



# Editing RPGs for Bias

By Lourdes Venard

Just as the book publishing industry is going through growing pains when it comes to diversity and inclusion, so is another genre we often don't consider as editors—roleplaying games. While this industry is [changing](#), historically it has been the [domain of white, cis men](#). And that means that, at times, these games contain issues of bias and inclusion.

And this is where editors can step in to effect change.

For this article, I interviewed three EFA editors—[Gavin L. Fregeau](#), [Leslie Horn](#), and [Rachel Lapidow](#)—who edit roleplaying games, either tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) or roleplaying games (RPGs). The two types of games have much in common, with the biggest difference being that tabletop roleplaying games are generally played in person and players have more of a say in shaping their characters and direction of the game (think *Dungeons & Dragons*). RPGs are played on computers, video game consoles (like Xbox or Nintendo Switch), and mobile devices, so they are more defined by the game's existing content and programming. (Other video games may also have stories and need editors, but for this article we concentrated on roleplaying games.)

Because games are intrinsically more interactive than, say, a fantasy book manuscript, an editor for RPGs or TTRPGs will have other elements to consider: the script (in a video game), the mechanics of the game, the rule book, and perhaps the setting

guide, which provides information about the place, time, history, people, and religions or beliefs. Issues of bias and inclusivity can be found in any of those game elements. This [paper](#), for instance, found gender bias in video game dialogue.

As with any other type of editing, those who work with roleplaying games can and should look at these issues at any point in the process—as developmental editors, sensitivity readers, copyeditors, line editors, or proofreaders.

Among the three editors, a common theme seemed to emerge: game creators often relied on stereotypical tropes and the appropriation of other cultures.

**Leslie Horn**, who provides developmental editing for roleplaying games, has dealt with “creators leaning into stereotypes. For example, creating game mechanics that make playing a female less physically strong vs. playing a male character, or forgetting to include those who identify as they/them.”

**Rachel Lapidow**, a developmental editor and copyeditor, also has seen these issues: “There’s a lot of unintentional appropriation of non-European, non-white cultures and I think it happens because so many of

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the big RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* have been guilty of appropriating Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, African, Native American, First Nation, South American, Indigenous Australian, etc. cultures for decades. Sometimes female characters seem like either an afterthought or a sexy hook to lure in heterosexual male players. As a Jewish cis woman, I’ve had to point out content that seemed problematic in terms of Jewish stereotypes and in the treatment of women.

“One fantasy game I worked on had races like orcs, elves, and dwarves. Each of these groups had racial traits tied to them that linked those fantastical races to real-world human groups. The orcs were depicted as having dark skin, being violent, and not being very intelligent. It was hard not to see them as being based on Black people. The elves were tall, fair-skinned, blond, beautiful, clever, and peaceful. The elves seemed modeled on Scandinavian humans. The dwarves were short, had large noses, were avaricious, and appeared quite Jewish. To be fair to the author, a lot of these traits were not created out of thin air but were instead imported from fantasy works like *The Lord of the Rings*.”

**Gavin L. Fregeau**, who mostly does line editing, also mentioned orcs and the use of fantasy races as having negative representations in some games. “Orcs are specifically and explicitly racist, but the concept of race as a substantive reality is also racist because it plays into the myth that ‘race’ is real,” Fregeau said. “This passively gives players permission to be racist, saying fantasy slurs or committing genocide. I once played a game where one player shouted slurs at another player (who also happened to be the only woman at the table)

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for the whole game, because his character was a dwarf and hers was an elf. Not all players will do these things, but the design encourages it.”

Fregeau has also addressed the issue of religion in TTRPGs. “I find people don’t think about religion enough in their worldbuilding. Often if folks are raised Christian (or even raised atheist but are culturally Christian), they end up with one vaguely Christian religion that doesn’t have any strong ideology or motivation or power,” Fregeau said. “Historically, and even today, religion has been a powerful force for both revolution and oppression. As a Jewish person, I see this every day. Like whiteness, or cisness, or maleness, Christianity is able to fade into invisibility.

“When atheists criticize religion, they often only consider Christianity. And when worldbuilding a religious hierarchy, authors often only consider Catholicism.”

Fregeau worked with an author who had written a whole religion as “a con to keep people in line and to take their money. I fixed this by explaining to him why I have my own beliefs and how religion shouldn’t be treated like one big con. We ended up with something that was more sincere, and could still be the villain.”

Lapidow also dealt with religion in a roleplaying game in which an author had created a cult named after a real Eastern Asian deity. “This cult

was obsessed with death and involved in some pretty reprehensible actions like attacking and killing large numbers of people,” Lapidow said. “Although this deity had some association with death in the historical stories told about her, I was worried that readers would see this cult as Other, and would associate the cult’s murderous rampages with this specific Eastern Asian culture.

“Because the cult is the only time any Asian culture is represented in the game, the game risked labeling the entire culture as being murderous and obsessed with death. So, I explained to the writer that I felt this depiction was insensitive and would turn off potential readers. I recommended that the author do one of the following: either rename the cult and remove any trappings of it that could be seen as tying it to the Eastern Asian culture, or to hire a sensitivity reader from that culture to read over the relevant sections. The author did the right thing in hiring a sensitivity reader after I made them aware of the issue.”

Fregeau often recommends that authors hire a sensitivity editor early and keep them on for the whole project.

“Oftentimes, authors and TTRPG designers hire a sensitivity editor last, only to learn the whole thing is trash,” Fregeau said. “I find they usually do not opt to rewrite/redesign if this happens.” But most creators or authors are receptive to changes, the editors said.

Lapidow, who works with independent game designers, said her feedback has resulted in them eliminating sections that could be seen as sexist, racist, or ableist. “Occasionally they’ve changed the wording or added additional context. Other times they’ve added or modified elements of fantasy races to make those races less homogenous,” Lapidow said.

She’s also heartened to see more games with representation of BIPOC and LGBTQ+ characters, such as two that she worked on: *Return to the Stars* by Festive Ninja Games and *Blue Planet: Recontact* by Biohazard Games. “Both games feature nonbinary, queer, and trans characters,” Lapidow said. “Both games also have art that shows BIPOC characters in a wide range of roles.”

Horn echoed the sense of change, saying, “I don’t find it difficult to address these issues in my editing because I think the landscape in society in general is changing. So, terms like inclusion, bias, and diversity are becoming words in everyday vocabulary that may not have been as present

before. The RPG space is just another area where things are growing and shifting for the better.”

For more resources on roleplaying games and conscious language, check out:

Leslie Horn’s YouTube channel: [www.youtube.com/@XPLovecat](https://www.youtube.com/@XPLovecat)

[The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity](#) by Jon Peterson

Crystal Shelley’s Conscious Language Toolkit for Editors: <https://www.rabbitwitharedpen.com/conscious-language-toolkit-for-editors>

Conscious Language style sheet plug-in for PerfectIt 5: <https://ko-fi.com/s/82010e6a63>

*Lourdes Venard has more than 35 years of writing and editing experience. She also teaches copyediting through the University of California San Diego certificate program and through EFA.*

The image is a promotional banner for the Editorial Freelancers Association (EFA). It features a red and white geometric design. On the left, the EFA logo is displayed in white on a red background. To the right, the text "EDITORIAL FREELANCERS ASSOCIATION" is written in white. Below this, on a grey background, it says "EFA Members Access Your Free Recorded Webinars" and "EFA MEMBER FREE WEBINAR LIBRARY" in bold, with the URL "courses.the-efa.org" in blue.