“LET ALL PARTAKE IN THE SUFFERING”: *MÖRK BORG* as a Visual-Material Toolkit for Fan Remix

PS Berge
Doctoral Student
University of Central Florida
4000 Central Florida Blvd.
Orlando, FL 32816-1990
hello@psberge.com

ABSTRACT
MÖRK BORG—an ENnie award-winning, heavy-metal, rules-lite tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG)—provides a unique case study into fan-creator and remix culture. Defying the reactionary ethos of other ‘old school revival’ games, *MÖRK BORG* reimagines the established dungeon crawler in politically subversive ways. Half rulebook, half artbook, *MÖRK BORG* has engendered an impressive response from fan-designers—eliciting hundreds of hacks, adventures, monsters, and zines. This article explores the *MÖRK BORG* fandom as an active zine culture and supportive community for new TRPG designers. I analyze how the visual and material design of the *MÖRK BORG* sourcebook—namely its visual layering, palette, typography, and deathpunk emphasis on illegibility—empowers even novice fan-creators. Pulling from game and feminist media scholars, I argue that *MÖRK BORG* extends ongoing discussions of punk zine culture to tabletop roleplaying games and serves as an exemplary toolkit for inclusive and remixable analog game design.

Keywords
MÖRK BORG, tabletop roleplaying game, TRPG, TTRPG, fandom, zine.

INTRODUCTION
“*WHAT WAS WRITTEN MUST BE KNOWN.”*[1]

“Rules light, heavy everything else.” *MÖRK BORG* (pronounced ‘murk borg,’ henceforth ‘*MB*’) is a Swedish post-apocalyptic tabletop roleplaying game (TRPG, sometimes styled TTRPG). The game was written by Pelle Nilsson, illustrated and designed by Johan Nohr, translated into English by Patrick Stuart (not *that* Patrick Stewart), and produced by Ockult Örtmästare Games, Stockholm Kartell, and Free League Publishing. At first glance, *MB* appears another installment in the OSR (‘old-school revival’) tradition of dungeon-crawler tabletop games, inspired by the earliest editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Characters are expected to be squishy and short-lived. There are goblins (spongey-skinned, shark-nosed monsters called “seths”), spiked flails, and random trap tables full of scorpion baskets and ghost-haunted urns. There are only 16 pages of core rules in the 86-page book—the rest is doomful flavor, eccentric monsters, optional rules, and an example dungeon. Thematically, *MB* leans into a grim apocalypse rife with doomsayers, flesh alchemists, and the violent Church of the Two-Headed Basilisks.

Proceedings of DiGRA 2022

Yet *MB*, a game with strong musical influences in heavy metal and punk, is an aesthetic and political reimagining of the OSR formula. *MB* uniquely blends several artistic registers—combining medieval artwork with punky doodles, and classic 'paperback dungeon' vibes with an impressive production value (e.g. glossy foil images and glow-in-the-dark runes). *MB* is a success-story of what Trammell calls the "new economy" of analog games (Trammell, 2019); crowdfunded independently through Kickstarter and developed predominantly by two people, the game's fandom is actively expanding. *MB* has attained a (literal) cult following and is now available through most TRPG marketplaces (and also, for some reason, the Macy's department store [*Macy's*, n.d.]).

The success of *MB* is largely owed to the impressive response of its emerging fanbase. *MB* fans have generated hundreds of independent publications through online marketplaces using the generous *MB* third-party license—offering their own merch, PDFs, and paperback/print-on-demand (POD) zines. The generative activity of *MB* fan-creators is enmeshed simultaneously in the practice of modding—a subject that has been discussed at length by videogame scholars (Anthropy, 2012, p. 70; Everett et al., 2017, p. 90; Howard, 2020; Welch, 2018)—and the digitally networked practice of zine-making (Clark-Parsons, 2017). This study involves three parts: 1) I explore *MB*'s relationship to the OSR, and the troubled legacy of the genre 2) I perform a brief network analysis of the *MB* fandom and the role of fan-creators, curators, and organizers and 3) I aesthetically examine *MB*'s sourcebook from an image-text standpoint, showing how it serves as a material toolkit for new designers and creators. Building on the work of game scholarship, feminist research into punk zine culture, and my previous work on structural actors in gaming fandoms (Berge & Britt, 2021), I hope to illustrate how the *MB* community actively supports and encourages fan remix, welcomes "crap games," and contests the reactionary ethos of the OSR genre.

BACK IN THE OSR

"A place few wish to speak of."

MB's rise to prominence comes during a contentious time in the TRPG hobby—and OSR in particular—as the community reckons with the racist, misogynist, queerphobic, and conservative roots of the genre (Stang & Trammell, 2020; Stenros & Sihvonen, 2017; Trammell, 2018). OSR games borrow from *Original* and *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* and seek to "emulate the feel of early 1970's and 1980's fantasy RPGs" (Torner 2018). As Torner points out, much of the OSR scene emerged out of TheRPGSite (founded in 2006)—"a right-wing platform" defined by its antagonism towards other indie TRPG spaces (Torner 2018).

The contentious legacy of the OSR scene has been recently brought to the spotlight. In June and July of 2021, Ernie Gygax (son of the "Father of *D&D*" Gary Gygax) made transphobic comments in an interview that resulted in public outcry. Gygax's statements lamented that old-school players had been "dissed for being old-fashioned, possibly anti modern trends." He claimed that "we're not going to get back to the diamond that was *Dungeons & Dragons*… we're never gonna see that great *D&D* diamond again" (SciFi4Me TV, 2021). Gygax's comments invoke what Katherine Cross has aptly called the 'terror dream' of straight, cismasculine gamers—which relies on manufactured nostalgia and a fear that their games will be 'taken away.' As Cross writes:

> "Such gamers see our virtual world as a fragile and ephemeral one, perpetually under threat by outside forces. For the many gamers who lived through the '80s and '90s, growing up at a time when games and *Dungeons & Dragons* were being scapegoated for mass shootings, suicide, and Satanism, the experience left a psychic scar that expresses itself as a violent reflex" (Cross, 2017, p. 181).

In the weeks that followed Gygax's comments, the racist, queerphobic underbelly of the old-school TRPG scene reared its ugly head once more. In the weeks that followed, the account for the OSR game *Giantlands* called a trans woman "disgusting" on Twitter, the official account for Gygax's company @TSR_Games tweeted '#keepgamingfantasy' (a nod to the reactionary '#keepamericagreat' used by the American far-right), and numerous companies cut ties with Gygax and his projects as a result (Carter, 2021). While the furor died down with the deletion of both @TSR_Games and Ernie Gygax's account, this moment highlighted a contention within the larger TRPG community about the toxic origins of the hobby.

Figure 1. (Left) *Dark Fort*'s cover page (Nilsson & Nohr, 2018). (Right) *Dungeons & Dragons* original cover (Gygax & Arneson, 1974).

MB's growth, then, takes place in the midst of reactionary vitriol and manufactured nostalgia, and the game's relationship with its own OSR roots provides crucial context. *MB* is actually an evolution of a solo-dungeon microgame by Pelle Nilsson, called *Dark Fort*. A printing of *Dark Fort* was later released as part of the *MÖRK BORG CULT: FERECTORY* expansion Kickstarter and consisted of a single bi-fold page of rules in the classic 'whitebook paperback' style (complete with handwritten rules in the marginalia) and a small character sheet. Community member Līber Lūdōrum, an archivist of *MB* content, analyzes the evolution from *Dark Fort* to *MB*, writing that while many of *MB*'s mechanical influences are at work in *Dark Fort*, "*Mörk Borg* directs its energy into adapting and expanding Dark Fort's streamlined mechanics beyond crawling a fairly generic dungeon" ("Basilisk's Legacy" 2020). *Dark Fort* emphasizes several crucial elements of the OSR genre. Foremost, its aesthetic inspiration (see Figure 1) puts it in immediate conversation with the classic paperback rulebooks of the '70s. Additionally, the game contains only two spreads of rules, resonating with Brander's findings that "in OSR play there is little reliance on written rules, and high reliance on the referee making rulings to resolve situations in a fair manner" (Brander, 2020, p. 14).

Yet *MB* is a reimagining of *Dark Fort*—and the OSR genre writ large—aesthetically, mechanically, and politically. Lūdōrum notes in his material review of *MB* that the decision to change the name to Swedish is indicative of the larger evolution of the game into the excessive, the visceral, and the weird:

> ***MÖRK BORG*** is something you can (and should) roar while hacking some poor bastard in half with your zweihänder. (Again, don't forget that umlaut.) You can *feel* the words in your throat and chest when you speak them; they are harsh and guttural, capturing the game's tone from the moment you announce the title ("Mörk Borg," 2020).

MB's relationship to *Dark Fort* is indicative of its relationship to its larger OSR roots. *MB* is a project of textural layering akin to what Teddy Pozo describes as the 'haptic media' of queer game design (Pozo, 2018). As a case study in independent TRPG culture, *MB* operates in a liminal zone. On the one hand, it has achieved 'mainstream' success as an independent TRPG publication: ENnie awards, funded Kickstarters, and worldwide publication and distribution through Free League. At the same time, however, *MB'*s player culture has emerged as part of the TRPG underground—circulating free, pay-what-you-want (pwyw), and print-on-demand third-party zines, modules, monsters, hacks, adventures, software, merchandise, card and videogames. The *MB* Twitter account announced in January of 2022 that, since releasing a third-party license in September of 2020, over 1000 publications had been released by the community. This surge in fan-made content circulating in response to a relatively niche, Swedish, brutal, campy TRPG is impressive, and builds on recent scholarship that unpacks the role of fandom in TRPGs (MacCallum-Stewart & Trammell, 2018).

As a case study in fandom and TRPG zine culture, *MB* disrupts and remixes the legacy of OSR games and their historical audience of conservative, white masculine wargamers (Stenros & Sihvonen, 2017). *MB* deliberately obfuscates, denies, and reimagines its OSR roots by painting over them with new aesthetic and political layers. By embracing its role as a 'high-production crap game' and blending multiple contradicting influences—punk and classical art, heavy-metal and cuteness, grimdark and camp—*MB* challenges its genre and serves as a low-barrier toolkit, opening the hellgates for new players and designers to enter the fandom.

PUNK ZINES, TRPGS, AND CRAP GAMES

"A golden afterlife beyond this dark and ruined world."

Studies of TRPGs have largely focused on mechanical evolutions (Torner 2018), issues of representation (Taylor & Voorhees, 2018; Trammell, 2014), and ethnographic profiles of player communities (Bowman, 2010; Hedge, 2021; Hendricks & Winkler, 2006). Yet *MB* is a merging of old legacies and new affordances: the resurgence of old-school zine games, the power of digital distribution through sites like itch.io, and community tools for encouraging fan creativity.

In her classic *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters,* Anna Anthropy gives a detailed overview of the independent videogame scene in which she argues for "the idea of games as zines: as transmissions of ideas and culture from person to person, as personal artifacts instead of impersonal creations by teams of forty-five artists and fifteen programmers" (Anthropy, 2012, p. 9). *MB* pulls from the old-school trends of zine culture: haphazard, print-on-demand, and crowd-funded materials. Yet—drawing from popular practice in the indie videogame scene—*MB* projects now largely circulate through digital platforms: Kickstarter (as fan-creators crowdfund their own zines), itch.io (both as a marketplace and for running jams), as well as community spaces on Discord, Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit. As Trammell writes, "the old model of analog game publishing has been iterated on through crowdfunding platforms that circumvent the riskiness of print runs by determining the size and shape of their audience prior to print" (Trammell, 2019). While Anthropy once told videogame zinesters to learn from "Role-playing zinesters! And ones who, through their change of focus from complicated and expensive rule books full of encounter tables to simple rules that create

conflicts and guide players in creating a story," the roles are now reversed, as independent TRPG culture borrows from the indie videogame scene (Anthropy, 2012, p. 58).

This aligns with the perspectives of feminist media scholars' examinations of punk and queer zine culture. Rosemary Clark-Parsons notes that:

> Zine-making, as an accessible DIY media practice that operates outside of both marketplace logic and sociopolitical constraints, enables the invention and circulation of counterdiscourses that might otherwise find no outlet within the commercial media landscape (Clark-Parsons, 2017, p. 565).

Clark-Parsons argues that, while zine culture is often affiliated with material, non-digital media (self-made prints, paper booklets, etc.) the socially networked counterpublics of feminist zine culture are enmeshed in digital affordances. As I will demonstrate, the *MB* fan-creator community operates within the same boundaries of "symbiotic advantages" between the digital and the print (Clark-Parsons 2017). At the same time, the *MB* community, as an "institution in itself" (Duncombe, 2014, p. 53) negotiates its precarious position as a counterdiscourse community within the larger OSR and TRPG fandoms. The looming shadow of big-name games is what opens the door to for games like *MB* to cultivate a grassroots space for creativity and third-party content. Comic scholars have noted how the underground comic scene formed itself around unconventional distribution models into counterpublics, circulating printed materials to foster identification. Galvan & Misemer write that "marginalized print spaces allowed creators and readers to speak back to the dominant discourses of mainstream media and underground comics alike (2019, p. 2). Underground comics, another extension of zine culture, negotiate a contentious relationship with the larger comic scene and within other subcommunities, often pushing back against conventions and censorship.

Game scholars have noted the importance of zine culture and paratextuality in TRPGs as "technical and cultural developments since 2010 have further stratified fandom, producing multiple ways of interacting with the TRPG as a fannish enterprise" (Hedge 2021, 216). MacCallum-Stewart & Trammell unpack TRPGs through the lens of gaming capital and fandom—noting that the act of playing and facilitating TRPGs is itself a co-creative act, but that there are subcultures and subcommunities within the TRPG scene (2018). Jennifer Grouling has likewise explored the role of paratextual games and *Dungeons & Dragons*, describing how they connect fans back to the central text (Grouling, 2021). Stephanie Hedge has noted how the proliferation of virtual tabletops and other modes of distribution have meant that playing analog games now takes place online as "transmodal stories, told across multiple platforms and channels" (Hedge, 2021, p. 70). While scholars have noted the role of fan-made content (zines, adventures, modules, podcasts, recaps, actual plays, etc.) less attention has been paid to what factors and affordances *encourage* the creation and circulation of fan TRPG content. This article seeks to complicate this relationship between fan-creator and 'urtext' (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018) by showing how the *MB* sourcebook defies expectations of canon and materially equips creators with visual and textual design tools.

THE EXPOSED GUTS OF THE *MB* FANDOM

"Lost souls all."

Before I explore how the *MB* sourcebook equips fan-creators, I must provide an (admittedly cursory) overview of the fandom. In line with my previous work on gaming

fandoms (Berge & Britt, 2021) and in order to center the role of fan labor (DeKosnik, 2016; Stanfill, 2019), I break down fan actors into three groups:

- **Creators,** who themselves produce content in the network.
- **Catalyzers**, who encourage and equip creators, often by coordinating events and providing resources.
- **Canonizers**, who legitimize, boost, and curate the content in the network.

Broadly speaking, the practices of all the actors in the *MB* community are characterized by a collective effort to reject canonization and embrace 'crap games' (Anthropy, 2012) as a joyous part of the fandom.

Creators consist of the designers themselves: artists and writers making modules, monsters, dungeons, tools, and guides to distribute and sell to the community. *MB* offers fan-creators two modes of engaging with the IP and publishing their own content—with some blurry space between them. The first mode is through the MÖRK BORG CULT, a sub-label which accepts written submissions for production in semi-official zines (with the layout and art done by the *MB* team). Submissions to the Cult, however, have been closed for some time due to the volume of responses, and so instead most of the *MB* content is published through the generous third-party license which allows users to make and profit off their games as long as they attribute *MB* properly. The license provides several guidelines and standard legal copyright text (for easy copy-pasting). These designers congregate largely on Twitter, Discord, and Reddit—sharing projects in-process, soliciting playtesters, and trading ideas. They distribute their work on itch.io, DriveThruRPG, Kickstarter, and occasionally personal storefronts. Some offer printed versions of their zines through POD or as physical tier rewards. Others commit to fully digital distributions—circulating screen-optimized PDFs and digital tools. Fan-creation is at the heart of the community—and much of the discourse and activity in the Discord, Reddit, and Facebook community groups for the game circulates around new or upcoming fan-made content.

The role of *catalyzers* is filled by community members hosting game jams and soliciting new content, building design primers and guides, answering new members' questions, and playtesting one another's content on Discord and Reddit. The role of catalyzers is shaped by their commitment to the community's collective emphasis on 'crap game' values. Catalyzers within the *MB* community actively solicit absurd, illegible, and even unplayable content. This is reminiscent of Anthropy's discussion of the Klik of the Month game—which encouraged new participants to start making games. As she writes: "the experience forces participants to get past their egos and their meticulous plans for future epic games, to stop focusing on details and CREATE. Klik of the Month is about doing, not planning" (Anthropy, 2012). In the same vein, game jam organizers in the *MB* community strongly encourage reckless, unplanned participation by providing few rules, absurd prompts, short deadlines, and devaluing ratings and competition. For example, the FÖLK-LORE Game Jam, hosted by community member Rugose Kohn, selected winners by knife-throwing and granted its special 'community prize' to the game chosen as "Most Favoritest" by an eight-year-old. Likewise, other jams such as the 24-Hour Misery Jam hosted by Karl Druid and the Bad-Basilisk Berg-Borg Jam hosted by Rugose Kohn actively encouraged ridiculous, haphazard, and hastily-made entries with few requirements. Entries were evaluated based on such categories as "Mörky borginess," "Metaltude," and "TPKability" (how likely the publication was to kill all the players). These ranking categories emphasized the sacrilegious values of the community and their open defiance of 'best practices' in game and aesthetic design.

Run through itch.io, these games jams have solicited hundreds of entries from experienced and novice designers alike. These actors also reinforced the political values of the community—each of these game jams reposted variations of this statement:

> **Remember**: Make it dark, depressing, weird and cruel. But let everyone partake in the suffering. Be sure to avoid sexist, racist, homophobic and transphobic tropes and themes in your content. There's plenty of that crap in the real world already. The world of *MÖRK BORG* doesn't need it (*MÖRK BORG — MÖRK BORG LICENSE*, n.d.).

Included as part of the third-party license agreement, community organizers have adopted this statement as a key part of contests and jams, reinforcing a larger community commitment to avoid hegemonic themes and content. In this way, while the official *MB* license was originally responsible for this language, its proliferation and enforcement are performed by community organizers. This is strongly indicative of the counterpublic functions of the network: catalyzers reinforce the internal values of the community while positioning their practices as separate from other, less inclusive TRPG design spaces.

The role of *canonizers* is complicated by the community's collective rejection of a concrete canon—while Johan Nohr and the @MorkBorg handle signal boost and lend legitimacy to certain projects, the community is largely uninterested in determining what is 'official' or even necessarily 'good.' Instead, *MB*'s third-party creators seem to care about the *creation* of content more than its quality. The lines between what is "official" and what is not are deliberately blurred within the community. For example, Johan Nohr provided original illustrations for third-party Kickstarters such as Kevin Rahman's *MB*-inspired miniature game, "Forbidden Psalm" ("Forbidden Psalm" n.d.) and has even made submissions to fan-run game jams. Similarly, the @MorkBorg account often retweets and boosts Kickstarters and independent modules created for its game. Even the @MorkBorg account and the book itself, however, resist true canonization: when fans began debating on Twitter whether supplementary *MB* zines were considered 'canon,' the @MorkBorg handle replied by answering "The canon is uncanonical" (MÖRK BORG, 2021).

Other community members have taken on roles as curators through technical means, creating generators and archives for the community. For example, Karl Druid has programmed a character generator for both 'official' player characters (*SCVMBIRTHER*) and unofficial third-party characters (*SCVMATORIUM*). Likewise, the website morkborgcompatible.com provides a curated calendar of forthcoming *MB* crowdfunding projects curated by the community. Other canonizers include zine organizers. Community members collected submissions for several charity zines, including *Babalon's Hangover* and *Babalon's Hangover 2* (supporting animal charities), and *Dissident Whispers* (supporting Black Lives Matter). Many game jams, likewise, have published their entries in zine compendiums, such as the FÖLK-LORE game jam. Perhaps most impressively, community member Līber Lūdōrum has established an extensive archive of third-party *MB* content called *Ex Libris Mörk Borg*. An edited "bibliography" of thousands of third-party and official resources, *Ex Libris* is a curated, tagged, and searchable index of all published third-party content made for *MB*, and the developers are actively working with other TRPG fandoms to share its open-source platform ("Ex Libris Mörk Borg," 2020). The *MB* Twitter account even went so far as to call Ex Libris "one of the most important body parts of the shambling ghoul-warrior that is MÖRK BORG" (MÖRK BORG, 2021). While the *MB* "Cult" may no longer be taking submissions, these fan-archivists have taken on the extensive labor of identifying, cataloging, and publishing fan-made content (DeKosnik, 2016).

These curators seek to be exhaustive rather than selective—refusing the meritocratic structure of other TRPG fan-creator spaces.

These community actors reinforce the values of *MB*'s zine-culture—encouraging "create now, plan later" approaches, embracing 'crap' game design (in Anthropy's sense), and adhering to an 'everything counts' model of curating content. These structures open the door to new creators—lowering numerous barriers to entry. Yet the accessibility of *MB* also relies on its material and aesthetic hackability. In the following sections, I will show how *MB*'s typographic, visual, and material design actively support fan remix.

TWO-HEADED AESTHETICS

"*The world trembles. One can feel it in ways sharp and subtle."*

MB synthesizes inherently contradictory visual combinations—doom metal meets classical art, and grimdark meets goofy. Ultimately, these disparate tones and influences are woven together not only through careful graphic and typographic design that guides readers' attention—but done so in a way that makes it easily remixable by fans. Take, for example, the spread containing the rules for determining character abilities:

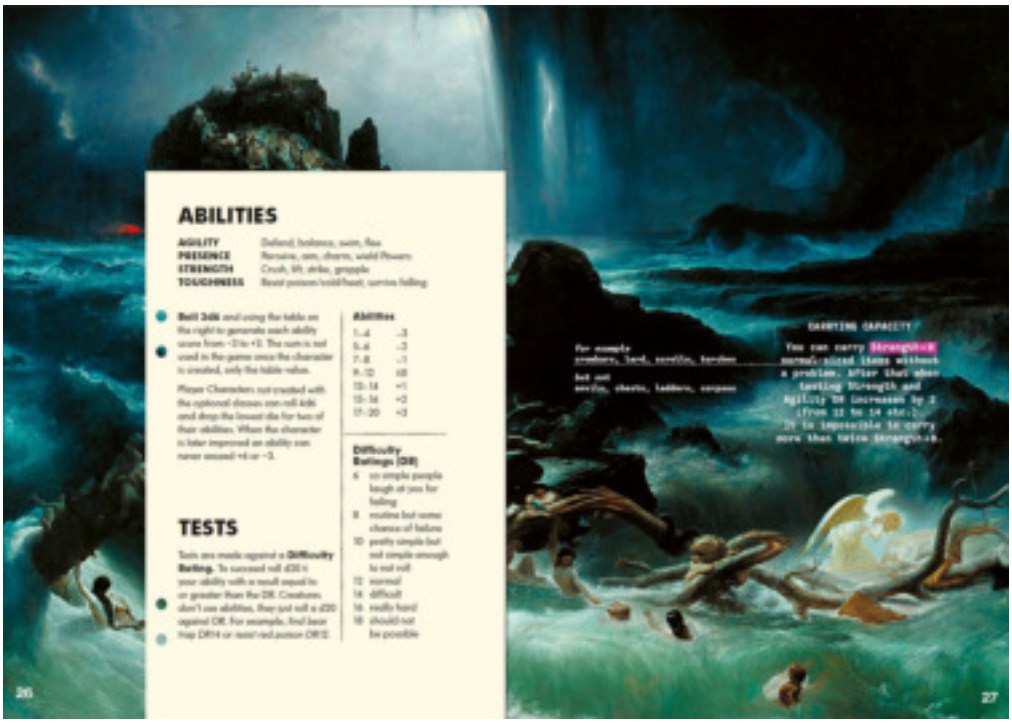

Figure 2. A spread from *MB*, showing the rules for abilities (Nilsson et al., 2019).

Here we see the minimalism of *MB*'s rule system and the influence of OSR: four abilities rolled with 3D6, a short description of how rolling works, and a small, off-page description of inventory management that downplays the significance of carrying capacity rules. Yet the layout of the page complicates this: the rules themselves are listed in a small, paper-white box with punched holes, a callback to the 'notecard' characters of old-school dungeon-crawlers. At the same time, the backdrop uses a beautiful, neoclassical oil-painting called "The Deluge" by Francis Danby (1840) that depicts a Biblical scene of a mass-drowning during the Gensis floods: people and animals grasp desperately at the last scraps of land. An angel weeps. The red sun sets.

The merging of these aesthetics (gamey notecard vs. religious oil painting) demonstrates an immediately subversive juxtaposition: play and death, canon and ephemera. This adjacency also calls upon legacies of moral panic associated with OSR (Laycock, 2015) and popular distinctions between 'games' and 'art.' It also marks the marriage of the 'seriousness' of the grim with the comical—the angel weeps beneath the cheeky rules noting that a corpse is not a normal-sized item.

Figure 3. Depictions of the lost adventurers from the Valley of the Unfortunate Undead (Nilsson et al., 2019).

MB also makes extensive use of original art by Johan Nohr, whose illustrations define the game's punk aesthetic: fierce, thick charcoal-lines, grunge spattered backgrounds, and a hand-sketched impression. Nohr's illustrations provide little distinction between 'human' characters and monsters; depictions of *MB*'s inhabitants oscillate between the terrifying and the cutesy. Consider, for example, the illustration of the lost souls of The Valley of the Unfortunate Undead (Figure 3)—a place where all are met with "a slow-growing, fathomless despair, weighing down the traveler with poisoned memories and dark thoughts until the spark of life is mutated into a mournful, hopeless death" (Nilsson et al., 2019, p. 15). While the grim palette and skulls serve the melancholic despondence of the Valley, the figures themselves are adorable! Their big, scribbly eyes stare forward awkwardly amidst their uncomfortable poses like a family portrait of damned souls.

The illustrations of *MB* are defined by texture: aesthetic layers that move between the cute and the horrifying. This mirrors what Teddy Pozo has noted about the videogame *SABBAT,* which weaponizes cuteness so that the "culturally-threatening becomes familiar, desirable, and erotic" (Pozo, 2018). In some cases, this is literal, such as the following spread—which showcases the game's use of both liminal aesthetics and careful design:

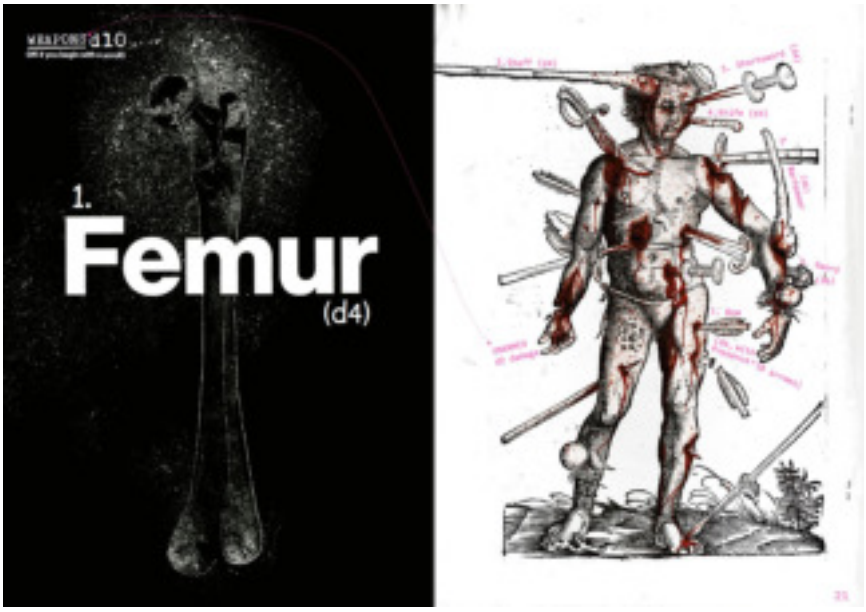

Figure 4. A spread showing the damage for most of the weapons in *MB* (Nilsson et al., 2019).

At first glance, these pages demonstrate several alarming aesthetic choices:

1. That a femur bone deals a d4 of damage is apparently a detail worth *an entire page* in the rules. This flies in the face of the page-efficiency of traditional OSR games and exaggerates the absurdity of the game's hyperviolence.
2. Rather than being listed on a table, the damage modifiers and names of weapons are displayed on an illustration of a cartoonishly brutalized person.
3. Between these spreads, there are six different typefaces in use—two in the weapons header, two in the femur description (including the notorious comic sans), one for the pagination, and *another* for the weapons on the second page.

In particular, the image-text relationship in *MB* is deliberately troubled. Take, for example, the grim illustration of the femur and the text on the left page; the rigidity of the bone and the word 'Femur' (in a hard-edged, sans serif font) vs. the hand-scribbled comic sans. By putting these in contrast, the rules of the game almost appear to be inscribed *atop* the rigidity of the femur bone itself. This same approach is reversed on the right page, where a hand-drawn, archaic illustration of a man is typed over in pink Calling Code. The presence of a monospaced font (which evokes a sense of digital interface) is at odds with the hand-drawn subject—set off in shocking pink. It is like we are looking at the wounded person through a digital HUD of some kind (emphasizing the morbidity of the numeric damage modifiers).

Finally, this haptic layering also extends to book's material interactions. Those who take *MB* into the (literal) dark will notice its glow-in-the-dark spine spells out "PSALM IV ⸸" between the letters of the title. Likewise, in the rules for "Troubling Tales," players are instructed to choose their character's backstory by throwing a knife at a page of options (or rolling a d20 if no knife is available). Perhaps most iconic, however, is the instruction for players to *burn the book* when they reach the seventh in-game 'Misery.' Despite resulting in the destruction of the urtext, this participation in the un-making of the game is the ultimate haptic layer of interaction, and fans often readily participate, sharing images of their burning sourcebooks with the @MorkBorg Twitter account.

AN ALCHEMY KIT FOR FAN REMIX

"*You are what you own.*"

MB's aesthetic meshings are more than stylistic, they serve as a low-barrier toolkit for fan creators—easily emulated by even novice designers in the community. Many community-made *MB* publications likewise exacerbate the "haptic" interference: excessive textures, shocking mashups of images, near-illegible text, and dizzying use of color. Clark-Parsons notes that zine-making and zine media ought to be seen as "not simply materials, tools, or texts but as social practices, as habits, techniques, values, and relationships that emerge from the conventions, resources, and needs of a particular cultural context" (Clark-Parsons, 2017, p. 560). While it is not unexpected for fan-creators to seek to imitate the aesthetic register of the original sourcebook, third-party *MB* content is unique in that the stylistic traits of *MB* are quite easily emulated, and easily remixed, by even novice designers and fans.

In line with the dynamics noted above, fan-made *MB* content tends to 1) indulge typographic deviance 2) mashup grim and cutesy tones as well as public domain and original art and 3) maintain a strict palette—especially focusing on pinks and yellows. In another game design space, these qualities would be seen as markers of poor design, underdeveloped or novice practices, and used to gatekeep creators. In the *MB* fandom, however, these practices are encouraged by catalyzers—especially jam and zine organizers.

Nowhere is this more evident than in the *MB* game jams hosted on itch.io. As mentioned previously, jams are responsible for a significant amount of content in the fandom. A quick survey of the submitters to some of the fandom's recent jams, however, reveals how *MB* has drawn in new designers. For example, I explored the itch.io profiles of all unique submitters to the "THE END IS NEAR: IT'S THE MÖRK BORG 24 HOUR MISERY JAM" hosted by Karl Druid (excluding Johan Nohr himself, who also submitted). Of the 43 designers who submitted to the jam:

- 33 (77%) profiles showed that a third-party *MB* publication was the first TRPG content that designer had released on itch.io.[2]
- 37 (86%) designers had published multiple *MB*-related supplements.

While many of these designers have gone on to publish content for other games in addition to *MB* (including *Troika!*, *Pathfinder*, and *Blades in the Dark*)—the fact that a significant percentage of designers had never published TRPG content on itch prior to their engagement with *MB* reveals the approachability of the fandom to new designers. Although this is not to suggest that these creators did not have prior experience with design at all, *MB*'s fandom demonstrates impressive effectiveness at drawing new designers to the community on itch.

While *MB*'s approachability is owed, in part, to the game's rules-lite framework, unique atmosphere, and (especially) the impressive labor and organization of fans—I argue that it is also largely owed to the unique way that these visual-material systems lend themselves to easy remix. Below, I characterize how the *MB* sourcebook has inspired the practices of its fan-creator community, illustrating how the image-text dynamics of the sourcebook readily equip new designers.

Twisted Typography

The *MB* sourcebook uses over 100 different typefaces. Johan Nohr, a self-described typography geek, has written several threads on his approach to font aesthetics and printing. For example, he notes his process for choosing the politically historical fonts in *Dissident Whispers*. As Nohr writes "The typeface used for RPG4BLM on the

@DissidentRPG cover is Martin by Vocal Type (a foundry seeking to diversify a very white and male typeface business), based on letter shapes from the Memphis Sanitation Strike of 1968" ("Thread by @JohanNohr", 2020). This interest in typography (both aesthetic and political) has been adopted by the community. The *MB* Discord features an entire channel where fan-creators discuss graphic design and typography. Likewise, a "Mörk Borg Design Primer" toolkit circulated on Reddit and Google Drive lists dozens of the fonts used in *MB,* broken down into two categories: "legible" and "Nohr" (*Mörk Borg Design Primer*, n.d.). In other TRPG design spaces, fonts used by sourcebooks are proprietary or require expensive licenses. Yet a vast majority of *MB*'s 100+ fonts are free and available in the public domain. Additionally, the use of 'notorious' and illegible fonts in both the sourcetext and community events is another way in which *MB* opens doors to novice designers, who may be unfamiliar with typographic design principles. *MB*, which makes use of jarring typographic juxtaposition, 'death metal' lettering (which is notoriously illegible), and an obscenely varied use of fonts, welcomes the inappropriate and obfuscated use of text. While including text in pink comic sans might get one quickly evicted from another creative community, *MB* fan-creators actively encourage textual-visual experimentation.

The use of illegible, exaggerated, and mismatched fonts and typefaces is a staple of *MB* fan creations and is encouraged by catalyzers in the fandom. Karl Druid's 24 HOUR MISERY JAM, for example, included in its call for submissions four different fonts including Comic Sans and ranked entries based on "fonts" as one of the six categories ("THE END IS NEAR" n.d.). Similarly, the "Anti-Paladin Filthy Slime Jam!" (hosted by RugoseKohn and AstroLich) ranked submissions on the basis of (amongst other criteria) how "Yellow and/or difficult to read" submissions were. The submission ranked #1 for illegibility was newyearstudio's "The Anti-Paladin Toolkit," which featured twenty distinct fonts on one spread alone and included vertical text, black-on-yellow writing, and small print (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Spread by newyearstudios, featuring dozens of fonts ("The Anti-Paladin Toolkit," 2021).

Bashing and Mashing

Most prominent among the themes that characterized third-party *MB* content was the emphasis on blending cutesy and doomful tones. In each of these cases, the cute and the terrifying juxtapose and exaggerate each other, but also provide easy inspiration for creators: layering the dark onto the innocuous and vice versa. For example, the Bad-Basilisk Berg-Borg Jam required all designs to incorporate an image of a religious children's maze. The maze featured several lizard-like creatures which the host edited to resemble *MB*'s "Two-Headed Basilisks" (Figure 6, top). "DUKK BÖRG" is a supplement that reframes *MB*'s rules around humanoid ducks in the vein of Disney's *DuckTales*—and features classic poses of the beloved cartoon in skeletal form on the character sheet (Figure 6, bottom). These mashups of the cute and the frightening grant tonal flexibility to fan creations.

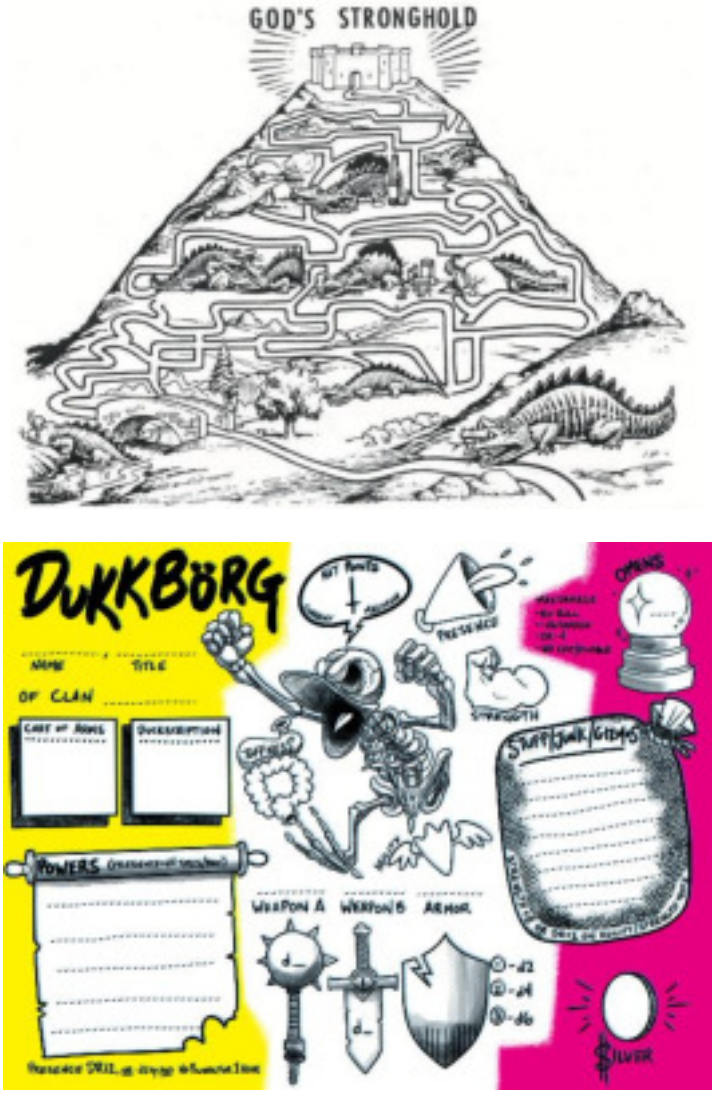

Figure 6. (Top) A picture of the children's maze used in the Bad-Basilisk Berg-Borg Jam (*Bad-Basilisk Berg-Borg Jam*, n.d.). (Bottom) Character sheet for *DUKK BÖRG* (*DUKK BÖRG by Gem Room Games*, 2021).

The community engages in further graphical mashups by blending photos and drawn elements. While Nohr's punky doodles have a distinct style, amateur artists can create their own harsh sketchings that easily fall within the purview of the game's aesthetic. Perhaps most importantly, *MB*'s use of classical art enables fan-creators to use public domain images available in the creative commons, which can be published in paid zines without fear of copyright retribution. While this practice is widely frowned upon in other TRPG design spaces, *MB* actively embraces sourcing from public image repositories. Users on the *MB* Discord and Reddit frequently share resources for finding royalty-free images on sites like Pexels, Unsplash, and Old Book Illustrations. Like the *MB* sourcebook, these fan creations recolor, doodle atop, and remix these stock images to new contexts. The punk-inspired mashup technique is not only an aesthetic part of *MB*, but fundamental to its easy remixability by fans.

Death in Pink and Yellow

The palette that undergirds *MB* is perhaps the most essential piece its role as a material toolkit. The game relies predominantly on six colors: occasional reds, blacks, whites, pinks, yellows, and greys. In particular, the game's emphasis on sharp yellows and pinks plays into its anticipation of fan remix. While yellow and pink are an odd choice for a gloomy post-apocalypse game, there is an accessibility element built into the palette: most graphic design software (such as InDesign and Affinity Publisher) offers default color tools in a CMYK (Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, Black) color scheme for print production. This means that users can easily alter the magenta and yellow values of objects without having to precisely blend colors. As a result, even creators using design tools for the very first time can easily replicate the sharp palette of *MB* by using default pinks and yellows in their documents. While fans have identified the *specific* pink (CMYK 0,72,0,0) and yellow (CMYK 0,3,97,0) from the original game and made them available in design primers, these colors are relatively close to what a new user would get from turning the magenta or yellow slider to 100. This accessible palette has also meant that *MB* entries on Kickstarter and itch.io are often recognizable on-sight for their signature use of yellows, blacks, and pinks (Figure 7, top). As Lazarus' "Punishment Fist Dog of the Rotten Gods" (Figure 7, bottom) playfully indicates, sometimes making a *MB* creation can be as simple as coloring things in pink and yellow.

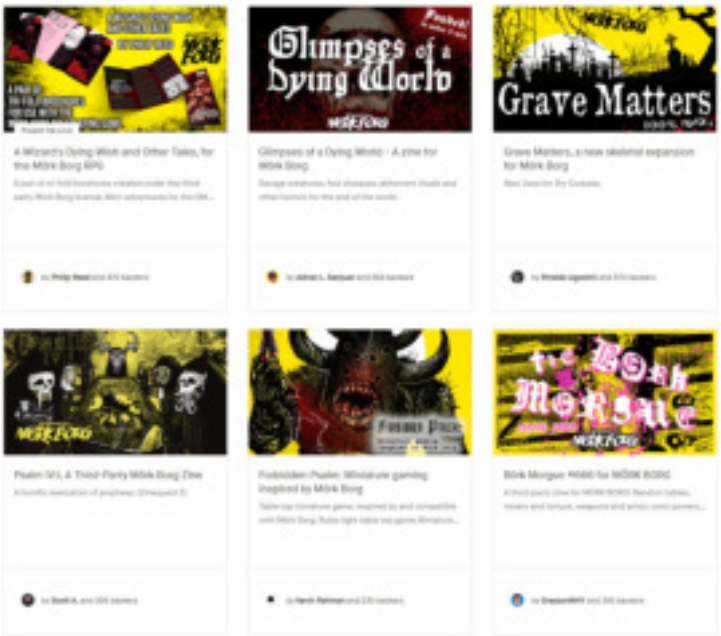

Figure 7. Top: Thumbnails for several (unaffiliated) *MB* Kickstarters that showcase the yellows and pinks, and black palette of *MB*. Bottom: Lazarus's "Punishment Fist Dog of the Rotten Gods."

CONCLUSION

"*And the darkness shall swallow the darkness."*

MB, as a TRPG 'urtext,' has become a lightning rod for fan creation that is actively inclusive during a time of gatekeeping within the larger TRPG and OSR scenes (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2018, p. 180). Rather than enshrining the rulebook and gatekeeping newcomers, the *MB* fandom focuses on fan-made content and *burns* the rulebook. Unlike other TRPG creator spaces—such as the Dungeon Masters Guild—which promote established creators and meritocratic practices of distribution, *MB*'s zine culture is primarily concerned with attracting newcomers and embracing an 'everything counts' mentality. For novice designers, *MB* encourages fan participation because it *rewards* 'crap game' design in the forms of excessive typography, startling colors, open-source art, frantic doodles, and deliberately unbalanced gameplay (Anthropy, 2012). *MB* remains enigmatic without gatekeeping and shows the possibility of the TRPG underground for games that allow contradicting dualisms, reject canonizing, and hand the tools of their making readily to new creators.

There is much for TRPG designers, and indie game makers broadly, to learn from *MB* about how low-barrier game design can encourage active fan-remix. To summarize, here are several distinct features that have guided the approachability and rapid growth of *MB*'s zine culture:

- **Legally anticipating and encouraging third-party design.** Providing a generous third-party license, allowing designers to make and profit from their own creations, is becoming increasingly common in the indie TRPG scene. Such licenses are crucial to enabling designers to engage the source itself.
- **Foregrounding inclusive values.** Clear language forbidding racist, queerphobic, and hateful third-party content helps define clear standards for the community and is an important signal to marginalized players and designers. Likewise, celebrating the *making* rather than the *quality* of third-party content creates a safe environment for experimentation by novice designers.

- **Supporting catalyzers and canonizers.** The success of a TRPG zine-culture is almost always due to the immense fan labor of jam organizers, archivists and curators, resource sharing, toolkits, and crowdfunding. Designers can make efforts to support these crucial actors—boosting them on social media, contributing art to their projects, hiring and collaborating with them, and setting up and participating in online community spaces.
- **Including imitable graphic design features**—especially color, art, and typography. The use of free-for-commercial-use fonts, creative commons artwork, and 'doodle-friendly' illustrations encourages fans lacking the professional software or the money to purchase licenses to still design and publish games. Likewise, a clearly defined palette makes it easy for designers to channel the aesthetic of the urtext in their own work.

MB's community practice indicates that zine media is as much about the practices of the community as it is the tools themselves. *MB*'s cult-success is not only due to its sourcebook or designers, but also the way the game and its community anticipate and encourage remix. At the same time, the community itself—from jam organizers to content curators—reinforces these values and drives larger participation. In this way, *MB*'s zine culture is enabled by a complex network of actors: the generous third-party license, digital marketplaces, online spaces for sharing resources (design primers, feedback, and ideas), game jams, charity zine compilations, and community software. Many of these tools are baked into the materiality of the game itself, from its color palette to its reckless typography. All of these have set up *MB* as a kind of gateway game into the TRPG design space.

While this portrait of the TRPG creator scene—and even of *MB* itself—is narrow, it's my hope that this study can encourage further considerations of the relationship between urtext and fan communities in game spaces, and additional explorations of remixable materiality. How might new games anticipate and encourage user remix? How might they encode usable tools for fan-creators into their materiality? And, most importantly, how might we find and build new player-designer communities that resist legacies of hegemonic play?

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anthropy, A. (2012). *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form*. Seven Stories Press.

Bad-Basilisk Berg-Borg Jam. (n.d.). Itch.Io. Retrieved July 17, 2021, from https://itch.io/jam/bad-basilisk-berg-borg-jam

Basilisk's Legacy: From Dark Fort to Mörk Borg. (2020, September 20). Līber Lūdōrum. https://liberludorum.com/2020/09/20/basilisks-legacy-from-dark-fort-to-mork-borg/

Berge, P., & Britt, R. K. (2021). Dance With Me, Claude: Shippers, Queerbaiting, and Meaning Making in the Fire Emblem: Three Houses Twitter Fandom. *Game Studies*.

Bowman, S. L. (2010). *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*. McFarland & Company.

Brander, T. (2020). Old school renaissance as a style of play [Preprint]. SocArXiv. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/b2w36

Carter, C. (2021, June 29). TSR Games cuts business ties with Ernest G. Gygax, Jr. And second RPG publisher calling itself TSR. Dicebreaker.

https://www.dicebreaker.com/companies/tsr-games/news/tsr-games-ernie-gygax-cut-ties

Clark-Parsons, R. (2017). Feminist Ephemera in a Digital World: Theorizing Zines as Networked Feminist Practice. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 10(4), 557–573. https://doi.org/10.1111/cccr.12172

Cross, K. (2017). The Nightmare Is Over. In B. Ruberg & A. Shaw (Eds.), *Queer Game Studies* (pp. 179–186). University of Minnesota Press; JSTOR. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1mtz7kr.21

DeKosnik, A. (2016). *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*. MIT Press.

DUKK BÖRG by Gem Room Games. (2021). Itch.Io. Retrieved July 17, 2021, from https://gemroomgames.itch.io/dukkborg

Duncombe, S. (2014). *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*. Microcosm Publishing.

Everett, A., Soderman, B., deWinter, J., Kocurek, C., Huntemann, N. B., Trepanier-Jobin, G., Chien, I., Murray, S., Hutchinson, R., Patti, L., Ruberg, B., Wood, J., Chang, E. Y., & Nakamura, L. (2017). *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games* (J. Malkowski & T. M. Russworm, Eds.). Indiana University Press.

Ex Libris Mörk Borg. (2020, September 28). Līber Lūdōrum. https://liberludorum.com/2020/09/28/ex-libris-mork-borg/

Forbidden Psalm: Miniature gaming Inspired by Mörk Borg. (n.d.). Kickstarter. Retrieved July 18, 2021, from https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/impioussaint/forbidden-psalm-miniature-gaming-inspired-by-mork-borg

Free League Publishing MORK BORG Fantasy RPG & Reviews—Home—Macy's. (n.d.). Macys. Retrieved July 17, 2021, from https://www.macys.com/shop/product/mork-borg-fantasy-rpg?ID=12157093&cm_mmc=Facebook-_-pdpshare-_-n-_-n

Galvan, M., & Misemer, L. (2019). Introduction: The Counterpublics of Underground Comics. *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society*, 3(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1353/ink.2019.0000

Grouling, J. (2021). Paratextuality and Transmediation in D&D Board Games. In S. Hedge, *Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age: Essays on Transmedia Storytelling, Tabletop RPGs and Fandom*. McFarland.

Hedge, S. (Ed.). (2021). Roleplaying Games in the Digital Age: Essays on Transmedia Storytelling, Tabletop RPGs and Fandom. McFarland.

Hendricks, S. Q., & Winkler, W. K. (Eds.). (2006). *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games* (1st edition). McFarland.

Howard, K. (2020). Learning about Queer Representation through Mods: Reviewing Past Challenges and Outlining Ideas About Future Approaches. *Proceedings of the 31st ACM Conference on Hypertext and Social Media*, 213–216. https://doi.org/10.1145/3372923.3404780

Laycock, J. P. (2015). *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* (First edition). University of California Press.

MacCallum-Stewart, E., & Trammell, A. (2018). Role-Playing Games as Subculture and Fandom. In *Role-Playing Game Studies*. Routledge.

MÖRK BORG. (2021, August 2). ELMB has become one of the most important body parts of the shambling ghoul-warrior that is MÖRK BORG; keeping track of all its ungodly bits and pieces for would-be corpse plunderers. It is now MUTATING into a platform for cataloging TTRPG content, possibly beyond MB. Back it! [Tweet]. @MorkBorg. https://twitter.com/MorkBorg/status/1422168230513229833

MÖRK BORG — MÖRK BORG LICENSE. (n.d.). MÖRK BORG. Retrieved June 12, 2021, from http://morkborg.com/p8889107/

Mörk Borg: A Material Review. (2020, September 14). Līber Lūdōrum. https://liberludorum.com/2020/09/14/mork-borg-a-material-review/

Mörk Borg Design Primer. (n.d.). Google Docs. Retrieved July 17, 2021, from https://docs.google.com/document/u/3/d/1j0ZhSZ7NFY_Yo1Ak1nnL1cwdzVrOOyXHkGPnBxYPsxg/edit?aaac=true&pli=1&usp=embed_facebook

Nilsson, P., Nohr, J., Ockult Örtmästare Games, & Stockholm Kartel. (2019). *MÖRK BORG* (P. Stuart, Trans.).

Pozo, T. (2018). Queer Games After Empathy: Feminism and Haptic Game Design Aesthetics from Consent to Cuteness to the Radically Soft. *Game Studies*, 18(3). http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/pozo

SciFi4Me TV. (2021). Live From The Bunker 277: The Return of TSR Games. Retrieved July 17, 2021, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xd5WHCeLTIo

Sihvonen, T., & Stenros, J. (2018). Cues for Queer Play: Carving a Possibility Space for LGBTQ Role-Play. In T. Harper, M. B. Adams, & N. Taylor (Eds.), *Queerness in Play* (pp. 167–184). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90542-6_10

Stanfill, M. (2019). *Exploiting Fandom: How the Media Industry Seeks to Manipulate Fans*. University of Iowa Press.

Stang, S., & Trammell, A. (2020). The Ludic Bestiary: Misogynistic Tropes of Female Monstrosity in Dungeons & Dragons. *Games and Culture*, 15(6), 730–747. https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412019850059

Stenros, J., & Sihvonen, T. (2017). Out of the Dungeons: Representations of Queer Sexuality in RPG Source Books. In E. Torner (Ed.), *Analog Game Studies (Volume 2)* (pp. 71–92). Carnegie Mellon University. https://doi.org/10.1184/R1/6686720.v1

Taylor, N., & Voorhees, G. (Eds.). (2018). *Masculinities in Play*. Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-90581-5

The Anti-Paladin Toolkit by newyear Studios. (2021). Itch.Io. Retrieved October 31, 2021, from https://newyearstudios.itch.io/the-anti-paladin-toolkit

THE END IS NEAR: IT'S THE MÖRK BORG 24 HOUR MISERY JAM. (n.d.). Itch.Io. Retrieved October 31, 2021, from https://itch.io/jam/24-hour-misery

Thread by @JohanNohr: 1/20 Choosing a typeface. A thread. Allow me to geek out for a bit. 2/20 When choosing a typeface I use two parameters: Association and Purp…. (2020). Retrieved July 17, 2021, from https://threadreaderapp.com/thread/1275739369735929856.html

Torner, E. (2018). RPG Theorizing by Designers and Players. In *Role-Playing Game Studies* (pp. 191–212). Routledge.

Trammell, A. (2014). Misogyny and the Female Body in Dungeons & Dragons, *Analog Game Studies*. https://analoggamestudies.org/2014/10/constructing-the-female-body-in-role-playing-games/

Trammell, A. (2018). Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games. In S. Deterding & J. Zagal (Eds.), *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*. Routledge.

Trammell, A. (2019). Analog Games and the Digital Economy. *Analog Game Studies*. https://analoggamestudies.org/2019/03/analog-games-and-the-digital-economy/

Welch, T. (2018). The Affectively Necessary Labour of Queer Mods. *Game Studies*, 18(3). http://gamestudies.org/1803/articles/welch

ENDNOTES

1 Bylines taken from the *MÖRK BORG* source text (Nilsson et. all, 2019).

2 Two designers had published videogame content prior to their first *MB*-related publication on itch.io, but no TRPG content.