. Although the setting of *BAH* is dated in Anglo-Saxon times, the events of the adventures are entirely fictitious, or "mythical," as the authors put it. The atmospheric value of the pretexts is tantamount to the game. Hence, historical accuracy is discarded in favour of landscape descriptions or other elements of local colour. Player and gamemaster are encouraged to create stories that "can be larger than life, details can be made up, embroidered and exaggerated . . . and no one needs to worry too much about doing their homework. It is not possible to get it 'wrong'" (Hodgson et al. 6). Interest in the period is, nevertheless, helpful to imbue stories with consistency and coherence. The authors invite both approaches to the game:

[6] In what follows, the title is abbreviated as *BAH*.

[7] Considering Tolkien's academic works, one ought to add his seminal lecture "Beowulf: The Monster and the Critics" at the British Academy in 1936.

one displaying historical awareness and aiming at authenticity, or one enjoying mythical story patterns. Both are equally legitimate and enjoyable.

As far as game mechanisms are concerned, *BAH* adapts some features of Old English literature, integrating them into its rules, mechanisms, and/or plot structure. Most prominently, the "portent" serves to create poetic flavour. The portent is a combination of two compounds, each consisting of an adjective plus a noun. It is assembled with the help of adjective and noun tables in the rulebook. The player rolls dice to select the constituents of the portents from those tables. This mechanical process may yield ominous phrases like "Harried Winds – Ancient Grief". The portent's form is supposed to imitate both the grammatical compound structure of Old English kennings[8] and the caesura in the long lines of Old English poetry. The portent's meaning is open to the players' situational interpretations. Since *BAH* imitates Old English poetry for its sound quality rather than its meaning, Old English poetry retains an aura of fascinating, yet unintelligible alterity. Poetic form is, hence, functionalized into a game mechanism that generates atmospheric 'fluff'.

The portent has a structural function in opening the plot of an adventure when the characters will receive it in one way or another – maybe a wise person or soothsayer will pronounce it to the hero. It can be used to foreshadow the story and offers a frame or script for future character actions. The player is invited to apply the portent interpretatively to any situation in the game, suggesting how the portent may have foreshadowed that particular moment. The phrase mentioned above could, for example, be invoked when the player comes across a ruin caused by a storm (hence, 'harried winds'). The player might wonder whether the ruin may hide a dangerous secret – perhaps an ancient monster once hid there and has now been released to ravage the surroundings (hence, 'ancient grief'). If the player utters such speculations based on the portent, s/he may be granted advantage for, say, a dice roll in an investigation check. Within the game, the portent supports the player's creativity and agency. From a literary studies perspective, however, the portent mechanism insinuates that literary interpretation is something subjective and volatile, in the sense of 'anything goes'.

Apart from alluding to the poetic elements of the kenning and the long line, the portent also creates an intertextual reference to the Anglo-Saxon concept of *wyrd*, attempting to translate it into a game mechanism. *Wyrd* is an Old Germanic concept of fate, which combines the idea of predetermination with human agency. A human being's past, present, and future are believed to be woven into fateful threads by the norns (Germanic mythological beings). Destinies of human beings may interlace with those of others, thus weaving a veritable *wyrd* web. Since the

[8] *Kennings* are conventional compounds with figurative meanings, employed in Old Germanic poetry to circumscribe single-word nouns (e.g. hron rade – 'whale road' – for the sea).

actions of human beings may have an impact on their destiny, the concept of *wyrd* is not entirely predetermined (unlike Puritan ideas of predestination) but leaves room for human agency. The portent establishes the idea of a prefabricated, if yet obscure frame of fate. It simultaneously offers instances of agency to the players, whose own creativity can influence the action's further course in a positive way. However, this agency occurs foremost on the level of player-gamemaster communication (i.e. it is negotiated on a metalevel) and not on the level of character decisions on the story level.

Expanding on the poetic frame of the portent, the sea voyage establishes an additional narrative frame for the introduction of an adventure because it modifies and individualizes the player's further potential actions. Although *wyrd* constitutes one option for the challenges the player encounters on the sea voyage, the player has little agency in this context because the gamemaster rolls dice to select challenges from a table and then narrates what happens during the voyage. In the sea voyage, "wyrd" is largely synonymous for a deterministic fate, whereas Germanic *wyrd* can be influenced by somebody's actions. Apart from being a "framework and a tool", the sea voyage in *BAH* has no independent story value except encouraging the player to roleplay the exchanges between the hero and his/her followers and thus helping the player to get into the role.

A third, spatial, constituent borrowed from *Beowulf* is the meadhall, a location for social interaction between the hero and the local community, and an expository starting point for the player's investigations that eventually yield clues and tools to defeat the monster. In *Beowulf* as well as in *BAH*, the meadhall is also the site where the monster is introduced. Whereas heroes in *D&D* must explore the setting to gather help and tools that will support them to overcome the antagonist, the eponymous hero in *Beowulf* already possesses almost everything he needs to succeed. He does not need special preparations for Grendel but overcomes the monster by his own innate, superhuman strength in a wrestling fight. In the fight against Grendel's mother, the sword to deal her the lethal blow is found in the very moment and place of need and then dissolves once it has fulfilled its purpose. Unlike *D&D* heroes, who gain experience points and advance in their skills and abilities, the hero of the Old English epic undergoes no such development; he is fully accomplished and complete from the beginning.

The quintessential challenge for the hero faction consists in the monster haunting the site. In *BAH*, the concept of the monster largely corresponds to recent positions in teratology, which are informed by attempts at reducing the traditional othering and attempt a more inclusive stance towards monsters instead. Accordingly, the authors of *BAH* contend that monsters are, generally speaking, an index for a world feature that lies beyond the control of the community member. Reading *Beowulf* allegorically, they suggest that, for instance, Grendel represents the

power of evil as such, Grendel's mother embodies the danger of blood feuds, and the dragon signifies greed. This allegorical reading of the monsters as symbols resembles syncretistic interpretations of *Beowulf* that endow the Germanic tale of a warrior hero with Christian significance.

"Every Monster has its source" (Hodgson et al. 124), the authors of *BAH* assert, establishing a typology of monsters according to their origin:[9] Monsters that are born evil are irredeemable. They are also fictitious by definition, for such inherent evil "does not apply to people in the real world but is exceedingly helpful for a storyteller setting up a clear threat to a Hero" (124). With this remark, *BAH* not only distinguishes between the fictions it generates and the real world. It also highlights the dual awareness of player and gamemaster, nonchalantly disproving common allegations that role-players tend to confound fiction and reality.

The second type of monsters are perceived as veritable victims of a powerful person, creature or deity who has transformed the monster into what it is, either as a punishment or just out of an arbitrary whim. Implying a story arch of guilt and punishment, this type also contains the potential for atonement and redemption. The hero faction becomes an instrument for the redemption of the monster. The hero, in fact, assumes an almost messianic role of redeemer. Nevertheless, the rulebook leaves a gap as far as the consequences for the character who originally created the monster by transformation are concerned – for the monster's creator usually does not appear in the adventure.

The third monster type is "twisted by nature" (124). Originating from natural reasons, the monster is an ecological power, acting from natural necessity. Conflicts arise whenever the monster's needs clash or become incompatible with those of human beings in the habitat. The hero may resolve this conflict and reveal modes of cohabitation and conviviality between the conflicting parties. If this proves impossible, "to slay this kind of Monster is a grim need" (124), without the feeling of guilt experienced when a hero slays a monster of the previous type. Despite its ostentatious gesture to diversity policy, *BAH* thus cannot deny its anthropocentric stance.

The fourth and final monster type, the "unresting dead" (124), are locally mobile undead foes, whose ties to their eternal resting place have been severed. Heroes must either help the monsters to complete unfinished tasks or release their souls from their physical vessels. The latter implies that monsters do have souls, while their physical condition and appearance is what essentially constitutes their alterity. This alterity may warrant their destruction.

In sum, *BAH* endeavours to display a diversified, inclusive concept of the monster, offering alternatives to the verdict that monsters are always inherently evil.

[9] The following explanation of the monster typology in *BAH* is based on Hodgson et al. 124-25.

This idea is diametrically opposed to *Beowulf*, where Grendel and his mother were precisely that. Their otherness was enhanced with Christian implications, defining the creatures as bearers of Cain's mark (apparently without its protective qualities) and God's wrath. *BAH*, in turn, secularizes the monster by explaining most of its evil constitution by external circumstances. It therefore reduces the moral evaluation of the monster as a sinful 'Other'. Consequently, the monster narrative in *BAH* potentially offers alternative solutions to mere destruction. Such solutions, however, seem to be founded on a distinction between a physical and a spiritual/moral dimension of the monster. Slaying a monster is justified by moral or spiritual reasons, and killing a monster may even be considered a legitimate release – which turns the hero into a redeemer figure. Whereas Beowulf was presented as a redeemer to the community he relieved from the monster, the redeemer function of the hero in *BAH* is extended to the monster as well. Within such a narrative, the problematic part of the monster is located with the monster's physical appearance and strength. The decision of whether to destroy the monster's body or not is entrusted to the hero, and with it the ethical and moral responsibility over the monster's life or death. In *BAH*, the hero is not an executive instrument of God but assumes a God-like function him/herself.

Although the rulebook of *BAH* extensively discusses non-destructive options in conflicts, the system's focus on the monster's destructive skills and the absence of social stats for monsters betray a strict anthropocentric position. Only the human hero (unlike other *D&D* systems, there are no other species available in *BAH*), that is, the narrative agent of the human players, is allowed to decide on the fate of the nonhuman monster. While the rulebook adheres to contemporary notions of political correctness by admitting a certain awareness of the monster's plight, the game nevertheless endorses the traditional anthropocentric legitimation for the hero to eliminate the monster. Since this elimination is also the goal of the adventures, one cannot but notice a certain hypocrisy in this context.

This impression increases if one considers the narrative pattern of adventures in *BAH*: A hero approaches a location from the outside to release it from its native scourge. The narrative of this resourceful human hero overcoming an undefeatable monster may also allude to the narrative of David and Goliath or, more generally speaking, the narrative of the underdog defeating the overpowering bully, which is so cherished by Hollywood – and, one may add, in recent political narratives, too. Nevertheless, one can hardly overlook the colonial, hegemonial subtext underlying the concept and the task of the hero faction: the resourceful, successful hero may also come to represent the eventual supremacy of the (neo-)colonial agent, whose task it is to travel the known world and to 'liberate' remote places from their homegrown scourges. I would even argue that *BAH* resonates a particularly US American narrative in which a heroic faction crosses the sea to reach

more or less remote places in the world in order to relieve and release the indigenous inhabitants from troubles that were native to the place but which the indigenous community was incapable of handling on their own. That this act of liberation is mostly carried out with violent means and results in the extinction of the troublemaker is legitimated by the hero's status of a redeemer for the indigenous community, the monster (that needs redemption and/or extinction anyway), and the world at large. Of course, it is all for everybody's best (including the slain monster's).

The monster's initial undefeatability is necessary to make the hero a hero in the first place. Heroism consists in overcoming undefeatability. The monster is, hence, the defining other to the hero. Unlike in *Beowulf*, where the hero and the monster are intrinsically matched,[10] the human hero in *BAH* must first transcend his/her already superior human qualities by becoming mentally superior because exploration and investigation ultimately lay an intellectual foundation for the monster's defeat – even if that entails the use of powerful rituals, artefacts, or spells. Therefore, it is only too adequate that *BAH* has erased the implications of the Old English *Beowulf's* final fight, in which the hero's failures and hybris eventually lead to his death. In *BAH*, the hero is supposed to refrain from confrontations with a foe until his/her arsenal has been equipped well enough to guarantee victory. Since the role-playing game system ultimately does not rely on *wyrd* but on dice, however, the risk of lethal escalation always remains, especially if the hero underestimates that risk and acts without sufficient consideration.

From an ecocritical or posthuman perspective, the human being must become transhuman or hyper-human, sharpening and deploying his/her human skills to a superhuman extent in order to become a match to, or even to overcome, the nonhuman monster. Contrary to *Beowulf*, this transcendence is not explained with a religious subtext (e.g. Beowulf is God's warrior) but solely evolves from the human hero's capabilities. In *Beowulf*, God's protection and the supernatural force of *wyrd* have chosen the hero, endowing him with the necessary means to succeed from the start. In *BAH*, the deficient human being must overcome its human deficiencies by becoming superhuman if the monster is to be defeated. Humanity rescues and redeems their habitat on their own. In a similar vein, neither the portent nor *wyrd* bear traces of the supernatural. If these game mechanisms express anything, it is the human player's creative skills warranting the human hero character's success.

[10] Beowulf does not defeat Grendel with a superior weapon but in a wrestling match.

4. Conclusion

Both *GKRPG* and *BAH* explicitly allude to clearly identified literary pretexts. Their reliance on these pretexts mostly concerns plot patterns and game mechanisms. Both systems are story-based rather than interested in worldbuilding at large. Both insinuate that belief in the supernatural or enchantment are characteristic of medieval culture. Accordingly, they combine references to historical pretexts or models with fantasy elements: magic and/or monsters on the story level and mechanisms of popular role-playing games on the game level. In both role-playing games, the Middle Ages are a site of alterity, and the enchantment of the world, sometimes coupled with (Christian) faith, constitutes one part of that alterity. In fact, it is this alterity that renders the Middle Ages a sufficiently interesting playground for role-playing in the first place. Starting from these shared assumptions and insinuations, the two pen-and-paper role-playing systems under scrutiny establish different profiles in their particular re-presentations and transformation of medieval literature.

The dual structural reliance of *GKRPG* on established fantasy role-playing games and Lowery's arthouse movie overwrites the medieval pretext of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. *GKRPG* is exemplary for an adaptation of an adaptation, superseding and gradually substituting a historical pretext that is gradually sinking into oblivion in popular culture. As honour – the central ideological concept in the game and its pretexts – is turned into a utilitarian commodity, players will profit from their cultural knowledge of role-playing game rules and mechanisms or from familiarity with Lowery's movie adaptation. Knowledge of the medieval *Sir Gawain* will hardly help them – quite on the contrary, if one considers the discrepancies between the endings.

Like *GKRPG*, *BAH* adapts its material to the medium of a role-playing game by translating elements into game mechanisms. In this case, the elements largely concern poetic and narratological features of the Old English epic. The authors compare the situational *Sitz im Leben* of Old English epics, their thorough grounding in an oral culture, with the situational context of a pen-and-paper role-playing game. The alterity of the role-playing game's setting on the story level is, hence, balanced with a continuity on the level of communication, between Old English storytelling and the collaborative narratives emerging from a pen-and-paper role-playing game session. Nevertheless, the generic nature of these continuities and of the structural reliances to some extent prevents genuine historical flavour from developing in the game. The poetic and narrative features of the Old English epic are rather absorbed by modern genre features.[11]

[11] The long line, for example, dwindles into mere linguistic fluff in the portent. *Wyrd* is reduced to dice roles with special advantage or to one among several sections in a decision table for the sea voyage episodes.

Appropriation seems to be the most prominent adaptational mode in the two examples. Marketed as ancillary material to a movie, *GKRPG* has largely severed its ties with the medieval *Sir Gawain*. Its sole reliance on the epic consists in the eponymous Green Knight (who has metamorphosed from an enchanted knight into a Green Man), a fox (referring to the movie rather than the epic), and the residue of a generic idea of knighthood, represented in the option to play a generic knight as a character. Only the Green Knight is essential for the game's story – Sir Gawain has become dispensable.

In *BAH*, the modern players roleplay characters who are outsiders to the (pseudo)medieval setting. Their status as outsiders enables them to transform the medieval setting, diminishing its alterity and assimilating it to the experiential world of the modern players. This transformation entails grafting contemporary ideologies and narratives onto the medieval storyworld. I suggest that the two role-playing games discussed in this essay exemplify a cultural appropriation of medieval Europe in American popular culture – an appropriation that seeks to confirm the superiority of both the present and US American culture and ideologies over the past in general, and a European past (and culture) in particular. With this mode of appropriation, the role-playing games discussed in this essay exhibit an apparent attitude of presentism. At best, they endorse medieval literature and culture as eclectic elements for the creation of an atmosphere conducive to the players' immersion in the role-playing game. At worst, they try to overrule the alterity of the past, by imposing contemporary ideological narratives onto medieval literature and culture – always presupposing the superiority of present positions and the need for improvement of past concepts and representations. Although this may sound disparaging, I want to qualify this verdict by hinting at the fact that the previous assessment was largely based on written handbooks. Pen-and-paper role-playing games, however, depend on their realization in players' (and gamemasters') performances. Those are never one-to-one translations of the written material. Since players and gamemasters always reshape and flesh out the framework provided in rulebooks and sourcebooks, they may also make amends and compensate for the deficiencies of the authors' works. Where the authors of a role-playing game may have been blinkered by their presentism, historically interested and informed players and gamemasters may go beyond mere fluff and atmosphere. Instead of following a presentist, revisionist impulse, they may acknowledge and appreciate the alterity of the medieval models and allow themselves an immersion beyond the position of a reformist outsider as they are playing with the Middle Ages.

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