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**The Quest for a Deaf Lesbian Dwarf (or Anyone Else that Might Have Been Excluded)
in Medievalist Video Games: A Response to Karl Fugelso's Manifesto**

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Despite the title of this essay, I believe that it is mostly futile to identify medievalist video-game character representations of those groups that have successfully broken the barriers of marginalization or other types of oppression, no matter how significant that break might be. Margins and barriers are tied to time as well as to space (hence, the space-time continuum continues), and the timing and placement of my original thesis for this essay (see below) has been queered (delightfully so) by Karl Fugelso's manifesto, "Embracing Our Marginalism: Mitigating the Tyranny of a Central Paradigm." Fugelso argues, "There simply is not enough time, space, energy, and money to air everyone's work, much less give it equal billing, much less make it easily accessible." My original thesis involved an analysis of medievalist video games and the current possibilities, as well as current impossibilities, for marginalized-character development—a different kind of issue of "time, space, energy, and money," but not so very different on the abstract level. I would like to suggest that this essay presents an alternative perspective on the situation.

My perspective holds a small key to the solution to our keenly similar struggles: my quest for a deaf lesbian dwarf and/or midget/gnome/etc. in medievalist video games (a narrow quest to move away from a type of medievalism centrism) and Fugelso's struggle to push beyond the barriers of current medievalism studies, to make studies in medievalism(s) reflect a broader spectrum of cultural and aesthetic studies—a broad quest to move away from medievalism centrism in general, regardless of its (hopefully playful) nature, be it scholarly or creative. If there is to be any sort of ethical growth in the circuitous relationship between analysts and artists (or scholarly editors and video game engineers), the decentralization must be radical, dramatic, abrupt, and thus acutely innovative. Fugelso's manifesto seems to me to be, at the very least, innovative, for it shows a concern that the focus of *Studies in Medievalism* articles have yet to successfully move beyond the journal's current discussions of medievalism(s), to push the envelope (as it were), to boldly go where no scholar of medievalism studies has gone before. This is indeed a noble and daring cause coming from an editor who (actually, like the rest of us increasingly marginalized scholars, particularly those struggling for tenure or for a tenure-track position) is trapped behind the bars of the gilded cage known as academic publishing. For all of us, it might be more prudent to step outside and (re)examine Iris Marion Young's renowned chapter from her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*: "Five Faces of Oppression." I see a great deal to compare in such injustices held between medievalist scholars and medievalist video gamers.

Briefly, Young suggests "that oppression is a condition of groups," that is a form of "systemic constraints" not tied to a particular individual or group of individuals oppressing another individual or group of individuals. Young argues that "oppression" is not a matter of one group dominating another group, but rather "the vast and deep injustices" themselves, the outcomes of "often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people" enacted upon others.¹ In other words, the focus here is not upon particular individuals or groups of individuals being oppressed in some way, or even in multiple ways, but upon the *way* that such individuals, or groups of individuals, are focused upon—or ignored. The five faces of oppression are: violence, exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, and powerlessness. Now I believe that I can make a case for

¹ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1990): 40-41.

each of these types of oppression existing in the historical development of medievalist video-game characters, but I'm not sure that all five apply to Fugelso's concerns—for example, I am not sure how violence is an issue among medievalist scholars. I will focus upon marginalization as it is further defined by powerlessness and cultural imperialism. I think we all have an idea in our minds as to what marginalization is: “social structures and processes that close persons out of participation in such social cooperation.”² Indeed, Young suggests that cultural imperialism can be identified by “a network of dominant meanings” imposed upon “from the outside” and thus “the dominant culture’s stereotyped and unfertilized images of the group must be internalized by group members” in order to survive within that dominant culture.³ In the case of medievalist video games, a dwarf must be a dwarf as defined by the dominant culture: a neo-Tolkienist society of game designers and game players that often allow for differences in skin color and a choice between two gender identities (male or female), but do not expect gender bending, alternative sexualities, or disabilities (other than dwarfism). In the case of medievalist scholars: one might still argue that established scholarship in North America is dominated by hundreds of years of traditional practice established by white male Christian authority (under the veil of heterosexuality).⁴ Young also argues that, “[...] the powerless lack the authority, status, and sense of self that professionals tend to have,” and that, “while many professionals have supervisors and cannot directly influence many decisions or the actions of many people, most nevertheless have considerable day-to-day work autonomy,” that signifies a “distinction between ‘middle class’ and ‘working class’ [...] in nearly all aspects of social life.”⁵ In other words, professionals (such as medieval scholars) and nonprofessionals (those outside academia)⁶ “belong to different cultures in the United States.”⁷

This issue of labor and power is a timeless dilemma. Feudal society dealt with it one way and current capitalist-socialist societies have dealt with it another way—neither solution has been ideal. As Fugelso has observed in his essay, “Very rarely do we [medievalist scholars] work back and forth across time while examining, say, the manner in which twenty-first-century Japanese game-designers have built their work from late twentieth-century Hong Kong movies that resonate with the ways in which nineteenth-century missionaries adapted medieval literature. But I think we should.” I concur. Consider, for example, the children’s pseudo-medievalist (fairy tale) video game, *The Legend of Zelda*, by Shigeru Miyamoto, for Nintendo (1987); it is a role-playing-game fairy tale full of medievalist elements, many of which are Japanese. A young elf boy, named Link, explores vast lands, and in addition to battling a variety of monsters (including dragons) and collecting treasure, Link’s ultimate quest is to destroy the most evil of monsters in order to rescue Princess Zelda of Hyrule. But this game is not about Link collecting treasures and exploring huge tracts of land in order to rescue Princess Zelda. It is about making money, not for Link, but for Nintendo. Furthermore, Link’s

² Ibid: 55.

³ Ibid: 59-60

⁴ According to a recently published article in *The Economist*, one scholar suggests that the reason fewer female faculty (regardless of discipline) are promoted is that they “are not pushy enough,” when it comes to self-promotion; for example “unlike their male colleagues they do not routinely cite their own previous work when they publish a paper.” This is an example of the expectations of the male faculty culture imposed upon the female faculty culture. Barbara Walter cited in “The Lamentable Lack of Female Professors: Promotion and Self-Promotion.” *The Economist*. Science and Technology. 31 August 2013. <<http://www.economist.com/news/science-and-technology/21584316-women-may-fail-win-chairs-because-they-do-not-cite-themselves-enough-promotion>>.

⁵ Young, 57-58.

⁶ Members of the Society for the Study of Medievalism witnessed this merging/clashing (however one might interpret it) of cultures when members of the Society of Creative Anachronism (most of whom pride themselves in being self-taught medievalists) were invited to present at the 27th *International Conference on Medievalism*.

⁷ Ibid.

powerlessness as a character is tied directly to that money-making venture, appearing to be the puppet-slave avatar of the innocent child playing him. That innocent child, in turn, however, is sucked in, made powerless by the limitations of how he or she can control the avatar Link. In short, the player becomes the powerless (and also exploited) serf of Nintendo. Such research into the depths of marginalizing cultural imperialism both within and without medievalism studies promises to provide a wealth of information about the nature(s) of mankind, the human connections to the arts, literature, history, religion, and politics.⁸

Such research, moreover, promises to mirror (if not mock and parody) the medievalist scholar, if not also the medievalist video game scholar-player. Consider, for example, the introductory video for *SIMs Medieval*. “You are the Watcher, and this is your home,” declares the narrator. The implication is that you, the player, are a god of sorts, “revered above all else,” whose “powerful gaze” gives your people (characters in the game) “inspiration” to “build and prosper.” However, according to the narrator, watching and inspiring is not enough: you need a hero, and with that hero you can build a great civilization. “The kingdom is ready to take shape. The people are eager for guidance. Their destiny is in your hands,” declares the narrator. He concludes: “Arise, Watcher! The story of your kingdom begins now!” Clearly, this game is selling an illusion of cultural imperialism, power, marginalization, exploitation, and violence that, by coincidence, places all individuals into the same spot of *you*. *You* (academic professional or not) are the Watcher, however, which is a hint at the illusion of power a player ultimately has. *You* are not the god that the animation implies; *you* cannot truly create people, characters, or even a digital world; *you* are not even an author. The reality is that *you* mostly watch. *You* have no control over anything tied to any sort of substantial reality, much less a medieval reality. *You* are powerless, enslaved by the corporate video game maker and marketer—a fact that is emphasized by the narrator when he commands *you*, “Arise, Watcher!” *You* are trapped within the confines of a cultural imperialism that is limited to the horizon of your video screen. *You* are marginalized: *you* have absolutely no real say in how this game progresses or how these characters develop. *You* are the Watcher; *you* watch. *You* are oppressed. However, *you* can turn the machine off, and then *you* are free (hypothetically).

In other words, my original quest was all wrong. I am not ever going to find what I am seeking because it is never going to be there. The video game industry, like other publishing industries, is not interested in stretching boundaries of diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is interested in money and, like the academic publishing industry (for example), tends to follow the general rule that if this published item worked once before, then it can be repackaged (from *SIMS 1*, *SIMS 2*, *SIMS 3*, *SIMS Medieval*, *SIMS Pirates and Nobles*,...) and sold again, and again, and again. Much of the publishing industry, scholarly or otherwise, seems to be functioning this way, too. If a type of scholarly work sold well once, then it should be re-packaged and sold again. Academics (including those of us who hold a lot in common with video game players) have our own addictions that are fueling exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and perhaps also cultural imperialism and violence. These addictions, as any doctoral degree should testify, are to learning (to gaining knowledge as well as to ways of understanding that knowledge). It is a healthy addiction, one that fuels general intellectual growth, particularly if shared with others, such as in the classroom. However, this addiction is often further fueled by the nature of the “publish-or-perish game” that has drastically

⁸ For example, in the medievalist video game world, most medievalist video games, particularly RPGs, collapse feudalism into a capitalist paradigm. See *Studies in Medievalism XVI: Medievalism in Technology Old and New*, ed. Karl Fugelso, with Carol Robinson (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008) and *Neomedievalism in the Media: Essays on Film, Television and Electronic Games*, eds. Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2012).

grown over the past few decades. In other words, our colleges and universities are taking advantage of our habits, putting them to use, but perhaps also manipulating them in order to keep faculty in a particular place: non-tenured or never promoted, for example. Thus, to limit the nature of scholarly exploration for the sake of maintaining subscribers while also never paying for the types of scholarly exploration completed and published is exploitative at the very least. Moreover, not to allow an editor the power to edit, to select the contents of a journal, is exploitative and marginalizing. Those in power create powerlessness, exploit, marginalize, and even cling to a sort of cultural imperialism. I am not suggesting, however, that scholarly publishing companies are oppressively exploitative and marginalizing. They too are oppressed, I think, by the same general oppressions held over higher learning (as described above). I am suggesting, however, that this does not seem, in other words, to be the case within the organization of the International Society for the Study of Medievalism—at least not in theory. In theory, the organization seems to be asking, what is medievalism for *you*, whoever/whatever *you* are? *You* are not the Watcher; the publisher/editor is the Watcher. Karl Fugelso: *you* are the Watcher of *Studies in Medievalism*, and yet *you* are also watched over (*you* are not alone). Indeed, as Fugelso has noted, he “like other editors in our field, have reached out to scholars who take such approaches and encouraged them to submit their work for publication. But that is not enough. We should not only invite but also sponsor such work.” I would now like to return to Fugelso’s (above quoted) observation that “there simply is not enough time, space, energy, and money to air everyone’s work, much less give it equal billing, much less make it easily accessible.” My empathetic response is that such battles against scholarly marginalization seem rather petty when we consider greater, deeper threats to academic freedoms. For example, in addressing the move to down-size universities, the Pope Center for Higher Education in North Carolina was recently quoted as stating, “One standard to use is whether a center, program, or institute serves and advocates for a political agenda. This is often the case in diversity or multicultural offices, women’s and ethnic studies centers and programs, and environmental programs.”⁹ There is a greater danger here. Beyond efforts to decentralize medievalism are serious threats to reconstruct towers of discrimination against marginalized scholars, and such reconstructions would impede noble efforts (such as those made by the Bonnie Wheeler Fellowship) to heal evil medievalist wounds.¹⁰

So, what’s to be done? For now, I have no response to the Pope Center, except for a jaw-dropped silence. Life is not a video game, and unlike the video game player, the scholar does not have to be the Watcher, not always. As with my quest for a deaf lesbian dwarf and/or midget/gnome in medievalist video games, ISSM’s struggle to push beyond the barriers of current medievalism studies, to make studies in medievalism(s) reflect a broader spectrum of cultural and aesthetic studies, is perhaps the wrong quest. Maybe we should be questing without an agenda? Indeed, I think that the International Society for the Study of Medievalism already has been struggling to do so, to broaden that agenda of medievalism studies, inviting a wide diversity of individuals to join in the discussion (even if such invitation has been, so far, responded to with limited success). Our addiction to scholarship is healthy, if not also exploited. We should not turn it off like a video game. We should play it for all it is worth, as though our professional lives depended upon our doing so. We should continue the invitation, pound steadily upon the doors of locked away (marginalized)

⁹ “GOP’s Enron-esque higher ed plan: Fire tenured faculty to fund student dorms.” *Salon.com* 14 January 2014. <http://www.salon.com/2014/01/14/gops_enron_esque_higher_ed_plan_fire_tenured_faculty_to_fund_student_dorms/>.

¹⁰ As men and women are still not represented in equal numbers in the upper ranks of academia, more women scholars are needed in the top tier of scholars. This Fellowship supports women scholars from around the nation as they complete major research projects that will satisfy professional promotion requirements—and that will help them break through the ‘glass ceiling.’” The Bonnie Wheeler Fellowship. <<http://bonniewheelerfund.org/>>.

scholars and oppressed topics until the hinges drop off. I heartily applaud Fugelso's manifesto. It is indeed written in the spirit of what Leslie Workman, Kathleen Verduin, Tom Shippey, and other founding members embraced as they set out upon the original quest for medievalism scholarship. I also applaud, by the way, the efforts of Richard Utz and Ed Risdien to recreate *Year's Work in Medievalism* into a scholarly publication that is free on all sorts of levels (free and open-source software, freely accessible for reading). In fact, here is my suggestion for a new title for this journal: *Medievalism Unbound*.

We need to do what we do best: to create a well-endowed scholarly atmosphere, one that fights against the five faces of oppression, both within and without the publishing world, for writers and editors alike. Those categories of oppression (exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence) are difficult to fight, sometimes even to identify.

Lately, I have begun to identify medievalism, itself, as it has perpetuated in current U.S. politics and culture, both on the campus and in the statehouse, to be a new face of oppression—one that exploits and marginalizes, rendering others powerless, caught within the imperialism of an elite and dominating culture. To give a few examples: Muslim-Americans randomly persecuted as potential terrorists, women losing the ownership of their own bodies, the right to a healthy life for everyone (no matter the cost), the right to a quality education (no matter the cost). Bruce Holsinger once argued that [Holsinger's italics] "*neomedievalism is above all a paradigm for neoconservative intellectual renewal.*"¹¹ I worry about the potential faces of oppression that may prevent us from freely speaking and writing our minds, from practicing what we believe or do not believe, from *being who and what we are, together-yet-different*. I do not like that kind of medievalism. Despite that stereotype image of the medievalist professor hiding away behind her books, I am *not* a Watcher, and deep down, I don't think that Karl Fugelso or any other member of ISSM is either. We need money in order to provide space and time, so that there is sufficient energy "to air everyone's work" in an "easily accessible" manner. It is a treasure quest, but it is one to be done for a greater intellectual good.

¹¹ Bruce Holsinger. *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2007), 65.