ROLES OF THE DICE: COMMUNITY AND CULTURE IN ROLEPLAYING GAMES

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Here I bring together Game Studies, Sociology, and Women's and Gender Studies to explore the scope of digital and analog roleplaying communities. Using interviews conducted with 50 participants who reported playing the tabletop roleplaying game *Dungeons and Dragons* or the digital roleplaying game *World of Warcraft* and my own experience of games I present evidence and develop theory in existing literature on 3 major axes. The first is women and marginalized identities' participation in the game space.

I detail the ways in which women have participated in not only the play of these games since their inception but also how they have held key roles in the development of roleplaying games. The second is how white, male-identified players navigate rule systems based on unexamined, racist assumptions about rules which are in conflict with their understandings of race. Additionally, I discuss the ways in which players who are subject to cultural 'othering' in their lived experiences embrace even further othered bodies in virtual spaces.

The third articulates a theory about how gamers have thrown open the "gates" of the pastime, but practice mostly at "kitchen tables" which are highly exclusive which creates a divide between the public "face" of gaming, and it's private "heart." These smaller groups operate simultaneously to the larger discourses on the public face of gaming. In these spaces, players can control their environment, who they game with, and thus create safe gaming spaces where they do not have to confront toxic or aggressive discourses in the larger gaming community. Using this I add nuance to larger theories of cultural practice communities which opt instead of forming hierarchies dependent on the 'right' way to do things of self-definition and ousting players who do not fit at their tables.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a sociological study of game communities writ small and large. Gaming is sociologically interesting not only because of how the particular group iterates, but because it reveals the ways that structure and individual agency can co-construct the social space in which they operate. This dissertation takes as its site the twin spaces of online roleplay gaming and analog tabletop gaming. These spaces have significant overlap in player base, development, and expansion. The other dimension in which they take up similar real estate is in the construction of the 'gamer' identity to the overarching culture. To be labeled a 'gamer' is something wholly different than to label oneself a 'gamer.'

Using interviews collected from 50 self-identified players, I explore the intersecting identities of those who play, how the space itself is constructed to give differing experiences of play, and explore the stark difference in the constructed stereotype of gamer, versus the reality of who is playing. The specific type of gaming and game spaces being addressed have been around since the early 70s, both in their digital forms and analog. These communities have weathered moral panics, explosions in popularity, and a long-standing social stigma to their members (Cohen, Seate, Anderson, & Tindage, 2017). Like many subcultures they are moving targets, ever transmuting to meet demand and redefine themselves within the larger cultural and media spaces that exist. What this study does most effectively is dispel the notion that subcultures can be reduced to monoliths wherein all members and undifferentiated because of their affiliation with that subculture.

Here will be evidence that within the subcultural space, there are private spaces and public spaces both of which have very different player experiences. There are people within who are new to the games spaces, and those who have played continually for 50 years in some form or another. Hopping between digital and analog roleplay (and play generally) as time and whim allowed. There are those for whom gaming is a feast or famine stutter, a hobby picked up and put down as life moves them. It is the study of a diaspora with no homeland besides each other in an ever more-connected world. The citizens connect here over play, but that does not make their bonds any the lesser for it.

Gaming in Real Life

What follows briefly is a compilation of experiences told to me by my research subjects. It is not a single player's experience but highlights repetitive moments from many.

Imagine yourself at 7 years old. The year is 1981 and it's one of those large holidays where the whole family is gathered in the living room. It's growing late, there may be snow, or a jauntily decorated cactus out front. Your aunt hands you a gift wrapped with care which, in your joyful exuberance, you rip apart to find a box. Inside is a large book, glossy covered with a knight fighting a spectacular dragon on the cover. Upon further inspection, you see a set of polyhedral dice and a crayon within the box as well. Your aunt shows you how to color in the dice and promises you'll play the new game tomorrow.

By the time you are back in school you are *hooked*. Playing pretend using characters sheets and being guided through adventures by your aunt was the best time ever. Your teacher notices your math scores are up – she's never heard a 2nd grader use

the term “initiative” correctly before either. Your aunt, however, is long gone and your parents are not interested or don’t have the time to run you through adventures. So, you do the next best thing. You recruit friends into your nascent hobby. Sometimes you use the rules, sometimes you don’t (dice, after-all are banned in the lunchroom). But always, your head is filled with dragons and wyverns, and orcs, and goblins, and heroes, and stories, and the voices of your friends as you adventure together.

Now it is 1988 and you are 14, just about to start your freshman year of high school. Things haven’t gone terribly well for you since those early gaming days. By the end of your 5th grade year, the club you had helped create in your local library had been shut down. Your parents had taken your precious books and dice, gathered over 2 years of birthdays and holidays, and secreted them away – you hope. They are worried about you, and all your friends. You are told your game is dangerous. That your friend Jimithy can’t come over to your house anymore because his parents believe you are summoning demons with your play. You play the *Star Wars* roleplay game instead for a bit until your parents stop that as well. It would be best for everybody if you took up a normal hobby, a sport maybe, or, yes, *even chess* would be better.

Some of your friends continue to game, but without Jimithy and under the eye of parents, the group starts to shudder and break apart. Like most kids, you start high school and find other hobbies eventually. Never the ones that would make you ‘popular.’ You read. You learn leathercraft and sewing. Your mind is at a race, and it grabs onto each new skill it can learn with new fervor. Fantasy, science fiction, media, comic books, and . . . to some strangely . . . embroidery become your go-to hobbies and tasks. With each new task you continue, in a small way, what you see as your hero’s journey. Feeling

rewarded as you collect skills to subconsciously 'level up' the character which is you. At the end of the year, your aunt gifts you *Zelda: The Adventure of Link* for your Nintendo Entertainment System. She remains your favorite aunt.

Your Junior year of college has struck, and you finally feel like you found your pace at 21. The year is 1995, and your major is Computer Science. A gaming club on campus has caught your attention – and most of your time. As you think about algorithms and programming during the day, you run them on weekends in service of epic adventures with others. You're excited by the languages of Pascal and Java, and the new Windows 95 release for your home PC. When your friends are asleep or otherwise unavailable you turn to the MUDs (Multi-User-Dungeons/Domains/Dimensions) connected through phone lines over the World Wide Web. The Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace can be seen pinned to your dorm door.

You are bright, filled with hope for the transhuman future and growing ever more adept at walking through fantastical worlds – sometimes even the one your body moves through. Possibility is in the air as the economy booms and you hone your skills at *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*. Fully painted miniatures guard your papers and desk, another hobby you picked up to fill the time between sessions. You're finally able to focus on the things that interest you, that you're passionate about. And you've even dabbled in game design yourself, promising yourself a trip to GaryCon once you graduate and land a real job.

It's 2003, midnight in August, your first child has just fallen asleep in their crib, and you fire up your PC. You managed to get an invite to Blizzard's new *World of Warcraft* game. You've played *Warcraft* since it was first released as a real-time strategy

game back in 1994, following all the games until migrating back to the familiar sword-and-sorcery roleplay of MMORPGS. You are top level in *Everquest* and excited for the rumored *Everquest II*. But you are excited for the new adventures in Azeroth, although you don't think much of the graphics.

Much of your play is again reduced to online friends and family at this point. Career, partner, and child taking up much of your otherwise free time. You are sometimes nostalgic for the space of the kitchen table, the basement or even the exceptionally forgiving diner. You and your partner tried some pick-up games in the local game store but were not fans of the experience. Not only where the people there more versed in the game, having devoted more time to learning 3 and 3.5 edition rules, but they didn't seem to hesitate to let you know it. There were times you showed up at the store to drop in, character sheets ready just in case, dice rattling in your pocket only to instead end up in a trivia quiz with rules lawyers. Additionally, much of the talk made you or your partner uncomfortable. Visiting message boards and thinking deeply about the messages in media have led you to some troubling conclusions about the games which have been your ever-companion. You start to wonder if goblins and orcs may be problematic representations, and not just targets from which to cull loot. Your first character in *World of Warcraft* when it launches, is an Orc. She is glorious even if her animations as well are a bit troubling.

It is 2010, you and your 3 children all sit around the table as your partner bakes snacks. It's your turn to DM the adventure, they will take over next week. The kiddos have rolled a well-balanced party using 4th edition rules and invited some of their friends to come over and play. Their parents are happy to have the 'night off' and are

nonplussed by the small gathering at your house. Afterall, you seem like nice people, maybe a little weird, and their children always come home exhausted and well fed. Your eldest, Delenn, is a bit fidgety but will settle soon to play – demonstrating an uncanny focus you recognize in yourself. Her teachers say she might have something called ADHD, and as your partner read off the symptoms you wonder if you have more in common than you originally thought.

This is your "weeknight" game you play on Fridays with the kids. You had to give up *World of Warcraft* a few months ago as the guild broke apart due to a brutal raiding schedule. You never thought your cousin would be so demanding. But, then again, they are in college and you remember what it was like to have that kind of free time. You are at the place where your skills far out-stripe the time which you are able to devote to play at this point. Additionally, you've had to resort to only text chat because at least that can be turned off so you don't hear the slurs and homophobic chatter that is the public chat. Whenever somebody hears you on headset, they make snide comments about sandwiches, or racial slurs about what you should do with/to them. It's not worth the hassle.

So, for now, you keep your subscription active, just in case one of your old friends needs somebody to fill in for a raid. Or they just want somebody to explore with. You are nostalgic for the old days of *World of Warcraft* like somebody wishing they were born in the 1950s. Unsure of how much is reality, and how much is nostalgia. Much like your experience of the 4th Edition rulebook you use with your kids. It's missing some magic, somewhere. You think it might be sharing the DM role with your partner, but there's something about the mechanics and rules themselves – almost too sterile. You

contemplate breaking open one of the 100 other game books you and your partner have collected over time, but something about *Dungeons and Dragons* being your kids' first game, as it was yours, keeps you bound to these books. As your youngest lights up at a natural 20 role which lets him defeat the gelatinous cube before the party, you silently thank your favorite aunt for the gift all those years ago.

It is 2017, you and the family are openly weeping at the Campaign 1 finale of popular Twitch/YouTube show *Critical Role.* Pregnancy in the family always makes you hormonal. It is the one thing the family can agree to watch together, even spread out over a few nights at dinner. Your eldest is just starting high school, she has an interest in computer programming. Your youngest is taking an interest in drawing and loves getting their hands on the *Monstrous Manual* to interpret and design their own versions of the monsters which you fell in love with. Your middle child is scribbling away in a notebook or on the laptop almost nonstop, designing games and mechanics far beyond your initial forays into game design. You are excited for them to debut some of those ideas at the local maker-space and youth game jam next month.

Around your house is the ephemera of the life you and your partner have built together. Technology rubs elbows with neo-pagan themed prints and patters. The house is cozy if a bit messy, some of the tasks being dropped as in many households. At this point you are grateful you and your family have weathered the economic storms that seem to be ever-present. You contemplate how gaming has left its thumbprint on your life and now the lives of your children. Of the message board and Twitter conversations you are a part of about the future of gaming. Of the gains and losses in terms of equitable play, representation, and the levels of toxicity in the hobby. Sure, you would never take

away your children's' games, but you do wonder how they might be perceived if they speak about their hobbies. There's talk of white supremacists using games to recruit and radicalize people. You trust your kids, and the values you have taught them, but you can't help but worry. After all, the memory of Gamergate is still fresh within your mind. You dabble at the politics of gaming, always aware, always trying to make sure you're not reinforcing or recreating for your children logics which serve to oppress others. But you also just want to have fun.

As you move forward, there are still many questions you and your partner have. They swirl in dice cups and shine through backlit keyboards. You love gaming. You love the friendships which it reinforced and the coworkers to close-as-family it helped carry in. You love how it taught you about hope when things were hard, and how luck was sometimes the most reliable thing to have on your side. You love your partner, and remember how you met over a campfire at a Ren Faire, initially bonding over your love of G.U.R.P.S into the twilight. You embroidered their wedding attire by hand for a whole year. They made your favorite boots. Gaming helped you on this path, and you grieve, truly, for everybody who feels cut out of this magical space which has meant so much to you. You rankle at the stereotypes around which do not match the reality of the vibrant, diverse, wonderful people who you play and sometimes work with. And you re-affirm your hope, that at least at your table, the fantastical world (digital or analog) can be the wonderful, magical place it was for *all* gamers as it was when you were just 7 . . . and coloring in your first set of dice.

Research Questions & Argument

There are three main areas of inquiry that this dissertation is focused on. Gaming itself is a large hobby, which on the plus side makes it sociologically interesting. On the minus side, this means that the site itself can be overwhelming and start being undifferentiated. To keep the study within the scope of a dissertation I focused on three major dimensions of gaming itself. First, how and when non-male identified gamers acted in the space. Second, how players negotiate race within the game structure itself. Third, the way that the gaming subculture itself is structured and the way it

One of the goals of this dissertation from the outset is to give a nuanced and empathetic voice to Gamers. Aside from the personal reasons attached to this perspective (my own history as a self-identified gamer), much of the literature can lean toward a single horror story whose main features were racism and misogyny. While those no doubt exist within the community, I decided a deeper understanding of how these things played out was necessary. Specifically, not how they played out on large, public stages but how and if they iterated in smaller, private groups. This is tied to the research question: Is it possible to generalize behavior in smaller groups from understanding how group behavior happens in larger samples/forums. The short answer here is "no." However, we lack understanding of how these small, private groups navigate the same worlds as the large group. It is in finding these novel pockets of behavior that we can start to build strategies of bending players more firmly toward social justice as opposed to writing them all off as lost causes. Much like Cote's (2020) call to change the definition of games and gaming to include casual games, rooted in gendered perceptions of play, the shift toward a truly diverse and universal play can be fostered by meeting the discourse of

these things head on (Cote, 2020). Knowing what happens in these small groups becomes crucial to that project.

While what I found in my research may be surprising to some, for many gamers it is banal. The idea that gamers, while over-represented in the categories of straight, white, cis-gendered male, are diverse or rapidly diversifying. That women gamers, while they face obstacles in public spaces like online public chats or game stores/cons have had seats at tables (or been the head of tables) since the inception of the games themselves. Finally, that while gamers refuse to play with "jerks" and keep them out of their home games and guilds, they will defend their right to be in the 'gamer' space because everybody has a right to game. Just not with them. This social function of kicking out jerks from play spaces into the public, I hypothesize is a major reason why much of the (non)academic research into gamers and their spaces results in such a uniformly horrific outcome.

Methods

I conducted 50 interviews with people who play roleplaying games both in person and online using a variety of chat and social media platforms. Interviews ranged from approximately 1-4 hours with an average of 2 hours. Most of my respondents were the result of snowball sampling with a handful responding to postings in groups on various social media platforms. I initially recruited players who identified either as *Dungeons and Dragons* players or *World of Warcraft* players. I chose these particular games not only for their longevity but because of their longstanding sites of research. *World of Warcraft* in particular has been a subject of study and is, of course, central to Nardi's (2010) *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*. *Dungeons and Dragons* has also been address, as

Fine's *Shared Fantasy* (1983) offered a robust analysis in As I conducted interviews however, it became clear that these were not discrete sets of gamers but rather my respondents were embedded in larger ecologies of games. Many of my *Dungeons and Dragons* players played *World of Warcraft,* and the same was true of the reverse. Much of the time, play of one game would lead to play of the other. For example, if a respondent had a history of digital or video games leading to their involvement in *World of Warcraft,* they would pick up *Dungeons and Dragons* via friends with similar interests. The overlapping play mechanics, style, and engagement of these role-playing games lead to other overlaps of leisure or hobby activities.

When possible, interviews were conducted in person but many of my interviewees felt more comfortable speaking via online technology. The respondents were given the choice to use video or not depending on their level of comfort and technology. While this is a newer technique when it comes to interviewing participants, it has been fruitful in setting participants at ease. Because they were in places where they were comfortable, they were able to ease into lengthy conversations about their game practices. This is key because many respondents reported social anxieties which impacted their lives in other ways. Perhaps most importantly, many of my respondents used the internet and telecommunications technologies as common ways to communicate informally with friends and other players. In short, while some people may find it daunting to speak into a microphone without any visual feedback, for many of my respondents this was more 'natural' feeling than sitting across a digital recording device would have been. It also enabled the sample to be unbound geographically and for me to speak to respondents internationally who were embedded in my snowball sample. While not 'entering the

field' in the traditional sense, the virtual field here allowed me to meet my respondents where they were comfortable – on their virtual home turf. The virtual here is used in the tradition of Boellstorff and other digital researchers which take the virtual as real as the analog world (Boellstorff, 2016). Especially in a world which saw social distancing and isolation, the reality of digital communications for work, play, and social interaction is something which should be explored with just as much rigor as traditional field sites as was argued before (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012).

The interviews were semi-structured and employed a mix of questions and techniques of "interviewing by comment" (Snow, Zurcher, & Sjoberg, 1982). The questions ranged from some demographic identifies to things like "What was your first experience of roleplay gaming, digital or analog?" To even more general, "If you could change one thing about gaming, what would it be?" During the answers to these questions, I would encourage them to go on, adding my own experiences or thoughts where I felt it would prompt more of a response. For example, when asking "Do you have a typical build for a character" I would inevitably prompt reluctant responders by saying something like "I always play elf bards if I can. I just love the aesthetics and I think like a bard." The disclosure here of my own play strategy eased their disclosure of own preference (or lack thereof) and would illicit in-depth tales of their own reasons for choosing. This produced not only rich data but allowed the respondents the freedom to discuss their habits and ideas freely as opposed to being interrogated. Respondents were encouraged to follow 'tangents' suggested by comment or question equally. This data was then transcribed electronically, then corrected by hand after all of the interviews were completed. Grounded theory methods were then employed to code and build

empirical findings from that data (Glaser & Strauss, 2001). While not true Grounded Theory, the findings and details in this dissertation come from careful coding and qualitative understanding of these interviews.

Of these respondents, 30 identified as men, 17 identified as women, and 3 identified as Non-binary or gender-queer. This means that 2/5 of the gamers in my sample did not identify as men, further, much like the men in the sample, many of these women had been involved in roleplay spaces as long as their male counterparts. That is to say, while respondents had all been involved in games for different lengths of time, gender itself did not determine how long that would be. All respondents ranged in their game involved from early childhood to as recently as within the year I had contacted them. Women playing *World of Warcraft* had been playing for at least 13 years – newest-to-the-game respondent saying she started playing right after the Burning Crusade (2007) expansion came out. Almost everybody else played since very close to *World of Warcraft's* original launch in 2004. In terms of *Dungeons and Dragons* the timeline is longer – with 1 respondent reporting she's been playing since 1983 while many more report having started playing *Dungeons and Dragons* since the 3rd edition in 2000. Only 4 of my respondents were new to these game spaces, having picked up the game within the last year or two. While many of these men and women couldn't recount an unbroken block of play (many went through life changes which infringed on free time) all players were currently playing at time of interview. The average age of my respondents was 37, the youngest at 20 and the oldest at 67. While the statistics here can be pulled by outliers, the rest of my respondents were between 35 and 45 years old which means they have lived a particular history of the social dynamics of play. Last, most of my respondents

identified as straight, with about 1/5 reporting being gender queer, polyamorous, bisexual, or gay/lesbian.

Literature Review

For this dissertation I take an interdisciplinary approach by bringing together three major strands of the literature. The first, the core is a sociological perspective rooted in the major concerns of the discipline. I use sociological literature here to keep rooted in the big questions of the discipline and draw connections to larger social processes. While my site is rooted in games, I use that site to explore those sociological theories and add theoretical nuance where my data can further our understanding of large social processes.

The Sociological perspective here is the most instructive in how games, the way people navigate them, and ultimately how they are constructed can create, challenge, or maintain the status quo of larger social structures. The games here are designed to be the marriage of a fantastical and 'real world' element. This means that they are in a unique position to speak to how this shared fantasy space can be limiting and liberatory by turns for larger ideological constructions. Most specifically I examine the race dimensions of this conundrum in my second chapter. This introduces friction between the race and culture arguments which don't account for my players' idiosyncratic mechanisms in navigating these waters. That is, where established culture literature would see players (even reluctantly) accept and acquiesce to the race-logics of the game and ultimately white supremacy in the very construction of the play space (Trammel, 2020). Additionally, it is possible to be subject to game properties and items which further misogynistic ideologies via non-player characters and characterizations in which the

players engage (Stang & Trammel, 2019). This does not happen to my players (many of whom have been playing for decades). Instead, through this research we are allowed a glimpse at how individuals resist those structures, that acculturation, and the reification of race structures.

In terms of the culture literature, I explore how being a gamer is very much an identity and how familiarization with tropes, themes, and other subcultural texts create a space where gaming is the 'next logical step' in many ways for these players. This culture argument is pushed through the lens of social networks logics and explored in the third chapter. I present the practice of being in a Roleplay Games as a facet of an overlapping set of practices in what I call the "Nerd Sphere." People involved in roleplay gaming are using the practice as part of larger Venn Diagram of practices which reinforce understandings across hobbies. In this way roleplay gamers are drawn into the hobby not so much as part of an advertising campaign but though homophilic cultural connections. Nobody comes to the hobby 'cold,' rather they arrive there because their other relationships and hobbies pave the way there.

The Cultural/Socialization Argument

Theories of culture from sociology tend to look at macro level processes and development of communities. Even when their focus is on subcultures or smaller pockets of culture, they develop theory as a whole to explain how that culture iterates, or how it can be identified.

For example, Bourdieu sees cultures developing as a site where the identity of inclusion is contested and mitigated by differing forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1993). In this conception, people within the culture deploy social, cultural, and economic capital in

an attempt to control and define the space as well as the identity of inclusion (Bourdieu, 1993). For Bourdieu, this ultimately entwines itself with economic capital as the populous has a legitimate power to define the practice of the people operating inside the culture (Bourdieu, 1993). Further, it is through this power that they can then continue to oppress those without their purchased cultural and social capital, further defining the lines between who has the power to *continue* defining not only the practice, but taste on the whole (Bourdieu, 1984). While this allows for the culture to move and shift over time, ultimately it still takes it as a single block in which individuals vie for control.

Anderson (1983) envisions ever-larger communities identifying across different lines of similarity. As places within the cultural fields solidify and people self-select into these large communities because of a feeling of ideological kinship, the ever-widening cultural community will homogenize, or rather, form, then homogenize (Anderson, 1983). We can see these cultures coalescing and mark their influences by the way in which they present and act (Hebdige, 1979). In this way, ideological and material conformity is the hallmark of participation and belonging (Bloustien G. , 2007) During the development of these larger communities and ideas of what games can be, smaller subcultures can coexist and part of the overall process becomes trading members in order to serve to direct the development and unification of the larger community (de Vaan, Stark, & Vedres, 2015). The trading of creative developer partners creates a more robust output from ever-homogenizing creative communities, while maintaining the benefit of removing a lock-step pitfall – that is, they are still evolving and doing something new while serving the larger umbrella of rewarded participation in the community (de Vaan, Stark, & Vedres, 2015). While de Vaan, Stark, & Vedres (2015) focused on game

developers and teams of developers I contend that we can draw a parallel line to players operating in public spaces when they seek new games.

This allows for sociologists to then apply the logics of socialization to the subculture itself, as initiation rites or dramaturgical performances become the hallmark of members of that culture. Here we can think of Becker (1993) learning what a crock was by touring with a group of medical students during rounds (Becker, 1993). That socialization process only makes sense when the subculture or group is seen as a whole unit with individuated moving pieces. A concession that Becker himself is willing to write about when it comes to the interlocking pieces and processes it takes to create a single piece of art (Becker, 1974). In this conception, while all actors are not necessarily vying to redefine the piece of art, or the art field, they are all interlocked components producing a single cultural object, perhaps a painted crock. It stands to follow that, like most ways of interacting, people will then take these 'tools' learned in virtual and analog worlds with them into other spaces (Swidler, 1986; Fine, 2004). Games literature has followed suit here in speaking not only about acts of violence, but about ideological logics which then play out in subtle and diffuse ways during analog interactions (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2007).

Additionally, when we think of the performances given by people within the culture or hobby Goffman makes the distinction between backstage performances and front stage performances. Those who are in the know are privy to backstage rules (and the trust it takes to pull off the show) while those in the front stage are there to confirm the performance (Goffman, 1959). All of the players come together in Goffman's conception here to keep from losing face or being the victims of larger social sanctions

due to a poor performance (Goffman, 1959). In theory, this would be a heightened worry for gamers because of their already precarious position in the larger culture.

Goffman particularly has been useful when studying virtual interactions. Here I use "virtual" both in the common, technical understanding, but also to include creative, fantasy spaces. This is a place where the "shared fantasy" of the game world can also act as a virtual space in which the players interact as virtual selves (Fine, 1983). This space has been called the "Magic Circle" by ludic scholars, a place where everyday assumptions can be suspended during the course of play (Huizinga, 1938). Although many scholars now complicate the idea that this circle is entirely set apart from day-to-day interactions, the suspension is a useful idea because much of what happens in a virtual space is carried out more actively reflexively than is assumed to happen in face-to-face encounters, they can be easier to dissect and discuss in terms of the parts people play. The virtual here is also useful for understanding performance because it is a simplified version of the messy world which carries much unpredictability within it. While virtual worlds may be pregnant with such opportunity, it is rare that either digital or analog gamers will faithfully recreate the reality in which they operate. For this reason, Goffman is useful in understanding how performances online construct ideas and reality, but care must be taken to *understand* the social action for shared meaning as opposed to assuming that virtual culture has the same shared meaning as those outside looking in (Boero & Pascoe, 2012). Indeed, it is through these constructed performances that many researchers find purchase in describing how larger social ideology is reflected and reified in game spaces (Kendall, 2002). It is also riffing on these performances and questions of 'authenticity' where digital and games researcher have found purchase in

uncovering how the digital (and I argue the virtual in general) reflects the analog world (Cherney, 1999; Nakamura, 2008; Bloustien & Wood, 2013).

Socialization, cultural performances and ideology are then intensely *portable* making the leap between the virtual and analog cultural worlds. That is, what a person learns in the virtual world, can then be enacted in the analog world, and vice versa. There are two dimensions which have served as flashpoints for this cultural baggage and reification. First, we turn to the race discourse in the gaming culture.

Race Logics and Discourse

Standing on the idea that racial discourse can be passed between worlds, we must also understand that it is codified in the cultural products produced by a culture. That is, the logics, assumption, and capital used to produce a "thing" which becomes less mutable as an object and must either engage an array of social interaction to change it or be consigned to history. This is most obvious in the game space with representations of race are concerned. First, it is useful to parse the word 'race" in terms of its sociological meaning, and what it means in the gaming sphere itself. Race sociologically refers to the social construction of *human* bodies along phenotypical lines. It is a construction into which is attributed multivariate ethnographic and cultural assumptions. Race as a *gaming term* refers to *mostly* humanoid bodies in which phenotype and physical appearance is *explicitly tied to* cultural and ethnographic ways of being. The content here is that if you are racialized your body denotes your culture. While in the non-virtual world, the body can have cultural assumptions made about it, it is, by text, rules and art a given in game worlds.

While the bodies of my participants occupy both flesh-and-blood space, this is no less important than the fantasy bodies, which they inhabit to negotiate virtual worlds stratified by race logics. There is a further layer here of racial politics in that the worlds themselves are specifically *created* both as fantasies and as reflections of current social milieus. To paraphrase Du Bois, the question of the 21st century is the question of the Orc-Elf line in gaming. However long players of color have been participating in this space, they are in a position to be confronted with fantasticized, racialized bodies. In both digital representations which are distinctly visual, and tabletop treatments (which can be seen as theatre-of-the-mind putting to one side the complimentary art in the game materials). These virtual bodies, I argue, operate as controlling images (Collins, 2009) and correlate to real-world struggles. However, as opposed to recreating racial stratification which allowed players to revel in white-supremacist fantasy, I found that players used these controlling images to craft more authentic fantasy representations and experiences of themselves.

The ability to inhabit bodies that are inherently different from that of 'human' was something all my players engaged in to differing degrees. However, what emerges here is the idea of using bodies and avatars to explore identity in a world that has a continua of verisimilitude to lived experiences. Much like women who use expensive beauty rituals to construct neoliberal opportunities for themselves (Dosekun, 2017), plastic surgeons who want to retain an ethnic and gender authenticity in their patients (Menon, 2017), and those choosing avatars or virtual bodies (Bergstrom, Jenson, & de Castell, 2012) players choose virtual bodies which they feel reflect themselves or idealized selves (either wholesale or in aspects). Further, they will play with the cultural aspects of those bodies

as written/prescribed. They will reclaim aspects of the non-human as feeling authentic and desirable (Jones & Harris, 2016) brining queer readings to the space and negotiating what they take into their virtual world and what gets left behind. In this way the lines of *what is* are erased in favor of an ethos of *what is possible*. So while neither *Dungeons and Dragons* or *World of Warcraft* are inherently queer (Chang, 2015), the readings and play can be. This is explored in depth in terms of the blurred lines of desire between "real," "play," "performance," and "game" desires when affective ties are formed both via the virtual world of the game that can spill over and effect non-virtual relationships (Sunden, 2012).

The central question here is whether players use these virtual bodies play out racist/colonialist fantasies (white knight or plantation owner . . . or worse) or if they negotiate these baked-in racialized, essentialized bodies in a different way. Players do not negotiate these racial dynamics by employing colorblind racism (Omi & Winant, 2015) and ignoring the mechanics and cultural text upon the concept that all fantasy-racialized bodies are equal. Instead, they are transmuted from their inherent construction and prescriptive status. Further, while the heritage of colonialism, xenophobia, and white supremacy are embedded in these cultural objects. We can see their development and justification running along the same lines of what bodies are disposable in the making of community/statehood (Pegoraro, 2015), how legal systems defined which bodies and races belonged in particular spaces (Haney Lopez, 2006), which fantasy races could/should produce viable offspring (Kline, 2001), and what bodies were *structurally* meant to perform certain kinds of labor or cultural practices (Nakamura, 2009; Kang 2010). A few examples here are the fact that dwarves can't use magic, half-orcs are the

result of a human/orc sexual assault, orcs themselves suffer from lower intelligence, and goblins have been historically seen as 'disposable' humanoid bodies able to be dispatched without moral or ethical quandary by more 'advanced' races (like humans).

Here we see a stark break from the socialization and some of the games literature which holds that a) players will hold to these ideologies baked into the structure of gaming, and b) that because they engage these logics, they will then use these tools to understand the analog world in which they exist. What I find, instead, is that players use novel ways to negotiate what *they have identified* as treacherous assumptions within these game spaces. Rather than embracing or side-stepping these waters, they instead "talk back" to the media during play, constructing their own virtual experiences which serve their analog identities and politics (Murray, 2020; Jenkins, et al., 2016).

Feminist Game Literature

When looking at literature generated by game spaces what is most apparent are two strikingly different experiences of that same culture and community. Many feminist and intersectional game authors have written about the abuse and toxicity they experience as part of gaming. Shaw (2011) questions whether women should even adopt the name or identity of "gamer" entirely in a prescient piece before the infamous Gamergate campaign which saw many male-identified gamers targeting and threatening female-identified game designers and commentators (Shaw, 2011). Gamergate was an online campaign seeking to oust women from gaming that will be discussed in more detail in the first chapter. Braithwaite (2014) describes her experience in *World of Warcraft* forums and the toxicity and dismissiveness with which she had to contend (Braithewaite, 2014). Gray (2014) writes about her respondents' experiences on Xbox Live as a queers of color

and the strategies they deploy to circumvent abuse thrown at them (Gray, 2014). As selections from the literature, these papers and books resoundingly make the argument that women in particular are unwelcome (and cast as invaders) to the game spaces themselves and must always be on their guard in order to participate in some way.

We can find the roots of this animosity toward non-male, non-white bodies in the marketing and construction of "gamer" identity writ large. Chess (2017) makes the argument that women are just now being tapped as "Player Two" for game companies (Chess, 2017). These games are then designed with the demands and needs of "Player Two" in mind, constructed in opposition to "Player One" who is defined as male, cis, more inclined toward violent aesthetics, and who has more time to attribute to gaming (Chess, 2017). Chess (2017) contend that "woman" is not the only "Player Two" which games are seeking to construct and then sell to, but she is the vanguard of new marketable publics which can be targeted. Kocurek goes a step further, tracing how gaming became associated with men and boys from arcades to living rooms (Kocurek, 2015). Finding more than just marketing but an ideological alignment with the values embedded in games (mischievousness, violence, economic and technical prowess) as aligning with the new construction of masculinity (Kocurek, 2015). These two strands, the marketing and the construction of masculinity combine to make the default assumption that of a masculine-identified player. By extension, the game space one which women, girls, and non-binary participants must infiltrate and battle the toxicity which keeps them out of these spaces.

This experience, however, is in direct opposition to many non-male-identified players who have found joy in the game spaces. Women researchers and gamers have

found support, friendship, and community in virtual spaces as long as men have been there. We see accounts of gamers, both men and women, forming strong community bonds through game (Pearce, 2011), transcendence of those bonds (O'Connor, et al., 2015), not to mention having *fun* in these game spaces (Nardi B. A., 2010) and creating their own communities of practice (Nakamura, 2008). The women in these studies find the space rich, fulfilling and a space in which they can explore their identity and build community in virtual worlds. It subverts the naturalized connection to male-identified players and games which has infiltrated both popular culture and research, erasing the contributions and presence of these players. This strain of literature casts non-'normative' players not as aberrations or interlopers, but as *marginalized* in the realm of games and gaming because they don't "fit" the idea of what a gamer *is*.

Chapter Outline

First, in the chapter titled "We Have Always Been Here" I not only address a small amount of games history and of key women within that history, but use examples of long-time women gamers and how the navigate the space. Because both *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft* have such long histories, many of these respondents have "grown up" playing and "grown up with" these games as they develop. That is, they have played since "Vanilla" or "Classic" *World of Warcraft* and through at least 8 expansions to the game which reconfigured the space each time both mechanically and via lore. Similarly, *Dungeons and Dragons* is now on it's 5th edition. Many players in my sample started with 3/3.5 and 'skipped' 4, for various reasons but are now using 5.

Second, in the chapter titled "Navigating Race" I explore both the construction of the game itself and the ways in which players navigate that structure. The 'problematic'

construction of race in both the *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft* worlds is of central importance to contemporary discussions by players. The discourse around how to 'fix' the game is a common topic around tables, in guilds, and in more public spheres where players try to hold game-makers and designers accountable for their design (with varying degrees of success). That discourse, however, does nothing to help the players who are currently locked into existing versions of the games themselves. That is, until a better option comes along (if, indeed it ever really does), players must figure out ways to navigate the games as-written. In this chapter I explore the ways in which they do so while not compromising their otherwise anti-racist, progressive political views.

The third chapter "Jerks in the Yard" address two major prongs of social networks and culture questions. Mainly, how players get involved in games, how they maintain their relationships, and how they recruit new players. I found that players used skills gathered from other aspects of their lives in order to 'jump into' games without too much friction as well as the practice of recruiting from these other hobbies as proof that players would eventually enjoy this game/space. I found that very few players entered the hobby 'cold' as their first fantasy experience. This allowed players to have a base understanding of the tropes and storytelling they were getting into and thus eased their adoptions. Additionally, I found that once in the game space, most players relied on existing network connections and not recruitment from larger public gaming spaces. They would then heavily moderate or police these spaces in order to keep their space 'fun' or 'effective' without exposing themselves to larger toxic game publics. The line here between what has been termed "Gatekeeping" and "moderation" blurs a bit as the lines upon which a player is deemed 'ineffective' or 'toxic' shift from play group to play group

and warrant further study. Last, I explore the implications of this way of creating and policing boundaries within play spaces and what then gets seen by larger publics as a result.

Finally, I conclude with thoughts on how this research can help impact not only game spaces but our overall understanding of larger social milieus. Gamers, after all, are a subset of the larger population but occupy every position within that culture. As opposed to subcultures who remove themselves from larger cultural goals or ideology, they are uniquely reflective of the larger cultural contexts from which the come. This is an advantage of leisure studies generally, and gamers specifically. I expand on the theory that if we take gamers, as they are, and not as their stereotypical constructions, what we might learn about how people think and how they navigate toward a more just world (both in and out of game).

CHAPTER II

WE HAVE ALWAYS BEEN HERE: WOMEN IN GAMING

Introduction

Using the case of tabletop and digital roleplaying games, this chapter explores the experiences of women in the gaming sphere. Specifically, the games *Dungeons & Dragons* and *World of Warcraft* are used as case studies. This paper briefly re-historicizes the development of these games such that the contributions of women are highlighted as key components in the history of roleplaying games. It then uses ethnographic fieldwork to describe the experiences of women in game spaces.

By acknowledging women erased in the noble cause of improving the interaction felt by women at these tables today does not exonerate the current hostile and dismissive way women and other marginalized gamers within the industry and community are treated. It does offer a historic narrative to counter charges of "diversity for diversity's sake." In order to frame this community, I address 4 aspects of gendered participation in gaming. First, I use feminist and culture theorists to explore the roles women are often relegated to in games. Second, I detail how women are actively excluded from game publics. Third, I offer historical evidence of women's participation in the game space as designers. Finally, I turn to my respondents to see how they navigate and participate in games as players and contributors to the game sphere.

To do this I use not only feminist and sociological theory, but a variety of methods and evidence. The game books and texts themselves, historic knowledge and cultural objects attributed to companies and individuals, and interviews with study participants. The result is a more deeply nuanced understanding of the culture and space

of gaming itself. Further, through the data I have collected, I detail the spheres in which women continue to participate in gaming space in ever-widening circles. First through the specific practice of roleplay gaming itself, but also in how my respondents participate in related game and hobby spaces.

Rolls of Women in Gaming

In order for subcultures to produce themselves and cultural objects, participants need to be in interlocked relationships with both materials and each other. Turning back to the mobility of Bourdieu here, we can think about how the structural positions of participants help co-construct the space of possibility (Bourdieu, 1993) and how those products are created (Becker, 1974). Roleplaying games and their communities are particular spaces in which the product (the game) and the producer (the player) are both equally ephemeral and dependent on active engagement. An installed game, or a game book may have a particular value assigned to it but its use changes with each participant's input, then ceases when the object is put down.

Roleplay gaming itself isn't peculiar when it comes to gendering practices or spaces. In this chapter I use feminist authors writing about women's labor and participation in public life to explain their seeming 'absence' from the spaces of gaming,

Women have labored alongside their male counterparts in not only reading, organizing, and running games, but in being players and consumers of that culture. The consumer/contributor line in game spaces blurs because in order to play, players must *create* the "shared fantasy" of the space both in play and to solidify the gaming community (Fine, 1983). However, because they are in this shared fantasy does not mean that they don't continue to reconstruct gender hierarchies within the space of games

(Buyukozturk, 2021). Nor that they are not themselves victims of the story that they do not belong in these spaces and thus have to relegate themselves to labor *supporting* male play (Buyukozturk, 2021) because of the vitriol and abuse they suffer when they speak in public spaces (Collister, 2016). In this way, while they contribute to the labor of building and maintaining community they are simultaneously silenced and hidden from being acknowledged for those contributions. Not only are the labor and contributions of women erased from these spaces as women's labor is from economic labor markets (Acker, 1990; Waring, 2004), but that they also find themselves needing to justify what is seen as their 'entry' in those same spaces (Braithewaite, 2014). Women helped build the clubhouse of gaming only to be shut out of it when the story society told about gamers was about straight white men.

Mothers could have their place in game history hosting and supporting week-long *Dungeons and Dragons* parties over spring break (Barton, 2008). This labor is legible because it aligns with pre-existing ideas of where one might find women laboring (Acker, 1990). Acker (1990) describes gender in the context of power in organizations, and the difficulties in even discussing the gendered dimensions of labor when the assumption is that the labor being performed is being performed by straight white males. According to Acker (1990) women in labor spaces were so unthinkable as to be invisible. The assumption that work was the sphere of men renders even working women as invisible, thus negates the need for discourse about their activities in that sphere.

This mimics the organization of the perception of the gaming community. The idea attendant here is why would somebody discuss women's labor when it is so far removed from the 'reality' of what labor is going into gaming communities? Where

women are allowed to work and not is a different question than whether or not they get credit for that labor in the long run – or if it's just an expected, hidden part of the process. This has correlates to the stories told by respondents and in the general narrative of game spaces.

This includes but isn't limited to the labor of setting up home spaces and food for running games (especially for those who grew-up playing), volunteering at conventions in various capacities, and being 'recruited' to play by significant others. A common metaphor here is the 'backpack' character. That is, a character whose main role is as 'support' and/or a potion or buffing repository. Buffing here refers to a character's ability to enhance the ability of other characters as opposed to acting themselves. These players are constructed as mostly in-agentic objects which the more active players (those who are effective in combat) which can support or help the meting out of damage but are otherwise non-agents in the construction of the space. They are literally erased from their position at the table in favor of narratives focused on the 'work' portion of the social situation. Their contributions codified as 'gifts' to the 'active' players who are the ones doing all the work. Much like (re)productive labor in the surrogacy and egg donation structure is framed as 'gifts' as opposed to men's' sperm donation being constructed as a job (Almeling, 2011).

Because the game spaces of both *World of Warcraft* and *Dungeons and Dragons* are predicated on social interaction, it would be unsurprising to find that women are relied upon to perform more prosocial behavior labor than their male counterparts. Indeed, women perform these supportive roles in-game. However, it would be a mistake to assume that these healing or support roles are taken on simply because they mirror

traditional gender roles. As will be discussed below, not only do my male respondents report their enjoyment playing support, healing, or cleric roles because they are empowered by care work – but women report gravitating to this role because it requires more technical skill and thus they become a more valued part of the game group, having more choices in the larger game ecosystem if they can perform these roles.

Active Exclusion History/Myth and Gamergate

When we consider the history of games, tech, and fan spaces (all of which have had women and female-identified participants) it is important to disentangle the mythic aspects and the evidence of history. Myth, as demonstrated above, tells us that women have been a null set (or very rarely the exception) in these spaces. Much of the research reinforces this idea when it speaks about "exit" as a strategy for female players to navigate public game spaces (Gray, 2014; Buyukozturk, 2021). While this makes sense from a research perspective in that these participants are no longer "within reach" of the researcher. They will either hide their identity or not participate in public spaces and thus become invisible. Additionally, they may refuse to identify as "gamers" (Shaw, 2011). However, rather than assume these players put down games altogether, how would the landscape change if we assumed they *kept playing*.

The text-based internet allowed users to hide or otherwise not disclose their gender (or racialized) identities to other users. The default assumption became that the people in those spaces were, by and large, white men due to already cementing stereotypes largely rooted in advertising (Chess, 2017). This ability to cloak the self-online *should* create a space of uncertainty when it comes to identifying users. That uncertainty, however, has been handily filled in by advertising keyed to white, male boys

who identifies as the constructed “Player 1” (Chess, 2017). This marketing choice has led to misconceptions about who is playing these games and a rallying cry to include women in game spaces. At the same time, research has generally been interested in why women were excluded from these spaces for so long (Kocurek, 2015). Whether they were the majority is something we can guess, but due to the same anonymity which protected the text-based gamers, it is hard to know for certain.

When people care to look, they see women, non-binary, people of color, gay, and even occasionally the straight white male sitting behind keyboards. So why the discrepancy between what seems clear in the record and the narrative we tell? One of the important pieces here is that in many studies of virtual worlds, the need to disclose your identity is, by design, not necessary. Many games will only need an email address to log in, and then allow you to create your own name allowing the player to hide, or proclaim at will, their gender. And, in the comfort of their own homes, many could choose to quietly play without harassment. Gamers adopted and developed strategies to cope with hostile players while still enjoying the games. The same methods, indeed are still being used today in public game spaces like Xbox Live (Gray, 2014) This creates the opportunity, for users to literally embody something completely different than the user at the keyboard (Nardi B., 2004; Taylor, 2006). This is not to say that game design or social conventions brought in from mundane life don’t circumscribe that kind of digital freedom (Chang, 2015). You might be able to be a Panda(ren) in *World of Warcraft*, but you will either be a male panda or a female panda.

We find evidence that women have been in the games industry whenever research addresses Gamergate. Gamergate was a violent, misogynist attack on women in games in

all aspects from journalism, to critique, to development. The online movement saw gamers threaten, doxx, and otherwise harass women *who were already working in games for years* in an effort to "reclaim" the space for what they perceived was the default male player. Gamergate was never about "letting" women infiltrate game space – it was about forcing them out of places they already were and had been for years. That it was only when they were becoming pivotal in the game scene did it galvanize male players to enact violence upon them (Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill, 2017). It's also important to be mindful of where Gamergate operated. While it harassed public figures, most of the women it targeted were "big deals on the internet' and/or embedded in games production visibly. For example, there was a reason that Zoe Quinn, Brianna Wu and Anita Sarkeesian were targeted as opposed to women working rank-and-file in games industry. All three were women designing, producing, or writing/speaking about games publically.

Again, this is not to say that they weren't targeted on a micro level but the macro level of Gamergate was interested in targeting big, visible names, operating in public spaces. Large, public attacks are a form of symbolic violence to control the participation in day-to-day operations. This symbolic violence has been used to police participants in a culture in order to either excise them or make them fit the mold of what is assumed to be the culture at large (Bourdieu, 1984). It would also be a fallacy to assume that they were somehow 100% effective in routing women out of the digital and tabletop games industries where they have been operating for decades.

Gamergate became a flashpoint not only for the harassment women faced when they declared their gender online, exposing the broader world to the everyday atrocities many women faced in digital spaces – but it also served to acknowledge their presence in

the industry in a way which hadn't been widely acknowledged before. Much like the repressive Victorian regime's obsession with sex and classifying some acts as normal, natural, and good, Gamergate's obsession with who they saw as female interlopers rendered them visible in the space (Foucault, 1978). To root out and attack women in the industry and women gamers generally, those carrying out the abuse had to cement their existence in the first place.

Whether or not people should embrace the identity of "gamer" as a universal and universalizing term or even a particularly useful one (Shaw, 2011), Gamergate was fundamental in exposing women designers. Additionally, because of the line drawn in the sand by Gamergate, women gamers started declaring themselves in ways previously unheard of. This can be attributed to larger cultural shifts in gender power dynamics and accessibility to the public sphere (Nakamura, 2008). Women, famous and not could use Gamergate to be a part of the conversation about women in video games.

This created a space where women, who had been playing in private for years could empower themselves, as well as by the targeting of female-identified designers made them highly visible not only in the industry but in the common consciousness in a different way. It rendered the invisible bodies who had been playing and toiling alongside their male counterparts *visible*. Whereas before a female designer would either be met with hostility or a sort of 'blind non-passing' acceptance, they suddenly had to be a) accounted for and b) protected. The viciousness and veracity of the rape, bomb, and other physical threats *forced* the hand of larger cultural and state structures to acknowledge the widespread danger women were in via game and fan spaces. In short,

while movements like “Cosplay is not consent” and women had quietly exited or hidden their involvement for years, Gamergate thrust them into the spotlight.

The reasons for this flashpoint could also be the growing network of social media sites and other off-platform and non-geolocation-locked affordances from the telecommunications revolution of Web 2.0. Online women could connect with other gamers (who they had been told didn’t exist) and form private or closed groups where they could play, create, and participate away from the prying eyes of a hostile and toxic male larger internet (Nakamura, 2008). Fomenting solidarity in cyberspace, Gamergate saw many of those women refuse to be intimidated out of the hobby and create accounts which exposed and documented the toxic behavior to which they had been subjected in all facets of their lived experience and not just in gaming. Web 2.0 allowed for the message boards and IRC of previous web connections a visual aspect and concretized modes of resistance including employing the ‘digital pillory’ (Vitis & Gilmour, 2016). It was a way for some women to show solidarity with relative safety.

Women’s historical participation in game Development

We have a good record that muddies the narrative that white straight men have been the only ones directing game content. While men have clearly dominated the field, I would like to highlight a few key players. Women have been in design and creative roles in the industry. In digital spaces, I would like to highlight Roberta Williams and Lori Ann Cole of what would eventually become Sierra On-Line Entertainment. As Barton writes of Cole’s contribution in the design for the *Quest for Glory* games, “Cole’s idea was to take Sierra’s highly successful adventure game engine and modify it, incorporating [Computer Role Playing Game] elements” (Barton, 2008, p. 229).

Williams, and Cole were not the only women working on games, but they are women who helped define what games were or could be just as much as Richard "Lord British" Garriott the creator of *Ultima* and eventual co-founder of Origin Systems Inc. While Garriot's *Ultima* series holds pride of place in the trajectory of computer role playing games,

Cole and Williams receive decidedly less laurels. We can still see the echo of this introduction of RPG elements in AAA titles like *Assassin's Creed* today. The idea that you could make choices in how your character proceeds through the game, even though it is an 'adventure-style' game on rails fundamentally alters player interaction with game – as Garriott and the CRPG developers would continue to exploit.

Garriott who, like other programmers and game designers of the time "saw in Gygax's game a rich source of material and inspiration" (King & Borland, 2014, p. loc 601). *Dungeons and Dragons* at this time was still being created by Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) founded and run by Gary Gygax who had in their employ Margaret Weiss. Weiss co-created the popular *Dragonlance* novels as well as adventure modules for what was then *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons*. Weiss here is a great example of somebody who was shaping not the bones of what *Dungeons and Dragons* would eventually become – but the body. Weiss was creating and publishing content for TSR that helped define and push the boundaries of what the game could be. Such content as we know Garriott, and suspect Cole and Williams interacted with as they were designing video games. Focusing only on Garriott without Weiss, or on Ken Williams without Roberta Williams and Lori Ann Cole, misses half the story and the creative force behind roleplay game development. Not to mention the rank-and file women programmers working

tirelessly along with their male counterparts as parts of development and implementation teams. These women in development are important not only because they represent players as well as developers but because they can be key flashpoints in the construction of games and virtual worlds as spaces humans, not just men can enjoy. That the ground in which players trod is fertilized with the passion and intellect of many different-bodied designers. That being said, it is also important to note the challenges these women faced in terms of social expectations both in the workplace and out. While it is a creative hobby, labor practices which unfairly impact women can be heightened by game development-specific pitfalls of crunch, an expectation of home labor being performed by a partner, or unequal burden of pregnancy.

Women's experiences of gaming now

Mechanisms used by Women in Games

Borrowing heavily from Kishonna Grey's work on X-Box live, I propose four major ways in which women have become underrepresented in the gaming sphere. The first is the construction of the spaces themselves as being misogynistic and hostile to what was defined as non-normative by men with cultural capital either as creators or critics. This erased the women who *were* in those spaces as well as relegated them to side or non-key projects with notable exceptions as discussed above. The second is that they would hide their gender identity in online spaces. Cherny addresses this in the text-based internet but Grey extends it to the headset and including other marginalized identities.

For my respondents who had been playing since the dawn of *World of Warcraft* this was a tactic they reported. When voice chat became 'native' to *World of Warcraft*

there was much discussion about whether or not users would adopt such a feature because it removed a layer of anonymity from the play itself and not all women were excited about the prospect. Indeed, when voice chat became a native feature of World of Warcraft in 2016, negating the need for 3rd party Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) services like Ventrilo or Discord, it marked a shift in opting-in vs opting-out of engaging voice to run raids. This meant that where before people would have to be invited to a separate channel, joining the conversation could be more streamlined and handled in-game, increasing the pressure to adopt voice as opposed to text chat.

Third, for the women who have extensive histories of playing Dungeons and Dragons this iterates in playing "home" games or spaces that are not generally visualized as traditional or public gaming spaces. For example, they wouldn't have been present in Fine's 1983 study, attending game sessions in a game store which would have been long ago coded as (and actually) hostile to their presence and participation (Fine, 1983). Instead, they would play with junior family members or partners. This data is found not only in accounts by female gamers themselves but by the male gamers recalling their game history. For example, Samuel reported that they were introduced to the game by a favored aunt initially who ran campaigns and taught them how to play. They then extended their play group to others in the neighborhood

Fourth, and to a limited degree, players recounted revealing their gender at opportune times. This could mean telling their party they were girls and playing into stereotypical ideas of incompetence to get loot or other help from gamers as Alexis did. Or it could be revealing their gender after experiencing toxic chat and completing the raid as was reported by Shannon. The third form this took was gathering encyclopedic

knowledge and/or skill at the game itself. This would be the female-identified gamer being technically better and more well read than the toxic person she encountered and trying to earn their spot either in the raid or at the table. Sometimes this worked – as when healers made themselves indispensable in *World of Warcraft* to get into more raids – and sometimes it backfired as the test wasn't about competency so much as gatekeeping.

During interviews there also emerged a dichotomy of these particular players where they would either choose to be high-intensity players and classes, indispensable to the group (Tanks or Healers) or they would choose classes where they could 'take care of themselves' if, say the male healer refused to heal their character. Paladins in *World of Warcraft* specifically were cited as examples of this tactic. Because mechanically Paladins are strong enough to pull enemy characters and have the ability to heal themselves. Much like women who have entered male-coded spaces in other spheres, they have felt the need to perform better than their male counterparts for recognition or be able to 'take care of themselves.'

Women playing World of Warcraft *and* Dungeons and Dragons

My respondents are not the vanguard of a new movement of women gamers. Many of them have been playing *Dungeons and Dragons* for decades or *World of Warcraft* since its release in 2004. Additionally, they have gaming histories which predate *World of Warcraft* and run tandem to *Dungeons and Dragons*. They have been affected not only by the history of exclusion but the relatively recent Gamergate fiasco. Many have strong feeling on the treatment they receive or feel they are subject to but they have little time or energy to spare in tackling it. As Trista (F 40) poetically put it "I need

to pour my emotional capacity to be hurt and hurting into stuff that is moving me farther along the spectrum. I'm not going to spend it on gamer boys. They just don't get my energy there."

Trista had been gaming both on *World of Warcraft* and more recently using 5th edition *Dungeons and Dragons* for a number of years and used techniques to keep herself distant from much of what she called the 'toxicity' of public spaces. While she enjoys playing with her *Dungeons and Dragons* group, she doesn't see time in her life anymore for *World of Warcraft* having otherwise played it within the first year of release. Trista, like many of my respondents, cites not hostility for her lack of play, but a lack of time. She will happily *play* but she won't go into game stores or other public spaces because she doesn't have the emotional energy to confront 'gamer boys.' Instead, she cultivates a table where certain types of action are acceptable and 'fun' and avoids what she dislikes about the community.

These twin strategies – avoidance and moderation – are core to the experience of gaming as women and a large part of why the ground was ceded to men in the narrative. A narrative Alexa (F 32) neatly captures when she says:

> I think there is still a large segment of the population that is wary of gamers/gaming. Sometimes I think they are right to be, when you look at some of the toxicity in the gaming community like Gamergate, Sad Puppies, SWATing, etc. But I don't think that gets a ton of mainstream news coverage, it's more so within our community. I think that the media (and most people) probably have a pretty narrow understanding of who gamers are - we're not all white men. And we're not all playing first-person shooters.

Here Alexa is explicitly referencing something I heard from most of my respondents across social categories and platforms – that the narrative of who a 'gamer' is does not paint a realistic story of who is playing. They acknowledge the toxicity of the

space while also feeling their own experiences aren't reflected. However, it is most important here as a woman playing, she does not see herself reflected in the story we tell about gamers even though women have always been gamers.

Perhaps this is no more clearly demonstrated than when Edna (F 66) spoke to me about "It's kind of interesting thing about me, I think is that there's three generations of D&D players in my family, but it's gone so far beyond me." Not only was Edna playing with her children, but she offers a third strategy of women (and gamers in general) for how they built their play groups. Tabletop gamers specifically recruited extensively to fill tables or involve others in their hobby. Unlike the strategy of playing in a game store or other public venue (Fine, 1983), my respondents were more likely to pull in others with whom they already shared bonds. Edna specifically remembers that her "gaming community grew out of a group of friends, essentially. And we tended to invite people because we enjoyed the game. You know, coworkers or people that we met or friends that, you know, reconnected. We sort of, you know, actively promoted [the game]."

This is the third way in which women navigated the space so that they were shielded from much of the public toxicity. They would only recruit from existing networks so everybody at their table was 'safe,' and they wouldn't have to moderate behavior. This friends component is echoed by Allison (F 36) when she talks about why she plays *Dungeons and Dragons* but not *World of Warcraft* as much anymore by saying "*World of Warcraft*, was really great while we had like a group of friends who were active and we were playing together, but now when we go back, it's just like me and my husband and there's not, it's not as fun if you don't have a big guild to play with." Allison goes on to cite the second *World of Warcraft* expansion *Wrath of the Lich King* (2008) as

"peak *World of Warcraft*" mostly because of how many people it required to be interdependent to access content. Allison, like Justice (NB 38) preferred the ability to have large guilds but the maintenance of 10-player raids. Both people felt that the 10-man-raid was a good working number of people and personalities to maintain. It's worth noting that both of them also reported a combination of friends pulled into the game, as well as friendships transcending the digital space. Those who became these friends both in the virtual world of the game in day-to-day life were, at least part of the time, guild members and not people found in the general population (for the most part). That is, their relationship across the platforms strengthened as opposed to being new and only of the single dimension of the game space.

How Women Feed the Hungry Hobby

Role play gaming is a hungry hobby in terms of time whether you are in public or in private spaces. To assume that women spend *less* time playing or researching or investing in their experience simply because they are not in the public eye as much would do them and the games they play a disservice. One of the things that continued to come up for both my male and female players was how 'hungry' both *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft* are. The most common response to why there were breaks in play history were along the lines of "life got in the way." This was cited equally along breaks from *World of Warcraft* and *Dungeons and Dragons*. Typically, respondents would speak about a few years of intense play when time was abundant in their lives. Either through high school, or through college. They would then *return* to play with their friends (new and old) and families within the last few years (as I was interviewing them). In some cases, play groups and guilds broke apart due to interior drama and there were no

other players, but Sara here is emblematic of a typical response to how putting down and picking up play happens:

> Life got in the way largely and they're just kind of by the wayside. You know? It started out as you know, I, my kind of group when it was college, so we kind of all went our separate ways and then I moved. And then I started working in this terrible desk job that I really hated. And, you know, just one thing after the next and eventually it was not even an afterthought. It wasn't after afterthought. And then a couple years ago, a friend of mine was like, Hey, I started playing *D&D*, and my friend really wants to lead her campaign. And I know that that's right up your alley. Like, do you want to come and play with us and be part of this, and I jumped on the opportunity.

At the Table

While there is, of course, variance in how long players sit at the table, the time commitment is a serious one. Most *Dungeons and Dragons* tables are 4-7 players who are expected to show up regularly if not for every session. Because of the nature of play, having a player or character absent can result in two problems. The first is if a combat encounter happens during the session. Different tables have different strategies to navigate this problem, one of the most popular being handing the character sheet to a different player or the "Dungeon Master" to 'Puppet' the character through combat. The second simply ignoring that player's existence during the encounter. Additionally, if the campaign is heavily involved in storytelling, coming up for reasons the character is absent can be a challenge. Again, one of the ways this is handled in-session is to just 'ignore' the character for the session. Either way, this results in a break from the world and is not optimal for the table.

So, having a stable group of people is very important to gameplay. People you can count on. The second part, once you have 4-7 people, is that sessions can last anywhere from 4-12 *hours* usually weekly or bi-weekly per game. This time

commitment was continuously referred to as the reason people became so close to their playgroups. Much like other social activities, the sheer amount of time spent playing together bonded people with their playgroups. As a result, most of my respondents had at least one long term friend with whom they solidified their friendship through play. As Justice describes her teen play "I think our sessions lasted like four to 10 hours. Like we would just hang out goof off and like, you know, play our characters but also kind of hang out and have like, you know, social friend time too."

One of the ways both *World of Warcraft* and *Dungeons and Dragons* players navigate this scheduling trouble as adults is to have routine set times and places to play. This becomes important as well for *World of Warcraft* players who sometimes need to coordinate up to 40 players at a time. Guilds who are recruiting for players will have application materials detailing when raids happen and what the character and gear level expectations are. Guilds, of course, are uneven in how they enforce this schedule, but players understand if they are 'booted' from the guild for missing raids or not having enough time to play. This, in fact, was one of the reasons *World of Warcraft* players stepped away from the game. The second reason for absences was a dislike of new content.

So, looking at a four-hour commitment in *Dungeons and Dragons* or possibly 2 weekly raids (at about 4 hours each) in *World of Warcraft* is already something of a time commitment. But it is not where the time spent in these spaces ends. For *World of Warcraft* there are other commitments in guilds, like farming for equipment, levels, or (traditionally) resources to put into the Guild coffers so that others can create items from raw materials. The cooperative play allows for character equipment to be leveled

quicker, as well as offering opportunity for 'alts' (alternative in contrast to 'main' characters) to farm experience and thus level so that they can participate in a raid in a different role if necessary. Male and female players, when asked about how much time they spent in game regularly reported habits of between 30 and 40 hours a week averaged out. This included game sessions of 4-8 hours ever week to two weeks, and raids twice a week at 4 hours each. The rest of the time players reported either "grinding" out levels in *World of Warcraft* in order to reach specific levels of play. Or it could include researching topics in both *World of Warcraft* or *Dungeons and Dragons* materials to supplement these play sessions. Beyond that, players reported spending hours talking or thinking about their play sessions creatively in terms of narrative or use of mechanics.

Beyond the Table

For example, many *World of Warcraft* players would have their 'main' which performed the job they preferred, be it DPS (Damage Per Second), Tank, or Healer. They would also have "alt" which could perform any of these roles so that the guild members would always be playing with an optimal party. To do this, not only would they have more hours playing the game, but it would usually involve research in official and unofficial websites to find optimal builds for characters so they could be most useful during these raids. This is compounded by the fact that with many of the new expansions or updates that Blizzard releases, these builds *change* for characters and classes. This would lead to "Re-speccing" already-leveled characters to maintain optimal status or starting a new character. In short, there is no real time that a *World of Warcraft* player is running on 'autopilot' unless they are solo and in charge of their own gamification.

This is echoed but slightly different when it comes to *Dungeons and Dragons* players. They as well spend a great deal of time outside of the game thinking about or researching for their play. The similarity here lies mostly in online or official resources for play. As Jada mentions the Reddit *Dungeons and Dragons* community and many players point to online tools like Roll20, or DNDBeyond through which they can access their characters and official Wizards of the Coast rulebooks and other paid content. *Dungeons and Dragons* players also spent great amounts of time simply *thinking* about the worlds they would like to build or how they would like to incorporate other aspects into their game worlds. This is most typified with Taylor who says:

> I've really been playing a lot of *Frostpunk* actually. Because I've been thinking of maybe running a game in that setting. I don't know what system I'll use. I'll figure something out. It'll be great. I'd love to play a game in the *Frostpunk* setting. If you're not familiar with it, it's a city building game based on like, snow apocalypse kind of thing.

Taylor here is using a different game to augment and think about her tabletop roleplaying games. In this way *Dungeons and Dragons* players are continually thinking about the possibilities of paying *Dungeons and Dragons*, it becomes a way of thought that is hard to disentangle what is thinking about *Dungeons and Dragons* and what is *not.* Many of my respondents had trouble answering the question of how long they spent thinking about games outside of actual play for this reason.

This is evidence of women being deeply embedded and committed to these games above and beyond the dismissive way they’re spoken of in much of the marketing literature. Importantly this is story is not deviant from the male-identified people I spoke with either. These games are not only hungry for time in terms of play but in how much time they occupy when away from the table or the console. As most of my respondents

were also employed, many with families they supported (and played with) it would be a fallacy to paint this 'background noise' of game as having a negative impact on their lives. While video game addiction is a recognized pathology this is not what my players reported experiencing. They *did* report experiencing shame for how many hours they played in some cases, and were quick with excuses or justifications for the long hours they spent playing or thinking about playing. While many acknowledged that the gaming stigma had lowered in recent years, many still recalled news stories about neglectful parents or other sensational stories about gaming and were quick to distance themselves from it.

In the end, this could also operate as yet another barrier of declaration for many women (especially with children when it comes to being public facing. Women did not significantly diverge from men in the amount of play or thinking about/researching their games. Nor was there any divergence in terms of merchandise owned (books, plushies, other swag). What *was* different is that men reported much more ease moving through the public spaces of gaming rather than the curated or private spaces. Many male-identified respondents were leery or had 'very little patience' with the toxicity they encountered (rarely aimed at them especially if they were white) but the time and effort spent avoiding or 'proving better than' the others in public spaces was not attendant. What both *did* experience was shame at how long they spent in play. This becomes an additional facet of why women would not be public about their play – especially if they are mothers..

Women Gaming Beyond Dungeons and Dragons *and* World of Warcraft

While this study focuses specifically on women playing roleplaying games (and further focused on the specific games *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft*) during interviews my respondents spoke of the many other games they played and were involved with. This mirrored my male respondents and is unsurprising. It's hard to imagine somebody deciding they would only play *Monopoly* for the rest of their lives. This section, however, outlines important action and participation in game spaces before and beyond their involvement in *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft*. Indeed, one of the major pathways to play for my respondents was involvement in other games.

Analog Game Ecologies

One of the more popular game types for Dungeons and Dragons players was, unsurprisingly, board games. Not board games as is popularly understood in the Hasbro/Milton-Bradley sense but in the newer trend of cooperative or "European-style" boardgames. These games trend away from rolling dice and moving along a board to engage mechanics and more toward mechanics like resource management. As Sara (F 33) stated when I asked her about her trajectory toward playing *Dungeons and Dragons* with her friends:

> Even though I wasn't actually playing *D&D* at the time, like they're still like doing really, tabletop game nights with friends of mine. It was just something like *Carcassonne*, *Ticket to Ride*, you know, silly tabletop games. And so just gaming in general has always been there. Like, sit down and commit to making a character.

In this kind of play it was usual for women to use the play not only as an end unto itself but as a social event. It was a way for friends to get together and play something which is consonant with the men in my research. *Dungeons and Dragons* was always

introduced by a friend or family member in these social game spaces and became a favorite, then sometimes the only game that was being played for a time. This is largely due to the mechanics of *Dungeons and Dragons,* as it is intended to be able to be played for long stretches of time and over multiple gaming sessions. In fact, one of the great mechanical innovations has been traced to Dave Arneson and his introduction of the 'leveling' mechanic into the game itself. It would be like giving your shoe in *Monopoly* extra turns to move as it becomes more powerful.

Edna also describes an important aspect of why *Dungeons and Dragons* takes root in these already-made play groups. Not that they were exclusory, but that they took advantage of folks already interested in a particular form of play. Edna here makes the distinction between playing board or card games and what she deems 'sport' when describing how her game table evolved to embrace *Dungeons and Dragons*:

> It would sort of depend on the company involved. Um I grew up in a family that was very much into gaming and that the different kinds of board games, card games, you know, outside outdoors, not so much sports, some sport, but more games, then sports …

This is not to make the claim that one had to choose between a tabletop game experience, *Dungeons and Dragons* or outdoors and sports. It is to draw the connection that *Dungeons and Dragons* was adopted by women already playing and active in games themselves. Women, like their male counterparts have been embedded in ecologies of games before and after playing *Dungeons and Dragons.*

Edna herself introduced the game to her son in 1983, who would eventually introduce it to his daughter. Similarly to the sister dynamics stated above. One of my male respondents received the game as a gift from his aunt when he was young and played it with his cousins on road trips, and several of my male respontents recounted

tales of playing with their fathers and sisters as well. *Dungeons and Dragons* has been very much a family affair for some time while *World of Warcraft* respondents reported coming to the game via friendship or work networks instead, migrating to family play as interest was discovered at family reunions or through other communications.

Digital Game Ecologies

Much like their analog counterparts, women who play *Dungeons and Dragons* or *World of Warcraft* did not come to their hobbies 'cold.' They were already playing many digital games and continued to do so while playing study games. This is seen most clearly with women who were 30 years or older and didn't have the opportunity to pick-up the specific study games until later. Either because the release date of *World of Warcraft* was 2004 or because they hadn't been in the orbit of *Dungeons and Dragons* until later. It's important to keep in mind here that many respondents played *both* games as a result of involvement in one or the other.

To set the timeline of women involved in digital spaces and games, I will note that Jada (F 34) declared that the first game she was 'hooked on' was *Age of Empires II* which was released September 30, 1999. This was 5 years before *World of Warcraft* was released and was a real-time strategy game. The mechanics of *Age of Empires II* and the series in general are important here because they are mostly resource-based much like *Carcassonne* as mentioned before. Both Jada and Sara play *Dungeons and Dragons* and took to the tabletop game intensely. This might indicate not a preference for analog and digital so much as ways for players to engage the game itself.

First in thinking about histories of digital play, older players indicated that they or the families were 'early adopters' of technology and computers. Many having a computer

in their home at what they describe as a 'young' age (usually teen or pre-teen). This bears out in the games they played both as solo endeavors and as parts of online multi-user spaces. *Zork* (1980) was mentioned by name as well as the category of "text-based-adventure" games. Further, as Trista reports, not only was she involved in these early games but her sister was playing *Dungeons and Dragons* (which she would adopt later) but she:

> was too young to play with them. And she didn't want me in her way. And so I never had a group that I played D&D with. But I did a lot of the (computer) role playing games. And so [my sister] did a lot of MUDs in college, and actually did like the writing and that kind of stuff on them. And then I played *World of Warcraft*, back when it first came out.

Interestingly on the MOOs and MUDs, Alexa reports that she was playing with "90% women. It's a funny divide. I couldn't tell you a single guy who played. We were all women, *many* playing just as many male characters as female characters, complete with romantic entanglements and all. (emphasis Alexa)" In many ways this would be the opposite from many assumptions made about digital multiplayer games. It also highlights some of the affordances of online play – the lack of necessity in declaring gender in these spaces. While people can voice-code race it's harder and sometimes just unnecessary to gender code text. Not that women playing in these spaces didn't face misogyny and discrimination but when looking at participation in game spaces Alexa's experience points to a culture of women playing from the beginning of this technological development.

Trista describes a 'lifetime' of playing games, roleplaying games specifically. Alexa describes a similar trajectory: "I started joining roleplaying games run through those old online chat rooms, then went from there to MUSHes and MOOs, and then to

WoW." MUSH and MOO are both terms for multi-user online text-based games which were developed and coded by players in online environments. Trista and Alexa here describe the experience of not only growing up surrounded by games, but in a very real way growing up *in tandem* with games, mechanics, and graphics. *World of Warcraft* for these players just became the next iteration of a hobby in which they were thoroughly embedded. Importantly, as hinted at by Trista's sister, there is a record of women being instrumental in the programming and running of these spaces. Alexa goes on to speak about how the online game *Pixel Petz* led her to programming and web design.

Players also reported playing classic Japanese Roleplaying Games (JRPGs) in their youth and would return to the format. Andrea (F 30) reported that she "grew up [playing] *Final Fantasy, Dragon Quests, Star Ocean, Lunar* like all of the like very like, classic quintessential like JRPGs and so there's a lot of those that are like newer that I like as well." Among other games mentioned were the *Legend of Zelda* games which first released on Nintendo in 1987, with the latest installment as of this writing in the series *Breath of the Wild* being released on the latest Nintendo hardware in 2017. While whether or not *The Legend of Zelda* is a roleplaying game or an action/adventure game is something of a contentious issue in the game community the mechanics are close enough that the knowledge is transferable to roleplaying games. Perhaps it could be a question posed to Cole and Williams. You level a character who goes into dungeons (literally here) to gain experience and 'loot.' My respondents report being as loyal to this JRPG series as they are to their tabletop and American digital roleplaying games.

This kind of loyalty is not extended exclusively to Nintendo or Zelda however, many of my respondents were loyal to Blizzard as well, which is partially why they

became involved in *World of Warcraft* – even if they just had the knowledge that it was coming out. We can trace this through play of the *Diablo* series first released for computer in 1996. The latest expansion as of this writing for *Diablo II: Rise of the Necromancer* was released in 2017 and Blizzard has two installments announced or in development. In some cases, the pull of this series (much like Zelda) is large enough to keep players returning even when time is a limiting factor when playing games. Allison describes her involvement in *Diablo* as such:

> Well right now I'm playing *Diablo III* because the new Season just came out. Anytime a new *Diablo* season comes out we play for like a few weeks until we get all the season stuff done and then we stop. But I don't play too many other games at the moment we we've played a lot of different games throughout the years but right now and I'm not playing anything other than Diablo and D&D.

Women are Game Magpies (Just like their Male Counterparts)

The last important category to consider here is what I refer to as "game magpies" in many interviews. These are women who play *Dungeons and Dragons,* usually in tandem with *World of Warcraft* as mere entries in vast categories of gameplay. This can range from players who attend boardgame conferences to those with Steam and Humble Bundle subscriptions. Steam and Humble Bundle are both online marketplaces for digital games with slightly different models. Importantly, both heavily feature 'indie' video games, or those not made by large "AAA" studios. They are also platforms where one can find 'alpha' or 'beta' access – or access to games before they are officially released – and thus be up to date on current trends and mechanics in the games industry. This also includes behavior like looking at message boards being in groups which discuss games, keeping up to date on ideas, and supporting Kickstarters where they can. These players don't simply 'play and walk away.' They are knowledgeable and eager to share their

findings with others, finding ways to contribute to content from writing and designing their own games to having podcasts. In short, they are embedded in game ecologies not simply as consumers but as content creators helping to shape the discourse of the larger gaming community.

Finally, it is worth noting that my respondents also reported playing 'cell phone games' or 'minigames' in addition to these longer commitments. Much like their male counterparts, these women would have a game they could play for 15-20 minutes at a time either on a handheld device or on their computer. That is, they played both "casual" games aimed at a wide audience, and "core" games aimed a specialized audience with more technically challenging mechanics (Cote, 2020). These casual games can be thought of as the puzzle games designed under Chess's (2017) "Player Two" construction. Gaming was one of the ways in which they passed time. This is important to note because while the statistic of 50% of gamers are female is bandied about online it is quickly discounted by the *type* of game they are playing. I submit, according to my research, that women are playing 'casual games' *in addition* to 'core' and a vast array of games in between those poles. Not only that, but they move from different iterations and types of games, usually along mechanics lines but not always. As new games develop, so do new players migrate from one platform (software or hardware) to another. Again, nobody decides that they're going to play only one game for the rest of their lives, and it would be ridiculous to apply that logic to either *Dungeons and Dragons* or *World of Warcraft* players.

Conclusion

When discussing the trajectory of games and gender disparities it is important to think about the women who are playing not in public spaces but those who are practicing in private spaces. These women might not feel they can access the identity markers that are available to their male counterparts even if they haven't been pushed out entirely by hostile environments. However, it is also important to not see the adoption of games, gaming, and gaming practices as somehow new to those who identify as female. This lends credence to the invasion-narratives of women prevalent in these spaces.

Women have become expert at hiding themselves, and many of these spaces have become expert at hiding or downplaying their contributions to these spaces. It's time to re-examine the record and give a full accounting of the women who continue to shape the games world – digital and analogue – either by driving play or designing games. This is not to say that the contributions of male and female game designers/players are equal, the exercise of gendered power has all but ensured they aren't. It is only in the moments that women's' contributions are so fundamental that they can't be denied, or where they are innovating in particular spaces that the narrative is forced to take note. Meanwhile players are playing in the shadows, quite happily in many cases, out of sight of the misogyny and toxicity they all but assured to experience.

It erases the contributions of women who helped shape games, game spaces and attendant fantasy or science fiction worlds. It also provides weight to the argument that these spaces are not for women in the first place. While they might not have been designed for women, or marketed to them, that does not mean women did not play these games. And while women may have been socialized in particular ways to embrace certain aesthetics, that fundamentally does not mean they are disinterested in what have

been seen as traditionally male spheres of activity. Just as history is full of women who either disguised their gender to participate in male spaces, or those that had enough privilege and power to go against social norms, it is important to remember that women have always been here. Rolling dice and creating characters to inhabit and adventure in fantasy worlds.

Instead, however, of making more room at the table, I suggest that we simply allow those already at the table a way to exist and use their voice where they have been silenced. Gamergate made these women legible and once we have seen them, it would be a pity to let them continue to inhabit the shadows of the game world or, worse, make them fight again as if they are new. Women don't need to be bigger experts or better tacticians, arguably many already are. What needs to happen is a recognition of their accomplishments, their rights as humans to play, and their ability to contribute to a hobby which tells the story of itself as an 'outcast' story. What if instead of thinking about game space as a "boys only" clubhouse being pried open we think of it as a many-chambered home where we could open doors and comingle to build a better space entirely?

CHAPTER III

NAVIGATING RACE: PLAYER AGENCY AND POLITCS

This chapter looks at how players navigate racial categories in the game simulacrum of *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft*. One of the reasons that fantasy roleplaying games can serve as a site to understand how people navigate race is that the constructions of race run parallel to how racial categories have been constructed in so-called real life. Fantasy roleplay is especially fruitful for the way it reveals assumptions about race by writing racial characteristics onto character bodies, and how it makes race salient for the player base. That is, the structural construction of race as a category and the lived responses to it are parallel. We can see the assumptions creators have about race played out in rules and game mechanics much like laws regarding citizenship and activity in raced-bodies was constructed in the United States.

Players engage in this construction much of the time with lower out-of-game stakes, but also with just as little comfort under its oppressive nature, developing radical or justice-oriented perspectives. As opposed to other scholars who see the blueprints for conservative ideology to flourish (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2007), looking at how players actually dis/engage mechanics can offer valuable insights in how people navigate structural and individualistic ideas of race in their lives. If we take these spaces as socializing forces, we must also understand how much of the space is swallowed wholesale and how much players opt instead to push back against the world they have been handed as constructed in the media object (Jenkins et al., 2016).

Racialized Bodies and their Construction

Race in the United States was constructed though the discourse of citizenship and which bodies would be incorporated into the state and which could be forcibly kept out of the new republic (Haney Lopez, 2006). We can see these echoes in the very xenophobic worlds presented by *World of Warcraft* and *Dungeons and Dragons*. While presenting an entire world, as opposed to singular nations both *World of Warcraft* and *Dungeons and Dragons* have specific boundaries drawn where races do and do not belong. Although this has been ameliorated as updated versions are released, much of the work by Wizards of the Coast in this area is ongoing. In *World of Warcraft* this is most classically represented in the constructions of "Horde" races or "Alliance" races. Whether a player chooses one or the other, the game structure itself disallows cooperation between Horde or Alliance characters even against narratively "common enemies." The argument can be made that *World of Warcraft* subverts narrative expectation in casting the "Alliance" races (traditionally 'good' archetypes) as controlling or invading the "Horde" spaces. However, more important here is not which faction the player identifies with, but the hard line drawn between them. In *World of Warcraft* a player either belongs or doesn't.

This construction of Horde or Alliance unsurprisingly rides in on the back of *Dungeons and Dragons* constructions of race and embodied essentialism. In early editions of *Dungeons and Dragons* there were 5 "playable" races, with humans being the 'neutral' race according to game mechanics. That is, a human received no statistical bonuses or hindrances in the game. Conversely, all other races and monsters were relegated not only to a *Monster Manual* or other additional books. This draws a line between what is 'on your side' and what is 'against you.' Whether or not the party is 'good' or 'evil,' hard lines are clearly drawn between what a player can "be" to be

included as a citizen-adventurer in *Dungeons and Dragons* and what exists only outside their party and is most often an enemy. It should also be noted that while *World of Warcraft* expanded what bodies players could inhabit, it still retains this "Player Character" vs "Non-Player Character" distinction as well.

Fantasy world creators like those working at *World of Warcraft* and *Dungeons and Dragons* reflect how race was understood by their creators, writing them structurally into the game (the same way law was used to structure racial relations in larger society). It's tempting to say that these rules as set down in the game world are immutable but, especially in the case of tabletop games like *Dungeons and Dragons* players go through the interpretive process of rules. They can choose which rules to implement, which to discard, which to modify, and which to "homebrew" or rewrite in such a way that it is more reflective of their experience with structural racism. "Homebrew" here is a term used by gamers to describe rules and worlds that apply at their tables alone and are either in competition or concert with published 'official' materials. Conversely, in digital settings where the concepts of race and immigration are hard-baked into the games themselves people still find ways around them – though imperfectly. Much of the time this involves operating outside of the system itself. This function then allows for individualistic conceptions of race and embodiment to be foregrounded while allowing players to (re)create the fantasy world they choose to play in.

Race itself, in addition to being structural, hinges on preconceived notions of belonging, morality, class and other cultural identifiers which get written on the body. Much like race becomes ephemeral when known descent is removed from the equation (Harris, 1964). Players need more than a one-drop rule to understand the bodies they are

engaged with. They need the surrounding cultural and social constructs to put together the raced picture of what they are encountering. Players then easily move between the embodied racial puzzle with which they have been presented and the out-of-game understandings they have of racialized bodies.

When Game and Out-Game Life Collide

This can be seen in the depictions of the various races of *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft.* In fact, *World of Warcraft* specifically has come under fire for their portrayals of certain races many times. Most notably their depiction of a "Pandaren" race which hails from a game zone reminiscent of mythic-era China. Many players put together the puzzle of the Pandaren in the United States as playing off harmful and fantastical Asian stereotypes. This critique is compounded by the fact that the Pandaren are the only race which can be either Horde or Alliance – allowing them to be the "model minority" in either *World of Warcraft* faction. Whether or not this was an intentional move by game designers (there is a strong rebuttal which maintains that the Pandaren were created to entice more International Asian players into the game itself) in America it reads to American audiences as a re-inscription of a harmful stereotype. This is an example of not only the salience of race for players, but how complex readings can become as we examine what is happening.

Similarly with the Orcs in *Dungeons and Dragons,* harmful stereotypes are reflected in the pages of the rule books. Orcs are described as having "piggish faces, prominent teeth that resemble tusks, and stooped postures" in the latest edition of the rules (Wizards of the Coast, 2014). In much of the art additionally, the orcs themselves are depicted having dreadlocks or other racially identified hairstyles and greyish or black

skin. They are described as 'savage' in their disposition, previously being 'evil-aligned' in opposition to the playable races which are all 'neutral' racially.

The images, descriptions, and mechanics of both the Pandaren and Orc can be read as re-inscriptions of controlling images (Collins, 2009) and racist conceptions of the other. That is, the races in these fantasy settings recreate racial ideologies which the players must navigate in order to play the game. There are choices to be made when it comes to race, and how much to ignore or incorporate into game spaces but race itself is never far from players' minds as they move through either Azeroth or their *Dungeons and Dragons* campaign. They have no recourse to color-blind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2014) when it comes to playing with race in these worlds. Further, unlike in their daily interactions, players can be reasonably assured that the assumptions about *who* they are ultimately interacting with based on a fantasy race are reasonably sound. This process mimics the assumptions people make about race in the larger social sphere based on appearance and the ascribed attributions and biases they have learned from the racial projects in the United States (Omi & Winant, 2015). The exception here, sometimes dependent on who is running the game is that those assumptions (unlike non-game life) are reinforced as *correct.* The game rewards these racist assumptions unless they are actively interrupted during play or lore building, as detailed below.

As a result, although not explicitly political, we see players call for and develop alternative pathways to tear down the structure of racism encoded in these pages and programming even just for their own benefit. This can happen as part of a larger movement in gaming, or, as we shall see, around the table itself. Looking at player behavior in game can offer insight into the ways in which players, specifically white

players navigate worlds where race is increasingly a salient category while they may still be reluctant to claim participation in political activities. This reticence to claim political affiliation by people has been observed by New Media participants in that they disavow political action (preferring to remain apolitical) but are engaged in challenging structures of race and class nonetheless (Jenkins et al., 2016).

We All Know What is Going On

Finally, it is worth noting that the fantasy genre itself, and the participants in the culture are not ignorant as to where the stereotypes they are playing come from. Be it a new race like Pandaren, or an old race like Orcs. These are savvy consumers who are immersed in game ecologies not only of a variety of games but much of the time in discussions either online or in person. When they reach for either *Dungeons and Dragons* or *World of Warcraft* they know the rules and limits of the genre in which they are engaging – in fact that aesthetic is partially what draws them toward these games -- their 'knowability.' While some genres are ever expanding and mutating due to decentralization processes (Beer, 2012), the fantasy genre itself remains well defined for participants in these spaces. Whether it is high fantasy, sword and sorcery, or dungeon crawling, the large genre net of 'fantasy' encompasses all of these and thus imports the racial project of the fantasy as a genre as a whole. Fantasy genre here becomes short-hand for players already familiar with the tropes, assumptions and byways of how fantasy 'works.' This is invaluable to get players "on the same page" and running quickly through either a home-brew or published campaign. That is, very few game runners are using these platforms to 'reinvent' the fantasy genre, preferring instead to tweak and

modify while still allowing players to use their previous knowledge as a backbone for understanding the world in which they are engaged.

Players understand not only the messages about race they are being sent, but where they come from, what they mean, and in the case of my respondents, that they need to be addressed and understood not simply performed in line with larger, oppressive racial systems. Players do not come to these games 'cold' in the fact that they have never had an experience with the fantasy genre before. Much of the time there is precursor not only in other games but in linked hobbies across other niche interests. That is, they develop a cultural and individual knowledge of the game's tropes and assumptions long before they sit down at a computer or with a pencil and set of dice.

Contemporary racial discourse can't quite capture the experience of these individuals during gameplay. This means that looking to Games Studies provides a useful intervention in how racism is reinscribed into media objects and leisure activities, eventually solidifying an ideology within the gamers themselves. Conceptions such as color-blind racism fail to capture this because, at its base, race is *always salient* in these spaces. Whether it's dictated by the visual representation of an avatar (*World of Warcraft*) and the attendant cultures and cultural biases, or the theatre-of-the-mind decision-making process of *Dungeons and Dragons* race operates to inform a character and player as to what their imagined body *can or cannot* do, accomplish or be. Whereas the construction of Omi and Winant rests on the idea that racism can continue to operate under the aegis of those who don't see color, gamers in these worlds can't help but see Orcs.

Gamer Assumed Identities & Politics

My respondents represent gamers, roleplay gamers specifically, who are generally not captured in popular or large press reporting on game spaces. More importantly, they offer a response to the popular and media-constructed stereotype that gamers are a monolithic culture only interested in radicalizing young white men more deeply into white supremacy. I position my players and their play in response to game mechanics which are by-and-large recognized as either problematic in total or, often, thought of not in terms of their implications but their usefulness. The question here is how players navigate a structure which privileges and disadvantages bodies based on race while maintaining a progressive or radical stance in non-digital space and politics.

While my respondents are mostly white men, I hesitate to generalize this to the entire community of gamers. This is because the access to players publicly has its own character and there are identities which have either actively been erased from the record of gaming, been actively hidden by participants or have been playing private spaces where they would not be seen by researchers or other players (Cherney, 1999; Nakamura, 2008: Gray, 2014). Therefore, drawing conclusions about what the player base looks like should be taken with care and used as guideline. This gets us away from making the fundamental mistake of taking the marketing construction of "Player One" as a truth (Chess, 2017). That being said, the ways in which race is treated within the text and game of *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft* produces dual outcomes.

The first is that players who would otherwise be interested in playing are confronted with constructions of bodies and prejudice which they experience in real life, making the act of playing a re-living of their lived experiences in a racially stratified society. This then can produce social closure in that players seek to opt-out of

participating in and creating narratives wherein they are re-subjugated according to white colonialist narratives. While *Dungeons and Dragons* players can and do throw out rules governing "fantasy racism" *World of Warcraft* players are bound by the programming of the game much more strictly. The second and what I focus on here is that even though many of the respondents were passionately dedicated to equality, inclusion, and actively "building a bigger table" wherein the voices of historically disempowered people could help drive the game content, they had to confront game mechanics which reinscribe essentialist notions of race. This second facet is what can prove useful in studying how self-reporting "progressives" navigate these race-salient spaces. It is in these moments that, even in game space, players confront intersecting racial hierarchies and *must* navigate them in order to start and continue play.

The rules themselves force the gamer into using the logics of essentialism during character creation and engaging in racist actions during gameplay itself. They are captives to the system in digital worlds (at least partially) and unless they actively choose to eschew this, they are captive to it around kitchen tables during tabletop play. This is where Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter can be instructive in how race operates inside and outside of the Magic Circle (the invisible line where game-world and out-of-game-world are separated). Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter use digital games to demonstrate how game logic reinscribes not only violence but capitalist goals during play (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2007). For example, most game economies are capitalist in structure even when it is not an accurate representation of the time or place the game uses as the setting. This is mimicked both in *World of Warcraft* and *Dungeons and Dragons* where currency is used to purchase goods and services. There is also a "marketplace" which is a place to

trade goods between players and several of my respondents spoke of this as a main focus of their gaming activities. That is, flooding the market, buying low and selling high – and actively trying to crash prices on certain items. If this holds true for capitalism, it is malleable enough to be applied to other ideological constructions such as race.

Although not comprehensive we can extend Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter's argument from the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise that "*GTA* is a cynical game that simultaneously satirizes, indulges, and normalizes individual hyper possessiveness, racialized stereotypes, and neoliberal violence" (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2007, p. 181). This then is instructive to the people experiencing the game for how the world 'works.' The argument then being if players experience the world 'working' in this way, they will then use those tools to and schema to apply to their non-digital lived experiences in subtle and novel ways (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2007). Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter's work doesn't say that the transformation is into overt conservatism or racism. But it does wire players into ideologies which can then drive social interaction. They make the argument that the player builds their toolkit using game logics, and that they then apply that toolkit in other social situations (whether they are playing with humans or not) (Fine, 2004). This is an extension of the Frankfurt School's argument that media is designed to brainwash and make compliant individuals under capitalism (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2006). Both Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter and Horkhimer and Adorno would say that this indoctrination by media is as unavoidable as it is ubiquitous. Games, in this case, have simply replaced movies and other forms of media in their socializing and brainwashing capacity.

However, this model assumes an un-reflexive play on the part of players themselves. As we shall see, players don't blindly accept the rules as written, they modify or otherwise change them to fit whim. Additionally, even if they take the armature of race rules, they will constantly adapt to avoid or circumvent the need to engage in simplistic relationships with race. For example, they engage mental gymnastics and lore-building to have the rules governing race 'make sense.' Uneasy with monolithic ethnic cultures, they create and ask for 'variants' and disposal of outdated 'alignment' systems which create literal evil races. Homebrew games have slowly changed the landscape of gaming – even though we can acknowledge lag and resistance to that change. The home campaign will generally be more responsive than the larger mediascape of either *Dungeons and Dragons* or *World of Warcraft* but as more variants arise, *Dungeons and Dragons* has been responsive to these calls, and not only come up with more variants on standard playable characters but have been seeking a way to balance integrating new player character types into their existing system especially on their more flexible digital platforms. *Dungeons and Dragons* has been more responsive than *World of Warcraft* possibly due to technical constraints, however, it is not enough to write this off to programming as *World of Warcraft* continues to make un-reflexive choices as new content is released even every couple years (to say nothing of the patches).

Race in Game

Thinking about the roots of the racism hard-baked in to the fantasy roleplaying sphere it's important to first note that this is part of a transmedia, trans-platform issue. Neither *Dungeons and Dragons* nor *World of Warcraft* invented racism, but what they

did do was use existing racist ideology and reify them into rulesets and fictional cultures. It's important to see where those ideas come from. First, I will use content from the games themselves to draw a line between *Dungeons and Dragons* itself to *World of Warcraft* so we can understand this as an unbroken line of heritage between the two games and how they construct race. Second, I will use examples from the *Dungeons and Dragons* text itself to demonstrate the logics players are being asked to engage in. Third, I will use data from my interviews to demonstrate how players themselves engage in choosing and applying racial traits to their characters.

D&D to World of Warcraft

The story of games, gaming, and game development starts (for this Dissertation) in the 1970s when Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson published the first *Dungeons and Dragons* set. Growing out of the wargame community, it was seen at first as a niche of a niche community and traveled mostly by world-of-mouth from the Midwest. This was done via Tactical Studies Rules (TSR) the company that both men founded in 1974. While not explosive in popularity it came to serve as a blueprint for the other niche hobby that was gaining traction at the time – designing and programming video games.

In many ways the rules, such as they were, could be easily transmogrified into bits and bytes using simple commands. This is most apparent when looking at the *Chainmail* supplement first released by Gygax and Perren. This document has the least amount of both 'flavor text' or text which fills in the idea of a game object. Mostly a collection of tables and if/then descriptions of mechanics. For example, when explaining the rule that "For melees involving less than 20 Figures per side double all totals" the mechanics are broken down mathematically as such: "HH then score 6 (for greater kills) times a die roll,

thus: 8 -2 = 6 x 3 (assumed die roll result) = 18. To this total the HH add a morale rating of 9 multiplied by the number of their survivors, thus: 9x 8 = 72. The entire score for the HH is 18 + 72 = 90." (Gygax & Peren, 1971, p. 15) Organized as tables and such if-then statements, translating these rules into computer code (or at least riffing off of them). The computer is an excellent calculator as well as able to navigate these logic-trees as already laid out in the system itself. Computers could even pop of the random numbers to simulate dice rolls. All that they needed, was somebody willing to translate that structure of gameplay into code. With such an overlap and opportunity, it wouldn't be long until "students and other programmers already primed by reading the Lord of the Rings series saw in Gygax's game a rich source of material and inspiration" (King & Borland, 2014; loc 590).

Indeed, as early as the mid-late 70s there were games being published using the same ideas and conventions, of which *Colossal Cave Adventure* is one. As one of the earliest interactive fiction and roleplay-like games, it relied on both spelunking and a framework of *Dungeons and Dragons* to help players navigate a narrative game while retaining player agency (King & Borland, 2014). It captured at least the same sense of adventure that *Dungeons and Dragons* was offering. Games developers in the digital, and non-digital spaces were, however, always looking for players and in some ways feeding off the media of each other (albeit in small ways before the explosion of home computing made it affordable). Central to their ideology was not simply that there were 'win conditions and opportunities to loot or level (although those remain important) but that they wanted a way to allow players to go on adventure and have an experience. That was the central draw and what game designers for roleplaying game chase. While

leveling and randomness might be the technical delineators between what is or is not a roleplay game (King & Borland, 2014), they do so in the service of immersive play which takes players on a journey with or as that character.

By 1979, Richard "Lord British" Garriott had started work on his first game called *Akalabeth* for the Apple II. The game was described as a "dungeon crawler." Garriott, a pivotal figure in the development of digital roleplaying games is credited with not only producing dungeon crawlers but deepening the play experience with creating digital worlds, moral and ethical choices, and worldbuilding via his Ultima series (King & Borland, 2014). *Ultima,* its sequels, and spin-offs managed to remain important to the online gaming world during and after the release of *World of Warcraft* spanning the years 1981 (*Ultima I*) to 2014 (*Ultima Forever*). It, and other games act as part of the bridge between *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft.*

While there is more fascinating game history as these two hobbies developed what I would like to highlight here is that there was an overlap of players and developers. If you were developing computer games in the roleplay genre, odds were you were also immersed if not in *Dungeons and Dragons* but at least with the same source material that they were pulling from. Similarly, as we see in my population sample, if you enjoyed tabletop roleplaying games and were lucky enough to afford a computer, your computer games were roleplaying games. This comes into sharpest focus when we consider the trajectory of a young Richard Garriott. Garriott, in addition to be obsessed with computers and "living in the shadow of NASA" (King & Borland, 2014; loc 502). While there were developers outside of these spaces, independent developers and other genres

of roleplay games, central here is the story of the fantasy RPG, especially the ones which would come to define the genre broadly.

Meanwhile Blizzard didn't publish until the early '90s. Their first adventure/roleplaying game wasn't released until 1997's *Diablo*. They had already released a Real-Time Strategy (RTS) game called *Warcraft: Orcs and Humans* in 1994 and *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness* in 1995. Central to these pre-*World of Warcraft* offerings was the dichotomy between Orcs and Humans. Like many RTS games of the time, the goal was to harvest resources, build armies, and take over the world via genocide of the opposing faction. That is, if you were human, you were to eradicate Orcs literally from the face of the planet, and if you were Orcs, the same held true for your Human foes. There was little to no diplomacy involved in these games.

But why Orcs and Humans? Why the much-beleaguered Orc? It was something that had already been codified within the Fantasy genre generally (starting with Tolkien) and reinscribed literally in the *Dungeons and Dragons* rules. While *World of Warcraft* allows you to choose a faction, they tie bodies to those factions. So, whether you choose to be the Orc-led "Horde" or the human-led "Alliance" there is no escaping the fact that the body you choose to be in command of has assumptions of loyalty, culture and capacity tied to it. It wasn't until 2012 with the release of *Mists of Pandaria* that players could choose a body which was not inherently tied to a faction. However, once you chose the Pandaren race you were once again faced with the same bind – choosing a faction to throw in with – as during other character creation activities. While some character *classes* might allow players to move factions, such as the Death Knight, they are still originally tied to their faction by body.

Recently there has been a movement to rewrite or save many of the 'monster' races from *Dungeons and Dragons* and not only make them player characters but allow them to move beyond their ascribed racial and cultural status as "cannon fodder." In previous play spaces, ported forward to many modern spaces killing, Orcs in *Dungeons and Dragons* was seen as a matter of course. Orcs according to *Dungeon and Dragons* 5th edition "are savage raiders and pillagers with stooped postures, low foreheads, and piggish faces with prominent lower canines that resemble tusks" (Perkins, 2018, p. 244). This language is carried forward from the Advanced Dungeons and Dragons *Monstrous Manual* which tells us:

> Orcs vary widely in appearance, as they frequently crossbreed with other species. In general, they resemble primitive humans with grey-green skin covered with coarse hair. Orcs have a slightly stooped posture, a low jutting forehead, and a snout instead of a nose, though comparisons between this facial feature and those of pigs are exaggerated and perhaps unfair. Orcs have well-developed canine teeth for eating meat and short pointed ears that resemble those of a wolf" (Beach, 1993, p. 281).

What is striking here is not so much the eugenic undertones of the descriptions, every creature has to look like something, but how unchanged the Orc has been for 25 years. Orcs have remarkably stable characteristics with the 1993 text being kinder (although undeniably tongue-in-cheek). They remain much like their first characterizations. An enemy that is evil – and able to be killed without remorse. Importantly, a "horde enemy" attacking in numbers or tribes. Horde language which is used again in *World o Warcraft* explicitly.

It is also important to note that the Orc *was not a player character* in Dungeons and Dragons regular play until the 4th edition of *Dungeons and Dragons*. However, it is still not an option in the standard *Player's Handbook* which is the go-to for many new

Dungeons and Dragons players. Supplemental books pre-dating 4th edition as well have incorporated Orc Playable Characters but it is never one of the centralized options as designed by the game. Even in campaigns where you can play an evil-aligned Human, Elf, Dwarf or any of dozens of humanoid bodies, the interiority of the Orc as a Player Character is forbidden by the very structure of the rules-as-written in the *Player Handbook*. The most a player can do is play a Half-Orc which is result of an Orc's ability to "crossbreed with virtually every humanoid and demi-human species except elves, with whom they cannot. The mongrel offspring of orcs and these other species are known as half-orcs" (Beach, 1993, p. 282) This is in contrast to *World of Warcraft* where Orcs are playable characters but Half-Orc "genesis is usually violent and perverse, and their appearance – too bestial to be human, too clean to be orc – reminds the parent races of the rift between them and the horrible deeds each has performed […] Conversely, some see half-orcs as symbols of unity. Not all half-orcs are born to abused or victimized parents; some are the children of clandestine love" (Johnson, 2006, p. 8) While this isn't playable in digital iterations of *World of Warcraft* this text comes from the tabletop version of the game and thus is officially part of the lore.

All this to say that even though *World of Warcraft* allows the interiority of Orcs to be explored, it reminds us that the union of Orcs and Humans is fraught at best. And in the end, we aren't terribly far from where we started – whether they are codified as evil (as in *Dungeons and Dragons*) or merely in opposition to the humans, entire cultures and worldviews are inscribed on the body which players choose to inhabit or are confronted with. Whether chosen by an in-person Dungeon Master/Referee or the design of the game itself.

So, knowing that digital and tabletop games not only developed in parallel, pulled from the same sources, and reinscribed racist and xenophobic ideas in the structure of their games, we now turn to how players engage those rules and structures. That is, how they navigate spaces which would seem to force them into particular ideologies in order to play.

Further, while it is tempting to believe that this hammering of bodies and tasks is something inherent to video games (true freedom after all is hard if not impossible code) we see the same thing happening in the *Dungeons and Dragons* materials. This appears in the *Advanced Dungeons and Dragons Player's Handbook* with the text:

> The human race has one special ability in the AD&D game: Humans can choose to be of any class – warrior, wizard, priest, or rogue – and can rise to great level in any class. The other races have fewer choices of character classes and usually are limited in the level they can attain. These restrictions reflect the natural tendencies of the races (dwarves like war and fighting and dislike magic, etc.). The limits are high enough so a demi-human can achieve power and importance in at least one class. A halfling, for example, can become the best thief in the land, but he cannot become a great fighter. The limits also exist for play balance." (Cook, 1995, p. 27)

This text, originally released in 1989 is already continuing a tradition of embodied capability originally found in the *Chainmail Fantasy* supplement which tells the player that Dwarves and Gnomes "natural habitat is deep under the ground" and therefore they "operate equally well day or night" (Gygax & Peren, 1971). *Chainmail* then goes a step further stating that "Goblins and Kobolds are their natural (and most hated) enemies" (Gygax & Peren, 1971). Here we see race, abilities, *and* ideology explicitly codified for the player – just as we see in *World of Warcraft* later -- when a player chooses a body, capabilities, and political position before they take any action in the game itself.

As different editions are released, this embodiment question is transformed, transmuted, and reiterated to be either more or less constraining. This usually takes the form of ever-finer tuning the base system. By the time the 5th edition comes out, not only are these embodied prejudices and ideology curtailed by phrases like "cues for building," "details are suggestions," "tendencies," "not binding" and the explicit permission that "adventurers can deviate widely from the norm for their race" (Crawford, 2014, p. 17).

This allows for players to have more freedom in how they *choose* to play their own characters. This affordance is particularly important for players who refuse to see race as an objective reality either in game or outside of game. As the language softens, it feels less binding even for 'old hands' at the gaming table. Where once strict dichotomies had to be combatted with homebrew rules or exceptions, these changes in the language encourage a different kind of play. A play that can more fully reflect players' ideas and notions while retaining as much of the core of the game *as the players wish*.

This is a particular affordance of both *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft* and games like them as well. *Dungeons and Dragons* itself has gone through approximately 5 "Editions" with fleets of supplemental material which can be used to respond to critique and refine rules. Indeed, some of the supplemental materials themselves have received new editions recently as well, specifically to make the language used more welcoming to diverse players. A prime example of this in the *Dungeons and Dragons* side is the Orc again. Starting in the 3rd, and so-dubbed "3.5" edition of the game, Orcs themselves diversified in culture according to landscape, not only picking up specialized cultural quirks but deepening the knowledge of their society and practices.

This is also explicit in *World of Warcraft* expansions, of which there have been 9 as of the writing of this dissertation. Expansions in *World of Warcraft* are used not only to further the central storyline of the game (the fight between Alliance and Horde) but to reinvent character class mechanics and introduce new areas of the world of Azeroth (destroy some). This is in addition to the possibility of releasing smaller 'patches' to the gameplay and language. What this leads to is a level of dynamic responsiveness to players, as well as the ability to grow. Unlike, say their source material of Lord of the Rings or *Conan* which remain stable in books (although subject to reinterpretation), both *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft* are able to grown and transmute over time. This can lead new players to try the game (as has been argued about 5th Edition *Dungeons and Dragons*) or old players to return to see the new expansion. Respondents reported keeping their accounts active and returning to play specifically to see the expansion, and how their character classes might have changed in *World of Warcraft*. Conversely, if the players found the changes too great or burdensome, they would stop play all together. This versioning is important when thinking about how the construction of race can change dynamically in response to the social context in which the games operate changes as well.

The same cannot be said of *World of* Warcraft . . . mostly. True, the dichotomy between "in race" and "out race" gets refined when turning to Player Character (PC) choices. Race and Class are some of the first decisions which players make when creating a character, often choosing them in pairs. This construction then tells the players not only what their culture or politics are but the capabilities of those character bodies. In *World of Warcraft* the player can choose between playing Alliance races which are

Human, Dwarf, Night Elf, Gnome, Draenei and Worgen or Horde races which are Orc, Undead, Tauren, Troll, Blood Elf or Goblin with Pandaren being the single race where you could choose your faction after creation. The player, unlike in *Dungeons and Dragons* cannot take this as mere suggestion but is locked into the pre-programmed options presented to them.

Once you have chosen your political faction (Horde or Alliance) you choose your race and class. That is, what you would like to *do* in the game helps dictates your eventual *body* in the game. For example, if you would like to be a Druid class, you cannot choose an Orc body to inhabit. The player may choose different race/class combinations until they find one which satisfied, but some options are entirely closed to them (like the aforementioned Orc Druid).

This represents the hard lines the game draws in defining what bodies can do in the game. If you would like to play a Demon Hunter for example you *must* choose to inhabit a digital Blood Elf or Night Elf body depending on the player choice of Horde or Alliance politics. Further, all bodies are restricted from 2-4 Classes or occupations with the Trolls, Blood Elves, and Dwarves being the least restricted in the game deciding what those bodies are able to do. However, this doesn't mean that Trolls, Blood Elves, and Dwarves can perform all those tasks equally well. A video game where it is designed to have at least an implicit 'win' condition of fighting and gaining loot. Each race has a set of "racial traits" which affect character ability to perform tasks or move through the world. This is echoed in *Dungeons and Dragons* and is usually referred to the need for what players term "balance." That is, in order to form a more perfect interdependent party, one player can't have access to all the spells *and* be able to use the hardest-hitting

weapons *and* heal themselves and the party *and* be really good at hiding *and* . . . etc. It would negate one of the central purposes both of *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft* – that is communal play and communal fantasy.

These racial bonuses operate to guide players to particular classes because the mechanical advantage in the in-game world allows players to more easily be successful in completing game tasks. While players can "play against type" or at a mechanical disadvantage if they so choose, the game itself does not reward such innovative play. For example, you can *choose* to play a Troll Death Knight but the racial traits *suggest* you play a Hunter for an easier (more fun) play experience. Not only that but this becomes particularly important when running "Instances" and not merely exploring the world and story.

Instances can either be a dungeon or a raid (depending on number of players needed to complete the Instance) and involve multiple players devoted to a single task of eliminating enemies in a particular geographic location. These Instances are able to be run multiple times without impact on the larger *World of Warcraft* world. You can either take a group of known players (usually guild members or friends) or que in an in-game "Instance Finder" utility which will automatically sort and put together groups.

Instances, especially higher-level ones, require coordination of characters and players, and are the space where all players must be committed to the same goal. If a player is not committed to that goal, or not operating at "peak" they are likely to a) be booted via vote from the rest of the group b) be harassed for "not doing their job" or c) simply be ineffective in completing the content. As opposed to players who explore and "grind" the world itself – harvesting, crafting, and selling things – if a player chooses to

run Instances they *must* conform to the essentialist ideas embedded in the game to be successful, and for their group to ultimately be successful. This results in a lively discourse of so-called "optimal builds" of characters, of which only the *first* step has been demonstrated here. However, as we shall see, *World of Warcraft*, even elite performers, do not run on Instances alone.

Player attitudes toward race & diversity

Having described the systems in which players engage it could be easy to come to two conclusions. Either that such a game space would *attract* players who already had racist views, because it confirms those beliefs. Or, more insidiously, that players internalize such values during the course of play and *become* more racist in their attitudes (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2007). However, interviews with players paint a picture of dedication to socially progressive values and styles of play.

First, however it is important to crack the shell of white-boy gaming and recognize that a diverse array of players exist in the space. While much of my sample was white-identifying nearly all of them expressed a passionate interest in social justice including racial, immigrant, LGBTQ, gender and class parity. Additionally, my research subjects themselves came from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds. In addition to many of my white participants citing specific ethnic heritage (Irish, Norwegian, British, Greek, etc), I had a handful of participants who themselves were non-white, Latinx and reported playing and forming relationships with non-white players. The clearest example comes from Allison, a 36 year old woman who during the course of the interview said "I mean, there are plenty of 20-year-old white boys doing it too but yeah, Well, my husband is half Vietnamese." (Allison, F 36, White).

Again, Justice noted another player amongst the many they play with speaking out one of her friends:

> "Like, I played WoW with this guy Lazy who is a vet. He's got enough like PTSD and other stuff from when he was serving that he pretty much stays home and plays WoW. And you know he's Black he's got that Southern accent. Really sweet guy" (Justice, NB 38, Asian/White)

Importantly this comment came at a time in the interview when we were discussing how the going stereotype of "white, male" was insufficient to describe the players which Justice encountered both in *World of Warcraft* and in *Dungeons and Dragons*. Justice herself is half East Asian and half white, and a first generation American on her mother's side. Both Justice and Allison along with the rest of my sample were aware of the whiteness stereotype and while some conceded that they had played with mostly white players they were quick to highlight the diversity that they *had* encountered.

Jada, a 34-year-old black woman who ran her own table tells me how she found players for her table at her workspace. She would keep a 20-sided die on her desk at work and one day a black man she worked with picked it up and asked her about it. Jada describes that conversation here:

> 'I didn't know black people played D&D.' And I was like, 'Yeah, we do.' And he's like, 'Okay, all right. I think I want to try it somehow,' […] So somehow word spread through like the other brown people there. I had like I met someone for the first time and like within the [political] campaign context, and I'm exhausted running around and she just stopped me. She's like,' By the way after the campaign I want to talk to you about D&D,' and like, within the campaign context, I was sitting there like, what political thing does that even stand for? It was like waves of realization like, Oh, my gosh! She's talking about playing D&D! Holy Crap! So, after the [political] campaign, I sat down, and did really intentional world building and I reached out [..] word has just kind of spread and like all the brown people want to sit in a brown person of color table and so I've got maybe more people right now then I know how there are like more people interested in then I know how to get in. (Jada, 34, F, Black)

While Jada is recruiting people she works with for her table (sometimes reluctantly because of her perceived skill as a Dungeon Master/Game runner) this indicates two important things. The first is that the stereotype of gamer has clearly influenced the first man she spoke with about who plays *Dungeons and Dragons*. The second aligns with other player stories about how "home" tables come together. They move along social network lines, riding along and reinforcing pre-existing social ties to iterate in private spaces. This makes them easy to be missed in larger studies that only look at gamers in conventions or active in communities where they would have to openly declare their non-white, non-male statuses. This is important because it suggests that it is by only going into these private spaces can these 'brown person of color' tables be captured, the number of which is a going mystery. We know there is at least one but beyond that we simply have no data.

Another explanation that gamers themselves had for the lack of diversity seen in the community is that players themselves were stigmatized for their hobby. This made it both hard to break into and built barriers to play and participation in public spaces. Emmet explains:

> And I'm just like now just, I believe it is diverse. It's just back a few years ago, of course, it looked to be not as diverse because people hid it, but now it's becoming more of an 'In' thing I guess for everyone. That is not as bad now. I mean, yes, certain groups and media wants to give video gaming or gaming in general a bad name when it's actually not. And it's one of the open areas, open minded people groups, there is that we don't care about." (Emmet M, 42, White)

Emmet here echoes the stories of many long-term gamers who feel more comfortable sharing their gaming habits openly than in the past. Emmet believes that the removal of gamer stigma has not only attracted new players but that existing players are more open

about their gaming habits. This applies not only in daily face-to-face activities like work and other social situations but breaking into the community itself. Because of the stigma gamers have had attached to them there is a double-barrier to presenting as a non-white, non-male gamer. This again drives gamers into the private and out of public spaces as Trista (F, 40, White) explains about avoiding possible hostile encounters in a game store: "I need to be doing that on my own internal anti-racism work right like I need to I need to pour my emotional capacity to be hurt and hurting into stuff that is moving me farther along the spectrum I'm not going to spend it on gamer boys."

I want to highlight here the work that Trista is doing outside of the gaming space. Trista, like Jada was active politically and self-reflexive but chose to avoid game stores because of "gamer boys" who would challenge her "right to be there." We know that players who are constructed as non-stereotypical find many strategies to hide themselves in order to participate (Gray, 2014). Important here is not only Trista's reluctance to go to a game store where she might be harassed for her gender identity but her accompanying dedication to "internal anti-racism work." This challenges the assumption that because gamers are not politically organizing around their hobby that they are somehow complacent in the governing political superstructure in which they find themselves. Trista would be seen as 'exiting' the game space according to Gray's work but we can see that instead, Trista is hiding her play to focus on what she finds important, and save her energy for what she feels in the 'real work.' While Gray discusses organizing online to combat the further marginalization and harassment of identities constructed as non-normative, Trista here chooses to not engage at that time and instead take her fight to the larger social construct of immigration reform.

Last, it's important to point out that most of my respondents were enthusiastically supportive of further diversification not only of players but of designers. Zach explicitly points this out during our discussion when her says "I want more people playing video games I want to see different people and have different perspectives and different ideas coming into the industry. I don't want some, as you said, gatekeepers, keeping people out that have good ideas or different viewpoints" (Zach, M, 34, White).

Further, many players advocated for in-game moderation done by the company (not the government) as a way to de-toxify the game space and make it more welcoming. As part of my questionnaire, I asked respondents what was the one thing they would change about gaming to make it "better." About a quarter of the sample spoke to technical or mechanical changes but the overwhelming majority echoed Luke's sentiment that he would create an apparatus that would remove:

> What I would consider actually toxic players. Like openly racist on mic where you can't be recorded because they're not recording conversations. Lasting punishment or like some sort of path to redemption there at the very best just in general. […]. There should consequences for doing something that is distinctly, hurtful. (Luke M, 36, East Asian/White)

Many players shared this sentiment but there was a wide spectrum of implementation. All agreed that they would like the make the community better but very few agreed on the mechanism that would be both fruitful for that purpose and/or not infringe on personal freedoms of speech.

In the end, there were four main strategies that players would use in order to navigate the race question posed by the mechanics of *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft*. While some of it, in *Dungeons and Dragons* specifically relied mostly on changing the nature of the game, *World of Warcraft* players as well found ways to play

with friends even across faction. What's fascinating about this is not that they used technical prowess (modification) which would get them banned or booted from the game potentially, but that they used the tools they had to hand in order to continue their game together. The four strategies for navigating race were denial about the racial mirroring happening in the game, extensive lore building in order to justify the given rules, throwing the rules out completely, and embracing the limitations as part of a project of technical prowess. These four categories are discussed below.

It's not Race It's Species (Removing the Parallels)

Species

One of the ways that players end up navigating the racial characteristics is to deny the parallels found in the game structure as being reflective of real-life racist stereotypes and ideals. This is summed up in the repeated phrase "It's not race, it's really more like species." Many of my respondents were uncomfortable using the "race" dialogue as it if it paralleled their game play. For exactly the reason that it can been seen as harmful to engage in those logics above. Namely that it reinforces an essentialism to bodies under racial categorization. Many of these respondents were cognizant of the problematic nature of essentialism but would also seek to have ways to describe differences in bodies as still inherent. Jacob, a longtime player was now teaching his children to play the game and said "Yeah. Well it's right there in the first thing you have to choose for your character. I was thinking about telling the kids you're actually choosing a species. Just to be clear." Jacob here was aware of some of the problematic things codified in the rules, noting "There's also the orc thing where like some point in DND legacy orcs got Dreadlocks and cornrows." Jacob, as opposed to trying to side-step the race conversation

with his children/play group recognized this moment as a possible teaching moment for his children. He was trying to find a different word so that the association wouldn't be as explicit or taught to his younglings.

In short, for these players, the race metaphor doesn't map on top of fantasy races because they are fundamentally different *in a way that race is not a fundamental difference* to them. This stance is most closely related to being "colorblind" in the traditional race discourse. It's reflexive "I don't have to think about bodily differences (even as minor as phenotype) because we're not talking about the same thing." And, at least in Jacob's case, an outright refusal to conflate the two while teaching others how to play.

Meanwhile, these players still honor and leverage the different bodies presented to them during the gameplay. Absent here was also a discussion of what choosing a certain character might *mean* during the course of gameplay. Once the species was chosen here, neither the *Dungeons and Dragons* players or the *World of Warcraft* players were generally concerned with how those bodies would play out in the game itself. That is, even though they were choosing fundamentally different bodies, different 'species' there was little to no thought about the impact this would have on the social relationships – just focus on the mechanical and physical attributes of the characters.

Evolution

Further, many saw the wedding of body to terrain as a 'natural' outcropping of evolutionary processes. That is, when dark elves have a racial trait of "dark vision" it makes sense because they have spent so much time under the crust of the earth in service to Loth. The same can be said with other humanoid and monster variants. *World of*

Warcraft visually makes this argument as well in where and what Mobs they place where. For example, you won't see a "Young Black Bear" in the middle of the "Hidden Reef" portion of the Azeroth map. It wouldn't make the kind of evolutionary sense players look for. While not telling players that *World of Warcraft* parallels the 'natural' world of their birth, they are informed of this via the graphic and immersive aspects of play. Further, *World of Warcraft* makes this argument even more concrete when players start their journeys in "home areas" *each time they start a new character*. While much of the world itself is free for exploration, *World of Warcraft* has areas which you need to quest through (which also function as tutorial areas).

What this verisimilitude does is reinforce the 'reality' of the world of Azeroth. This can be seen in *Dungeons and Dragons* as well when the same creature can be adapted to the chosen terrain of the advanture. For example, in the 5th Edition Monster Manual, the creature "Mephit" has 6 different variations – Dust, Ice, Magma, Mud, Smoke and Steam. This allows them to be an adaptive encounter for game runners while still retaining an 'evolutionary' model of bodies in *Dungeons and Dragons*. Perhaps an outlier when it comes to adaptability, the Mephits are, however, not singular and other Monsters are tied to terrain via flavor text, stat suggestion or custom. Importantly, these changes are also beyond mere "flavor" changes, or the substitution of the word "Fire" for "Mud" when describing Mephit actions. The base statistics for the Mephits born of different environments are, structurally built differently and due to evolving in different spaces are different. For example, between the Magma and the Mud Mephit, the Mud Mephit has higher Hit Points but lower Speed, is more Intelligent and Wiser than its Magma cousins but has far less Charisma. Finally, Mephits are defined as residing

mostly on their Elemental Planes (that is the Planes of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water) but able to appear on the Material Plane (the Plane most resembling what players see as the 'natural world'). Once there, the Mephits will "prefer to dwell in places where their base elements are most abundant" (Perkins, 2018). In short what happens is that Mephits evolve out of two Elements on their home planes and then will most likely be 'happiest' in environments that mimic their 'homelands.'

While all of this makes sense from a verisimilitude standpoint, recreating a world that makes an inherent sense to players for a variety of reasons, it does also lend credence to the Evolutionary argument. That is, if animals, monsters, and other (super)natural phenomena proceed in accordance with the Theory of Evolution (as understood by game designers at least), then different bodies will evolve much the same way they have on the Earth players are familiar with. This means that while the purple-black skin and white hair of Drow may have a divine component, their dark vision capabilities are a result of their subterranean lives. This continues with how players conceive of and build Player Characters. The attributes of the character bodies are presented as the result of a power-neutral evolutionary (at times divine) process.

This stance operates in much the same way as the species-driven conception but starts to incorporate elements of the environment and divine into how players conceive of bodily differences. It remains apolitical but is also seen as part of a naturalized process in how bodies work and iterate over different terrains. This stance feels closest to modern theories of phenotypical and evolutionary models of race prevalent today. It reifies essentialist notions of bodily iteration while removing cultural or systemic oppressive

experiences from those bodies. Thereby rending the concept of race/species as wholly other from the experience of racialized bodies outside the game space.

Further this stance can be turned to celebrating the diversity of life as depicted in *World of Warcraft* and *Dungeons and Dragons*. Players with this perspective believe that while it's not able to represent non-game racial dynamics via the species of their game worlds, it is necessary to celebrate and embrace the diversity of bodies at their fingertips. Especially when it comes to the characters they want to inhabit for a game. Players use the diversity as a way to explore different combinations and different experiences of play like when Matt speaks about his Githyenki character, explicitly because it was different saying :

> They are from another dimension, and I was playing. I was able to play I was I got the right I got a certificate. So they let me play one of these characters in this [Role Playing Games Association] network campaign. So I was the only one of that playing the game, so I actually would drag that character out occasionally and play it. And it was, I can't remember what class I chose. But it was not normal. Not one of my normal classes. It was something very off the wall that you wouldn't that I wouldn't normally play, but I thought This will be fun. It's a completely different combination of things that I would not normally play.

Matt here is reveling in the biodiversity of the game itself, knowing the origin of the Githyenki (and their counterparts the Githzerai) as being from the Astral Plane and thus not on the same trajectory or bound by the same rules that beings developed on the Material Plane are bound by. This embrace of the other is only possible with Matt's deep knowledge of where the Githyenki and Githzerai come from, and to a degree what they are designed to do. It's a way to both demonstrate mastery and to use his deep knowledge of the game to offer more and interesting play encounters at tables.

Sense Making (Lore Building/Justification)

Because race and culture are tied so tightly together both in *World of Warcraft* and *Dungeons and Dragons*, players who recognize that the fantasy racial archetypes are connected to non-game racial stereotypes will build upon existing lore to 'make sense' of those bodies and cultures. That is, they will try and reverse engineer how these stereotypes can be understood in and out of the context of the game. What this does is it takes a pre-existing fantasy race which would first appear to be a harmful stereotype of a non-fantasy race and rewrites it so it valorizes a different non-fantasy race. This gymnastic move allows the player to simultaneously acknowledge non-game correlates to fantasy races while not reifying them as harmful stereotypes.

Jonathan called this process "culture painting" and offered the most detailed account of it when it came to conceptualizing Halfings. Detailing his thought process he said:

> I had this brilliant moment of inspiration while flipping through one of the books and I saw the knowledge domain clerics and I was like, so what would a cleric of knowledge actually look like? It's a Rabbi. So, then I had this idea of like, okay, so that's a way that you could like interpret what a knowledge cleric is. Because the entire thing is that it's a cleric that gains it through study of the divine. Like, there's more scholarly approach to it. So why not just lean into that?
>
> And then instead of making the fantasy Jew effectively be a dwarf, that's, you know, the money grubbing, like miserly and all, make it the Halfling. They already have a culture that has food as a central part to it. So kosher laws are easy to throw on it. They've already got tight knit communal like family units. So that's something that you see in Semitic. Like yeah, family's all over the place. You've got the option for knowledge clerics going as that gives them a religious background. So why don't I just make them second temple-era Judaism. Why second temple period? Because nobody talks about the second temple period! Also, it gives the option of halflings being the originators of clay golems because the Golem comes from Jewish folklore.

While the switch here is full of twists, turns, and interesting conclusions it's entirely a homebrew solution. At this player's table, that take may gain primacy but it

does little to challenge the overarching anti-Semitism they were trying to escape. That is, it stays at the table and doesn't move much further outside. Additionally, this sense-making perspective remains derived from non-game cultures and bodies and, by and large, is only applied to Player Character or prevalent humanoid races.

Additionally, some players will actively use the injustice found in the world in order to play-out fantasies of fixing non-game oppression. Using the lore and the world building, players will choose an oppressed racial category explicitly for the experience of either being oppressed or so they can fight that oppression in ways they cannot in their real lives. For example, Paul, recounts the story of how their GM "put us up against some Duergars that had been taking slaves and we rescued every single slave in that village and a lot of those nasty little frog people did not survive the process." Paul is reflexive about what he calls his 'power fantasy' about being able to stop hurting, favoring mostly cleric and healing classes. So this story typifies that need to do good in either the world he lives in during fantasy play or in his non-game life.

While it can feel like a savior fantasy, it's important to note here that many of my players were involved politically and some were starting to be. It may not be the fix of systemic racism in America but acting out that fantasy can help people learn how to address racism in their day-to-day lived experiences as well. The players here use the lore and the fantasy of heroism to act out their own wishes in ways they can't in their non-game lives for various reasons.

Rule Disregard (Throwing the Rules out completely/changing the goal)

One of the more surprising things about this research was how *World of Warcraft* players found ways to play outside of the confines of code. That is, how they managed

play groups across the boundaries set-up by the game itself. Unarguably the game *World of Warcraft* and *Dungeons and Dragons* are fundamentally battle-simulators. Their rules and gameplay all assume the player is there to fight, win, loot, and level. The encounters produced and the mechanics are all preoccupied with those things. Both games do have secondary rules if players want to be diplomatic or sneaky in how they go about defeating somebody but that's just combat in a different key.

So, it's worth asking how *World of Warcraft* players subvert this directive in order to also subvert the divisions between Alliance and Horde politics. The answer lies in 3rd party software which allows friends to communicate via voice, and a different focus for their gaming habits. Even elite players have and need time when they are not in instances to level, build supplies and find equipment. In the Instances players are unable to combine Horde and Alliance characters, however, there are many areas on Azeroth where Horde and Alliance characters can farm supplies together, exploring the world and staying connected via Discord or other VoIP application.

Justice talks about the social aspects of 'farming' when speaking of a coworker who plays *World of Warcraft:*

> And I think it's probably because her experiences with World of Warcraft, like socially are kind of like, similar to my experiences how it's just kind gotten more asshole-ish but she's more into collecting and farming stuff. She likes to go ahead and just collect stuff. So for her it's not so much about raiding it's like about collecting thing I think for Final Fantasy she does raid but I don't think it's anywhere near as bad as WoW.

Justice details their friend moving away from what was central to the game as designed – raiding and instead embraces the farming affordance. *Final Fantasy* itself owes more heritage to Japanese Roleplaying Games so-dubbed JRPGS so the mechanics themselves

are different and this can affect gameplay which is what Justice is obliquely referring to here. Justice also goes on to talk about how the farming is a much more social aspect of the game when you can put on headsets and chat. During raids the goal is very clear and everybody needs to be paying attention to do their job, but in the farming and digitally hanging out is where Justice found her friendships solidify regardless of if the toon was Alliance or Horde.

While many *World of Warcraft* players remain tied to a "main" they can have alts across both factions so if a player needed to level their Horde character for a raid later, they could hook up with a friend or even other guild member who is leveling an Alliance character and kill MOBs together. This can be tricker in some zones because if a player wanders into a populated area controlled by an opposing faction, it will go badly. However, in the Northrend and Pandaria especially there are many places where neither faction holds sway. Kalimdor and the Eastern Kingdoms as well are divided either E/W or N/S for friend or hostile territories in case a player needs to fast travel or visit a populated area for any reason. The point being here that players will *change the main objective* of the game in order to not only play together but achieve alternative goals while doing so.

This across-faction play is similar to *Dungeons and Dragons* players who will either throw out race-based rules entirely or selectively choose them in order to maintain enjoyable play. Perhaps the most radical stance on race-based fantasy play is Jada who refuses to engage in "Fantasy Racism" during her pay sessions. Somewhat of a heritage problem imported from JRR Tolkein, for instance, the dwarven and the elvish races don't like each other. Similarly, if somebody chooses to play a half-elf they are ostracized

from both human and elf communities. This holds true to different races in different degrees throughout the *Dungeons and Dragons* materials. There is also a running joke of players playing non-humanoid creatures which are rare in whatever they are adventuring but the humanoid-populace not reacting to their strange composition even when they have clear physical markers of difference. Player Jada was particularly active in her rejection of "Fantasy Racism" and preferred to play Dragonborn (scaled skin descended from dragons). As a woman of color she had this to say about it:

> It bothers me that like, elves are white, the Drow are dark skin, you know, there's a lot of problems built into all of that. And also, like, I'm very careful about introducing fantasy racism. It's something that we talk about in session zero. It's sort of like, do any of us want to explore a dynamic in something that's supposed to be an escape and fun for us that we experience in everyday life? Not really.

Jada, it can be noted as well is very politically active and would be a voice on various *Dungeons and Dragons* Reddit threads specifically about race in addition to her other interests. While she approaches the "fantasy racism" as a question and acknowledges the problematic parts baked into the game, ultimately she rejects the idea of playing according to that set of rules. She goes on to talk about opportunities for her players to feel 'exceptional' in her mostly human world but not as an oppressed race.

Chosen Bodies

The connection between character and non-virtual embodiment is shown clearly in Allison's embodiment as a gnome. Allison says that "In spirit though, in spirit I'm a gnome. I also only play gnomes" when asked about what kind of character she builds. Allison is a straight, white children's librarian who picked up ukulele to entertain the children and sews her own clothes to match library activities. This also ties her to her favorite character class – that of the bard. Bards are notoriously musicians whose

mechanics are based on charisma stats. Allison's sense of identity was poured into the embodiment she chose to play each time she sat down to play Dungeons and Dragons as she details

> So, every character I've ever played has either been a gnome or a bard and often both. I've never I've never played something that was that was not a bard and also not a gnome. If it's not a gnome. It's a bard. And if it's not a bard, it's definitely a gnome, but most of the time it's a gnome and a bard, usually multi class. I usually like Bard and Warlock combos, but I've also been bard rogues.

This close combination of virtual and material embodiment using strictly in-game mechanics means that Allison was able to enact and explore as if she were in the virtual world herself. More explicitly, Mike who identifies as a white man says "if I'm playing World of Warcraft, or I'm playing any other game, I'm just playing. It's me playing and I guess I don't five that character a life of its own in that regard."

George, who is a British man represents the third "have a beer" engagement with virtual embodiment. He says "So, you know, I'll get attached to them because I'd like to go for a beer, have a chat with them sort of thing. But there's still like a little like a favorite sort of fictional character that I'm attached to." George here and this category generally represents the first break in embodied play in some ways. They don't inhabit the virtual body as fully as those who pour themselves or even parts of themselves into vicarious experiences. That doesn't mean that during the character creation embodiment isn't considered. During creation, George considers the body as crucial to helping create he backstory and personality of his characters. For example, when describing a character, he created for a Dungeons and Dragons campaign he says

> because Eldarin are quite fey, in the way they act. So, I think it was that was I wanted to make an illusionist and I wanted them to be an elf. But I didn't know what kind of elf and […] it just seemed to mesh really well." While George

> wasn’t embodying the character himself so much, he was very interested in the virtual aesthetics of his character.

Finally, Henry a white male is a good example of players who put the pieces of characters together to either play and dispose of them or to solve the puzzle of characters. Henry describes his character history as such:

> So, it's, it's always been the I've played the strong male characters like a couple of times and it gets boring. Except for when they're a little bit crazy and eccentric, and then they're okay, but I've only had one good, you know? Pure masculine character, other. All my other characters are just kind of soft guys

Once in the game itself, Henry tangentially embodies the character but for the most part the character isn’t alive so much as a way to move through the mechanics and levels of the gameplay itself. Unlike the players above who pour themselves partially or wholesale into the experience of the shared fantasy, Henry and players like him are more interested in solving the either the statistical or the lore puzzle presented in character creation. They pull together elements in order to create a character who serves a need in the game or the party.

Discussion

One of the things to pull out here is the directive of the materials vs, the way in which gamers who engage those racist mechanics actually employ them. As opposed to having fun “playing oppression” players who have experienced less structural oppression see themselves creating verisimilitude to concurrent and historical events. Conversely, those who have identities and bodies which have placed them at the intersectional nexus of structural oppression prefer to omit these things from their gameplay altogether.

While my research suggests that the more politically radical players are in their non-game lives about dismantling white supremacy and systemic racism, the more radical

they are about the rules of their fantasy game I hesitate to put this on a spectrum. More interesting here is not that these strategies can be rated as 'most radical' to 'least radical' but that they provide insight into how players navigate fantasy hierarchies without becoming ever more entrenched in them. That is, while the games undeniably have racial hierarchies, stereotypes, and essentialism baked into their DNA, players themselves navigate these structures in a variety of ways which allow them to retain their conceptions of self as progressive and on the side of liberation.

Current ideas of how people, especially white people do or do not engage race structurally are inadequate and can lack nuance. Seeing how players engage racist structures during play give us valuable insight in how to move forward toward more complete ideas of equity and justice. It can not only offer us more effective arguments but, in the end, how the question of the color line continues to mutate as it continues to be central to dialogues of liberation.

CHAPTER IV

JERKS IN THE YARD: STRUCTURE, PLATHWAYS, AND PLAYER EXPERIENCE

Introduction

Online and tabletop roleplaying provide a robust subcultural space for study. Subcultures here are defined by players engaged in a leisure activity centered around the metric of 'fun' in unstructured space (Fine & van den Scott, 2011). From the fashion of music subcultures (Hebdige, 1979), to the idea of subcultures as fomenting collective action (Banet-Weiser, et al., 2014), to how people come together and embody their particular lived identities in temporary spaces (Gardner, 2004: Fine & van den Scott, 2011; Coleman 2012). Sociologists look to these spaces to understand the mechanisms and tools people use to navigate social space. Although each of these subcultural spaces has their own central practice or metric, what binds them is that they see themselves as apart from the larger cultural trends or practices.

One way in which sociologists use subcultural spaces is to understand how culture is learned and transmuted from one arena to another (Fine, 2004). Sociologists are also interested in the portability of this cultural knowledge and understanding, and how it becomes applied to address other social contexts (Swidler, 1986). Research has focused on how power and hierarchy or decentralization (re)define taste and the boundaries of valued cultural objects (Light & Odden, 2017), how shared symbolic understanding of rituals can be used to integrate seemingly disparate communities (Alexander, 2004) and how the different facets of a cultural space (beyond just the creators of cultural objects) interact to produce cultural objects (Becker, 1974). Culture has also been examined as a social space or field with defined rules for participation and inclusion, however contested

they may be (Bourdieu, 1984). Anderson (1983) proposes that as people continue to identify with more and more abstractions, a great homogenization will occur ending in a monolithic culture aligned in ideology and practice (Anderson, 1983).

In this chapter I ask how the subculture of tabletop and digital roleplaying iterates, interrogate the reality of its 'fit' with dominant theories, and offer evidence that the experience of subcultures varies depending on the structure of the subculture itself and the various pathways players take to become members. I present a typology of online and tabletop gaming communities. Building from Bourdieu's work on social space and Goffman's dramaturgical theory to better understand how groups are formed and maintained in these subcultural settings. This offers insight into how the most visible and accessible members of subcultures are not typical participants. This typology allows for researchers to understand subcultures not as a large block, but as a fractalated space in where the social interactions of participants can vary widely. To do so, I build the typology using metaphors starting at the Kitchen Table in ever-widening social spaces. The typology here is the Kitchen Table, the smallest private group of which there are multiple iterations nested inside the larger subculture. The Porch, a semi-private space, which is larger but fewer in number. Last, the Yard as the most public space of gamers which most closely operates as a "field of gaming." The spaces themselves come from many of the players reporting in their stories of play, sitting around a 'kitchen table' even if they were located somewhere else. The Kitchen Table evokes the feeling of safety, comfort and hominess many players felt while with their friends. The Yard in contrast is derived by me from the idea of "gates" or "gatekeeping" certain players. Thinking of this gate and the contrasting kitchen table, a house metaphor sprang to mind from which the

liminal Porch space was constructed as well – not quite inside the house, but also not in the perils of the Yard.

I then turn to the various pathways that gamers use to access these spaces and how the experience they have of gaming in general is different because of that pathway. Through interview data I detail several pathways that allow longtime players to navigate the overarching subculture of gaming. I find that the way in which somebody enters a subculture will first have effects on their embrace of the practice and identity of gamer, and subsequently their willingness to stay in the subculture. Beyond the initial entry in the space, I find that players must come up with strategies to navigate the social space if they are to remain part of the subculture. It is through analyzing the pathways players use to ultimately navigate this space that we can understand its structural composition.

Three Main Spaces

The Yard (Getting In, Getting Out, Getting Good)

The Yard is set up in contrast to the Kitchen Table of gaming. It is a large space, usually privately owned but treated as a public space, which the private owners don't moderate or monitor substantively. By all accounts of players, the Yard is not the best place to be. In fact, many would rather either not play, only go into the Yard with members from their Kitchen Table or remove themselves entirely from the social portion of the games they enjoy rather than stay in The Yard for any length of time. Many describe the yard as "toxic" or generally unpleasant. The kindest way a player described the Yard was useful as long as you don't turn on/pay attention to the chat. Winslow describes his extensive experience in unmoderated online publics by saying companies' lack of moderation:

> creates these super toxic communities where then the good people, the good hearted people in the world feel pushed out and isolated and that they stopped playing in these communal the games cuz they don't want to be involved in the community that's there in those types of cases because its super toxic.

Winslow here was specifically speaking about the "larger social games" like *World of Warcraft* and *Final Fantasy Online*. Having been involved with gaming and online gaming since *Ultima Online* (1997) Winslow played both *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft* while also migrating across different games either by purchase, Kickstarter, or being offered beta access. Winslow had been through and around many different corners of the large MMORPG Yard, and had collected a core group of people to game with from these spaces. He now either coordinated with his regular game group or used access "keys" to play with the same core of people when he was feeling social. In this way, Winslow crafted his own, digital Kitchen Table in where his friends could play different games using one communications system. Keeping him from having to interact with that toxicity in the yard if he chose.

Additionally, game changes in the digital platforms remove not only the agency of players to punish bad behavior, but also to have recourse after bad interactions. In *World of Warcraft* players can use a tool called "Dungeon Finder" to put together a random party in order to gain experience and gear by completing dungeons. Knowing that sometimes social and play conflict happen between random players, Blizzard tried to manage negative interactions using a "Kick" function. That is, if 3 players decide that a player isn't contributing or that their behavior is unacceptable, the offending player can be removed from the Dungeon by vote. This, according to my respondents, rarely happened. While the tool was always available, it was generally seen as too much of a hassle to engage. Players would rather just run the Dungeon (which took little time to

complete) and then cue up to get an entirely different party. Additionally, the "kicked" player was only punished from *that group* and was free to que up again. Similarly at conventions, players could either elect to leave the table, or wait it out for the 2-4 hours a session. The important thing here is that the experience of toxicity was seen as transitory and not within the purview of players to police.

The paradox here is that respondents who are either only transitorily in the Yard or not in the Yard at all are not counted within that subculture. So, their experiences are lost. In gaming, this is expressed by many of my respondents/players talking lovingly about the long-term friendships, transformative experiences, and deep connection to people and games, and commitments to social justice juxtaposed with the idea of a player being a toxic white supremacist. That's not to say that hose players don't exist, they do and it's a problem. It is to say that, those players are not the sum total of the hobby. They're just the ones who got kicked off the Porch or out of the Kitchen Table. However, as the public face of gaming, they are also the ones from whom it is easiest to gather information and data. And they are able to continue to be toxic because the Yard, as it currently stands is essentially a lawless place with disposable and limited-duration social interactions. While other players eventually migrate out of the Yard (ether to the Kitchen Table, The Porch, or out of the hobby entirely), those who remain in the Yard are by definition the most dysfunctional players.

The Porch

The second space(s) here are conceptualized as "The Porch." In The Yard there can be many Porch spaces but they all share a few similar characteristics. The first is that a player has to know the Porch exists through advertisement, chatter, or invitation. As

opposed to the easy access of the Yard (purchasing a game or doing an internet search), Porches can be ephemeral. Second, there is stable identity associated with the Porch space. This can be an embodied identity with ties to other aspects of the player's lived experience, or it can be entirely detached from social interactions outside of that Porch space. On the Porch, players can engage in reputation building and become invested in making and maintaining social connections. There is also moderation, rules, and a way to enforce those rules. Moderate-sized Facebook groups, small conventions, large guilds, or game stores can fall under this category.

The Porch is a place where two forms of social power can be enacted. The first, from the top-down as moderators or owner of The Porch can step in and gatekeep who is allowed action. The second, is intersocial. That is, other members on the Porch are able to police the behavior/actions but may feel disempowered to do so. Another feature of the Porch is that while a member can be kicked off of the Porch, re-entry is not difficult. Unlike the Kitchen Table, the offender can usually just walk back in (sometimes after some time has passed) or even migrate simply to a different part of the Porch.

Samuel here describes the different experiences of what would constitute a "Porch" or a "Yard." To give a sense of scale, Gen Con in 2019 had approximately 70,000 attendees, while Origins had around 20,500. Gen Con is arguably one of the biggest *Dungeons and Dragons* conventions and has ties to the co-creator, Gary Gygax. Samuel, who has attended Gen Con, an annual *Dungeons and Dragons* convention now held in Indianapolis, Indiana due to outgrowing its origin in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin as well as attending Origins Game Fair in Columbus, Ohio contrasts his experience between the two spaces:

> Origins is smaller but still now growing and so it feels like what Gen for me which used to be. It's not Gen Con's fault that it's popular. It's so nothing I'm not trash talking Gen Con. It's great. It's just there's so many people that it's difficult to find a space to sit down that's not your hotel room and play a game. I think Origins is not like that yet Origins you could kind of describe a space and in play, but it still feels like there's a lot going on.

Even though Samuel preferred Origins to Gen Con for the possibilities in its size, he was still looking to pool players to form a Kitchen Table game on that Porch. The thing that Samuel clarifies here is how overwhelming the Yard can be, and how much easier it is to parse a space like the Porch. Samuel was able to make connections across play at Origins in a way he found more difficult in the large space of Gen Con. Samuel's point about Gen Con's popularity is also indicative of the differences in the space. As conventions get smaller, the harder they can be to hear about and thus it was through Samuel's connections made as a game designer and player though which he came to Origins. Ultimately Samuel didn't report creating a Kitchen Table game from Origins itself, although he used the mechanisms of the convention (the ability to sign up for and test games) to engage in play while there.

Importantly, there can still be a heavy amount of traffic across the Porch – as in this smaller convention. Samuel was not meeting specific people (although many respondents said they would use Porch spaces to meet friends, especially distant ones) he was looking forward to an influx of new people to game with. Conventions, Festivals, and Events are great places to make, meet, and return to see friends even though the contact may seem ephemeral (Fine & van den Scott, 2011). These temporary Porches are constructed and dissipate, but the bond which can be formed there can remain stable for years either through annual meetings or other forms of communication

While players and respondents can and do encounter toxicity or negativity in the spaces, there can be con officials and policy to enact for justice. Similarly on message boards or chat situations, rules and moderation are key And, players are able to find enough replacements for toxic players that they don't feel the need to suffer through that toxicity.

The Kitchen Table

The Kitchen Table metaphor is meant to be evocative of the environment and experiences many of my players had. That is, a private, cultivated space where people felt warm, welcome and comfortable playing and being themselves. These Kitchen Tables are either physical locations in somebody's house or they can be digital as sites of heavy, swift and no-tolerance moderation. It is a private space where the term 'gatekeeping' is swapped for 'moderation' and players can continue their practices in relative peace from antisocial players (broadly applied). It allows them escape from the toxic behaviors of those in the Yard without having to address the problems that are happening in the Yard itself.

The Kitchen Table which is with whom my respondents would regularly play has a few dimensions which make it desirable. The first is the moderation above. Players feel empowered to "disinvite" people from their Kitchen Table if they are being toxic. They also tend to know the players at their Kitchen Tables through various pathways. Like Brian above collected players for his Kitchen Table throughout games. More typical is the way Blaine describes the overlapping social ties he has to his Kitchen Table games:

> So if we include my Fantasy Grounds D&D, folks, you know, Lucas's my cousin So, I see him at family functions and we would hang out anyway. Shane and

> Larry, same thing. My friend Ewan, same thing, my friend Nathan, same thing. But when we cross over to Adrienne and Jack, like I only spend time with them in the context of D&D and Fantasy Grounds or them coming here to play my game. Same with Cormac and same with Keiran and Eugenio and all the UK people that I don't even know their names. So, they're strictly, you know, RPG friends. Whereas the other people that I listed prior, you know, we were friends first, I think.

The Kitchen Table then becomes not only a space for play but for reinforcing multiple ties of family, friends, coworkers, and players met in different contexts. At the Kitchen Table, not only does play occur, but social interaction does as well in which everybody as a vested interest in making sure everybody feels comfortable. In Goffmanian terms, this is the most backstage area of the gaming public where, regardless of how they might present to their non-game friends, these players are allowed a different performance of self and that, along with the experiences of play, reinforce those bonds (Goffman, 1959).

In the Yard of games, there are many Kitchen Tables where people are playing and enacting player identities. It is here from which my players speak most passionately, most fondly about the experiences they have around the table. When queried, all my respondents said that they would not hesitate to offer aid to players at their table (emotional, financial, moving or other kinds of support). Part of this is achieved because they are reinforcing existing bonds. Players may donate at conventions or online, but they do not donate along the identity or culture of Gaming. They do help and donate to those with whom they have forged bonds around hours of play and social exchange.

Pathways to Play

Looking at these three levels of the subcultural space we can see how the experience of the subculture can differ. The more heavily moderated, the less toxic the space becomes, and the more intimate it can be. The Porches and Kitchen Tables within

the Gaming Yard also, importantly, operate largely by invitation only. The Yard of Gaming, due to it's unmoderated and toxic nature, is the easiest to access but, for my players, not often the first point of contact. Many were gamers long before the Yard existed – they picked up dice before the internet or were already embedded in MMORPGs before *World of Warcraft* made its spectacular debut. Below are the common pathways to play my respondents found and how they shaped their understanding on the play space itself.

Neighborhood To Kitchen Table

This is what happens when somebody new to gaming gets invited into the Kitchen Table directly. Much of the time they already had overlapping hobbies and are thus in the "neighborhood" already. This is one of the most common ways to enter the game space because there are different overlapping Yards for players. These tend to be connected hobbies but can also be familial, romantic, work or school related Yards. What usually happens here is that somebody knows somebody who games, or might be interested in these kinds of games, and then acts as their guide into the hobby. This allows the previous relationship to be reinforced and for players to get their feet under them before seeking out the wider, public space of gaming which may or may not be hostile to them and their identities.

One of the major examples of this is players who reported not being able to remember a time which they weren't embedded in a game space. Examples here are Jordan and Taylor who both started gaming from a very young age. As Jordan explains when asked whether they played digital or analog roleplaying games first.

> It's really hard for me to say what my first memory of RPG is […] Because my first memories of it, I do remember playing a tabletop like D&D second [edition].

> But I can't remember if that was before or after I played some of the earlier RPGs like on Super Nintendo. And I think the other half of that is that I've always sort of invested my personality into the avatars and games.

Taylor shares a similar recollection of their first tabletop experience stating that:

> One of my earliest memories is rolling a D 20. I was I've been about three. I've been playing D&D for a long time. in some form or another, my parents had game night at their place so that they didn't have to hire a babysitter. So yeah, one of my earliest memories is of playing D&D. Some of my most solid childhood memories have to do with like, my mom buying me my first set of dice which I still have

Both respondents who were brought up in a gaming household here remain close with their parents and lived in households where at least one member of their family was of the professional class. Although both identified as gender non-binary they were also both still in contact and reported good relationships with their parents as well. This result is typical of my sample in that those participants who gamed with family members early in their lives tended to still enjoy good relationships with those family members suggesting that the hobby is helps reinforce relationships rather than break them apart.

We can see this further reinforced with Chad and Edna who were mother and son interviewed and assured me that this was the beginning of *Dungeons and Dragons* specifically as 'family affair.' Chad reported starting to play *Dungeons and Dragons* when he was "about seven years old that would have been 1978 […] making my character and playing *Dungeons and Dragons* with my mom and my stepdad." Chad goes on to quickly sketch the scene as taking place in a laundromat using the "Blue Box" or first edition of *Dungeons and Dragons*. His mother, Edna described herself as coming from a "board games" family and credits a relationship with introducing her and her family to *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Edna and her family played for about 8 years then took a break from gaming due to the dissolution of a relationship. As Edna describes it she was with "this guy who was like chronically unemployed, and he was our [Dungeon Master] and that worked really really well as long as I was willing to support him. When that relationship ended, the D&D group sort of fell apart because nobody else really had the time and energy to put together a campaign for the world." Importantly to this narrative however, Edna does not credit *Dungeons and Dragons* with reinforcing familial or friendship bonds so much as the game being "one of our favorite activities, but not what bonded us." Edna's and later Chad's experience with Dungeons and Dragons can be traced back to Edna's romantic relationship which is a pattern that replicated itself in *World of Warcraft* more explicitly. This is true particularly when it came to participants who did not identify as male.

Alexa serves as a typical example of this transition into play to *World of Warcraft*. Importantly, like the other respondents, Alexa was pulled into *World of Warcraft* by a romantic partner but she describes a long-term relationship with online activities predating her entry into the MMORPG. Alexa, having been active in the precursor to MMORPGs known as "MUDs" or "MOOs" which where text-based interfaces used for gaming and roleplay, notes the gender difference in the spaces, saying that while *World of Warcraft* seemed populated by male-identified players, her previous experiences were mostly female-identified. She was reluctant to follow the trajectory from those text-based spaces to the graphic interfaces even as she was "begged" by a "guy friend" to try it out. Eventually, a later boyfriend enticed her to play. According to Alexa:

> the truth is, that the boyfriend wanted to play WoW during the time he was with me so he got me set up playing, you know? He gave me an old computer of his so

> I could play with him. That relationship didn't last long but he left the computer behind when he went.

Alexa then continued to play but, like many players experienced a lowering of time dedicated to play which she attributes to other hobbies and relationships needing time. This was right before the Battle for Azeroth (2017) expansion hit (she reports playing since right before the Burning Crusade (2007) expansion) so at the time she had been playing and raiding for 10 years. During that time, she would change her server (from Player vs Environment to Player vs Player) to play with friends, as well as her faction (from Alliance to Horde). And the guild she plays with was happy to return the favor of this loyalty. As mentioned, she was experiencing a lack of time to dedicate to play and preparing to leave the guild when "an officer from the guild approached me and was like 'Look, we miss raiding with you, we want to make this work, what if you take a part-time raiding position?'" Alexa reported feeling touched by the gesture and ability to continue to play with her guild and friends. Once embedded in *World of Warcraft* Alexa made friends via guilds which replicated her experience on the MUDs and MOOs she had previously been a part of. That is, in her guild online people would move from the Porch to the Kitchen.

Finally, and perhaps most typical is how Sara came from the neighborhood to the kitchen. Sara works at an Esports bar and played *Dungeons and Dragons* when she was in her preteens but took an absence from the game until her 30s. As somebody who works at an Esports bar, Sara was still active in game spaces and hobbies but not playing *Dungeons and Dragons* until

> a couple years ago, a friend of mine was like 'Hey, I started playing *D&D* and my friend really want to lead her campaign and I know that's right up your alley.

> Loke, do you want to come play with us and be part of this?' and I jumped on the opportunity.

Sara was a player-in-waiting for somebody to invite her into the kitchen. Many of the players I spoke to, even when they didn't have an active game, are generally in-waiting for a game or a Kitchen Table to sit at. A group of people to come together and create that space, largely because the work of sifting through a large public for players is daunting. Further, the consequences of choosing the *wrong* players for a table can be dire. In those instances, the best case scenario is that the game falls apart because otherwise, players will end up spending on average 4-6 hours each week with those at the Kitchen Table.

Porch to Kitchen Table

These are the folks that make their way through the yard to a porch. Usually, a smaller convention or large online message board/social media space. This Porch experience then either allows them to build their own Kitchen Table, or to be invited further inside to play in already established Kitchen Tables. By far, this was the smallest section of my respondents. Nobody in the sample went from a large convention (Gen Con, DragonCon, SDCC) which would count as a Yard to a Kitchen Table game. They might attend conventions but even then, it was usually part of a friend group already going (or this would be what tempted them to go in the first place). None of the respondents went to large conventions or public boards 'cold.'

Allison is a typical story here, using a separate community and their spaces to test out and enter into tabletop roleplaying. As she describes it, a My Little Pony fan group in their area wanted to start a *Dungeons and Dragons* group so they went to that session. Allison, unlike many first time players, reported that this first experience "just felt a little

intimidating" as she tried to learn the rules and how the game was played. This didn't sour her on the game, but she did stipulate that

> once I got familiar with the game, I was able to do the role play and all of that much much better. But when I was trying to figure out all the rules and had all these people around who I didn't now, I didn't want to make mistakes. It was a little overwhelming. But it was still fun and I kept going back.

In this way, Allison and her husband were able to use the smaller space of the My Little Pony porch to be invited into the Kitchen Table of a *Dungeons and Dragons* game.

This can be contrasted to Allison's *World of Warcraft* experience. First, it was her husband who started her in *World of Warcraft* as a way for them to spend time together while playing. Second, Allison was invited into a large guild via her husband very quickly. When asked to describe how her *Dungeons and Dragons* group compared to her *World of Warcraft* group Allison described it as such:

> Well, they, the guild is obviously much larger. that the *Dungeons and Dragons* group so and I have less of a choice of who's in the guild. So there's definitely a much bigger range of people in the guild. After a while, we were in a guild but we had like a small group of people that we did 10 man raids with and I think like once we did that, that that 10 man raid group was more similar to like what my *Dungeons and Dragons* group is but the guild as a whole less so because this just by definition, a much larger group and a much wider range of people in it.

Perhaps better than anything else, this guild space wherein smaller groups can form best describes group formation from the porch to the table.

Another way people make it from the porch to the table is to be invited or at the least tolerated by my respondents. Winslow, who prefers to "solo" games generally in that he enjoys the exploration and griding aspects of the game, basing his play on that type of achievement originally came to *World of Warcraft* via a long journey. First he played *Dungeons and Dragons* with his family members, then he moved to MUDs before

eventually playing *Ultima Online* and then to *World of Warcraft*. While not typical in trajectory, this kind of game hopping was also not uncommon. Winslow is particular here in that while he loved to play he would be frustrated with the gaming publics and the relative precarity of his progress especially in *Ultima Online* which eventually made him migrate to *World of Warcraft*. Winslow would miss time playing and be non-competitive because of it so he eventually became his "own guild leader. That I was like, well, I'm just gonna have my own group for me, just one. And then it ended up growing, which I had other friends from, that I had raided with in the past. And they're like, well, we want to join your little group of one."

These players were probably looking for safe harbor from the Yard in that they knew Winslow's table was good and they were already on his porch due to previous game activities. They gravitated toward Winslow because not only was he a skilled player, but he would keep a fun space without the toxicity of the public filtering. Everybody was there to have fun and they had a common definition of that, anybody who broke the rules would either be booted or Winslow himself would move on as he describes in another MMO later when he felt taken advantage of by his guild members. The table, as in other conceptions, was a privileges place which replicated the feel of Winslow's initial experience in *World of Warcraft* before Raid Finder was implemented.

One person who did manage to leverage a posting board at a local game store was Andrea. Previously, Andrea had lived in a place that either didn't have a game store at all or had stores more dedicated to either *Warhammer 40,000* or *Magic: The Gathering*. While these games also provide Porches to entry into *Dungeons and Dragons* and vice versa, they weren't the game which Andrea was ultimately looking for. Her move and a

new local game store afforded the opportunity to find a play group because it had a "looking for party type board." Through this cultivated posting board, Andrea was able to find a *Dungeons and Dragons* 3.5 edition play group while would also engage in other forms of play including *Vampire: the Masquerade* and *G.U.R.P.S. (Generic Universal Roleplay System)*. Eventually Andrea would move toward the 5th Edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* but preferred the 3.5 version as did many of my respondents. This movement through editions as the game evolved was typical of longtime players who had spans of continuous play. Many still prefer 3.0 or 3.5 with very few preferring the 4th edition of the game. This is analogous to not only the different expansions of *World of Warcraft*, each of which forward the overarching plot of the game in addition to changing mechanics, but the way in which long time digital players would migrate from Digital Kitchen Table to Digital Kitchen Table in search of a better play experience.

(Digital) Kitchen Table to (Digital) Kitchen Table

This describes players who would move from one gaming space to another specifically. It rarely happened but if a player is playing *World of Warcraft* they would then be invited to play *Dungeons and Dragons* via the same social group that was playing *World of Warcraft*. The table itself remains mostly the same in terms of participants but just gets move to the digital or the analog world. Additionally, this can happen when gamers playing one game decide to migrate platforms. For example, if somebody was in a guild in *Everquest* much of the guild would eventually migrate to *World of Warcraft* or other MMORPG. This was a massive migration process that happened when *Everquest II* and *World of Warcraft* briefly shared the same marketspace (*World of Warcraft* eventually emerging as the clear victor).

This roughly describes the way in which Luke first came to *World of Warcraft*. His experience with *Dungeons and Dragons* is detailed above but coming to the digital table was a different journey. Luke was able to play what was known as the "beta" release of *World of Warcraft*. The term has come to mean something different in current video game context (thanks largely to the Steam platform and other indie game spaces) but for *World of Warcraft* it was known not only as a "beta" release but a "closed beta." This means that accounts were offered to players through networks as opposed to being open to everybody. You had to be invited to play and test the game for developers (for free). Luke, having been playing online MMORPGs for some time before *World of Warcraft* came out "made a conscious effort to get into the WoW beta because I was in *Everquest* beta too, and I just realized that 'Oh, I like this early access, get a head start on the other people. Learn how to play before and get up whatever advantage."

Luke mentions in the interview *Ultima Online* which was released in 1997 and is widely recognized as one of the first MMORPGs as the genre as become known so he is familiar with the 'migration' of players from one MMO to another, describing his eventual journey to *World of Warcraft* saying "all those friends that we went o *EverQuest II* with kind of migrated over to WoW as well so I don't remember where they're like I consciously went to WoW on my own or that one of my friends had bailed earlier it was like hey come play WoW with us but it could be either way." The central importance here is how players who are already embedded in these game spaces move from one game to another. In this respect *World of Warcraft* isn't much different than other MMORPGs then and now. What makes *World of Warcraft* impressive is the *amount* of players who migrated from their previous digital tables into the *World of Warcraft* space.

Blaine is such a player. Having been *deeply* embedded in *Everquest* previously, he was also part of the *World of Warcraft* beta. Blaine was so enthralled by the game after being frustrated with *Everquest* he 'ditched college' to get in line before the store opened and "was blown away that there was not a line to get into the store." What makes Blaine special here is that he, like Winslow, is a self-professed "solo" digital game player although he maintains 4 *Dungeons and Dragons* games which meet. Blaine, as well, has a long history with digital games and were it not for that history and the *World of Warcraft* beta he probably would have continued with analog role playing games having grown frustrated with the digital content he was experiencing. This is a way in which the movement from digital tabletop to digital tabletop functions to move players from one game to another.

Even before Blizzard's acquisition via Microsoft buying Activision games and the even larger problem of scandals in Blizzard's upper management, many of the players were already looking to their next game, where the next migration might land. Many players pointed to mechanics changes that had been part of expansions or led to a more toxic public space (Raid Finder being a big one here) because of an erosion of the 'social contract.'

Conclusion

Cleaning up the Yard

Like my respondents I am hesitant to blanket ban players from game spaces. Not only does this feel ineffective, but it feels like just pushing them to different games as opposed to sanctioning their behavior. Instead, I would argue first for creating research which accesses these private spaces explicitly so that *all* gamers are represented. While

representation is not the end of shifting a culture, it can go a far way into letting people see themselves in gaming spaces and not simply being targets. As long as the story being told of gamers remains a single story of toxic, angry, white men it will always feel like a struggle for players who do not fit those statuses to claim space in the game.

Second, game design itself should recenter the individual and their experience in that space. Bartle once wrote about MMORPG players as suits of cards (Clubs, Diamonds, Hearts, and Spades) and that the goal of a designer should be to have these players in balance to remain enjoyable (Bartle, 1996). What has seemed to happen is that by preferencing Clubs and Diamonds in *World of Warcraft* the Hearts have not only been sidelined but are assumed to not be a part of player identity. Bartle argues that any of these out of whack and the game becomes unfun in a way, recognizing that while player drive leans toward one or the other, it doesn't preclude the need to tend to all four. This is why many of the player no longer recruit from the Yard, it is infact not condusive to building or stabilizing social relationships. That work is done at the Porch and the Kitchen Table where it feels manageable. However, if the game changes mechanically to the needs for prosocial behavior of the kind favored by the Hearts, all players (and their Hearts) reap the benefits. This doesn't mean a policing or ban of antisocial players. Indeed, that might have the opposite effect. What might prove most useful is not moderation but a reintroduction of the mechanisms relied upon by Hearts and force players to interact with each other. This can look like removing freedom or accessibility, removing Raid Finder or once again keeping players locked to a server. However, it also incentivizes players to police themselves and their yard.

In the absence of sanction, then, players in the Yard can continue to be toxic. Indeed, that toxicity might be what has landed them in the Yard to begin with. When players eject toxic or anti-social players from their Kitchen Tables or, more rarely, from The Porch, they usually end up in the Yard if they continue to play. This is also a place where that toxicity can be gamified for player amusement – the point is the toxicity which was a common theory amongst respondents. This was also used as a reason to not report or interact with the toxic player at all, using the theory that if they are unable to get a reaction from the other players, they will eventually grow bored and go away.

This is the milieu under which many researchers and journalists and some new players enter. It is where the most common stereotypes are born and nurtured. It could also be the first place where players are socialized into the online or game world itself. That is, where they learn "how to be" in the game world or conventions. In addition to much of this behavior being present in more mainstream spaces, the Yard can be seen as a place where this behavior is acceptable and, in fact, part of the fun for players. Much like players who take the game structure and tweak it for their own enjoyment, the social space of games is the same way. While it is designed for players to interact in prosocial ways, players can reject those boundaries and instead engage in antisocial behaviors as a game in and of itself. The Yard is the place that this can happen most freely. Which then perpetuates the stereotype of how a player behaves.

The Kitchen then is where we see power enacted most consistently and forcefully. Policing comes both from functions within the space and from other players who will happily remove antisocial players from the space or never invite them in, in the first place. By doing this, the central actors in the game space lost their control on two of three

forms of legitimacy as discussed by Bourdieu (1993), the legitimacy conferred by producers on producers and that of the 'bourgeois' taste aficionados. Where previously, players and designers could control what constituted good play, and develop refined language and taste to control their population, they now fling open these claims and lay everything at the feet of "popular" legitimacy or "the consecration bestowed by the choice of ordinary consumers" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 51).. In the Yard, my respondents would argue that there is no legitimate use of power. That the Yard is for everybody whether or not they agree/disagree with the players. There is also no social power, that is no social contract between the people in the yard. Interactions are seen as largely disposable and/or as interactions which will not affect individual players. The Yard, for some respondents is seen as a necessary evil in the face of an ideological commitment against gatekeeping and censorship broadly understood.

In the end, these game spaces recognizably have a problem with toxicity to non-white, non-male, non-cisgender, non-heteronormative players in the public spaces. The moderated Kitchen Tables tell a different story. However, getting to those tables is a problem if you're not already on somebody's porch and it's obvious why many of these potential players would choose to exit as opposed to stay in that space. It is also important to acknowledge that players have been forming and reinforcing bonds over decades of gaming with a variety of people. If we want to tell the whole story, these spaces need to be a part of it as well. We can recognize the toxicity of the space while holding examples of good gaming citizens up as well.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Roleplay gaming is a large subculture based around practices and creative ideas, itself sometimes a "shared fantasy" even when players are beyond the table. It is both idiosyncratic in the way players navigate through its Kitchen Tables, Porches, and Yards and utterly mundane in the construction and maintenance of those spaces. It is emblematic of a possible shift in how people form groups in the late 20th and early 21st centuries where we are afforded the freedom to keep a multiverse of communities in our pockets thanks to the telecommunications revolution and nation-wide networks. It has allowed for a national, some would say international network of players to be able to connect and form a community without borders or gates.

It is not a community which has developed as a utopic fantasy, nor is it universally accessible. For many, it remains behind a pay wall. For many more still they do not feel welcome in the public spaces of gaming or the community overall. The members and the non-members both acknowledge and lament the toxicity of many players and player spaces. They decry gatekeeping, histories and ideology steeped in racism, colonialism, misogyny, eugenics and sometimes, unreflexive, uninventive world-building. In many ways while gamers may be trying very hard to throw the gates open to the Yard, they have not addressed the fact that not everybody can walk on grass.

Gaming then is a microcosm of the larger cultures in which it is embedded. It remains, made up of both people and texts . . . created by people. And, in the digital sphere code . . . created by people. It is grounded in technical prowess and storytelling

where some players tell stories through stat blocks and others through virtuoso improvisational monologues. It is in reading these stories that we can see the history and development of the subculture which, in turn can give us ideas about how other subcultures grow, function, and thrive when people have the choice of electing into that subculture or not.

We Have Always Been Here: Women in Gaming

In this chapter I took a two-pronged approach to interrogating the participation of women in gaming spaces. Because of the toxicity of the Yard, and how it flashpoints and hinges on racism and misogyny, it was important that this chapter address the participation of players and creators who did not identify as men. My data and research revealed two thing. The first is that in the incipience of roleplay gaming, there were key designers who have been shaping both the mechanics and lore in which modern-day roleplay games exist. Further, reports from my respondents show long-time participation in the Gaming sphere. This was true both specifically of the *Dungeons and Dragons* and *World of Warcraft* sites and also of their pre-cursors.

This reveals a few important sociological points. The first is echoing work done in labor, that when the study and understanding of a social space is assumed to be entirely male, the women get erased from that space and it impacts their opportunities (Acker, 1990). What I have done is firmly establish the longevity of women and non-binary-identified players in this space. Further, I used Foucault (1978) to argue that while Gamergate was a misogynistic campaign against women gamers specifically, it also had the effect of rendering them visible in the space. Last I augmented Gray (2014) in how

women navigate these spaces, how they invest their time and energy into play, and how they embed themselves in game ecologies.

For the gaming community, this chapter has some explicit implications. The first is that anybody who is not seen as a straight, white, male should not be cast as an 'invader' or somebody to 'make space for.' They should be seen as somebody who enjoys playing games and as at least as much right to play, create, and participate in directing the practice of gaming. Second, the accomplishments and participation of a full spectrum of people should be lauded and written back into the histories of gaming. Additionally, companies *and players* should be mindful about incorporating the work of diverse individuals *because it makes the creative space more rich*. Wizards of the Coast has done some laudable work in this area, although there remains a long way to go.

Future research in this area should focus heavily on the contributions of diverse actors and stakeholders in these spaces to make sure their stories are told. Additionally, many participants are carriers of history at a very particular moment in these gaming spaces. That is, they grew up together. Much of the research tends to be focused on younger participants or highly visible members of the gaming community. However, one of the reasons I was able to uncover some of the rich history was because my sample had an average age of 35. Many of my respondents had weathered moral panics associated with games, watched with doe-eyed curiosity as a dot-matrix printer produced physical ASCII art, and remembered the internet as a mostly text-based interactive telecommunications tool. Compiling their accounts and impressions of how games and game culture have changed over time would be invaluable to future researchers. It would

allow a history to be written, and add in our understanding of resiliency in leisure spaces which are toxic.

Navigating Race: Player Agency and Politics

In this chapter I used Content Analysis of game mechanics and lore building, as well as interview data to address how my respondents navigated essentialism in the game space. I found that contemporary theories of how people navigate these racial structures didn't apply for a few reasons. The first is that race itself was salient at all times and confronted or redefined during character creation so it couldn't run on Colorblind logics (Omi & Winant, 2015). Nor, borrowing from Game Studies did engaging in these mechanics produce players who internalized those racial logics and used them in their non-play spaces (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2007). Instead, what I detailed were strategies for understanding why and how those racial characteristics were created in the game. I then turned how players addressed the reasons behind them, and finally how they changed, threw out, or engaged with the rules/game mechanics in order to craft fantasies they enjoyed both aesthetically and ideologically.

This is sociologically important because it allows us to understand how people interact with media objects which do not reflect their beliefs. It extends the idea of "Remix Culture" (Jenkins et al., 2016) to the game space. Additionally, it extends the idea of remix to smaller, private spaces where we can see the remix happen even for individuals who are not producing media objects for public consumption. Here I detail the mechanisms of how players subvert and discard the ideology of their media objects in order to enjoy them. These mechanics trouble the notion that consumers either accept the

ideology embedded in their media objects wholesale or that they must reject them in order to escape internalizing them (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2006).

This chapter is important to gaming for 2 reasons. The first is that, mirroring contemporary struggles in America, race has become a topic of discussion in the game spaces. My respondents were self-aware of the racial politics in the game, and found ways to navigate them so they didn't see themselves engaging in those problematic notions. The second is that the games industry is trying to respond to critiques of this problematic essentialism. Wizards of the Coast has released "new rules" via their digital platforms which remove the stat changes attached to character race. This effectively makes the mechanics themselves 'colorblind' but is an incomplete measure according to the many players. Blizzard has included content developed with the idea that people could see themselves in the game (how well they have accomplished this is up for debate). Both companies have material interests in keeping consumers who are voicing their politics over internet platforms. And the response is not unified to the changes made by either company. Still, the conversation will continue to evolve as either game company navigate their own past offerings.

Future research in this area should focus in tightly on the intersection of virtual and physical embodiment and lived experiences of players. The beginning analysis here of how players use raced bodies to explore and enact authenticity in the virtual world of the game is insufficient moving forward. Rather than throw bodily difference out wholesale, research should explore ethical ways to incorporate and celebrate that difference. Another venue ripe for research is the art contained in the materials. This and other content analysis of roleplaying games focus on mechanics and text, but the art is an

important component that remains under researched when it comes to games research. An exploration of "controlling images" as represented in the game materials could also reveal how those images form boundaries and opportunities of who can play, and how they can construct themselves in the game space and beyond (Collins, 2009).

Jerks in the Yard

In this chapter I proposed a new way to conceptualize subcultural space as having 3 different levels. The Yard, which encompasses all participants in the subculture and is the most public, and least regulated space of subcultural practice. The Porch, which is semi-private and heavily moderated or policed space and of which there can be multiple. Finally, the Kitchen Table, the most heavily policed and private space embedded within the subcultural field. These spaces are meant to help differentiate the field and the different experiences which can be had there. I further go on to address how different pathways into the subculture, and how use of those spaces can result in vastly different experiences of players.

This chapter is important sociologically because it allows for a conceptualization of subcultures which doesn't homogenize them. Bourdieu conceptualizes culture as existing in a field wherein the participants are using various forms of capital to have the power to define the cultural tastes and wants (Bourdieu, 1984). Similarly, they can be seen as many interlocking individuals necessary to create art objects (Becker, 1974). While these theories are useful in thinking about the social interaction needed to define a culture and practice they also view that space as one large block of people. What this chapter does is expand on those theories by detailing the structure of both private and

public spaces within the large space of subculture. It adds further nuance to the social action taking place within the larger conceptions of (sub)cultural development.

This chapter is important to the gaming community for a few reasons. The first is that it provides a counter narrative to the idea that all gamers are specific way. While the public face of gaming is incredibly toxic, all gamers (whether or not they participate in those public places) bear the brunt of that stigmatization. It is also a warning as to who can operate in those public spaces, and who *must* be relegated to private practice in order to keep themselves safe. It both acknowledges those who game and do not share the problematic ideology attached to gaming, and recognizes why they do not choose to engage publicly. On the obverse, it is a call to action to those operating in private spaces to help clean up the Yard either through moderation or by inviting players from the Yard to Kitchen Tables to show them a different way to game. The Yard is not going to clean up itself, and if gamers would like to slip the stigma, they will need to find better ways to address the toxicity besides avoidance. Third, it is a suggestion to game and platform developers about the tools they should employ to build stronger, more inclusive communities in their games. Beyond moderation, making sure that players have recourse to toxic players, and ensuring that a good reputation has a social and then mechanical value are the two biggest changes to the platforms which could improve the public communities. Tying participation to a *stable* entity whether or not it has ties to non-game identities, and having consequences for that player's actions may see a community turn as players . .. want to play.

Future research on communities and culture here could focus more heavily on the networks and pathways players take to find their 'stable' of game companions.

Conversely, focusing on players who 'solo' either digital or tabletop RPGs and how/why they choose to navigate the space of play alone could further reveal an even more private/heavily moderated experience. Finally, in the future research focused different sized conventions and public spaces would be useful to determine how big or small communities can grow before they need to centralize and build hierarchy into their events. At the Kitchen Table, informal conversations and social mores are enough to keep most players centered and able to share fantasy. In the Yard, not only are all the stories people bring with them potentially in conflict, but they very idea of what constitutes "fun" is vastly different. Seeing the social mechanisms to have these ideas if not in alignment but at least in common understanding could apply to ever larger communities where homogenization is not possible or preferable.

Overall Conclusion

When players speak about *Dungeons and Dragons* or *World of Warcraft* there are a wide variety of topics to address. From detailed understandings of game mechanics, to well-crafted stories, to impressive improv to design, lore-crafting, writing, props, general crafting skills, dice, and the every-impressive swag collected. Both games are powerhouses in their respective and the overall roleplay game community. *Dungeons and Dragons* has been deemed "The World's Most Popular TRPG" by Wizards of the Coast (their home company). *World of Warcraft* exploded onto the scene with the highest player number, and continued to grow for years. They're big enough that if somebody engages in the culture of roleplaying, it would be hard for them not to have a passing understanding of what they are. *Dungeons and Dragons* specifically is credited

with spawning not only all the tabletop roleplaying games that came after, but as I have discussed, informed the computer roleplaying game industry from its inception.

Always here, we see play, players, and practices at the beating heart of these games. These are games which necessitate human interaction. Where the worlds and stories are built in communal moments between characters and players. Players trade inside jokes and reminisce about old game stories together, strengthening and relying upon bond they made in game. In all the interviews I completed, the thing that remained static even when respondents had undesirable encounters or traumatic experiences to relate, was a love both of play and players. A love of a community that they wish they could be prouder of, but that they embrace wholeheartedly. Players who acknowledge the problems in the community but find ways to uplift that which is great and beautiful about killing MOBs and telling stories together.

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