

# Mermaids aren't real, and neither is race



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A recent tweet explained the often-elusive difference between science fiction and fantasy: "Fantasy is when Black people are told they're historically inaccurate, sci-fi is when Black people are told 'it's woke garbage' they exist."

The concept of race in speculative fiction comes up in media discourse whenever someone in some well-known media franchise turns up with a crumb of melanin. It is a debate that is particularly frustrating, because like most issues of the 21st century, it requires an exhausting amount of nuance and analysis while simultaneously being incredibly stupid.

We've had Black stormtroopers (*Star Wars*, not the *Sturmabteilung*, though there is that one Key & Peele sketch, who apparently couldn't exist because of (a worryingly racist reason). The casting of people of colour in Netflix's adaptation of *The Witcher* was derided because of (a worryingly racist reason). Black women cannot exterminate ghosts because of (a worryingly racist reason). And over the past few months, it's been Black elves, Black dwarves, Black Targaryens, and now Black mermaids can't exist because of (you get the idea).

Why not a Black mermaid? Because Hans Christian Andersen was a White guy? Disney, a multibillion-dollar corporation with a vice grip on global entertainment, is not making a loving homage to 19th century Danish culture. (Nor, I suspect, are people who are mad about Black mermaids particularly interested in 19th century Danish culture or the sanctity of Andersen's body of work.) Disney has no in-text reason to not cast people of colour in whatever role. We are at a point in our history, thankfully, where denying roles to actors of colour is recognised as racial discrimination. Meanwhile, *House of the Dragon's* prominent change of characters to black and mixed race is not merely colourblind, but in fact adds to the plot. The show still largely has a White cast, but its decision to show the existence of racial diversity in Fantasy Europe has been treated as "historically inaccurate."

There is a point to this: Westeros is not real, but it does represent a vision of Europe, and so we can expect the people within its world to look European.



Black and Brown people are 'historically accurate' to any fantastical rendering of Europe. VISUAL: STAR

Of course, if you look at Europe, you'll find Bangladeshis running *gulyás éttermek* in Budapest, even though Viktor Orban told me Hungary is for white people. But historically, right?

Black and Brown people are "historically accurate" to any fantastical rendering of Europe. The imagination of medieval Europe that serves as the template for your bog-standard fantasy setting is White, because Europe has historically been imagined to be White, as a project to imagine the presence of supposedly non-White bodies as interlopers, outsiders, people who do not belong. Even if the faulty imagination of a "White Europe" were true (it is, to reiterate, not true), the modern Western world that generates the bulk of our entertainment is demonstrably not a White world, and to insist on a performance of Whiteness in the media where the diversity underlying the real world is erased cannot be justified except by (a worryingly racist reason).

Let's go deeper. Are elves, Targaryens and mermaids White? No. Because elves, Targaryens, mermaids and White people don't exist in the real world.

Race itself is not real. Race is the idea that humanity can be sorted into discrete groups with unique behavioural and intellectual characteristics, largely corresponding with physiological differences and similarities between potentially related groups of people. The

ways in which these physical characteristics dictate identity and culture are fantasies, and our current conceptualisation of race derives heavily from the last couple centuries of European imperialism, and from the dominance of American media. Race is one of the most important concepts underlying

are White for a reason: because he wanted to represent a superior form of life. What elves are to the Men of Numenor (the Men of the West), Numenoreans are to the other categories of men, and then on down to the orcs et al. Sentient life is sorted into racial categories of greater and lesser worth. The parallels are not

modern social relations while simultaneously completely fictional.

This means that while there are no mermaids in real life, the skin tone we ascribe to the mermaid's human half is a legitimate battleground for how we view race. Speculative fiction has long held what Helen Young called "Habits of Whiteness." We live in a world that continues to be dominated by a former imperial core, whose self-declared rightful inhabitants in turn self-declared as "White," and their viewpoint continues to dictate the shape of the world through global culture. It is a viewpoint that centralises Whiteness as the normal. Speculative fiction has its roots in genre conventions established by writers who hailed from an era of explicit imperialism (rather than the more genteel liberal capitalism of today). JRR Tolkien, we can very safely say, never imagined the existence of a Black elf. He was a White supremacist. Though he was no Lovecraft, who wrote primarily to express race anxiety, race as hierarchy is intrinsic to Tolkien's worldbuilding.

Let's circle back. As elves aren't real, they can be Black. In the context of a Tolkien adaptation, however, skin colour matters. The canonical Whiteness of elves isn't just the default assumption of a writer imagining Ye Olde England as a supermarket mayonnaise aisle. It is thematically consistent with Tolkien's view of racial hierarchy. In Tolkien's legendarium, elves

coincidental. Tolkien famously despised allegory, but everyone writes an allegory whether they want to or not. Just as racial hierarchy was not incidental to the world in which Tolkien lived, it was not incidental to the world he invented.

Should a Tolkien elf only be played by a White actor? No. However, a better show than *The Rings of Power* might have had something insightful to say about race through the casting of Black actors in roles that were, in the original, expressions of White supremacist race hierarchy. Instead, *The Rings of Power* represents yet another sort of fantasy: a world where anyone anywhere can look like anything, and you don't need to think about it too much. This sort of fantasy of diversity would certainly feel less cynical if it were not being beamed at us by Amazon.

The fantasy of racial diversity that Amazon and Disney relay relies on a lack of history, where we have no politics or opinions that trouble a society making money for our bosses. Race is a fiction, but its pages are burnt and bloody. Race matters. The politics of the representation of this fantasy in fields of make-believe are not clear cut, the stories we appear in are often written with the subtext of our exclusion, and our increasing presence on the screen (rather than just consuming content) cannot be to passively legitimise anodyne projects of racist capitalism.

# When currency, not arms, is the weapon of choice

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AFTER a relative calm since World War II, we are facing a situation in Ukraine that can flare into a catastrophic nuclear conflict. But it is not only the hard power of hypersonic missiles and nuclear warheads that can be used to score victories. Today, we have much less lethal, yet no less stealthy or tactically inferior weapons – these are the monetary instruments for sinking economies through gradual asphyxiation and disabling the financial capacity of opponents.

The use of money for good and bad has a long history, going back to Byzantine *solidus* – the dollar of the Middle Ages – which projected the might of the eastern Roman empire. The monetary power gradually shifted to silver of the Spanish and later to the British pound sterling as the world's most valued reserve currency.

The deflating of the gold standard by President Richard Nixon more than five decades ago was the beginning of the new era of the US' financial dominance. The gold standard was replaced by the dollar as the fiat currency, and all oil deals were denominated in dollars.

The emergence of the mighty dollar was backed by gold, and the hegemonic transition in the aftermath of World War II that came with the rise of American geopolitical and military leadership of the Western world. The generous USD 15 billion credit by the US to the war-devastated European countries for reconstruction under the Marshall Plan of 1948 helped in this process.

Today, the dollar has unparalleled supremacy. Almost all imports and exports are denominated in dollars. In addition, billions of dollars are transacted globally in the form of small private transactions, such as for travels abroad and repatriation of savings by millions of workers overseas. International transactions between businesses, countries to settle contracts, repay loans – all require dollars. Countries have to keep enough dollar reserves to pay for their import needs for at least six months or face the danger of default, poor credit ranking, and bankruptcy.

Globally, USD 12-13 trillion is kept as reserve, much of which is kept with the Federal Reserve System of the US. These reserves work to the advantage of the US, which can (and does) run large budget deficits and take national loans equal to many times its GDP without much concern for bankruptcy.

The dominance of the dollar and the hegemonic power which supports it have emerged as a sore point in the rising strategic competition to determine the global financial architecture.

Jose Miguel Alonso-Trabancho, an international relations professional, notes, "In this game of determining suitable financial architecture, monetary assets, control over resources are weaponised as instruments of coercion, manipulation, disruption, subordination and conquest. The

realm of money is now at the forefront of rivalry for domination." The US can and often does weaponise the dollar to support and extend their dominance. Such sanctions can be tolerated to a certain extent, but beyond that, it can backfire through powerful, destructive measures.

Unlike the hard power of missiles and war machines, financial power can be used for both construction and destruction, from building alliances, to gradually weakening the economic power of countries. It can be used for patronage or denial, to gradually snap the energy of the "disfavoured." Financial power, coupled with another lethal weapon, the "food diplomacy," can cause havoc on countries at the receiving end.

Large and small nations can be subjected to its squeeze in different ways. For example, Bangladesh, during its immediate post-liberation period, was subjected to sanctions for selling jute to Cuba, leading to the deaths of thousands of people by starvation through denial of food delivery.

In the context of the current conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the sanctions imposed by the US and the West focused on key elements of financial transactions, choking the Russian economy out of the freedom of exchanging goods and services.

What impact are these sanctions expected to have on the Russian economy? It is difficult to assess at this stage. Russia, with about USD 630 billion in foreign exchange and gold reserves, was in a comfortable situation in the pre-war period. The impacts of sanctions are reported to be negative; it is observed by some that in February-May 2022, industrial production went down by nearly 70 percent, imports reduced by 50 percent, and debt portfolio increased to USD 300-400 billion.

The Russians countered to stay afloat by denominating exports and imports in terms of rubles, adopting a quasi-barter system among its allies, or with countries dependent on Russia for its oil and gas. But the ruble strengthened, and Russia had to take measures to weaken the ruble for fear of adverse impacts on exports.

So far, Russia is doing not so badly. But how long it can sustain the persistent pressure from the US and its Western allies remains to be seen. It could be a close call for a showdown.

The key to this lies in the hands of China, another mighty economy with vast financial and commercial reach as well as hard power. It holds huge financial reserves (more than USD 3 trillion and 1,948 tonnes of gold). Allied with China, Russia can deliver a heavy counterpunch.

Coercive weaponisation of financial vectors does not involve bloodshed, but it can still inflict substantial damage in terms of hunger and poverty, not necessarily on the target countries, but as unintended "collateral damage" on innocent "bystander" countries. Already, the rise of inflation and potential food shortages are sending ominous signals. Low-income countries around the world can only wait and see, and build up their own defences to the best of their capabilities against the unwelcome outcome of an ugly bullfight.

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Sl.	Tender/Proposal ID, Reference No & Name of works	Tender/Proposal Document last selling / downloading Date and Time :	Last Date and Time for Tender/Proposal Security Submission :	Tender/Proposal Closing & Opening Date & Time
1	Tender ID No. 741466 eGP-01/RHD/ACE/RZ/2022-2023.(Re-Tender) Periodic Maintenance of Barabari-Lalmonirhat-Burimari Road (N-509) under Road Division, Lalmonirhat through Strengthening with Aggregate base type-I and surfacing (DBS-Base course 70 mm & DBS-Wearing course-50 mm) from Ch. 7+000 (Mahendranagar Bazar) to Ch. 8+800 (Lalmonirhat Airbase) & Ch. 10+000 (Lalmonirhat Airbase) to Ch. 12+575 (Simanto Mor) under PMP (Road-Major) during the year 2022-2023.	26-Oct-2022 17:00	27-Oct-2022 12:00	27-Oct-2022 12:30

N.B : This is an online Tender, where only e-Tender will be accepted in e-GP portal and no offline / hard copies will be accepted.

(Md. Moniruzzaman)  
ID No-000422  
Additional Chief Engineer,RHD  
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GD-1871