

Gender Rolls:
A History of Gender, Identity, and Nostalgia in Tabletop Roleplaying Games

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Dedication

For Morrigan

The power of the dragon, it will guide us...

Abstract

Since the mid-1970s, tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs), epitomized by Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), evolved from a niche hobby into a profitable, transmedia phenomenon. Two moral panics involving children’s entertainment media—the “Satanic Panic” of the 1980s and the news media’s reaction to the Columbine High School shooting in 1999—solidified the public image of the gamer as a White male who was vulnerable to suggestions of violence or self-harm in games. Historically, White men and boys were the assumed audience for TRPGs. This dissertation puts the lived experiences of women and nonbinary gamers from several generations into historical context. It argues that changes to gaming culture have been changes to visibility and accessibility of and for marginalized gamers.

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Chapter 1 : You Meet at a Tavern (Introduction)

An encounter is any significant thing a character meets, sees, or interacts with during the course of a game...An adventure without encounters is like sitting in a room all day with no one to talk to and little to look at. It certainly wouldn't be very exciting. And who wants to play an unexciting roleplaying game? Encounters provide danger, risk, mystery, information, intrigue, suspense, humor, and more (Cook, 1989, p. 111)

This description of an encounter from the *Advanced Dungeon & Dragon's Player's Handbook* (2e)¹ takes on a whole new connotation as I write during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The quintessential Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) adventure begins in a tavern where adventurers meet for the first time, but in early 2020, our real-world taverns were shuttered. Physical encounters, even something as innocuous as going to the grocery store, felt perilous. As the name suggests, tabletop roleplaying games (TRPGs)² are usually played around a table, but during the pandemic, remote playing became a necessity, and it was made easier by tools like Zoom and digital dice rollers. The differences between analog and digital games were collapsing, its digitalization journey hastened. Though the basic format of a tabletop roleplaying game has remained relatively unchanged since 1974, when the first ever edition of Dungeons & Dragons was published, the culture of roleplaying games and their communities have been influenced by changes in technology and cultural norms. Tabletop roleplaying games, especially

¹ In D&D, editions are abbreviated as 1e, 2e, etc. The most recent edition is 5e.

² This acronym varies from person to person. From 1979-2000, it probably would have been only designated as roleplaying game (RPG). Later, *tabletop* was added to distinguish these games from digital games of the same genre. Newer players have abbreviated it as TTRPG. Throughout my dissertation, I will use either TRPG or RPG (primarily because I prefer short acronyms), but some of my respondents use the acronym TTRPG. Additionally, roleplaying is sometimes hyphenated by some sources as role-playing, but I prefer the single word.

Dungeons & Dragons, have also cross-pollinated with other forms of media such as literature, television, film, and video games.

I embarked on this project around January 2017, when I was a PhD student at the University of Missouri, taking a qualitative methods and an historical methods course at the same time. A few years earlier, I had started to play Dungeons & Dragons with a group of friends. Except for our dungeon master (DM), none of us had never played before. That first day of playing, we played from around 12pm to 10pm, erupting in cheers when we completed our mission. Like the decades of young players before us, we kept tentatively asking the DM – *can we do this?* To which he always replied: *You can try*. Unlike those decades of young players who had started playing in their teens, we were all in our late twenties and early thirties. Nonetheless, we made fart jokes, swung axes, stole treasure, and somehow started an underground submarine sandwich franchise. This was a mixed gender group – three cisgender women and three cisgender men (one as Dungeon Master), but except for our laugh lines and rogue strands of gray hair, it's difficult to say that we were much more mature in our gameplay than the teenage boys who became the face of D&D in the 1980s. We were hooked and I wanted to learn more about the history of a gaming form that could mesmerize its players for hours at a time.

So, with some skepticism that I would find anyone to interview and a lot of imposter syndrome, I started an interviewing project in 2017 – what would become this dissertation – where I proposed to interview eight women who had started to play tabletop roleplaying games in the 1970s and 1980s. These were the nascent years of the TRPG form, and Dungeons & Dragons, first published in 1974, is cited as the first roleplaying game of its kind, a form that was inspired by, but took sharp turns away from

the genre of wargaming. I wanted to interview women in particular because at that point in time, I only knew about the assumed and stereotypical image of D&D: A bunch of young boys, usually White, playing in their parents' basement. Anecdotally, I knew this was not the whole truth, but I had not had much exposure to D&D before 2013. The history of D&D was, as far as I knew it at the time, the story of boys and men. Gary Gygax, the creator of D&D was a larger than life figure whose fellow writers and designers – the ones that became household names – were mostly, though not exclusively – men. Furthermore, the contemporary narrative of gaming was, on its surface, much like the narrative of any activity that was originally “male dominated”: Early gaming was mostly devoid of girls and women, and even hostile to them, but the hobby had much improved for women over time. That is, until the internet enabled and amplified toxic masculinity and voila, #gamergate.

Of course, none of these assumptions – whether that gaming in the 1980s was purely a boys' club or that anyone has always been welcome in gaming – is the whole story. There is no single story. *Gender Rolls* presents a slice of gaming history as interpreted through the individual stories of my respondents, each of whom came to gaming at different ages, with different motivations, and different understandings of how a tabletop roleplaying game serves them in terms of pleasure, therapeutic value, and experimentation. Got your salty snacks and sharpened pencils? Then we're ready to start the campaign.

Methodology

Gender Rolls presents a history of tabletop gaming through the eyes of women and gender non-conforming players via interviews and historical media. It challenges the

master narrative that players who were not men were absent from or otherwise disinterested in tabletop roleplaying games. This master narrative was influenced by a combination of factors:

1. Until the mid-to-late 2000s, fantasy tabletop roleplaying was a niche subculture. As such, its early materials and histories were mostly archived by fans and not libraries or museums.
2. What little research was published on D&D in the 1980s and 1990s tended to ignore gender differences because it appeared not that many women were playing at the time.
3. Contemporary “official” histories of D&D heavily focus on the charismatic figure of creator Gary Gygax; women appear only as marginal figures.
4. Historically, concern about the impact of games on children has been heavily focused on boys because they were assumed to be the intended audience for most games.

Master narratives are adopted as shorthand generalizations, but often “do not represent every individual’s lived experience” (Adame & Knudson, 2007, p. 143). The interviews included in *Gender Rolls* are proof that women and gender non-conforming players were not only present throughout the history of modern tabletop roleplaying, but contributed to the hobby as players, game masters, designers, writers, artists, and collaborators.

Gender Rolls examines who played fantasy tabletop roleplaying games and why it appears that women did not play in equal numbers to men. While 1970s D&D may have left out women by default, assuming that they would not be interested in a hobby derived

from wargaming, the 1980s image of roleplayers as lonely White boys in a basement was branded into the minds of several generations. The Satanic Panic further anchored this image of gamers as not only White, male, and young, but also vulnerable and unhinged, a narrative that would continue in the 1990s when mass media linked violence to playing violent video games. I argue that moral panics over gaming drew on a rhetoric of a pervasive and toxic nostalgia: A mix of fear of the unknown, changing technologies, and a desire to return to an imagined past of peaceful White suburbia. This toxic nostalgia continues in tabletop roleplaying communities today with clashes between those who prefer to leave the canon of D&D unchanged and those who want to see tabletop roleplaying updated to reflect and support a more diverse and inclusive society.

To contextualize my interviews, I drew on several sources to help shape a history of roleplaying in each chapter. For general timelines, I relied on histories of D&D and tabletop roleplaying games as well as biographies of Gary Gygax, the founder of D&D. To understand how players were debating gender in roleplaying games, I examined issues of *Dragon*, the official publication of D&D, which included letters to and responses from the editors. In popular literature, the contemporary resurgence of D&D has been primarily written about through the eyes of authors returning to roleplaying after a long hiatus – surprised that their once maligned hobby is now cool. Such books gave me insight into how players tack on their personal narratives to roleplaying. Academic research on tabletop roleplaying games from a sociological standpoint continue to be rare, though the number is growing each year. Research on roleplaying games prior to the mid to late 2000s tended to focus on the psychological impacts of tabletop roleplaying, except for Gary Alan Fine’s (1983) sociological study, *Shared Fantasy*, where Fine was a

participant observer in gaming groups. Much of the contemporary research on TRPGs that I include in *Gender Rolls* was published in 2015 or later. More details about these sources are included in the section that follows.

There are several sources that helped me to contextualize, confirm, or compare the responses that I received in narrative interviews. I dove deepest into the longest running periodical for D&D players, *Dragon*, first published by Tactical Studies Rules, more commonly known as TSR (1976-1997), and later by Wizards of the Coast (WotC; 1997-present), with a short stint by the games' publisher Paizo (2002-2007). This publication has had various names over the years including *The Dragon*, *Dragon*, and was renamed *Dragon+* when it went to a fully online publication in 2015. My analysis of *Dragon* focused only on the issues from 1976-1989 because of my previous exclusive focus on this decade. Predating digital social media, *Dragon*'s editorials and letters to the editor (which editors responded to) was a fascinating glimpse into debates and discussions regarding women's involvement in gaming. In its early days, *Dragon* had a zine feel, and it was not difficult to get a sense of the tensions that arose when readers wrote in to accuse gaming materials – especially artwork – of sexualizing and/or infantilizing women players and characters. Since the rise in internet use around the mid-2000s, but especially post-2010, I found similar debates on Twitter. Discourse on marginalized identities in TRPGs expanded with social media to include people of color, LGBTQ+ identities, and disabled players and characters. Interviews with players and creators posted to YouTube and Twitch were spaces where contemporary gamers and creators articulated the responsibility the roleplaying game industry has been inclusive of marginalized identities.

When I started this project, I read more popular literature than academic literature on roleplaying games, most of it in the form of Gen Xers and older Millennials picking up the hobby they had abandoned as adults, scratching their heads in disbelief at the how *cool* gaming had become, and using the opportunity to jump back in and tell a few awkward-teenager-in-1980s/1990s stories. *Of Dice and Men* by David Ewalt (2013) a hybrid memoir and history, is one such example. Ewalt played D&D in his childhood, but took ten-plus year hiatus, after which he picked it back up again in adulthood and wrote about the experience. Ethan Gilsdorf (2009) published a similar book called *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks*, where narratives about his mother meshed with memories of childhood and awkward attempts to Live Action Roleplay (LARP). This was a common theme among these types of books – the *reliving* of a previously geeky pastime that was now mainstream.

It wasn't until Shelly Mazzanoble's (2007) book *Confessions of a Part-Time Sorceress* that I came across a similar type of book on D&D written by a woman. Like the others, it was part memoir, but unlike the others, it was not a nostalgic reliving because Mazzanoble had only started to play D&D around 2006 in her thirties. The difference between the former type of book – usually written by men – and the *Confessions* type of books was that in one, older players were primarily rekindling their old love for D&D in an era where no one would make fun of them for doing so. The latter type of book was partially explanatory, and partially a “what I've learned” by playing D&D, in the tone of a self-help book or Cosmo magazine advice. Such writing set out to *prove* that girls and women enjoy gaming just in case readers had doubts. Other examples of D&D books in the vein of *Confessions of Part-Time Sorceress* include Mazzanoble's

second book, *Everything I Need to Know I Learned from Dungeons & Dragons: One Woman's Quest to Trade Self-Help for Elf-Help* (2011), and *Chicks Dig Gaming* (Brozek et al., 2014), an edited collection of writing on games by women.

Third-person histories of roleplaying games tended to be authored by men who were longtime gamers and usually had a personal connection to Gary Gygax and the early roleplaying scene. While these books omitted a discussion about the homogeneity of early roleplaying groups, they provided historical context for the creation of D&D. I relied heavily on *Empire of Imagination* by Michael Witwer (2015), a biography of Gygax as well as *Playing at the World* by Jon Peterson (2014), which contains lots of narrative detail about Gygax's personal life and the creation of D&D and its origins in strategic wargames. The histories written of tabletop roleplaying – whether they are third-person historical or memoir – are usually the histories of men creating and playing D&D. Gary Gygax's larger than life persona is responsible for that focus. Gathering women's stories – and seeing the value in women's involvement – *even if* they were in the minority of players takes a little bit more digging, which is why I reached out to such players for interviews.

What started as a class paper with eight women who began to play in the 1970s and 1980s grew into a project involving 37 respondents who identified as women or nonbinary. Respondents' entry into gaming spanned 42 years, with the earliest player beginning in 1976 and the latest in 2018. To gather narratives from players' early and continued experiences in tabletop roleplaying, I used in-depth interviews that lasted from about 30 minutes to an hour. Except for two of the interviews, which were conducted in person, I conducted the remaining interviews by telephone or video conferencing

software (Zoom, Google Hangouts, or Skype). All interviews were recorded and transcribed by me or a professional transcription service. The first eight interviewees received no compensation for their time. The remainder of the interviewees were compensated for their time with \$20-25 gift cards. Players were recruited via personal connection, snowball sampling, and posts on the social media sites Tumblr and Twitter.

A table of respondent demographics is in Appendix. Each chapter focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on specific decades, where I will also describe the group of respondents who cited their formative years of playing during that time. As a whole group, there is a lot of variation, but there were a few trends. The first involves both the ages of players and the years which they began to play. Of 37 respondents, the majority (n=23) were aged 41-56 at the time of their interviews and said that they had begun to play in the 1970s (n=7) or 1980s (n=17). These numbers reflect the original intention of the project, which was to focus exclusively on early roleplayers – or those who started to play in the 1970s and 1980s.

I believe this intention to narrow in on early players is also partially responsible for racial makeup of respondents, most of whom identified as White/Caucasian (n=28). Of those who identified as White/Caucasian, 22 of them belonged to the group of players who started to play in the 1970s and 1980s. The overall sample being primarily White could be the result of the fact that my social circle on social media tends to be primarily White. Though I tried to expand this circle on Twitter by following diverse gaming communities, I was unsuccessful in recruiting racially diverse groups through calls on social media. For instance, when I posted on Twitter in 2020 specifically asking for players of color, I still only got responses only from those who identified as White,

though some mentioned that they were marginalized in other ways in terms of gender, disability, and/or religion. However, I was more successful in reaching gamers of color when I was able to reach out to them by email and especially if I had a referral to speak with them from a mutual contact.

When I recruited with the intention of making my sample more racially diverse, it was necessary to let go of my sole focus on the earliest generations of roleplayers, which is why the group of respondents who started to play post-1990 is much more diverse. In this group, the numerical difference between players of color (n=7) and White players (n=5) was much smaller. However, as a generational cohort, it is also much smaller than the overall sample. It also reflects the fact that for the group of players who began to play later, tabletop roleplaying as a hobby was becoming more mainstream and the stigma of being identified as a roleplayer or geek was disappearing. Cut to today, where many players are very public with about their gamer identity. In short, it was easier to find younger players of color because more of them were online. I did know of players of color, either from personal contacts or searching online, who had started playing in the 1980s and earlier, but I was not able to interview them because of scheduling conflicts or non-responses.

I attribute my difficulty in reaching gamers of color to the aforementioned reasons and do not suggest that this indicates an absence players of color in the 1970s and 1980s. Early research on TRPGs like *Shared Fantasy* by Gary Alan Fine (1983) did not report much on women in tabletop roleplaying because it appeared to them that many women did not play. He was not entirely wrong; there were *fewer* women players. Fine's conclusion is that women were not particularly attracted to TRPGs because they had not

been socialized as boys had been, to enjoy strategic games *and* that some male players were less than welcoming. I would posit that as a male-identified researcher recruiting in a time before home internet connections were common, Fine may not have had knowledge of or access to women players except for the few who were playing in groups of men. Diane (54, Caucasian) speculated that early roleplaying game researchers were “looking at the peer groups that started in junior high and high school” were looking at groups that were gender segregated. She added, “And way back then, geekdom was something to be avoided if you ever wanted to have a date, so girls weren’t included in it or asked to join it.” Thus, the dearth of academic research on tabletop roleplaying before the 2010s may be a problem of access and visibility – both of researchers seeing women players and women players *wanting* to be seen. Fine was not purposefully recruiting women roleplayers, but it could also be that male respondents felt more comfortable talking to male-identified researcher.

Likewise, I believe that my own racial identity as White—but also my status as an academic and at all known within a public TRPG community—affected who was reached by my recruitment and who wanted to speak with me. The reality of qualitative research is that researchers are often bound by their pre-existing social circles. Though it is possible to escape that bind, it takes more time and dedication reach out and maintain relationships with communities of which one is not a member. It took time for me to learn this and was unfortunately outside of the scope of what I felt I could do within the timeline of my dissertation. Though my sample is primarily White, it does *not* indicate that tabletop roleplaying games were only enjoyed by White gamers.

The socio-economic class of my respondents is more difficult to summarize. Firstly, I did not ask them to specify their class on the demographics survey, and am not sure that asking them to report this would add much clarity, since class identity, at least in North America, is a set of cultural identifiers which does not always adhere to traditional notions of class identity such as a combination of income, occupation, and education level. As Holladay (2018) pointed out in her analysis of the reality TV show *Duck Dynasty*, class identification is also entangled with other elements, such as political views, racial identity, and hobbies. For example, when some of the *Duck Dynasty* cast was photographed sans ZZ Top beards playing golf, some fans saw this as incompatible with the working class, “redneck” identity that the cast members portrayed in the show.

That said, I can give some descriptions of class when it comes to the group of respondents and to how class may affect access to playing tabletop roleplaying games. I did ask respondents to report employment. The majority (n=12) reported being writers, artists, or game designers at least part-time and/or on a freelance basis. Class did sometimes work its way into an interview. Only one respondent, Bonnie (47, White) spoke directly about class, saying that she grew up in a working-class family. By playing D&D at her middle-class friends’ houses, she learned how to apply to college from her friends’ parents. TK (33, Biracial Black/White) touched on class when they mentioned that Wizards of the Coast, the Seattle area-based company that publishes D&D, has a diverse group of freelancers, but not full-time staff. When it came to education, this group of respondents was highly educated, with sixteen respondents reporting that they had attained a bachelor’s degree and nine reporting that they had a masters or doctorate. All respondents had attended at least some college. These findings reflect that roleplaying

games attract players with interests in art and literature – fantasy and science-fiction are often concurrent interests. Roleplaying games also appeal to players who are analytical and strategic. The current edition of D&D has simplified much of the statistics and math involved, but players still need to strategize and collaborate on how best to tackle problems given their individual character’s strengths.

Roleplaying games can involve, but do not require a financial investment. Today it is easy to find PDFs of game materials for cheap (or free) online. But even in the 1980s, roleplaying games did not necessarily require a player to spend any money. Because the games were played collaboratively, only one player would need to own the *D&D Player’s Handbook*, while the DM would need a copy of the *Dungeon Master’s Guide*. Players use a version of the handbooks until a new edition comes out or might keep using older editions depending on their group preference. Before home internet, it was common for players to photocopy and share gaming materials with each other. Next to books, the most expensive item would be the polyhedral dice used in a game of D&D, which can also be shared among players. Other gaming systems use only regular six-sided dice or no dice at all. Thus, affording material items is not a barrier to playing D&D.

Class, as well as intersections with race and gender, affects the ability to play roleplaying games in terms of *time*. Some roleplaying games can be played in a few hours, but a traditional D&D play session typically lasts at least two hours and requires regular attendance for longer campaigns. In fact, it is the time investment that most players cited as their reasons for drifting away from playing D&D as they got older and started to work full-time and/or care for young children. This may be why early surveys

of roleplayers found that they skewed quite young. A December 1981 readership survey by *Dragon* magazine indicated that the average age of the 7,000 respondents was between 16-17 years old (Jaquet, 1982, p. 2). Many of my respondents said that they had started to play in the 1970s or 1980s as children aged 7-9 years old. Others started as teens or in their early twenties while in college. No one I interviewed who began to play in this cohort started their involvement after their twenties.

It is reasonable to assume that any adult, but especially poor and working-class individuals working multiple jobs would have more difficulty in getting together with friends to play a game of D&D. This time investment is also why there were fewer adult women playing in the 1970s and 1980s, as they were often managing households and children in addition to sometimes working outside of the home. For African American women, who “have routinely worked long hours outside the home *and* cared for their own families,” setting aside two hours or more for gaming would have been nearly impossible (Seiter, 1993, pp. 19-20). Before fast internet or video conferencing software, travelling to and from a friend’s house or a hobby shop ate up additional time and made accessing TRPGs difficult for those who did not have access to reliable transportation. Likewise, though players can access gaming from home now, it still requires reliable internet and a private space to play in. Thus, economic class *does* influence who plays TRPGs, but not in the sense that it requires wealth to participate. Responsibilities such as employment as well as domestic responsibilities such as childcare are aspects which make it more difficult for the poor and working class—especially adults who are responsible for children—to take part in roleplaying games.

What Roleplayers Do with Games

Roleplaying games allow players to explore possibilities in a safe way. One of the more literal examples of safely exploring possibilities came from Helen (58, White)³, an oral storyteller and animal caretaker in Scotland. Growing up in a rough neighborhood, she found that roleplaying games opened her mind to doing something about the crime she witnessed on a frequent basis:

Everybody's scared to go out, the old people don't dare go out, and everyone moans but no one does anything. Maybe roleplaying games helped me realize that I could do things because my mind had been allowed to go to the point where I could think about consequences of what I was doing. Perhaps that helps develop you as a character because I was able to think through, well what if I did get into that situation? What would happen? What's the worst that could happen? Well, you would try it out in a roleplaying game, can't you?

Roleplaying games are often a space to “try out” situations and identities: This was true for players of all ages. Players distinguished between *role* players and *roll* players, where the former type of player prefers the theatricality and storytelling of roleplaying games, while the latter focuses on strategic use of stats and skills. *Roll* players primarily play roleplaying games to accomplish specific goals. Andrea (43, mixed Asian/White), an IT consultant was more of a *roll* player. When pressed about interactions in the TRPG *Champions*, Andrea said:

³ Names used are either pseudonyms (chosen by respondent or me). Some respondents preferred to use their actual names. Ages of respondents were at the time of our interviews in 2017, 2018, 2020, or 2021. All information in the survey was open-ended, including race. Helen actually entered her race “Human, non-aligning,” which is a reference to race in D&D. A full list of respondent demographics can be found in Appendix A.

I mean, it was a superhero genre game, so it was not terribly high on the deep social role-playing aspect. It was a lot more beating up villains. I'm not sure what you're trying to get at here.

My interview with Andrea in 2017 was early in my dissertation, and it threw me off to interview someone who *wasn't* more into the narrative than she was into the mechanics and strategy of roleplaying games. It was a good reminder that each player comes with their own preferences in how to play roleplaying games *and* that roleplaying games are versatile media that offer diverse pleasures. Later in the interview, Andrea described characters that she tended to play, adding an example scenario:

I've played characters with different personalities, but they've all tended to be very analytical about problem solving and resourceful in bringing strengths to bear from unexpected quarters. I played a D&D cleric at one point who decided to deal with your typical D&D dungeon by using the stone shape spell to flood it. It's a bit of a shortcut on the usual method for clearing a dungeon, but hey, you use this to create a pipe from your local inexhaustible water source into the dungeon. You wait a while. You turn it off, let it drain, and everything that can't breathe water is dead.

This example illustrates Andrea's preference for analytical problem solving over plot in tabletop roleplaying games. In rereading her interview, which I had always thought of as one of the most difficult in the project, I appreciated that she brought a different type of creativity to gaming than a *role* player did and wish that I had someone like her in my own D&D games.

In contrast to the analytical *roll* player, *role* players prefer following rabbit holes of the storyline and relish the flair, the intricate details, and the narrative drive. Several players described themselves as favoring the roleplaying or storytelling over the more mechanical aspects of games. Jasmine (42, Black), described games as “another way of telling stories”:

I’m a storyteller. I’ve always been a storyteller. Games for me is another way of telling stories. And I’ve always believed that every story has its way it needs to be told, so every film can’t be a book. Every book can’t be animation. Every video game can’t be a book. It’s opened up horizons and thinking about how to tell stories where there is interactivity where the player is telling their own story because I think one thing people forget is that game design mechanics is story telling. What the player ... We think about the story itself, the world, the characters as the story. But what the player does in a game or does with the mechanics in a tabletop game is story telling. The player is telling their own story by the way that they play. So that helps me think about ways of telling stories not just in games but outside of games as well.

Betty (46, White) also loves the storytelling aspect of D&D and added that she felt the experience was a “challenge” to occasionally set aside combat weapons and “see what happens,” suggesting that the pleasurable part of the challenge is improving and finding creative ways to approach conflict:

I love the story. I love not knowing where the story is going to go. I love the surprise and I love that... The way that it forces me to be creative in a way that we just don’t get to be in real life. That I can literally do anything. I can at least try to

do anything. I love just like I could take out my bow and arrow, but I could also try to do this super crazy thing and just challenge myself and challenge my character and just see what happens in a nice, safe environment.

The type of play setting might determine what players prefer. For example, at a convention with organized play and pre-generated characters, players may be more focused on strategy than characterization, since they do not have time to get to know their characters deeply as they would in a long campaign spread out over multiple sessions. A preference for one or the other type of play is also influenced by the roleplaying game itself, and whether it lent itself more to strategic, mechanical play or roleplaying. For instance, D&D's fourth edition was more "crunchy," and emphasized strategic battle tactics. D&D's fifth edition, its most recent, simplified the mathematical calculations and lent itself to roleplaying. Brandy (33, Hispanic) said that while she preferred *role* playing, she adapted to situations where she needed to attend to the mechanical aspects of roleplaying games:

...I am definitely more in the R-O-L-E bucket. Because I have a theater background and I like performing. And that's a whole side of me that exists. And that's really what jives with me about the game is telling stories with people. Because organized play was the only way I could play, I grew into being more of a mechanical player. And then I swung back around when I found a good group of people that I learned to trust and play with regularly. So, it's kind of a swinging pendulum for me of being one type of player or the other. And system has played a part of that. Some systems are more crunch oriented than others.

Most, but not all, of those I interviewed said that they considered themselves primarily *role* players. Some described themselves as being equally interested in the mechanics/strategy and the roleplaying, but most *preferred* the roleplaying aspect. I suspect there was some overlap between those who enjoyed the roleplaying aspect of TRPGs and those who would agree to an in-depth interview – a form of storytelling – on TRPGs. Narrative provides a crucial sensemaking process for emotionally complex experiences (Boudes & Laroche, 2009; Cornelissen, 2012) and that storytelling is a fundamental part of bounding and processing events in one’s life (Fisher, 1987). Tabletop roleplaying games can serve as a medium through which experiences are made “sensible in embodied narrative performances” (Cunliffe & Coupland, 2012, p. 65). Participating in narrative interviews was a metacognitive experience: Players described gaming narratives that helped them to make sense of the world, while also processing those revisited experiences in the interview.

The concept of gender in tabletop roleplaying, of both player and character, has been influenced by feminism and intersecting conversations about race and sexuality. Although this project started as a history of women’s experiences in tabletop roleplaying games, it has become a broader look at how changes the concept of gender has influenced gaming and how players have influenced the industry’s moves in addressing diversity. In the social sciences, gender (or any identifying demographic trait) is often isolated to make a note of what splits groups in terms of opinions and behavior. Leading with the question “what divides people along identity lines?” can be misleading when it comes to entertainment media because, at least for tabletop roleplaying games, most people want to play a game in a space that feels safe, fun, and exciting. What does split players along

demographic lines is that spaces of fun, safety, and pleasure may be fewer for certain players because of social dynamics or game design. The question of what pleasures unintended or marginalized audiences get from media is less provocative than understanding *how marginalized groups interpret, transform, or navigate* media to derive pleasure from them.

Previous studies that have looked at marginalized fans have found that fans adapt behaviors to avoid being ostracized within the fandom, by non-fans, or anti-fans. For example, Click et al (2016) found that male fans of *Twilight* tended to hide their interest from other men who were not fellow fans. Likewise, Dawes (2015) suggested Black and queer heavy metal fans were visible online, but numbered fewer at concerts because heavy metal was sometimes associated with White supremacist views. Sveinson and Hoeber (2016) found that female sports fans “conformed to sport fan norms” by downplaying their gender and by “excluding less highly identified female fans” in order to gain acceptance from the dominant group of male sports fans (p. 13).

Women who started playing tabletop roleplaying games in the 1970s and 1980s sometimes explained their involvement with gaming by distancing themselves from traditional femininity. Later, online text-based roleplaying via multi-user dungeons (MUDs), message boards, or chatrooms allowed for participation without revealing one’s “real” identity; in the twenty-first century, online authenticity is en vogue and young adult players now use social media to demand that TRPG materials reflect the diverse spectrum of real-world gender, sexuality, race, and disability. Although TRPGs share similarities with other fan communities, tabletop roleplayers – especially those who started to play pre-Internet – tend to play in small, isolated groups, and there is no

singular community of roleplayers. That said, tabletop roleplaying is more public facing and more popular than it has ever been. The most well-known franchise of roleplaying games, Dungeons & Dragons, has come under scrutiny for its storylines and character designs which have heavily relied on White, Eurocentric social and political narratives. In *Gender Rolls*, I trace a number of cultural changes that have influenced how tabletop roleplaying games and their communities have changed – and some ways they have stayed the same.

The evolution of tabletop roleplaying and its communities is an evolution of *accessibility* in various ways. The first shifts are at the level of cultural expectations and norms for women, especially regarding leisure time. This shift appears in the way that women have been represented in artwork and gaming materials or in discourse about who games are produced for. The second, related shift, is about visibility and connectivity. With the growing adoption of home internet use in the mid-to-late 1990s, it was possible for gamers to connect with each other online – this offered a chance at anonymity, and for roleplaying games, an opportunity for new players who could not access physical gaming groups. In the 2010s, user-driven digital streaming and broadcasting services like Twitch and YouTube rose in popularity, and audiences began to consume “actual play” media, a public game that is livestreamed or pre-recorded for video or podcast (Hedge & Grouling, 2021, p.3). The ability for any group of players to broadcast themselves means that there is more visibility for players and creators who identify as women, nonbinary, queer, disabled, and people of color. Responding to the influence of outspoken gamers on social media, gaming materials started to slowly change in a way that allowed for and

encouraged greater customization. Collectively, these shifts broke down some of the barriers for new players and players of marginalized identities.

What is tabletop roleplaying?

Tabletop roleplaying grew out of tabletop wargaming, where players reenact large-scale battles on hexagonal graph paper using miniature figures and emphasize historical accuracy (Ewalt, 2013). Tabletop roleplaying games engage players in collaborative storytelling following an established, but flexible system of rules. Fantasy roleplaying (FRP) emerged in 1974 with TSR's publication of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Most *Dungeons & Dragons* scenarios take place in a fantastical setting, involving players who, through their characters, usually explored a dungeon, fought monsters, and collected treasure. Schick (1991) defines a roleplaying game as "quantified interactive storytelling," where the *quantified* indicates that "action resolution must be defined in terms of numbers or quantities that can be manipulated following certain rules" (p. 10). For most roleplaying games, the outcome of a proposed action is determined by rolling dice in conjunction with a referee, known as the game master (GM) or dungeon master (DM) who directs the narrative. D&D originated with a fantasy/pseudo-medieval setting, though roleplaying games can be of any genre. While D&D became the most ubiquitous brand of roleplaying, there are several other roleplaying systems such as Pathfinder, GURPS (Generic Universal RolePlaying System), and Amber Diceless that have been around since the 1980s and 1990s. Because *Dungeons & Dragons* was and is the most popular system of tabletop roleplaying and because it is the system I am most familiar with, it is what I have focused on throughout the dissertation. It is the system that most respondents had played, especially when they first started in tabletop roleplaying, but it is

not the only franchise that came up in our conversations. Because of its long history and popularity, D&D is also the system most discussed in scholarly work on TRPGs and is frequently critiqued on social media for its history of and continuation of sexist and racist tropes.

Before the capability of the internet grew to support streaming live videos and voice chat programs such as Skype and Zoom, TRPGs were played primarily in person at a private residence, convention, or hobby store. There were people who played by mail, or as home internet use grew, on message boards and in chatrooms, but before the 2010s, TRPGs were games that were almost always played in private or semi-private spaces; they were not broadcast via mass media. This meant that experiences varied depending on the group. Enjoyment and comfort depended on other players and the game master. Many players that I interviewed were quick to point out that there was no single community of tabletop roleplayers. As Isabel (43, Jewish/White) told me,

I don't know what the roleplaying community even necessarily means. I mean, I could talk to you about some of the trends I see in the kinds of games that get made, but ultimately, my strategy for surviving and being my full self has always been to highly curate who gets access to me.

Isabel's comment acknowledges that any one person's experience is not representative, and direct overlaps in experience happened in more public spaces like conventions or in online spaces. Therefore, I have framed the history of tabletop roleplaying games and gender as a series of cultural trends illustrated by respondents' stories.

Though it may be the butt of sarcastic jokes in media, playing Dungeons & Dragons is no longer something that most players feel the need to hide. This was not always the case. Long before Stephen Colbert or Vin Diesel went public with their love of D&D, tabletop roleplaying and interests in computer science, science fiction, and fantasy were stereotyped as being for brainy, socially awkward, isolated adolescents, particularly boys (Fine, 1983). The irony is that tabletop roleplaying games are inherently collaborative and often take long hours spent with others to play. They have also been credited with building self-esteem and social skills. (Ashley, 2016; Daniau, 2016; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). Lynsey (38, White), who started roleplaying in high school told me:

I feel like there's a safety in roleplaying games, because there's a little bit that you can put yourself out on the edge, and you can put yourself out there in a way that you wouldn't necessarily in real life because there's not as much risk. And then it gives you confidence, because even though it wasn't real, you lived through that. So, I feel that that, it's a similar thing where in theater...it builds that resilience in you.

Lynsey's point about building resilience through roleplaying games because it feels safe was similar to Helen's comment that roleplaying games allowed her to work through worst-case scenarios. Through roleplaying games, many players work through complex problems and emotions, yet the image of tabletop roleplaying gamers, especially Dungeons & Dragons, has been reduced to stereotypes of emotionally and socially stunted boys and young men in mainstream media.

Despite evidence that all kinds of people now play roleplaying games, in entertainment media, D&D is frozen in time. *Stranger Things* and *Big Bang Theory* may have brought Dungeons & Dragons to a new audience, but they did not stray far from the stereotype of its typical player as a geeky boy in his parents' basement. This master narrative of the outcast male – especially the White male – has had ripple effects on the culture of gaming and the way that White boys and men have been framed in discourse on the effects of media on young people. Through the lens of moral panics involving media in both the 1980s and 1990s, outcast boys are figured as those who fell prey to dangerous media and committed violence against themselves or others. The language used to bring White boys into the role of media victim (though sometimes also the *perpetrator* of violent crimes) is eerily similar to the ways that young White men are defended by the legal system and in other institutions when they are accused of sexual assault, in which they are portrayed as individuals with potentially bright futures, while the arrested future of the victim is downplayed.

Reinforcing or misremembering gaming as a pastime for White male nerds also allowed for misogyny in the gaming community. The incidents of #gamergate are perhaps the most notable in recent memory, but there are other ways that Whiteness and maleness have remain entrenched in and defended by some players of fantasy roleplaying. Toxic nostalgia, which appears in many fandoms, is the intention to 'go back' or freeze time; it erases or does not acknowledge the achievements, contributions, or oppression of marginalized populations. By claiming that fantasy roleplaying is or was *for* White boys forces others into the position of trespasser. Demands for change in gaming culture are then interpreted as personal attacks on a beloved pastime. For the

most part, nostalgia as a desire to freeze time was not a sentiment expressed by my respondents, but something they observed in resistance from others. This is easily observed on social media, but defensive reactions from gamers when faced with potential changes to the hobby are found in *Dragon* magazine as early as the late 1970s. Where I saw the most nostalgia expressed was in from older respondents who were ambivalent about the mainstream popularity of TRPGs, as it had both allowed for better inclusivity *and* invited more outright criticism and harassment in online spaces.

What I present in *Gender Rolls* is an overview of the history of tabletop roleplaying games, especially as it is interpreted by women and femme individuals. It highlights the involvement of players and creators who do not identify as cisgender men and their impressions of how their communities have changed over time. This is not an alternative history, but one featuring experiences that have not been highlighted by most gaming histories, primarily because the actual number of women in gaming – at least in public settings of gaming – numbered fewer in its first few decades. Moreover, the combination of time passing *and* the continued use of gamer stereotypes in mainstream entertainment media contributes to the misremembering and erasure of women’s involvement in Dungeons & Dragons and other tabletop roleplaying games. The history of any subculture cannot be simplified as a linear course of progress, but as a journey on the variable terrain of social, historical, and political landscapes. As a hobby that has now spanned several generations of players⁴, tabletop roleplaying is a unique subculture to examine how social shifts play out in a single gaming system.

⁴ The earliest players I interviewed began playing in 1976 and the latest in 2018. The oldest player I interviewed was 64 and the youngest was 21 at the time of their interviews.

Research Questions

Several research questions developed over the course of my project and drew from Communication, Audience/Fan, Feminist, and Game Studies. One of my earliest questions was *how do players describe their experiences in a 'male-oriented space?* The term “male-oriented” shows up in letters to the editor in 1980s issues of *Dragon*, where it was used to describe tabletop roleplaying as catering to men. D&D creator Gary Gygax and other editors defended the lack of attention to women by saying that women were in the minority of D&D players (Gygax, 1980, p. 39). The question of how players described their participation in a male-oriented space derived from my impressions of early D&D as a hobby. With interviews of younger respondents, the question felt outdated, but not irrelevant. Men no longer heavily dominate gaming, but it is difficult to get any updated statistics about tabletop roleplaying games. Survey data from a 2014-2015 indicates that 59% of all Americans play video games (52% male and 48% female). The players have also aged: 39% of all gamers are over the age of 36 (*Indie Game Revolution*, 2021). The same survey found that the people who make video games are a less diverse group, with 76% of game designers being male and 79% of them identifying as White. Adrienne Shaw (2021) presented updated 2020 data from the Electronic Software Association that showed that the split of electronic gamers was 59% male and 41% female. I have not been able to find any recent statistic about tabletop roleplaying games, though a survey by Vanek (2014) showed that 35.5% of Live Action Roleplayers were female and 1.3% were non-binary. Digital games and LARPing differ from tabletop roleplaying games in terms of interaction, so it is unclear if these statistics are at all indicative of participation in tabletop roleplaying games. Additionally, some surveys

measured only respondents who identified as male and female and not as gender non-conforming.

Some cultural holdovers of “male-oriented” gaming communities remain, especially in online interactions. Thanks to the public incidents of #gamergate, identity-based harassment in gaming spilled into mainstream consciousness. Several articles have detailed and interpreted the events and significance of gamergate and masculinity in gaming (Condis, 2018; Todd, 2015). Gamergate not only publicized harassment in gaming but shed light on how polarized discourse on gaming culture was. Shaw (2014) contended that gender-based attacks on women in gaming “did not merely deny a woman’s right to be present in a male-dominated virtual space but flat out rejected *anyone’s* right to critique games as cultural texts” (p. 4). While the study of games is often disconnected from the rest of media studies, the fury with which some gamers defended games from feminist critique illustrates that game studies does overlap with fan studies.

Using Giddens’ notion of “pure relationships,” Williams (2011) argued that fan objects provide fans with ontological security when they become part of a fan’s reflective self-narrative (p. 270). When fan objects become a crucial part of identity, it may be no surprise when criticism of that object is perceived as an attack on the fandom. For example, Ferreday (2015) studied reactions to a scene in HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (Season 4, Episode 9) in which Jaime Lannister rapes his twin sister Cersei.⁵ Reactions to the scene were mixed in part because at this point in the show, Jaime’s character was likeable; he was a good foil to Cersei’s dark machinations. In interviews, the

⁵ Previous to this scene, it had been depicted as a consensual sexual relationship.

showrunners and even actors involved avoided calling this a rape scene (Ferreday, 2015). While many fans immediately recognized and called out the interaction as rape, some appeared to defend Jaime's actions by arguing both that this is fantasy and therefore "not real," while at the same time describing the scene as consensual – where consent meant "giving in" (Ferreday, 2015, p. 32). In roleplaying games, disagreement about appropriate behavior and content is sometimes enshrouded in toxic nostalgia, where players, who have been playing for decades, may interpret critique of a beloved game as a personal attack. When fictional media, especially fantasy, is critiqued for racism or sexism, it is contradictorily defended by some fans as inconsequential because it is fiction *and* upheld as being historically accurate. Yet upon a deeper look, this argument is not based on textbook history, but on what is considered canon within a particular franchise. One can easily see this fan phenomenon in fan fiction, where readers are quick to catch what they see as unacceptable derivations from the original text.

The difference between *Game of Thrones* and D&D is that tabletop roleplaying games have no finale. While game manuals may go out of print, gaming groups can create their own homebrewed scenarios within established or imaginary words. Characters on *Game of Thrones* were embodied by professional actors; characters in D&D can be assumed by anyone. They are family, friends, colleagues, and occasionally strangers. Tabletop roleplaying is a genre and space where harassment is just as possible as with online video gaming, though it is sometimes tempered by the inability to remain anonymous. In my interviews, I asked women how they perceived their gender identity as affecting their experiences of gaming. For those who started to play before 2000, the most common response was that they felt that boys were excited to play with them. As

they got older, the sexism they encountered was most frequently a questioning of their credibility as gamers. Incidents of sexual harassment typically occurred at conventions and not in private homes.

My second research question was *how and when representation was important to players*. This question was derived from Adrienne Shaw's (2014) interviews with queer gamers, where Shaw found that players did not always value representation in the way that the market did. She has argued that media representation should not rely on "static notions of either identity or identification," because such things change with time and cultural context (Shaw, 2021). In a 2021 lecture, Shaw acknowledged that with the rise in social media, more players are "demanding and take seriously the idea that representation is important full stop, and that it's something they feel they can be empowered to demand something back from (Shaw, 2021). The demands for change aren't new, but social media platforms amplified them.

In *Gaming at the Margins*, Shaw talks about growing up in Japan being unaware that games were directed toward certain audiences because *everyone* played games. Although I grew up in the midwestern US, I felt the same way. Growing up, I played games of different genres without considering gender; a lot of my respondents told me the same thing. Shaw (2014) opens the introduction to *Gaming at the Margins* in this way:

I am fascinated with the way the male (White and middle class) image of the digital game player has become enshrined in common sense to the extent that it has eclipsed a much more diverse picture of the medium's history (p. viii).

Comparing my lived experience to more official histories, the assumption that gaming was homogenous and unwelcoming to women seemed like an incomplete story. Shaw asked gamers how and in what contexts they cared about representation. Her research is at the nexus of audience and game studies, as I intend mine to be. What Shaw found was that gamers use games in a myriad of ways; they connected with characters not based on identity markers, but more through “affective connections” (p. 69). The focus of representation in games has generally come from market logic and placed the responsibility of diverse games on an extant or a potential consumer base. In the era when my respondents began to play games, *how* women were represented in gaming materials was explained by designers as a reflection of who the majority of players were: Heterosexual boys and men, primarily adolescents (Fine, 1983; Jaquet, 1981).

In gaming, as with other entertainment media, representation is typically discussed through identification with (or as) characters. In many video games, players can design avatars in terms of race and gender, but may be limited by programming – for instance, a game might only offer male or female for gender choices (Shaw, 2014). This has changed with more recent video games, such as *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) which feature customizable first-person avatars from head to toe - including genitals (Messner, 2020). In tabletop roleplaying games, limitations based on gender or sex may be present in texts, but players and game masters can ignore or change them. Still, there is a different sort of limitation for tabletop roleplaying games: The physical body and mannerisms that the player already has. Whereas in a video game, there is an avatar made of pixels to represent the player, D&D players embody characters via their own bodies, gestures, and voices. Although a player envisions and plays a character, they are still

physically sitting around a table interacting with other players face-to-face. Even remotely, a game is typically played using video conferencing software. With the rise of actual play, or livestreamed, games, spectatorship raises new questions about the study of roleplaying games. As Hedge and Grouling (2021) ask, “When a ‘pen-and-paper’ game is played with a virtual tabletop and then recorded for an audience, what is the object under study?” (p. 5). D&D was not originally conceived of as a game to be spectated. Considerations of representation change when roleplaying games are public and presented for a wider audience.

In my interviews, I asked respondents how alike or unlike their created characters have been to their “real world” selves. I wondered to what extent players saw characters as extensions of themselves. Most described their created characters as neither fully idealized nor an exact replica, but a mix of the two. Ellen (45, White) illustrated this limitation by saying, “you have to have certain resources to play an extrovert if you’re an introvert.” While playing a variety of personas may get easier with experience, there are nonetheless difficulties and limitations on how representation is enacted in tabletop roleplaying games. Speaking about the popular Twitch/YouTube show *Critical Role*, Vist (2019) argued that while the seven experienced voice actors all play a variety of characters—including queer characters—the show’s presentation of Dungeons & Dragons is still ensconced in what Vist terms “canonical whiteness,” cemented both in *D&D* lore and in the featured White actors.⁶

⁶ On June 24, 2021, *Critical Role* released a mini-series called *Exandria Unlimited*, in which three of the original cast members reappear. The two new cast members and the GM are people of color, one of whom, Robbie Daymond, continued as a temporary cast member in the current (third) campaign of *Critical Role* which started on October 21, 2021. Season 2 of *Exandria Unlimited* began airing in May 2022.

My next research question was in tabletop roleplaying's long history, *what have TRPGs communicated to players?* This question overlaps with other research questions, concerning gaming materials and the behavior of players. I am interested in how players have interpreted gaming materials, the behaviors of their fellow players, and choices made by the gaming industry. Responses to this question pop up when players discuss interactions between players and characters in games, at conventions and elsewhere. Game studies scholars have been interested in how gameplay might differ between genders (Lucas & Sherry, 2004; Poels et al., 2012). Fantasy roleplaying games set in pseudo-European medieval or Renaissance settings have influenced how game masters direct players and design worlds when it comes to gender and race.

In a study of Dungeon & Dragons handbooks, Garcia (2017) found that the early manuals assumed male players and when women were included, they were exoticized. Like other fantasy realms, racism is “built into the D&D system” (p. 240) where *race*⁷ is “a series of mechanical augmentations to a character and present attitudinal beliefs about other races within the world” (Garcia, 2017, p. 241). In D&D and other fantasy roleplaying games, *race* is more akin to species, as it is in Tolkien's books. Choosing the race of one's character comes with a particular history, personality traits, strengths, and weaknesses. Although roleplaying games are more flexible than video games – in that they largely rely on the game master and the group of players around the table to set the tone and direction – it does not guarantee that groups will take advantage of the flexibility of a fantasy world.

Scholars have written about racial and gender inequalities in fantasy roleplaying in tabletop, online, and live action roleplaying (LARPing). Martin, Vaccaro, Heckert, and Heasley (2015), in their study of a group of live action roleplayers, found that women often took supportive, devalued roles within the group, where combat roles for “epic glory” were played overwhelmingly by men (p. 293). In their studies of massive multiplayer online (MMO) fantasy games, Higgin (2009) found that these games privilege whiteness and erase players and characters of color, while Nakamura (2009) argued that racial divides were reinforced by *World of Warcraft*, where Chinese players labored in digital sweatshops.⁸ Despite the ironic limitations of a fantasy genre, Nielsen (2015) asserts that digital roleplaying games have potential for “transformative power” and allow players to “embrace feminist programming strategies” and explore identities (pp. 45; 48). Exploring identity through roleplaying games was a recurrent theme in my interviews.

Although early versions of Dungeons & Dragons were not designed with girls in mind, my respondents described it as an open world in which to experiment and play. The queer potential of tabletop roleplaying games is reflected in the various options for gender and sexuality play and flexibility within the collaborative storytelling of TRPGs and video games (Shaw & Ruberg, 2017). Even so, gatekeeping measures in gaming materials or by players and game masters can hinder or discourage gameplay that doesn’t stick to canon (Alberto, 2021).

⁸ The Chinese workers/players did the tedious work of “grinding,” or performing repetitive actions in order to win gold, which they then sold to other players. There is a documentary on YouTube about this made by then doctoral student Ge Jin, posted to YouTube in 2006: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ho5Yxe6UVv4>

My final research question was *how have tabletop roleplaying games been significant for players?* The answers to this question were individualized, but related to identity, confidence-building, and socializing. Additionally, I wondered how gender and gendered experiences in tabletop roleplaying games have changed over time. With interviews with women who begun to play in the 1970s or 1980s, our conversations regarding gender were primarily about playing in a space that appeared to be dominated by or geared toward men. With players who had started their gaming experiences online in the 1990s, *anonymity* (of one's real self) became a feature of gendered play. As feminist discourse on gender became more inclusive of genderfluid or agender/nonbinary identities, so too did many tabletop roleplaying spaces.

Boosted by the pandemic and the need for many to stay at home, the "tabletop" in tabletop roleplaying disappeared for players in 2020. For most respondents, this change was not dramatic, as many of them had already been working from home. Others had been gaming in person and took a break but picked up gaming via Zoom later in late 2020. In short, with few exceptions, the pandemic was not much of a hindrance to respondents' gaming practices.

My Gaming Narrative

Even before I knew how to play Dungeons & Dragons, I had internalized that it was mostly boys who played it. My friend and respondent Lynsey (38, White) introduced me to online roleplaying in AOL chatrooms in the late 1990s, and she also invited me to play D&D with her group in high school, but I never ended up playing with them. Except for Lynsey, this group was all boys. I had not had much experience with D&D, but I'd been exposed to stereotypes about who played it. As most stereotypes do, they were an

incomplete version of the truth. In my first call to respondents, I was shocked to receive around 40 responses to a call I posted on Tumblr. As it turned out, a lot of women had been playing as well as working in the tabletop roleplaying game industry since 1970s and 1980s. Somewhere in the timeline, their experiences had been understated or ignored.

I am a White ciswoman, an “elder Millennial,” nearly lifetime Midwesterner, and a medium casual gamer. I had never played Dungeons & Dragons until I was in my early thirties. In my interviews with 37 respondents ranging in age from 21 to 64 who identified as women or nonbinary, how much I did or did not have in common with respondents varied with age and gaming experience, race, gender identity, and (dis)ability. Some respondents had experience working in the gaming industry and were public figures within tabletop roleplaying, while others had stepped back from gaming at conventions or stopped playing TRPGs altogether. Some players started to roleplay as children, others as adults. Players had experiences with different editions of Dungeons & Dragons, because the very first publication came out in 1974 and the latest edition was published in 2014. A new update to 5e termed *D&D 5e Errata* was published in late 2021. Personally, I had started by playing a modified version of Basic rules around 2014, which were first introduced in 1977 and then revised in 1981 and 1982 because the first dungeon master I played with preferred it. Later, I was introduced to fifth edition while playing on Zoom with the organization Game to Grow.

My most obvious biases and assumptions going into this project were about the construction of gender itself, or that by using certain language, my actions were inviting and inclusive. When I started to add “nonbinary” to my call for respondents, I found that putting together “women and nonbinary” I might be linguistically conflating the two.

Someone on Twitter suggested using the term “marginalized genders” while a nonbinary student argued that using that term was still putting women and nonbinary folks together, and the experience of being a ciswoman and being a transgender person were different. Ultimately, having recruitment spread out across multiple years was a learning opportunity for me, and I would recruit differently in the future, not indicating any gender in recruitment materials.

Current events also affected my questions. In 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic and after the murder of George Floyd, I added questions about the ways in which the pandemic affected players and how they thought the TRPG community should respond to racial inequalities. For the youngest players, the question of race in tabletop roleplaying games and its communities was something they were already reflecting on and talking about on social media. In my earliest interviews with respondents who had begun to play in the 1970s and 1980s, race was primarily discussed as far as it related to fantasy worlds. It was also not a question I had originally written, perhaps a product of my own upbringing as a White woman in which “whiteness refers to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1). Moreover, discussions of race among White women tend to be avoided and unexplored because they often see themselves as *without* race (Frankenberg, 1993). After the murder of George Floyd was caught on a bystander’s cell phone and released to the public, the impact of race in American society permeated existing discussions on race in fantasy roleplaying.

Seven of my respondents started their involvement in the 1970s, seventeen in the 1980s, six in the 1990s, three in the 2000s, and four after 2010. This distribution reflects my original intention, which was to focus solely on those who began in the “early days”

of roleplaying games. The inclusion of newer and younger players added depth to the existing narrative and made it possible to see changes in roleplaying over time. Although I will often use the term “women” throughout this dissertation – this is also the term I used during most of my recruitment – I did not intend to exclude those who identified as gender nonconforming. To get an accurate picture of who my respondents are, I asked them to complete demographics survey that was mostly open-ended, meaning that they could type in their responses to gender as well as other identifying terms. Therefore, some players identified as “White” while others as “Caucasian.” Responses did not always fall into typical social science categories of race and gender. This outcome falls in line with what O’Hara (2013) and her team found in qualitative interviews with 115 respondents who, when asked their race, produced 30 different racial descriptors. A table of self-reported respondent demographics is in Appendix A.

To gather narratives from women’s early and often continued experiences in tabletop roleplaying, I used in-depth interviews that lasted from about 30 minutes to over an hour. Themes that were frequent in the interviews were how roleplaying games were formative for respondents as young players in terms of emotional and social development as well as moments throughout their long gaming careers where they felt singled out because of gender identity. Respondents also offered insight on how their experiences differed from cisgender male players. The central aim of my dissertation is to expose and explore roles in this subculture from its outset in order to highlight the significant contributions that women had as pioneers in the earliest days of TRPGs and present a more complex picture of the evolution of gaming, connecting past feminist issues in gaming with current ones.

I include historical context as it applies to the intersections of tabletop roleplaying games and marginalized players and creators. Shifts that were happening in American politics and media – the push for an Equal Rights Amendment, the growth of the conservative Christian right, and consequently, the moral panic over Satanism that led to accusations that Dungeons & Dragons and heavy metal music encouraged impressionable teens and young adults to commit suicide. Furthermore, there were accusations of “devil-worshipping pedophiles” which sent individuals to prison; many of whom have since been exonerated (Hughes, 2017). These were the conditions under which Dungeons & Dragons emerged as a hobby. Although D&D grew in popularity during the 1980s, it was not mainstream. As Mikaela (46, White) put it:

It was just, from a school standpoint, that’s something that the nerds did, even though a lot of us were also kind of athletic, or jocks, or what have you. It was a dirty secret, that was still definitely the case. You didn’t want to admit to it really.

As D&D became more mainstream and less of a dirty secret in the late 2000s, players felt more empowered to demand more inclusive gaming materials and practices.

I approached the design and analysis of my dissertation through historical, feminist, critical, and narrative lenses. I examine how individuals identifying as women or as nonbinary have experienced tabletop roleplaying in connection with socio-historical context, especially how changes in feminist thought and women’s roles affected their participation in the subculture of tabletop roleplaying. Critical approaches, which examine power dynamics, have been crucial to understanding the ways that marginalized groups have transformed gaming. Younger generations’ online activism forced influential companies, such as Wizards of the Coast, to rethink longstanding storylines, lore, and the

representation of marginalized identities in gaming materials and on transmedia initiatives such as livestreams.

I have used narrative inquiry and grounded theory to structure my research because this was the best way to get to a cohesive, historical narrative. My sample size is relatively small and therefore more detail and attention could be given to each individual's narrative while still placing stories in conversation with each other. Besides sample size, narrative research made practical sense to me as someone who started as a creative writing and English scholar. For me, the heart of tabletop roleplaying games is storytelling; a player must take on a role and add to a collective narrative.

Narrative inquiry, especially the work of educational researchers Candace Kuby and Jeeong-Hee Kim (2015) and sociologist Catherine Riessman (2008), influenced the way I have chosen to conduct interviews, code and organize, and present the data from interviews. Although narrative inquiry has much in common with grounded theory—and many scholars using narrative inquiry do use grounded approaches in tandem—the biggest difference between them is in the coding and analysis. While with grounded theory, “a priori concepts are discouraged” (Riessman, 2008, p. 66), narrative inquiry often starts from established themes or questions. Riessman (2008) names four narrative approaches to analysis: Thematic, Structural, Dialogic/Performative, and Visual. Each of these approaches concerns narrative but focus on a different aspect of how narrative is constructed. In my research, I tend to use thematic analysis, categorizing responses by theme, focusing on *what* interviewees are saying, categorizing responses by research question.

Narrative inquiry often focuses on a small number of cases. Scholars aim to “keep a story ‘intact’ by theorizing from the case rather than component themes across cases” (Riessman, 2008, p. 53). When working on a solo project with in-depth interviews and limited funding, the numbers of interviewees were necessarily limited. There is no number of interviewees (humanly possible) than can tell an entire history. Instead, throughout my analysis chapter, I try to present each person’s story as whole as possible, while being mindful of each person’s concern for privacy and confidentiality – which were not the same in all cases. For example, some respondents who consider themselves public figures, preferred that their names be used, while others chose pseudonyms for themselves or asked that I provide them with pseudonyms.

In “Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences,” Riessman (2008) provides several examples of studies which examined the master narrative of a phenomenon and how respondents’ responses fit or deviate from that master narrative. For my project, thematic narrative analysis is appropriate because it is “akin to what scholars in folklore use with archival data” (Riessman, 2008, p. 53). Many of my respondents, reflecting on experiences from 30 to 40 years ago, layer past and present experiences in their recollections. Kim (2015) and Riessman’s (2008) books give in-depth examples of research using narrative inquiry, including analysis of historical documents, visual artwork, and oral history. Additionally, how researchers analyze and respond to their object of inquiry can also be creative in nature. Leavy (2013) advocates and practices using fiction in the presentation of research data, stating that doing so “invite[s] diverse readers into the text in a pleasurable way” (p. 20). Kim (2015) argues that fictional ethnography gets at the “cognitive and affective truth of lived experience” (p. 141).

Although I do not fictionalize my data, I was inspired by fiction, creative nonfiction, and ethnographic writing for immersing the reader in sensory detail. This emphasis on pleasure and feeling – and putting readers into the fray rather than having them on the outside looking in – works to shift from conversations about objectivity to ones that acknowledge partial perspective, the interplay of interviewer and interviewee. I do not, however, claim that the power dynamic of interview/interviewee is removed in doing this. In striving to be transparent about the evolving processes that went into collecting interviews, I acknowledge the ways that my methodology has changed over time as I grew more cognizant of shifting power dynamics in the interviewing and researching process.

A Map for Travelers: Chapter Overview

In *Chapter 1* (Introduction), I have given an overview of my methodology, respondents, and texts. The chapters which follow are organized more or less chronologically, with each chapter focusing on key events and changes for the subculture of gaming. I say “more or less” because themes among respondents are not strictly bound to one year or even generation. As social and historical context changes, so do the ways that respondents speak about issues of representation in games. The *how* changes, but the *what* is similar. Gender-based harassment does not disappear, but how it happens and is responded to has. Many of those changes have to do with developments in communicative technology and media. I characterize the changes that happen broadly as changes in accessibility, and how accessibility has changed the content and experience of gaming and the experience of living a gendered existence. How gender was/is conceptualized in North America and Europe has also influenced how respondents talked

about their experiences of gaming. Two major media moral panics structure the first two chapters – the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and the reaction to the Columbine High School shooting in 1999. The third chapter focuses on 2010 to present, which is characterized by social media and the growth of an audience and fandom for tabletop roleplaying games.

Chapter 2 describes the origin of *Dungeons & Dragons* and why TRPGs at this time were considered “male oriented.” At this time, gender is spoken about in terms of binary opposition: Women who played RPGs often described themselves as not fitting into the mold of traditional femininity. In conversations with this group of players, I asked them to speculate on the supposed absence or erasure of women in early tabletop roleplaying, which led us into discussions about women’s labor and leisure time as well as the image of *D&D* as being for socially awkward and nerdy boys. An additional hit to gaining new players was the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, which blamed “Satanic” media – most notably heavy metal and *D&D* – for brainwashing teenagers into committing suicide. I discuss the gendered aspects of the Satanic Panic that helped the stereotype of the tabletop roleplayer as the White male to linger.

Chapter 3 looks at roleplaying after the Satanic Panic, when *D&D* saw a quiet growth of tabletop roleplaying games in the 1990s and early 2000s. Although it was not yet “cool” or mainstream to play TRPGs, several things boosted participation: The rise of Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs), and the connectivity of home internet meant that players could connect to each other without leaving their homes. Games that were like *D&D* in its use of fantasy themes and long campaigns were popularized through MUDs, MMORPGs, and in online chatrooms. Being online also meant that players could remain anonymous if they chose to. Additionally, the concept of

gender and sexuality as a spectrum rather than a binary was gaining acceptance. The Columbine High School shooting and the media's suggestion that violent video games were at least partially to blame was rhetorically similar to the language of the Satanic Panic that blamed D&D and heavy metal for brainwashing boys. The media coverage of the mass shooting in Columbine added to the characterization of young White boys as the primary audience for and victims of violent media.

Chapter 4 describes the youngest generation of adult roleplayers. In the mid-2000s, celebrities began to go public with their love for D&D. Post-2010, tabletop roleplaying gained mainstream visibility and acceptance thanks to streaming broadcasts like *Critical Role*. Combined with social media, this led to huge gains in visibility for TRPGs and for players of marginalized identities. Digitalization keeps moving forward in its capability for players to watch broadcasts and to broadcast themselves, and greater scrutiny is on publishers like Wizards of the Coast to be more inclusive of marginalized identities in gaming materials, events, and hiring practices. The concept of gender is moving even further from a binary in terms of gender expression and identification, and this is reflected in D&D's fifth edition and in games that are publicly streamed. Younger roleplayers are demanding to see themselves represented in character options and are calling out racist depictions in both early and contemporary gaming modules.

Chapter 5 (Conclusion) reflects on the impact of this collective history and considers the future of fantasy roleplaying, which is gradually moving away from notions of fantasy as a Eurocentric, historical genre. I also consider how to study gender in audience studies when more and more individuals are not identifying with binary gender. I end with pondering some questions: What is our current moral panic? In a digital world

of algorithmic niches, could there be multiple moral panics? What will be the long-term impacts of the emergence of a mainstream audience and fandom for tabletop roleplaying games?

My project's analysis fills in gaps of gaming history and sheds light on the continued gender inequality in gaming culture, even as categories of gender appear to be dismantling. The narratives of women involved in gaming culture for decades offer unique perspectives rarely showcased in scholarly or popular publications. A deeper focus on the changing concerns of women and gender nonconforming people in gaming elucidates social dynamics in play.

Chapter 2 : Gendered Labor, Leisure, and Participation in Early Tabletop Roleplaying (~1976-1989)

...I know there have been girls involved in the game for a long time. I introduced girls to some of the games. Now, whether or not they've stayed interested is another thing. But first of all, back in the '80s and such it was very much geek culture. And geek culture was not as cool as it is now (Erin, 51, Caucasian).

I think it's harder to discuss these things now because a lot of people are using history as a political agenda to try to preserve some form of status quo that they feel should be the truth (Maria, 46, Caucasian).

There's no secret cabal of old dudes saying, "How can we ruin women's gaming experience today?" But there's a mechanism, by which guys are expected to have a lot of open time, and women are expected to do a lot of stuff that isn't really considered labor (Carolyn, 48, White).

In the November 1978 issue of *The Dragon*, a magazine described on its cover as a "monthly adventure role-playing aid," writer Jean Wells unwittingly started a minor feud amongst tabletop roleplaying enthusiasts. In her review of the fresh-off-the-presses *Dungeon Masters Guide* (DMG) for the new Advanced Dungeons & Dragons, she made a flippant remark addressed to Gary Gygax, the author and co-creator of Dungeons & Dragons⁹: "Finally, let it stand that I say, 'Dwarven women do not have beards, Gary!'" (Wells, 1979, p. 44). Wells, the only woman game designer on the TSR staff at the time, was outnumbered by her colleagues in this opinion about the hirsuteness of an imaginary race of creatures in Dungeons & Dragons. On the same page, Allen Hammack, a fellow game designer at TSR, shot back: "With the lopsided score of TSR 12, Jean 1, the mini-controversy of whether dwarven women have beards has been laid to rest. They do" (Hammack, 1979, p. 44). Gygax (1979) concurred; despite the innate flexibility of the

⁹ Co-creator with Dave Arneson. Arneson left TSR on bitter terms in 1976. Arneson's work was crucial for the basics of D&D, but Gary Gygax's name is more well-known and more has been published about his life.

D&D system, Gygax insisted that female dwarves having beards was a non-negotiable point. He argued that dwarven society was one of the most egalitarian, while Wells' called for an acknowledgment of difference between sexes. Reader Gregory G. Rihn (1980) wrote in to say that he thought female dwarves' beards allowed them to blend in safely with the rest of their society. Unlike their human counterparts who were vulnerable to rape during a pillaging, female dwarves were protected because they looked like the males.

The debate about beards eventually lost momentum. The fifth edition *Player's Handbook* (Wizard of the Coast, 2014) mentions that "male dwarves value their beards highly and groom them carefully" (p. 18). In her guest role on *Critical Role* in 2019, voice actor Ashly Burch chose to play a dwarven woman with a "five o'clock shadow" as a callback to dwarven women having beards (Critical Role, 2019). I mention the beard debate because it's a useful metaphor for how the discourse on women in roleplaying was framed in the early days of fantasy tabletop roleplaying and debates about gender equality at the time my respondents were beginning to play. Did gender equality mean being the *same*, or was it about acknowledging difference? Was D&D a boys' game, and if so, what did that mean for girls who enjoyed it? For players in the 1970s and 1980s, gender identity and its relationship to interests and expected gender expression and roles was at the forefront of our conversations. Many respondents described themselves as atypical girls or women in the sense that they did not have "feminine" interests. They preferred computers and science over makeup and dolls. They spoke of the rigidity of gender roles and how tabletop roleplaying allowed them to break ties with stereotypes.

Part of the reason that Dungeons & Dragons was associated with men is that it was derived from wargames, whose purpose was to simulate wartime battle and strategy. Early Dungeons & Dragons maintained some holdovers from its predecessor such as the use of maps, miniatures, and attention to detail such as how far characters could move within a given day. Despite including intense minutiae, D&D was designed with “rule zero,” which indicates Dungeon Masters (DMs) have the final say over any rule. In the second edition of the *Dungeon Master’s Guide*, editor Zeb Cook (1989) writes, “In short, follow the rules as they are written if doing so improves your game. But by the same token, break the rules if doing so improves your game” (p. 7). Rule zero is what made tabletop roleplaying games (and arguably many other analog board games) different than video games, which are inherently limited by programming. Did rule zero mean that tabletop roleplaying games were a utopia for players? Not exactly. TRPGs became sandboxes for what Peterson (2014) called “playing at the world.” Instead of being limited by programming, tabletop roleplaying was limited by the people sitting around the table. In the 1970s and 1980s, boys and men primarily dominated such tables.

Visibility and Accessibility

Most tabletop roleplaying games in the 1970s and 1980s were played primarily in private homes or at conventions. The *public* image of early roleplaying games was that men dominated them. However, the ability to curate gaming groups in private means that the true breadth of women’s participation is impossible to estimate accurately. As a game that was largely played in small groups without an audience, the visibility and accessibility of tabletop roleplaying games remained niche throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Interested players who had never played D&D heard about it from friends and

family or were connected to an existing community that had overlapping interests with science fiction and fantasy and/or science and technology. The notion of D&D as a boy's game was tied up in the image of the nerd, what kinds of things were considered nerdy hobbies, and who was assumed to be engaged with those hobbies.

Tabletop Roleplayers in the 1970s & 1980s

In the following two sections, I give an overview of my respondents who began to play in the 1970s and 1980s. Together, they form the largest group of respondents, indicating my original intention to focus on the earliest days of tabletop roleplaying. Below, I have split them into two groups: Those who started playing almost as soon as D&D was published around 1976 and those who started to play in the 1980s. Although the two groups are similar, the 1980s saw several important developments. The first was that D&D was shifting from a game marketed to adults to being more heavily marketed to teenagers and children who, unsurprisingly, were attracted to a game promising an adventure with dragons and monsters. The second was that the Satanic Panic, a fear of “Satanic” ritual and influence was spreading through mainstream media outlets. For the most part, my respondents reported that the Satanic Panic had not impacted their playing, but this moral panic *did* influence the image of roleplayers as antisocial nerdy outcasts, an image that is still perpetuated by entertainment media today.

Early Adopters: Playing Roleplaying Games in the 1970s

The assumption that D&D would not appeal to women or children turned out to be false. Writing about literature, Segal (1986) has argued that while boys might have shied away from “girls” books, girls had no such qualms about reading books for boys (Seiter, 1993, p. 146). Respondents told me that they had usually heard of D&D via word

of mouth or through personal connections. They had not, as respondents in later years would, discovered D&D by browsing at a hobby shop or coming across a streamed game online.

Demographically, the number of respondents interviewed who started to play TRPGs in the 1970s was small and homogenous. Seven of my respondents stated that they started to play tabletop roleplaying games in the 1970s: Jody (63, Caucasian)¹⁰, Penny (62, Caucasian), Carolyn (48, White), Michelle (53, Caucasian), Shannon (46, Caucasian), Linda (50, White), and Helen (58, White). All had attended at least some college; with five have bachelor's degrees. Most worked in a creative profession – author or illustrator, for instance – while others worked as a high school teacher, secretary, and one in IT. This group also had the most self-reported neo-Pagans, with four reporting their religion as something outside of the major monotheistic religions, with the others reporting as a denomination of Christianity or leaving the question blank or reporting “none.” Regarding their sexuality, three respondents reported as bisexual while four identified as heterosexual, with one identifying as “questioning straight-ish.”

Jody and Penny were introduced to Dungeons & Dragons as young adults – Jody at 19 and Penny in her early twenties – and both worked with Dungeons & Dragons. Jody typed the *Dungeon Master's Guide* (1979) and *The Monster Manual* (1978) for Gary Gygax doing a little “judicious copyediting” along the way for grammar and spelling. Today, Jody is a renowned science fiction and fantasy author. Penny and her husband Skip Williams started working for TSR in the 1980s and later moved to Seattle to work

¹⁰ These demographics were open and self-reported, hence the reason why some respondents used the term “Caucasian” and others White.

with Wizards of the Coast until around 2002 when they were laid off and moved back to Wisconsin; Penny currently teaches high school science and told me that she often incorporates the creativity and problem solving of D&D into her lessons.

Linda, Carolyn, and Shannon were influenced by family members who encouraged their creativity and supported their interests in fantasy. Carolyn, who started playing D&D around eight or nine years old, used to go to work with her mother, a systems programmer. At her mother's work, the computers had games installed in a secret file, which Carolyn would play Colossal Cave Adventure while her mother worked. Later, she was introduced to D&D by her older cousins. Linda started playing around age 11 with the support of her mother, who although she was not herself interesting in gaming "a great supporter of [Linda's] imagination" and bought her D&D books when asked. Likewise, Shannon's parents, science fiction writers from Berkeley, California, supported her interest in D&D.

Michelle and Helen were introduced to D&D by male friends – Michelle at around 14 and Helen at 17. The stereotype of the female player – that she was brought on by a guy and was not interested in the game. Helen did say that in that earliest game, both the Dungeon Master and the other main player "fancied her." Being introduced to D&D by a male relative, friend, or boyfriend was not common, but it was not the only way that young players were initiated into the world of D&D. Yet this stereotype, as I will touch on later in this chapter, did appear to have an impact on how women characterized their identity as women – that being interested in science fiction or in roleplaying games was because they had never felt particularly feminine or that they were considered "one of the guys."

Yet this group of women was also fiercely feminist; they wanted to be treated as equals who had the skills, knowledge, and fannish chops to keep up with any dude. They recognized that one of the reasons that fewer women started to play early D&D – or quit when they got married or had children – was because of the expectation that women should prioritize domesticity over personal entertainment and pleasure. They were also cognizant of sexist imagery in D&D, fantasy, and science fiction which had the effect of diminishing or erasing women’s contributions to science-fiction and fantasy gaming and literature.

Growing Popularity: Women and Nonbinary Gamers in the 1980s

Seventeen of my respondents said that they started their involvement with tabletop roleplaying games in the 1980s. For tabletop roleplaying games, the 1980s were a time of growth, and expansion. New companies and new games were popping up; players had more choices than Dungeons & Dragons. Seeing D&D’s popularity with children, companies were now tailoring their ads to reach a younger demographic. Dungeons & Dragons was branching out from analog tabletop games into a transmedia franchise which included a computer game and a popular Saturday morning cartoon that ran from 1983-1985.



Figure 2-1: D&D cartoon still from <https://www.cbr.com/dungeons-dragons-best-episode-vengeer-controversy/>

This growing recognition would come to haunt D&D during the Satanic Panic, when involvement with Dungeons & Dragons was blamed for publicized teen suicides. Suddenly, the game that had kids pretending to be a wizard or a fighter had become a sadistic brainwashing tool in the eyes of Christian conservatives. More importantly, this connection was perpetuated by secular mainstream media outlets and spread like wildfire among parents who had no idea what Dungeons & Dragons was. Though it provided kindling for news media, most of my respondents told me they were not significantly impacted by the Satanic Panic. As I will argue later in this chapter, the Satanic Panic had an impact on the image of roleplayers even when it did not impact their access or ability to play.

Like the group of respondents who began to play in the 1970s, the group who started to play in the 1980s was majority White, with two respondents identifying as Jewish/White and one respondent reporting her race as mixed White/Asian. Most respondents reported their gender as female (with one reporting as “female – transgender”) while one identified as genderfluid. Nine respondents reported their sexuality as straight/heterosexual, with one reporting as heteroflexible. Five respondents

identified as bisexual, while one of each identified as lesbian, queer, and pansexual. Most of the respondents in this group did not identify with any religion (N=5) and/or stated their identification as Atheist (N=2). Four reported being Agnostic or having attended multiple types of services, three were Jewish, and three reported a denomination of Christianity. Most of the respondents in this group had attained a PhD (N=5) or a professional degree (N=5), with the rest having completed a Masters (N=1), Bachelors (N=2), Associate/2 year (N=2), or some college (N=2). Respondents worked in a wide variety of professions, including academia (N=3), library services (N=2), attorney (N=2), marketing, retail, or product management (N=3), IT/computers (N=2), administration/customer service (N=2), and machinist (N=1). One reported being an author full-time, while another was a part-time writer in addition to her another job.

Like the group from the 1970s, this group of players had usually been influenced to play from a family member or peer, but they were also more likely to have heard of D&D before they started playing. Only a few had instances which they identified as harassment, but several mentioned that they felt a responsibility to protect younger players from harassment. Many respondents had experience in being game masters, which they said gave them some power to make sure situations were safe and enjoyable for their players. At this point in time, it was clear that there was no homogenous community of roleplayers as the hobby spread throughout North America and Europe. Individuals from this group gave me unique perspectives of the Satanic Panic via their firsthand experiences with religion and described discrimination in roleplaying games not just via gender, but also religion and age.

In the next sections, I describe the images of roleplaying games, particularly D&D, that this group of respondents would have been exposed to, how feminism impacted early gaming, and why the expectations for women's labor may have affected the number of women roleplayers. Additionally, I highlight how the 1980s Satanic Panic further solidified the image of the D&D player as White, male, and an outcast.

The Image of Women in Tabletop Roleplaying Games



Figure 2-2: Illustration in The Dragon #10, October 1977

Players' impressions of TRPGs came from gaming materials, advertisements, media, and peers. At first, outcries about sexism that I noticed in doing historical research were what was most visible: The artwork. Artwork in gaming manuals, supplements, and magazines dedicated to roleplaying games at this time featured women and female characters as highly sexualized, often in costumes that were inappropriate for adventuring. When women complained that sexualized imagery alienated female players, their complaints were largely ignored as those of a small group who were not the intended audience for TRPGs.

In May 1980, *The Dragon* published a letter from Kathleen McCauslin who complained that the magazine, as well as other roleplaying materials were too “male-oriented” and alienated potential female players (p. 45). Editor Jake Jaquet responded that 98% of submissions that the magazine got were from male writers and that he encouraged more women to submit to *The Dragon*. Jaquet’s argument was that women were not a substantial portion of the roleplaying community, so why should he cater to them? Player Katherine Kerr (1980) wrote in and encouraged women to take their money elsewhere if a company continued to sell sexist miniatures, the figurines used on maps of encounters in D&D. Kerr directed women to *tell* men that the figures were sexist, because “most men don’t realize how offensive they’re being when they gloat over cheap porn in the form of fantasy gaming aids. The macho conditioning is simply so strong as to be blinding” (p. 2). As for the illustrations of women in *Dragon*, Kerr said it was difficult to call them “sexist,” since the illustrations of men can be just as ridiculous. Letters that followed on the same topic, continued to say that *Dragon* is “male oriented” and that the illustrations of women were regularly more sexualized than those of men (Devine, 1986; Reed, 1983).

More cutting than the illustrations were that female characters were given lower strength statistics in the first versions of Dungeons & Dragons. In *Dragon*’s third issue, Len Lakofka (1976) ruffled feathers with his article called “Notes on Women and Gaming: Bringing the Distaff Gamer Into DnD.” This article, along with P.M. Crabaugh’s (1977) “Weights in Measures” in issue 10, established women gamers and female characters as unequal to men in terms of physical strength. While Lakofka proposed that women could surpass men in dexterity, he said that “only as fighters are

women clearly behind men in all cases” (p. 7). Perhaps this was why early female players—or male players whose characters were female—tended to play magic users, who did not need to rely on high strength scores. Women characters also had a stat that men did not. They could use *beauty* to seduce or “charm men.” In 1986, Jefferson Swycaffer published an article entitled “The Six Main Skills: What AD&D Game Abilities Mean in Real Terms,” in which he supported the unequal strength stats with biology, saying that the strongest man would still be stronger than the strongest woman.

When asked about the difference in stats for female characters on an EN World forum, Gary Gygax (2004) argued for lower stats of female characters based on a lack of historical examples:

I am always amused when history programs on the tube attempt Political Corectness [sic] by featuring the only examples of female duelists, pirates, warriors, etc. They represent less than one percent of the whole being considered, and featuring one-armed men in the same roles would be at least as meaningful historically. Frankly, not only did society generally prevent such participation, but I believe most women were generally not the least interested in engaging in such dangerous and questionable activities. I never enforced the rule in my own game, for the milieu is fantasy, and given that, why have a physical power barrier when there are no others?

This comment was typical of Gygax, who would insist that rules or lore were set in stone (such as dwarven women having beards) and then contradict himself by saying that game masters could choose to ignore the rule. Even though Dungeon Masters could choose not to enforce unequal strength statistics between male and female characters, it

was still a rule in the books before 1989. Ellen (45, White) thought that the unequal stats between sexes might have discouraged people from playing female characters:

I think I might have been the only woman in that early group... I remember being a little bit annoyed that female characters at that time had lower stats in certain stuff. And it was like, yeah, I can see why they're doing that, but that's annoying. It kind of discourages female characters in a way.

More than discouraging players from choosing female characters, it could have also turned off girls and women who wanted to play D&D. Using characters to embody a particular identity and identifying with characters was important for players, but having that identity mechanized as a disadvantage was discouraging. Debates over gender equality that first appeared in *Dragon* would expand decades later on social media to include demands for changes to the representation of sexuality, race, and disability.

The defense of differing strength stats for female characters based on “historical” or “real world” evidence indicates that “misogynist attitudes in the gaming community reproduce themselves by way of the community privileging the *accuracy* of simulation over the *ethics* of simulation” (Trammel, 2014). More recently, the way that race functions in D&D has also been a point of contention. Although not directly supported by fans as biologically or historically accurate in the way that sex differences once were, the differences between characters based on race have been defended as an historical part of the game itself. The race-based mechanics in D&D are a more foundational part of the game because they can give a character a mechanical advantage (or disadvantage) in a given situation and therefore choosing a character’s race can be an important process for a D&D player.

The idea of “race” in Dungeons & Dragons and other sword and sorcery media borrows heavily from JRR Tolkien’s writing and from European histories and mythologies. Although race is a mix of species and ethnicity in TRPGs, *human* holds an assumed Whiteness and humans are the race in D&D against which all other races were defined. A “half-elf,” for example, was always half human and half elf. In 1977, P.M. Crabaugh, writing for *The Dragon*, instituted a system of stats which would “provide an equitable and reasonable method of handling sexual differentiation,” in addition to providing a randomization system for physical appearance (pp. 19–20). It was noticeably limited. The example of a “heavily built female” was Wonder Woman. Using Crabaugh’s system of rolling a twenty-sided die to determine complexion, a player had a 4/20 chance of rolling a non-White character, which was limited to “Black” or “Oriental” (p. 20). Crabaugh (1977) defended the limitation by saying that the percentage does not represent “the actual population distribution; it is because the literature of swords & sorcery is *primarily* (but not entirely) concerned with caucasians [sic]” (p. 20). The argument for limited representation of any marginalized player – whether it was a woman or a person of color – was based in the notion that such players were absent or very few and therefore did not need to be recognized or catered to.

Many readers did not buy the argument that differences needed to be reinforced between males and females in D&D. In August 1986, Darcy Stratton wrote to *Dragon* to point out that this is a very selective realism since it’s only based on one statistic—strength (p. 31). She furthermore argued that realism should not apply to fantasy races such as elves. Several other women wrote in to agree with her, but it was not until 1989 that the sex-based strength stats were scrapped when the second edition of Advanced

Dungeons & Dragons was published. The system revised the core mechanics of the game were simplified so that strength scores were level for all races and genders.

Feminism and Women's Culture

Second-wave feminism is largely defined by its reaction to patriarchal institutions in which women were relegated to having less agency than men. In the 1970s, radical feminists such as Shulamith Firestone and Luce Irigaray wrote critiques of Freudian phallogocentric thought. Firestone argued that eliminating biological reproduction was key to dismantling sexual inequality. To read feminist literature of the 1970s now is to see a call for dismantling the patriarchy via radical shifts or destruction of marriage, religion, and other institutions and systems that reinforced normative notions of sexuality and gendered labor. Much of what ended up being labeled as radical or second-wave feminism in the United States and Europe was also steeped in Whiteness – as Audre Lorde (2007) pointed out in her critique of Mary Daly – with the presumed notion that feminism was for “all” women, but had not touched on an intersectional or postcolonial feminism. While the average American may not have been pondering Freud’s relevance or calling for the elimination of gender, the impact of feminist thought was still palpable for early roleplayers.

The Equal Rights Amendment, which was designed to guarantee equal legal rights among US citizens regardless of sex, was approved by the US Senate in March 1972. The same year, it was ratified by twenty-two states, though six states would later revoke their ratification.¹¹ Respondents who were young adults at the time were aware of

¹¹ As of 2022, 32 states have current ratifications of the ERA.

feminism and the Equal Rights Amendment. Olive (48, Caucasian), who started to play roleplaying games in 1981, spoke about growing up with an anti-feminist mother:

My family was anti-feminism in a way that I am now horrified by. The ERA amendment came out and I remember my mother saying, “I already know I’m equal to a man. I don’t need an amendment to say that.” It just makes me cringe. My mother is an active misogynist. She is terrible to women. I have no contact with her anymore. She’s horrible to me. But you know, I grew up being told, *well, women couldn’t fly fighter jets because they’re not as brave as men.* That was dining room conversation.

Olive said that in her early roleplaying, she avoided playing female characters and felt that she had some internalized misogyny. She now considers herself a proud feminist who raised feminist children.

Helen (58, White) recalled an influential teacher who talked about women’s rights around 1974:

I had an English teacher particularly, who was very, very keen on the idea that we would have equal rights, and “it’s coming, and your generation will get it. We haven’t had it, but you are going to get it. We’ve got equal pay and we’re going to have equal jobs.” I think she told us all about how the new laws were coming in to protect us and everything would be equal for us. Yeah right, okay. But it *is* in theory, but the perception of others that you’re working with weren’t there.

Helen’s sentiment was that policy was a crucial step but getting the average person to support equality between genders was a different thing altogether. A legal acknowledgment of women’s equality was one thing, but the dismantling of gender roles

was another. Changes in the concept of gender and of gender roles would have an impact on D&D in the ways that players defined themselves.

When respondents were beginning to play in the 1970s and 1980s, second-wave feminism was in full force. The image of the feminist was always radical, in the sense that 1970s feminism had a locus in dismantling what feminists saw as patriarchal: The heterosexual marriage and the expectation of childbearing, childrearing, and housework. Whether or not a woman worked outside of the home, these tasks were not something she could clock out of at the end of the day. There was a significant “leisure gap” between mothers and fathers in heterosexual married households, where women, regardless of employment, spent more time on housework and childcare (Seiter, 1993, p. 18).

Dungeons & Dragons is known for its long campaigns lasting weeks, months, or even years. Roleplaying games are engrossing, and it can take some time to get into the flow of play; many adult women could not afford the time investment that TRPGs required. The work that women did at home was devalued, as was the historical labor of women players and creators in tabletop roleplaying games.

Even before the first D&D game was published, women had been intricate to the process. Women’s unseen labor haunts Witwer’s (2015) biography of Gary Gygax, co-creator of D&D. Gygax’s wife at the time, Mary Jo, watched their six young children while Gygax was spent long gaming sessions away. According to Witwer’s (2015), Gygax was gone so often that Mary Jo began to suspect that he was having an affair. As D&D was in its early stages, Gygax’s children Ernie and Elise were among his first playtesters. Gygax was the brilliant artist and the mad scientist – working early in the mornings or late into the night; he could not “ignore the urge to write” because “ideas are

ephemeral, slip away too quickly, so when the muse is there, go like hell...” (Witwer, 2015, p. 98). The ability to write when the mood struck him and be away from the family for lengthy periods was made possible by his wife, Mary Jo Gygax.

The gendered division of domestic labor meant women – especially mothers – had less time to play roleplaying games. In his 1983 sociological study of fantasy roleplaying, Gary Alan Fine estimated that 5% to 10% of roleplayers were women, though fewer were considered “hard-core” gamers (p. 62). Fine’s respondents, who were mostly men, argued that women simply were not interested in a long, complicated games and Fine suggested that gendered socialization played a key role. Women were hesitant to join a game that was considered a “male game” (p. 64). I agree that socialization probably played a role in the smaller number of women but would add to it that women were socialized not to work-then-play, but to take responsibility for the home. Helen (58, White) weighed in on why tabletop roleplaying may have, at first, been considered a male hobby:

It was a traditional thing going on about men led. Men started things. It wasn’t very feminine to go do things like that because it involved guns and things. Maybe women weren’t doing so much playing full stop because they were supposed to be at home cooking and making the house nice for the bloke. No way my mother would have got to play at anything. My generation we kind of went, well actually, why not? We’re out there working, we’re equally working, we can equally play.

Domestic labor – or the expectation of it – may have kept more women from playing tabletop roleplaying games. Carolyn (48, White), who has been playing tabletop

roleplaying games since 1979, pontificated on why many women roleplayers who had played as children stopped playing as adults:

...when I moved out to the Midwest... I started looking for a roleplaying group almost immediately...I found a whole bunch of married guys.... They married women who also loved to game. And every single time, I went over to their house and sat down to game, I'd be like, why isn't your wife playing? And they say, oh, she doesn't like to do it anymore. And when I finally cornered them [the wife] and asked them, why aren't you playing D&D, they get this sort of glassy eye, and say, oh, well, you know, I loved doing it when I was young, but who has the time now? I'm like, *your husband*. Your husband has the time, clearly has the time, he's got six different gaming groups and he's moderating all of them. He's got an online forum, he's on 36 hours a week. ...There's a mechanism, by which guys are expected to have a lot of open time, and women are expected to do a lot of stuff that isn't really considered labor.

There simply was not enough time in the day for some women to play. Moreover, labor at home was not paid labor, which Carolyn refers to when she says that women are "expected to do a lot of stuff that isn't really considered labor." Being a wife or mother was a supporting role to the lead role of husband, who did the wage-earning labor. Women who played D&D at this time often (not always) described themselves as taking on "supporting roles" of a magic user to support the active role of fighters, who as Bonnie (47, White) described went "headlong into the fray."

Dungeons & Dragons is a collaborative game. It works best if everyone works together, and this was something I heard players mention when I asked them what types

of characters they usually played. They often played supporting characters, or characters that would round out a party. But what did “supporting” mean, exactly? In Mary Jo Gygax’s case, it meant taking care of a household while her husband worked on his passion project. In a D&D game, “supporting” usually meant that a character was not a fighter, would stand at a distance to do damage with magic, not an axe. Jean (46, White) stated that being a supporting character means being flexible to make the party well-rounded and strong: “My characters tend to go for party balance. If they need a healer, I’ll be the healer. If they need a ranger, I’ll be a ranger or an archer.” Women did not *always* play magic users or stand back from the fight, and I don’t wish to suggest this is the case. For example, Bonnie (47, White), who no longer plays TRPGs said that she credited Gary Gygax for “saving her life” because playing D&D as a teenager at her friends’ houses allowed her to escape an abusive household. The character she played at that time was tough and reckless:

[playing D&D] was a way to get out of the house, and a way to pretend to be strong enough that I could just stab anything that might hurt me. And so I’ve spent a lot of time since my roleplaying days thinking about how that ability to pretend I could do it as well as just the ability to get out of the house for a reason and to get permission to get out of the house pretty much all weekend really kept me from becoming another tragic story...Even though [my character] was very, very different from me, and her life was very, very different, I didn’t have to put up a show of *I’m in control, I’m capable of handling anything. I know what’s going on.*

Choosing a character was partially about what a player wanted and partly about what was best for the group. Which way a person went depended on what they needed out of a character and their dramatic reserves. Linda (50, White) told me:

Unless I deliberately decide to play against type, they usually do end up being support characters, like bard in Pathfinder or D&D...My original Star Wars character, my GM said, “You’re going to play against type. You’re going to play a noble. You’re going to play someone who is in charge for once.” So I guess supportive. I don’t usually do the, “Boom, dammit!”, or the, “I will crush things.” It’s the, “I will *help you* crush things” kind of thing, or, “I will talk our way through this.”

Terming certain types of characters “supporting characters” diminishes their power and agency, but all characters in a D&D group are crucial. Dungeons & Dragons is a game without a winner and a loser. It’s a group working on a common quest. Without cooperation, the group isn’t likely to succeed in any given mission. Like mothers and wives, magic users were never *just* supporting characters – they were vital to the overall structure of the group.

Roleplaying Games, Femininity, and Labor

In my interviews with respondents who began to play in the 1970s and 1980s, gender was primarily spoken of as a binary in terms of gender roles and gender expression. Because D&D’s early image was “for boys,” I was curious why young girls and women had been drawn to the game. Sometimes they were brought to TRPGs by a friend, boyfriend, or family member. Other times they spoke about their love for science fiction or fantasy. There had been women authors who wrote science fiction as early as

the 1930s, but it was still a genre assumed to be written by and for men; it was implied that the *science* in science fiction was not of interest to women (Larbalestier, 2002).

Some respondents justified their involvement in early Dungeons & Dragons by mentioning they were interested in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) and computer science. Others pointed out that they were *not* interested in what was presented as typically feminine activities and interests like dolls, makeup, or fashion. A few used the term “tomboy” to describe themselves. These descriptions were used as explanations as to why they got involved with D&D despite its image as being “for boys.” Being a girl who wanted to play a boy’s activity meant that some respondents figured themselves as “one of the guys” – at least when it came to hobbies:

You know, I’ve such a tomboy my whole life, that I’m actually more comfortable playing with guys than I am playing with girls. To me, I was just more comfortable playing with guys. I was more comfortable being one of the guys...I was into electronics. I’ve been into electronics since I was 13 years old (Michelle, 53, Caucasian).

You know, I was never one as a kid to like to play with dolls. That was like a death sentence if mom said, “Go play with your dolls.” That was like the worst thing. But if I could play cards with the adults - and I kicked their butts - I’d be all happy about that (Anna, 48, White)

A lot of respondents, especially those who started to play before the 2000s, characterized themselves as tomboys or as being generally interested in things that were marketed to boys. They distinguished themselves from “girly girls,” who, it was suggested, would not enjoy Dungeons & Dragons. Regardless of its marketing or image, D&D allowed some players to imagine a world free of binary gender roles and performance. Jean (46, White) who is genderfluid, pointed out that when she was growing up, she did not have a word for genderfluid, transgender, or “this rich

vocabulary of gender identity and sexuality,” but that roleplaying games gave her an outlet to experiment with identity:

That was the fun of playing that particular character. I got to be creative, but I didn't have to be limited what I was seeing in the media. I didn't have to be a homemaker. I could go out and have adventures. I didn't have to be considered a female.

Roleplaying legitimized taking on characters and “new” identities, but for Jean and many others, playing a character was a space where they could be themselves, to embody aspects of their identity which were not known to many people IRL (In Real Life). Mikaela (46, White), a transgender woman, talked about her experiences playing text and chat-based roleplaying games in the 1990s, which allowed her to openly play female characters:

So, in the early years, most people weren't aware, but I would play female characters probably three times for every one man, which would statistically be an anomaly for most male players. When online play first started back in the nineties with text, I played female characters and people didn't know I was a male player. I was also in the first TSR live stream, is what we would call it now, but it was a chat game that was being more or less visible to a bunch of people. And I played a female character there. It gave me an opportunity to feel like I wasn't wearing the mask even though it was a character.

Women have been involved with tabletop roleplaying since its earliest beginnings, but many women in the history of Dungeons & Dragons have had their participation invalidated if boyfriends, husbands, or male friends had invited them,

raising suspicion that they had not gotten involved of their own accord or couldn't hold their own in a game.

When I asked Susan (53, White) about how she got started playing in 1982 at age 18, she seemed self-conscious:

I wish it was more original instead of a stereotype, but yeah, it was a boyfriend.

On the other hand, I would've wanted to have started on my own. In fact, back when I heard about it in high school, it was just a name. It was just oh, this guy plays Dungeons & Dragons. And just the name of it - that sounds interesting...I'd like to know more about it. But being kind of shy and backwards, I didn't. And the other aspect, I will admit, the person they spoke of who played Dungeons & Dragons...they sort it with sort of derision.

In a follow-up email, Susan emphasized that joining D&D because a boyfriend had invited her was only her entry point. Like most of my respondents, she continues to play TRPGs despite and has passed on her love of gaming to her children.

Similarly, Andrea (43, mixed Asian/White) spoke about going to a game convention while she was in high school by hitching along with a college guy:

I didn't have anyone to play with in junior high. It wasn't until my junior year of high school that I got into a campaign. And I did that because I kept reading all these cool things about gaming in ...well, mostly in the About the Author sections of these science fiction and fantasy novels I'd been reading. So, when I found out that there was going to be a small gaming convention hosted by one of the colleges, I talked my mom into letting me go, and I picked up a guy in order to get into his gaming group. I was shamelessly using him, yes.

Andrea and Susan had not started to play D&D when they first heard about it – Andrea because she could not find anyone to play with despite the fact that her junior high had a D&D club, but “they didn’t want to let girls in.” Susan had not started playing in high school because her only knowledge of the game was via rumors and impressions. It had taken a personal introduction to the game to get her interested.

Another reason why there may have been fewer girls playing Dungeons & Dragons in the 1970s and 1980s was that young peer groups in the US were often gender and racially homophilic (Shrum et al., 1988). If a girl was not a “tomboy” who had male friends, she may not have been exposed gaming. Without any formal introduction to the game, young girls may have avoided D&D based on its image. They may have waited longer to start playing like Susan, or if they had started to play as children, quit later when they entered a romantic relationship with someone who *did not* play TRPGs. No one I spoke with who began to play in the 1970s or 1980s started to play later than their twenties. Homophily among peer groups also meant that groups of all women and groups where players were primarily people of color could have been less visible if they did not attend conventions. As Dawes (2015) suggested in her article about Black and queer heavy metal fans, marginalized fans may not be as publicly visible in fandoms dominated by White men. Likewise, marginalized tabletop roleplayers may not have felt comfortable in attending conventions where they were in the minority. If players had experienced or witnessed sexual harassment during a game, it usually happened at a convention.

Some players of this generation said that their gender identity did not affect their experiences as players – or if it had, that it was not a negative experience. Although I

phrased my question in this way— “how do you think that your gender identity has affected your experiences of playing?”—some players interpreted this as a question about horror stories of sexual harassment or “no girls allowed” behavior. For instance, Penny (62, Caucasian), who worked for TSR and started playing Dungeons & Dragons in the late 1970s, responded:

Well, here’s where nobody who interviews me really likes my response, because it really hasn’t that much. As I say, I started out playing with my first gaming group as their DM. They were all males, but they didn’t have any problem with me being their DM...And that’s pretty much how it was with the other groups I played with as well. Nobody made a big deal about me being a woman.

Occasionally I would run into something at a convention. One of the...must have been an Origins [Game Fair] that I went to when I worked with TSR, was running a tournament there... and collected my players and went to the assigned room and they sat down, and one of them looked at me and said, “It’s a woman.” And I said, “Okay, five points for perception.” And I think that was probably the most blatant that I ever had. Most people really didn’t care whether I was female or not, just I was a gamer.

The extent to which a player felt that they had been singled out because of gender identity – and how they felt about it – varied widely. Olive’s (48, Caucasian) impression was that sometimes girls were treated as a novelty and that there was a sort of “fascination with the Other” when they played in groups of all boys:

I think part of the attraction to playing D&D was because I was a female, I got very definite positive attention about - it’s great that you’re here. We’re so excited

to have your perspective. We are so excited to play with a girl. Now some of that was you know, sexism and sexualization, and oh, isn't it sort of, I don't know exciting to play with a girl, right? But some of it was just like, excitement of the Other.

Like video games, tabletop roleplaying games allow for some psychological distance between the player and the character. However, in a digital game, a player embodies an onscreen avatar. Tabletop roleplayers are still present in their physical bodies; visually, there was no hiding space or anonymity. When players did mention sexism and sexual harassment, they often minimized it or said that they had not taken it seriously at the time, especially when it took place in game. Shannon (46, Caucasian) described this interaction in high school:

SHANNON: Um, let's see...I had one rogue character...She was a little tiny halfling rogue, and she was an assassin. And she was actually a pretty awful character. There was another character that kept sexually harassing her, and she would just sneak up on him and stab him repeatedly until he stopped...And it happened so often during this campaign. She eventually killed him, I think.

KRISTIN: Wow. So that was... that other character that was doing the harassment ...that was someone's character or that was a non-playable?

SHANNON: That was someone's character played by another person in the group, and it was really creepy, but it wasn't really looked at as anything but a joke. And I think that was something that a lot of people didn't really take seriously at the time, and still don't, really.

Feeling that she had some control over the situation – and that her character could react against harassment and “repeatedly stab” the other character made the incident more bearable, and even fun. Andrea (43, mixed Asian/White) described a situation at a convention when she was 15 and was assigned a character named Jailbait by the GM, whose power was “Area of Effect Mind Control, Always On, Only Works on Men.” When I mentioned that it didn’t seem subtle, she said:

No. On the other hand, I had fun with it. I kept walking up to the NPCs, asking them to undress, and then saying, “Okay, now stay right there. I’ll be back. I just want to take care of a few things,” and walk off and never return. Hey, the GM seemed to eat it up. I got voted in an award for that session for best roleplaying, which is disturbing. But yeah, I don’t want to give you the impression that all convention gaming was like that. That was just one that stuck out for...I was being treated very differently for being a 15-year-old girl rather than an 18-year-old boy.

Where does the player end and the character begin? What is the role of an avatar, in the theatre of the mind? Research in communication has considered the role of the video game avatar as a tool in reducing racial bias (Behm-Morawitz et al., 2016). Tabletop roleplaying games offer considerably more choice than video games, especially in comparison to digital games of the 1970s and 1980s. Even in organized play, where a player might be assigned a type of character, they have considerable leeway in how they play the character. Peterson (2014) argued that “agency is as much a necessary condition for inclusion in the genre of role-playing games as role assumption itself. To play a character is to dictate the actions of an imaginary person, and self-determination is

inseparable from personhood” (p. 15). If players felt in control of a situation, as Andrea and Shannon did, unwelcome behavior was something they could deal with in ways that subverted gendered expectations and would be impossible or illegal outside of a game – stabbing an offending character, for instance. *Consent* was not a buzzword in early rulebooks, and the dungeon master was the ultimate arbiter of what was allowed in gameplay. In his interviews with tabletop roleplayers in the early 1980s, Gary Alan Fine found that some young men didn’t want to play with women because their presence might inhibit misogynist behavior. As Fine stated, “In theory, female characters can be as powerful as males; in practice, they are often treated as chattels. Many games reflect fantasies that assert male sexual potency and fear of impotence” (p. 69). The image of D&D as a game for socially awkward outcast boys would only be reinforced by the Satanic Panic.

Think of the Children: Entertainment Media, Violence, and Satanic Panic

It wasn’t until the 19th century that children’s culture emerged, and with it, the idea that children needed to be “isolated and guarded from an abusive world” (Kline, 1993, pp. 48-49). Over time, more protections for children developed as childhood became a unique moment in one’s life separate from adulthood. The twentieth century saw a growth in products designed for children and an explosion of advertising and television directed to children in the 1980s and 1990s. Along with heavy metal music, fantasy roleplaying came under scrutiny for occupying children’s time in unsavory ways.

Following the suicide of her son Irving Pulling II in 1982, Patricia Pulling blamed his death on Irving's involvement with Dungeons & Dragons. She founded the group BADD (Bothered About Dungeons & Dragons) shortly after her son's death to warn other parents about the dangers of fantasy roleplaying and D&D's Satanic content.

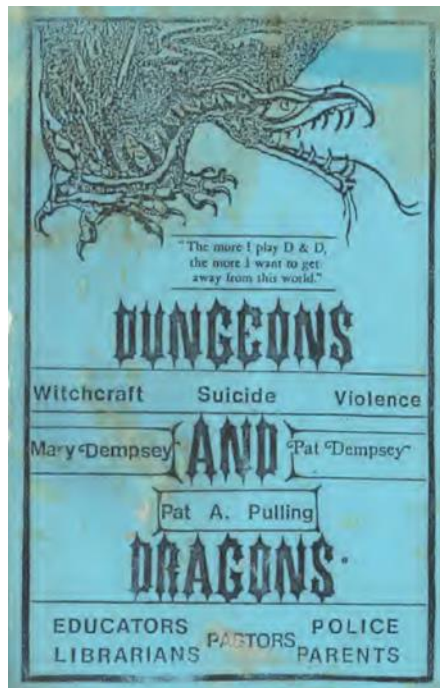


Figure 2-3: BADD Pamphlet, undated.
<http://www.theescapist.com/BADDbook.htm>

Pulling's conclusion was likely influenced by a high-profile case of 17-year-old James Dallas Egbert III, who disappeared in 1979. Private investigator William Dear surmised that the college student had gotten lost while playing *D&D* in the steam tunnels under Michigan State University (United Press International, 1979). Publicized suicides and murders committed by young White men that were linked to their participation in fantasy roleplaying were part of a moral panic referred to in contemporary parlance as "the Satanic Panic." While the Satanic Panic of the 1980s seems especially outlandish in hindsight, moral panics over children's entertainment are frequent and ongoing. Tying

moral panics about children's media to the modern concept of childhood is a reminder that while concerns about children's media may change, moral panics will continue to arise so long as children are rightly understood as a protected, vulnerable group.

Gender plays a key role in who gets situated as the victim of a moral panic. In the case of panics over media in the 1980s and 1990s, White boys and men were the victims of Satanic or violent media, even when they perpetrated violence. Except for fictional examples such as the protagonist in Jack Chick's "Dark Dungeons," girls were often absent from any discussion over the influence of Satanic media. Parents, especially mothers, appeared to be the most concerned over the impact of violent or Satanic media. In the 1990s, parents also shouldered a large chunk of the blame for not intervening enough in their troubled children's lives and their media consumption.

The panic over D&D was part of a more widespread fear of Satanism or occult behavior infiltrating quiet suburbia. While accusations against D&D and heavy metal bands resulted in bad publicity and sometimes legal trials¹², they were only a part of the Satanic Panic, the most disturbing of which involved claims of Satanic ritual abuse against young children by their caregivers (Nathan, 1991). Such claims were eventually debunked or thrown out due to lack of evidence but left permanent marks on those who had been accused. For example the podcast *Conviction* profiled the case of Melvin Quinney who was convicted and imprisoned in 1989 for eight years, followed by 12 years of parole when his 9-year-old son testified that his father had molested him and his

¹² One of the most notorious of these trials was that of the band Judas Priest, who was blamed for putting subliminal messages in their songs that caused young people to commit or attempt suicide (Philips, 1990) Dungeons & Dragons would also be frequently accused of causing young men to commit violence, such as in the case of Daniel Dower, who killed himself and his foster father in 1985 (Enstad, 1985).

siblings and engaged in Satanic ritual abuse (Knafo, 2020). Quinney's son later recanted his testimony, saying that he was coerced by law enforcement and psychiatrists (Knafo, 2020). Quinney's daughter Sarah Parker set up a GoFundMe in November 2020 to help pay for a lawyer to exonerate her father, who, now in his seventies, was never taken off the sex offender list. Parker posted an update in February 2021 to say that the Innocence Project of Texas will be picking up Quinney's case ("Exonerating Melvin Quinney," 2021).

Most of my respondents said that they were aware of the Satanic Panic, but largely untouched by it:

Well, I was fortunate by having a very supportive mother who had seen the books, who had seen me play, and went, "She's using her imagination. She's writing. She's socializing with people," which was always something that she was worried about with me, "so I have no problem with it." But like I said, I did get a really good deal when the minister's son sold me all of his game books for a really reasonable price, because he had to get rid of them. Then a few years ago later, he bought them all again. I'm like, "Dude, that's so sad (Linda, 50, White).

You know, I was an adult by that time. I graduated college in '76, so we all thought it was hysterical. And I could never really understand how parents could really see it that way...I did have relatives who were very Catholic...to some extent, you just don't bring it up at family gatherings because it makes some people go a little wacky about it (Janet, 64, White).

For the most part, the tone in their responses were similar to mine; looking at media from this period on the Satanic Panic, I thought it was overwrought and funny. But Carolyn (48, White) let me know the very real damage that the Satanic Panic did, and how the image of the game as Satanic or evil *did* affect D&D's image and might have scared off adults who would otherwise be interested in TRPGs:

There was a huge amount of social capital that law enforcement and parent groups got out of saying there's this evil thing that's happening right under your nose in

your community, and if you don't root it out, it's going to be cats and dogs living together. It's easy to make fun of it now, but at the time, they were genuinely scared, but they were also very heavily invested in making other people scared. So, people were rightfully afraid of being accused of essentially witchcraft. So, you had a lot of people say you know, I'm a teacher, I work at a school, I can't play D&D, it would ruin me.

One argument as to why the Satanic Panic didn't affect many respondents was that they were either children whose parents were accepting of D&D, or they were adults in fields where their participation in fantasy roleplaying was a non-issue. Adults working with children appeared to be under the most scrutiny and were those who were most frequently accused of engaging in Satanic ritual abuse. In May 2018, Twitter user Dr. Jenn Jordan posted images of a document that her sister, an art teacher in Florida, found in her supply closet. It's dated February 4, 1989 and titled "Identification, Investigation and Understanding of Ritualistic Criminal Activity," presented by Robert "Semandi,"¹³ a detective in the Chicago Police Department (CPD), a "gang crimes and ritual abuse specialist" for the CPD (Smith, 2018) who traveled the US warning communities of cult activity (*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, 1987).

¹³ According to the Smith (2018), the name was misspelled in this document, and the correct spelling is Simandl.

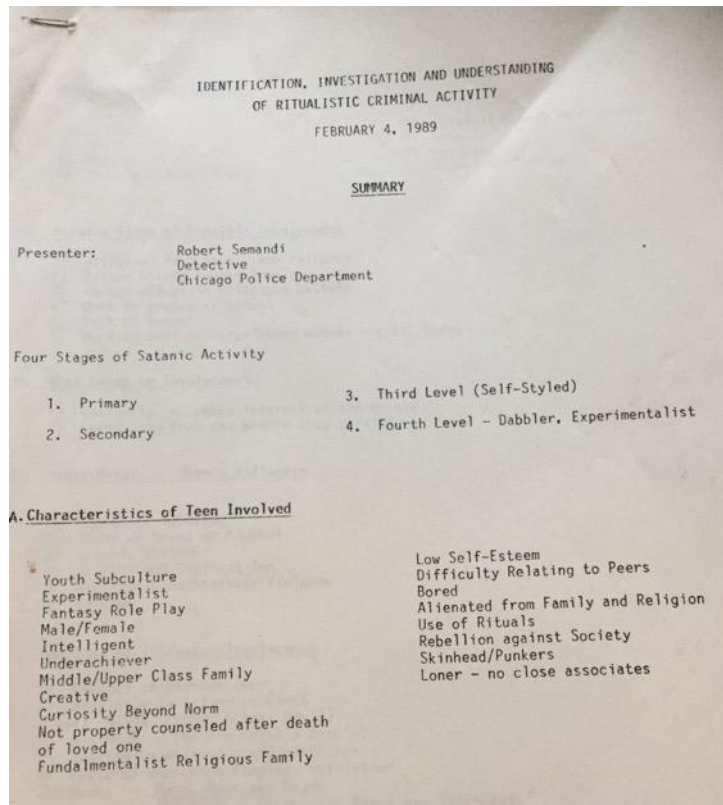


Figure 2-4: A document distributed to educators in 1989. Posted by @jennlynnjordan

Sparked by a small few, the most fervor came from Evangelical Christian media such as *The 700 Club*, but concern over occult behavior became mainstream when it was picked up by television shows such as *60 Minutes*.¹⁴ Anecdotally, my own parents, and many other baby boomer parents who had children in the 1980s and early 1990s, were very aware of the discourse around Dungeons & Dragons and Satanism, but the degree to which parents acted on that awareness varied. European respondents benefitted from a more generally secular upbringing, as Gwen (52) told me, the census in the UK shows “a gentle creep towards atheism.” Respondents whose parents played D&D with them or who were more familiar with the game, were likewise unbothered by their children’s

¹⁴ The *60 Minutes* special on *D&D* can be found here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yShqF1YSfDs>

involvement. Respondents who were not raised as Christian were also mostly unaffected by the Satanic Panic, though Isabel (43, Jewish/White) said that because she came from a religiously conservative background, others who experienced the Satanic Panic felt they could confide in her:

...I would talk to people about my experiences being a gamer from an Orthodox Jewish community, and they'd be like, oh, so your parents thought you were something Satan. And I was like, we don't really know. We don't believe in that. We don't do that. But I kind of got it from the cultural conversation once I got to college...I think people who have come from these more conservative backgrounds and who did have that experience firsthand with Satanic Panic have often felt like they have someone they can confide in and talk to about it, because even though it's not my world, there are some similarities and growing up in an insular community, right?

Even respondents who were practicing Christians felt that much of the hubbub surrounding D&D and Satanism a failure to understand the basic premise of D&D, which was entrenched in traditional fantasy tropes and storylines about good and evil. Anna (48, White), a practicing Catholic, spoke about D&D as it relates to her faith:

I still see this as not offensive to my faith at all. This is all make believe. You know, in the game, there's certainly evil gods and goddesses or whatever and there's demons and devils and all the different planes of this, that, the other thing. There's so many different levels of evil. But that actually is reality. We're in Earth, which is run by Satan. You know, Catholics believe that. Catholics believe that this world that we live in is run by Satan. And our life is the afterlife when we

get to heaven with Christ. But here, there's an evil influence. And you open the newspaper any day of the week, and there's evil perpetuated day in and day out...And to some extent, a parent whose child killed himself and he happened to be playing Dungeons & Dragons... if you don't have reality and balance with fantasy, that's not the game's fault. That's like, saying somebody killed themselves with a gun, so let's blame it on the gun, you know? There's other underlying factors like lack of upbringing.

As Anna's remark shows, respondents who considered themselves Christian did not have a problem reconciling tabletop roleplaying with their faith. If D&D is still going strong, why does the 1980s Satanic Panic matter, and what does it have to do with gender in tabletop roleplaying? Even though the Satanic Panic was a blip in roleplaying history, it cemented the image of the tabletop roleplayer as White, male, and a social outcast for a very long time.

Moral Panics and Gender

The political context that fueled the flames of the 1980s Satanic Panic was Ronald Reagan's election in 1981, which spurred a bigger platform for the evangelical Christian Right. Reagan's presence in office lent legitimacy to popular religious media, such as *The 700 Club*. It also allowed for evangelical Christian rhetoric to filter into mainstream media and for concerns about "demonic" media to be molded and taken seriously by secular media outlets by connecting media with teen suicide and the image of the troubled and vulnerable adolescent.

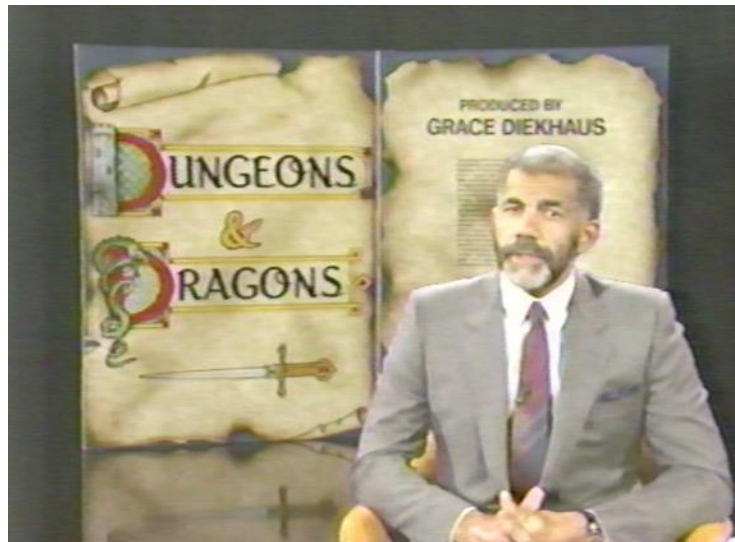


Figure 2-5: Still from 60 Minutes special on Dungeons & Dragons and its possible connection to teen suicide, aired on September 15, 1985. Posted by @DinosaurDracula

In Ronald Reagan’s (1983) “Evil Empire” speech, given to an audience of The National Association of Evangelicals, Reagan sets up a dichotomy between Christians and those Americans who have “turned to a modern-day secularism.” This secularism, Reagan argued, led to the crumbling of “traditional values,” an uptick in abortion, prescribing birth control to girls without their parents’ consent, and the abuse or death of disabled children. Secularism and those who display the influence of secularism are framed as what Cohen (2011) calls a “folk devil,” or a “a visible reminder of what we should not be” (p. 2). The girls in Reagan’s speech have a moral failing and access to birth control encourages “promiscuous” behavior, a word that Reagan uses to thumb his nose at the more recent and less judgmental term, “sexually active.” Later, Reagan tells an anecdote about a “prominent young man” giving a speech in California:

And suddenly, though, I heard him saying, “I love my little girls more than anything —” And I said to myself, “Oh, no, don’t. You can’t — don’t say that.”

But I had underestimated him. He went on: “I would rather see my little girls die

now, still believing in God, than have them grow up under communism and one day die no longer believing in God.”

The young girl-as-victim returns, but unlike the boy and D&D, the language is more about protecting the girl’s soul or morality than her body or mind. In fact, boys are not mentioned in this speech except in the gender-neutral invocation of “children” and “infants.” There is no acknowledgment of a young man’s role in an “illegitimate” child or in his participation in sexual activity. The speech ties together the struggle between good and evil with American nationalism during the Cold War. It’s an inspiring document for a moral panic, where abortion and sexually active girls is a mere pinhole in the fabric of American society, but one sign of a slippery slope to immoral behavior and communism.

Secularism – and a related notion – hedonism – “figures prominently...in common-sense explanations of the growth of consumerism” (Seiter, 1993, p. 39). Adults “may emulate bourgeois norms,” and the fear of hedonism – or the uncontrollable desire to consume, causes them to stigmatize children’s desires. Meanwhile, “adults are blind to their own use of consumption for ‘status purposes’ (Seiter, 1993, pp. 38-39). Thus, a fear of secularism/hedonism, individualism, and the perceived crumbling of the nuclear family structure led to moral panic that entangle children’s consumption of toys and media with behaviors that deviate from expected middle class norms.

Whiteness is also an unspoken factor in the rhetoric of moral panic. Race isn’t mentioned in Reagan’s speech or in most media coverage of the Satanic Panic, but it appears to be the de facto requirement for victims. One source that does mention race directly is BADD pamphlet which lists the names of suicide victims whose deaths were attributed to playing D&D which states, “all were White males between the ages of 12 to

18” (Pulling et al., n.d., p. 1). In BADD’s estimation, the stranglehold of D&D over its victims was quite narrow. The audience for BADD’s anti-D&D screed were White suburban authority figures who would have an impact on young, White suburban boys – the group who was apparently the most susceptible to Satanic media messages.

When it came to the Satanic Panic over D&D, girls were largely absent from the conversation. The *victims* of Satanic media were mostly White boys and men. To

SUICIDES		
The below listed victims of suicide have one common denominator: ALL WERE HEAVILY INVOLVED IN DUNGEON AND DRAGONS ; ALL DEATHS INVOLVED WEAPONS; SAVE ONE; THREE DIED ON THE FULL MOON; ALL WERE WHITE MALES BETWEEN THE AGES OF 12 to 18 , THREE WERE HONOR OR GIFTED STUDENTS.		
JAMES D. EGBERT III HOME STATE - MICHIGAN	W/M 16	Died 8/11/1980
MICHAEL P. DEMPSEY HOME STATE - WASHINGTON	W/M 16	Died 5/12/81
IRVING LEE PULLING III HOME STATE - VIRGINIA	W/M 16	Died 6/9/82
HAROLD T. COLLINS OHIO	W/M 18	Died 4/29/83
DANIEL E. ERWIN COLORADO	W/M 16	Died 11/2/84
STEPHEN R. ERWIN COLORADO	W/M 12	Died 11/2/84
THE DEATHS ABOVE DO NOT REFLECT ALL SUICIDES , DEATHS AND ATTEMPTED SUICIDES DUE TO DUNGEON AND DRAGONS		
1		

Figure 2-6: Page from BADD pamphlet on D&D

examine how the rhetoric of moral panic got applied to Dungeons & Dragons and how it helped to reinforce a stereotype of the White male outsider, I turn to Stanley Cohen’s (1972/2011) book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, in which the author lays out the tenets of a moral panic. According to Cohen, three things are necessary for a successful moral panic:

- 1) “A suitable enemy: a soft target, easily denounced, with little power and preferably without even access to the battlefields of cultural politics.”
- 2) “A suitable victim: someone with whom you can identify, someone who could have been and one day could be anybody.”
- 3) “A consensus that the beliefs or action being denounced were not insulated entities (‘it’s not only this’) but integral parts of the society or else could (and would) be unless ‘something was done’” (p. xii).

When it came a suitable enemy, Dungeons & Dragons was not a difficult target. Although TSR was labeled one of 1983’s “fastest-growing companies,” it constantly suffered from mismanagement and overspending (Witwer, 2015, p. 251). Gary Gygax may have been a visionary, but he was not a good businessman. He dreamed big and had a tough time letting others control his intellectual property. During the media frenzy over Satanism in Dungeons & Dragons, Gygax’s PR was lacking. When he appeared on *60 Minutes* in 1985 to defend D&D, Gygax doesn’t appear likeable. He scoffs at the accusations of Satanism and appears insensitive to parents of children who have committed suicide. Host Ed Bradley asks, “Even though your intentions weren’t bad, don’t you think that you have to rethink these connections?” Gygax chuckles and answers, “Perhaps for those people who are looking for any other cause than their failure as a parent for their child’s death” (Dungeonmaster Mark, 2015). Bradley’s question echoed parents like Patricia Pulling who saw playing D&D as a catalyst for into dangerous behavior, turning away from Christianity, and at its worst, suicide. Gygax’s response, however, references that D&D’s role in the moral panic “has been exaggerated...in itself (compared with other, more reliable, valid, and objective sources)

and/or...compared with other, more serious problems” (Cohen, 2011, p. vii). Notably unmentioned from the *60 Minutes* debate over D&D is the state’s lack of intervention in matters of gun control and safety or in addressing mental healthcare for adolescents.

Cohen’s requirement for a suitable victim is “someone with whom you can identify, someone who could have been and one day could be anybody” (p. xi). Children are the typical victims in a moral panic because the ostensible call of a moral panic is to protect those who cannot protect themselves. In the moral panic over roleplaying games, the victim is young, usually a boy, and always White. “Victim” usually indicated someone who committed suicide, although in cases of the young person committing violence against others, such as in the case of Daniel Dower, a teenager who murdered his foster father in 1985, the framing of victimization is more complicated (Enstad, 1985). A boy could be framed as the *victim* of media, even if he was the perpetrator of a violent crime. Dower was described in the *Chicago Tribune* as spending “most of his spare moments playing the fantasy game Dungeons & Dragons” (Enstad, 1985). D&D, along with other types of entertainment media, were blamed for brainwashing, infiltrating young minds, and forcing them to do things they may not have otherwise done.

Boys who were the victims of the Satanic panic were described as already being on the fringes: Though they were always described as “bright,” they were also “disturbed” and vulnerable to suggestion (Isikoff, 1983). In the *60 Minutes* special on D&D, host Ed Bradley says that D&D is played by “highly imaginative and intelligent kids.” A BADD pamphlet even suggested that playing D&D would awaken “latent schizophrenics” (Pulling, Dempsey, & Dempsey, n.d.). Gifted and brilliant, these boys “could have been and one day could be anybody” (Cohen, 2011, p. xii). The language

used to describe boys who were influenced by Satanic material in media emphasizes the lost promise of its young, White victims.

Though all the victims of the Satanic Panic at this time appeared to be young men, the *concern* over playing *D&D* appeared to be expressed by protective elders, especially mothers. Most of my respondents said that the Satanic Panic did not affect them much – never to the point that they had to hide their involvement from their parents or guardians. I propose that this is the result of boys as the assumed audience for *D&D* as well as other media that involved combat or violence of any kind. I argue that in the case of “dangerous” media, the removal of girls from gaming influence is an erasure of their agency. In this figuring, vulnerable young men will see violence and then commit it against themselves or others. The same doesn’t appear to apply or be assumed about girls, either because they aren’t the intended audience for violent media or because, they have almost always been depicted as victims without agency. Things are done *to* girls unless men protect them, especially within traditional fantasy tropes.

Chapter 3 : Girl Games, The World Wide Web, and Media Violence (~1990-2009)

So roleplaying is always very interesting to me. Not just as a player, but I think also just as looking at social science, I suppose...It provides a relatively safe structure for identity formation and gender formation, especially in the ways that that happens on anonymous forums like the internet (M, 34, Mexican/Japanese/Osage)

Especially in the early metal years here, it was the advantage that it was very much a unisex look, because it was us against the world. It wasn't popular enough that it attracted hang arounds in the same way. It changed... Late '90s changed a lot. Suddenly it would have lots of girl metal T-shirts, and they have never really been a thing before (Maria, 46, Caucasian).

Yeah, it's...you know, you worry about video games and violent video games now more. I worried about that more than I ever did about my kids playing fantasy games. Maybe because I'd seen that side of it, and I didn't really grow up around video games because they didn't exist (Janet, 64, White).

In 1997, I was fifteen and my family had just gotten AOL, downloaded from one of the dozens of CD-ROMs that appeared in the mailbox monthly. My first experience with roleplaying wasn't D&D around a table; it was in AOL chatrooms. Even though I lived through it, it's difficult for me to conceptualize what is special about the 1990s and 2000s when it comes to tabletop roleplaying games. Perhaps the feeling that it was a lost generation is fitting for Gen Xers and early Millennials. It's a period irrevocably changed and defined by September 11, 2001 and its aftermath. The image of the suburban high school as safe haven was shattered by the mass shooting at Columbine High School in 1999. Our parents and authority figures worried about our media use – how much and whether the increasingly graphic violence displayed in films and video games would make teen consumers prone to committing violence themselves.

We adopted internet and mobile phones as teenagers and young adults but weren't "digital natives." For about three years in high school, I logged onto AOL daily,

listening to the eeeee—oooooo of the dial-up modem, and played chat-based roleplaying games. I didn't know anything about Dungeons & Dragons and had never played a tabletop roleplaying game. Like most of existed as internet from the 1990s and early 2000s, I don't have any evidence of my participation in chat culture. I had never thought to print out my chats or save them at all. Even if I had saved them, the format I would have saved them on is now obsolete. Historical materials are often scanned and digitized so that scholars can access them more easily and to protect deteriorating physical copies, but it wasn't until the mid to late 1990s that anyone had thought to archive digital histories.

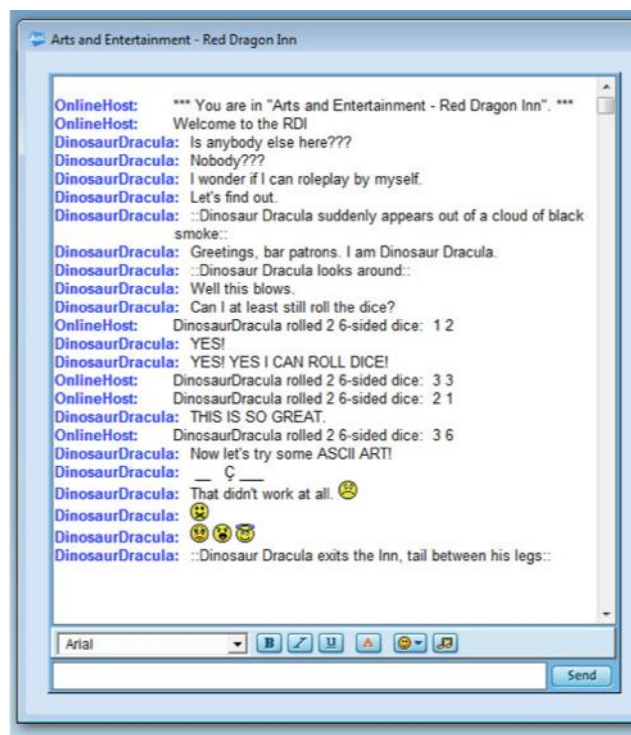


Figure 3-1: 2013 screenshot of the empty roleplaying chatroom Red Dragon Inn. From <https://dinosaurdracula.com/blog/old-internet-junk>

In 1996, the non-profit Internet Archive was founded, but there is little of pre-2010 internet culture captured therein. This is true of pre-2010 fan culture as well, especially if

it was only available on Internet 1.0. Archiving fan-generated material or digital ephemera was previously only the work of fans. One of the best archivists of early Internet gaming and entertainment is game designer Anna Anthropy, the archivist for annarchive.com. The site contains scanned physical copies of *Dragon* magazine from its very first editions to early computer games run on MS-DOS, and even *The Joy of Cybersex*, a 1993 “underground guide to electronic erotica.” Perhaps the 1990s and Internet 1.0 feels so inescapably quirky and ephemeral because its record lives primarily in the lives of people who lived it and those who [re]live it through nostalgic media.

A Generation in Transition: Roleplayers, 1990-2009

Nine of my respondents pinpoint their start in tabletop roleplaying games in the 1990s or 2000s. Unlike my previous section, I have chosen not to separate out these two decades of respondents because their number was much smaller. When I interviewed these players in 2020 or 2021, they were all in their thirties and forties, the youngest being 33 and the oldest being 48 with an average age of 34.9. Most players said that they had started playing tabletop roleplaying games in middle school or high school, with two exceptions. TK (33, Biracial, Black/White) told me that they had been playing their “whole life,” since their parents played Dungeons & Dragons and taught TK to read using the *Monster Manual*. Another, Betty (48, White) had started playing in 2006 at the age of 34.

Although smaller, this group was also more diverse than previous respondent cohort. Four players identified as White/Caucasian, one player as Asian-American (Korean), one as Hispanic, and two as multiracial (Black/White and Mexican/Japanese/Osage). Seven respondents identified as female, one as nonbinary, and

one as agender. Six respondents have attained a bachelor's degree, one reported completing some college, one a master's degree, and one a doctorate. Five reported having no religion (one answered "none/spiritual"), two reported being Christian, one as Animist, and one as Kitchen Witch. Six respondents identified as straight or heterosexual, two as bisexual, and one as pansexual.

This group was a mix of respondents I had found through Twitter and personal contacts; many of them participated in the TRPG industry as employees of a major games publisher or as freelance writers. There was also a notable jump in respondents who said that their interest in tabletop gaming followed their interest in video games, computer games, and/or online gaming. Unlike previous generations, who had primarily discovered TRPGs through friends or family, those starting in the 1990s and later sometimes discovered D&D by chance or through related interests in digital games. Lynsey (38, White) had discovered D&D at a hobby shop, picking up an "old beat-up book" without knowing what it was. Another respondent, M (34, Mexican/Japanese/Osage) started their online text-based roleplaying in the early '90s. As M's father was military, the family had early forms of internet access, so M would roleplay and create "free form stories" in online bulletin boards. Kora (33, Hispanic/White) cited the massive multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG) *Guild Wars* as her gateway into roleplaying games.

Tales of loneliness or alienation permeated some interviews with the older Millennial/young Gen Xer group, where discovering roleplaying and a group of people to play with you was a crucial moment of social connection. Megan (40, White), said that because she was bullied as a child, she transferred from a public school to a small private school, where she made a close knit group of friends who introduced her to D&D.

Growing up, M lived in rural Kentucky and was far from any urban center or hobby shop; online internet access allowed them to connect with others. Likewise, TK grew up in a small Kentucky town, where their family was one of the few interracial families, so there “weren’t a lot of people willing to be [their] friend.” For Lynsey, transitioning from middle school to high school was a moment where she felt abandoned by her group of friends. She threw herself into performative activities like theater and competitive speech and began to connect with others who shared an interest in gaming and geeky media.

Although the height of the Satanic Panic ended in the early 1990s, its aftershocks continued for some time, popping up occasionally. A notable example is the Christian Right’s response to the depiction of witchcraft in the *Harry Potter* series (Soulliere, 2010). One of my respondents, TK (33, Black/White), talked about experiencing a resurgence of moral panic in the small town where they grew up when local Rod Ferrell, who led a “vampire cult,” killed two people in Eustis, Florida in 1996 (Baker, 1998). TK was only 9 years old at the time of the murders, but had learned to read from D&D books because their parents played roleplaying games. After news of the murders broke,

Everybody was like...it was *Vampire: The Masquerade* that made them do that. But nobody really knew what *Vampire: The Masquerade* was, where I was from. So, they were like, Dungeons & Dragons. It was definitely Dungeons & Dragons that did it. And then a bunch of like Chick tracts got sent out and stuff.

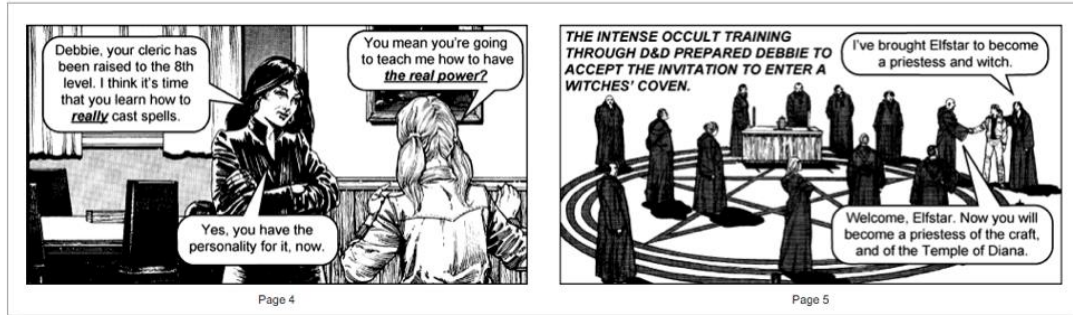


Figure 3-2: A panel from “Dark Dungeons” (1981), a religious, anti-D&D tract by Jack Chick

Further reflecting on the impression that this moral panic left on them, TK felt that there was an intersection of religious fervor and racism at play:

I played with my family until about middle school and high school. And then I didn't play Dungeons & Dragons with anyone, because pretty much everyone was very like, *ooh*. And of course, there's a sort of intersectional issue there, where we lived in a rather racist town, and my family was one of few interracial families. So, there weren't a lot of people who were willing to be my friend. So, we already had issues with that. So, it wasn't until, really, after college that I was able to find other adults to play with, for which those were not big hang-ups.

TK felt that the moral panic over D&D hinged on parents not wanting to understand or take responsibility for their children. Instead of “taking ownership of a situation...you're going to blame a thing you can't actually control,” TK said. Eventually, it came to light that allegations of Satanic ritual abuse could not be corroborated (Schreiber et al., 2006), but there was another media panic to take its place, and this one centered on violence in media and a suspicion of the Internet's influence.

Internet 1.0 made it possible and appealing for users to be anonymous; identity play and deception was common (Monro, 2005). It was a brave new world for communication

and socialization. Home Internet access gave rise to a new term – digital divide – which created indicated a gap between generations as well as economic class in accessing and using the Internet. This chapter and the next one will touch on how digitalization affected the conceptualization and expression of gender and how toxic nostalgia played a role in media panic.

Gender, 1990s and Beyond

In 1990, Judith Butler published *Gender Trouble*, a fundamental work in thinking about gender for third-wave feminists and beyond, arguing that gender is performative rather than an innate set of characteristics based on biological sex. According to Butler (1990):

If a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity (p. 186).

It is apt that Butler’s book was published at the beginning of a decade that would be in part characterized by the growing adoption of Internet and a fascination with how digital behavior and identities—in other words, the roles that people played online—diverged and converged with “real life.” Post-Butler, the concept of gender as a “spectrum” became common parlance, at least in academic texts. The primary use of the term *spectrum* was in relation to gender expression – how masculine or feminine one’s gender performance was – and it also reinforced that gender expression wasn’t synonymous with biological sex.

While earlier feminism had focused its sights on dismantling patriarchal institutions, third-wave feminism posited that the individual woman had a right to *choose*

her career – or to be a housewife, be single, or be childfree. Whatever choices a woman made, she should have that *right to choose*. Snyder-Hall (2010) argues that while third wave rhetoric on choice is “sometimes caricatured as uncritically endorsing whatever a woman chooses to do as feminist...third-wave feminism actually exhibits not a thoughtless endorsement of “choice,” but rather a deep respect for pluralism and self-determination” (p. 255). Snyder-Hall also states that the term *choice* simplifies and obscures “the ways in which women’s choices are often overdetermined by societal structures and cultural traditions” (p. 256). Choices are constrained and directed by economic class and its intersections with race, gender identity, and sexuality. Thus, acknowledging that gender was a spectrum was still limited in practice.

Individuals who didn’t conform to heterosexuality or hegemonic masculinity or femininity in their gender expression were still prone to discrimination, harassment, and a lack of legal protections. In 1993, the Clinton Administration instituted the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy, wherein *closeted* LGBT individuals could serve in the armed forces without penalty – so long as they never disclosed their identity. At the same time, organizations such as PFLAG and The Human Rights Campaign, added gender identity to their categories of inclusion in 1998 (Devor, 2002). The representation of gays and lesbians on television was steadily growing, but there were still few TV shows with gay characters in lead roles on prime time, excepting *Will & Grace* (1998-2006). For the most part transgenderism was treated as a joke in sitcoms, where men would make fun of each other and live in fear of being accused of engaging in any behavior that appeared too feminine. Homosexuality and bisexuality, though they got some screen time, were

frequently used as punchlines to emasculate men, frame lesbianism as male erotic fantasy, and reinforce heteronormativity.

Gender and sexuality may have been a spectrum in the 1990s, but it only had two poles: Man or Woman; Gay or Straight. An individual could exist anywhere on that line, but the gender binary still existed in the sense that popular discourse on gender identity was limited by existing representations. In the realm of hobbies, there was a greater awareness that girls wanted to be involved with hobbies traditionally marketed to boys like computer games and comic books.

Seeing dollar signs in a market that they had previously overlooked, companies shifted into full gear to create products *for girls*. Rather than to address ways in which certain products were aggressively marketed to boys, new products were created and aggressively marketed to girls. *Barbie*, a longstanding name in girls' toys was used in comics and video games to try and create a market for girls in industries that were heretofore marketed to boys. For example, Marvel Comics released the comic book *Barbie* in 1991. The same year, Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) released its *Barbie* video game. Nancie S. Martin, the director of Mattel's Girls' software development from 1995-1998, said that early Barbie games were "boys' games made pink" (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998, p. 138). Products designed and marketed to girls tended to employ bright colors, especially pink, and center around domestic activities, such as cooking and childcare or self-improvement and consumerist activities such as fashion, makeup, and shopping.



Figure 3-3: A newspaper announcement about Barbie comic book. Los Angeles Times, January 1991.

Transmedia marketing initiatives appealed to both parents and children. Martin said that a big part of promoting Barbie video games was reaching parents who wanted their children to gain computer literacy without playing violent video games. There was a push to reach fathers, because “parents not only are the gatekeepers of software but also men are the people who go into the software stores more” (Cassell & Jenkins, p. 143). Cross-promotion is visible in *Barbie’s* first issue, where ads for comics, trading cards, and video games sit alongside Barbie’s adventures in fashion.



Figure 3-4: A spread from the first issue of Barbie in 1991.

Cassell (1998) noted that many computer games for girls involved narrative, but argued that such narratives were not sufficient for children because they relied on gendered stereotypes:

First of all, many of the games for girls have been designed to exclude or turn off boys (and hence girls who do not fit stereotypical notions of girlhood?). Second, these narratives are not about the child's own self, nor are they flexibly designed to allow a range of gendered constructions. Some, such as 'American Girls,' are designed simply to tell a traditional story of 'girlhood' to an all-too-familiar type of ideal 'girl' audience (p. 301).

It is no wonder then, that the respondents in my study would often describe themselves as "one of the guys," and mentioned that they had always had lots of male

friends or framed their interest in *D&D* as one of several interests in other hobbies like science fiction and computer science. Those who started playing the in the 1970s and 1980s said they noticed the shift towards actively gendering games. Carolyn (48, White) told me that

In the '70s and early '80s, marketing execs figured out that they could sell the same thing twice if they strongly gendered it. And I think that happened to video games super strongly, and it happened to roleplaying games super strongly.

Except in the case of roleplaying games, they forgot there was a female market.

So, everything started getting marketed exclusively to guys.

This created a problem for Dungeons & Dragons as the demographics of players became noticeably more diverse. Carolyn added:

So, there was this idea that the biggest demographic was young, White men in their twenties and thirties, and when that stopped being true, the people who were writing *D&D* and other RPGs started flailing and going, oh god, what do we do? We've alienated all these people and now we got to get them to buy our product.

Jean (46, White) mused on the changing marketing for toys and how at the time our interview in 2018, she felt that things had gotten better in terms of advertising in roleplaying games:

I'm sure you looked at the advertisements for the game. They showed girls playing the game, which is the absolute truth. Girls are playing the game. Then of course they come up with a bullshit that girls don't play the game. Well, no, they do play the game, thank you very much. It degenerated for a while; girls started being pushed toward being extra girly bullshit.

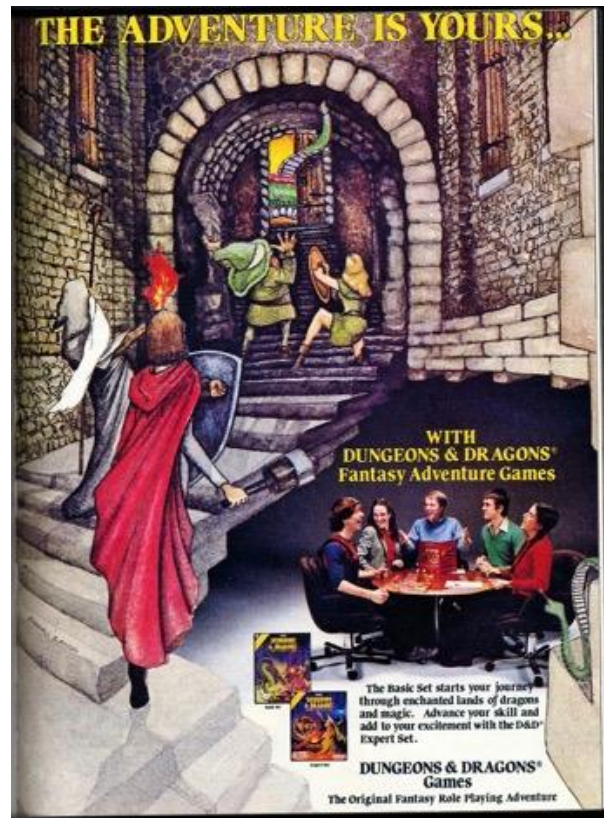


Figure 3-5: A D&D Advertisement from 1982. *Art & Arcana: A Visual History* (Witwer et al, 2018, p. 145)

My respondents' comments reflect that companies were concerned with creating and selling more products by creating new products *for girls* that were in the same category but still relied on gender stereotyping for their narratives. Games for girls, as Cassell (1998) astutely pointed out, cashed in on a specific type of girlhood and excluded girls whose interests didn't align with social norms. Advertisements aimed at middle class parents' desires for toys to prepare children for social advancement "place[d] children in a social tableau," reinforcing racial, gender, and class differences (Seiter, 1993, pp. 54-55). According to Seiter (1993), race and gender is "both prominent and invisible" in media produced for children, where White boys are typically protagonists with girls and children of color relegated to the sidelines as tokens (pp. 134-135).

The shift to “girl games” in the 1990s was an attempt to merge gendered training—preparing girls for their assumed eventual status as wives and mothers—with the notion of the girl as a consumer-in-training. If the 1960s *Easy Bake Oven* was primarily about socializing girls to become homemakers, girlifying video games was about training girls to be independent consumers by appealing to girls’ assumed preferences for leisure activities that were separate from domestic responsibilities. Philosophically, girl games align more with third wave and postfeminist thought, where women were articulated as individuals who had independent interests and presumably, some leisure time (Stalp, 2015). A key tenet of postfeminism, as characterized by Gill (2007) is a “focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment” (p. 147), but such choice and empowerment rests on purchasing power and the ability to please oneself through shaping their bodies and selves to a standardized notion of femininity.

Researchers and educators were concerned that if girls didn’t get involved with computer games, that they would lag behind boys in spatial awareness, hand-eye coordination, and problem-solving (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). Yet girl games were not usually designed to practice these skills and were instead reinforcing girls’ “private sphere of appearance” (Brelis, 1999). This private/public distinction was a concern for feminists in the 1990s and 2000s as well, who were dismayed by the number of women who stopped working outside of the home in order to take care of children under the guise of *choice*, especially because it was a choice that most fathers did not make. Hirshman (2006) argued that when women opted out of the public labor force, they were also opting out of the public sphere. Toys and games directed to girls that focused on the

private sphere of childrearing and domesticity might have had the effect of normalizing the choice for women (but not men) to opt out of the workforce as natural and expected.

In the 1990s, children grew as a market for advertisers, as did scholarly research into children's "consumer socialization," through which "children develop the knowledge, skills, and values they will use in making and influencing purchases now and in the future" (John, 1999, p. 207). Toys and games for girls expanded beyond dolls and kitchen sets to include games. But the so-called games for girls often presented similar narratives of past toys packaged in game form. The 1990s and 2000s market for children was based on the idea that though girls and boys might enjoy games, they would not play the same types of games. In general, games for boys were centered on strategy, problem-solving, and adventure or battle. Games for girls were centered on dressing up, fashion, makeup, and shopping. Though gender was now figured as a spectrum and a performance in feminist thought, there was nonetheless still a rigid gender binary in place when it came to the marketing of children's toys.

Any parent knows that children that don't always play with toys in the ways that adults design them. I bought my toddler some giant beads to string on shoelaces, but she proceeded put the beads into plastic cups and shook them around like ice cubes, offering drinks to her grandparents. Olive (48, Caucasian) had a similar revelation about her son and his use of toys from when he was younger:

He plays dolls with Legos. He plays with Legos like I play[ed] with Barbies. He doesn't build with them. He'll make a basic structure like an outline of a house and then he'll take two people and he'll just have them talk to...each other. I remember being so shocked and thinking, this is where we get gender wrong. We

think boys play with Legos and girls play with Barbies, but they're just all playing dolls.

Both children and adults transform entertainment media to suit their needs and desires. Olive added that when D&D was originally released, it was marketed as a strategic war game, but that people “forget that D&D is also a theater improv game. It’s also a storytelling game” and newer editions emphasizing the roleplaying aspect broadened its intended audience.

As the original audience for D&D entered their thirties and forties, publisher Wizards of the Coast was interested in reaching out to more women roleplayers. One such example is Shelly Mazzanoble’s (2007) book *Confessions of a Part-Time Sorceress: A Girl’s Guide to the D&D Game* published by Wizards of the Coast. Mazzanoble’s book is different than other semi-autobiographical books on D&D I had read. It was written *by* a woman *for* women, and Mazzanoble was a new player, not someone who was looking back and reviving a childhood experience. She started playing D&D in her thirties while working for Wizards of the Coast. The book has a distinctly *Sex and the City* flavor, bright pink and full of cheeky asides. *Confessions* was not a D&D manual, but a book that demonstrated, through Mazzanoble’s own experiences, that D&D *could* be a game for girls and women – including those who liked painting their nails.

Rogue: Who hasn't encountered a rogue or two? Cunning little bastards—sorry. Wrong book. The rogue is the guy in high school who chalked IDs and turned fifteen-year-old babysitters into twenty-eight-year-old baby mamas. The rogue picks a lock with his Amex card and

HEAD OF THE CLASS

If opposites aren't attracting you or you're torn between two classes, take the following quiz to determine which class best suits you.

1. You've won a dream vacation. Your bags are packed for:
 - A. A desert spa get-away for some serious pampering
 - B. A twelve-day trek through the Andes mountains
 - C. Destination unknown, you'll know when you get there
 - D. Boot camp
2. Your best friend just got dumped. You:
 - A. Tell her she's beautiful and smart and much better without the lowlife scumbag and give her enough margaritas until she believes you
 - B. Take the strand of hair and old shoelace you stole from his car and plant it along with an eye of newt in a hole in your backyard
 - C. Wait for him to leave for work and peg him with multicolored spit wads
 - D. Kick his ass
3. Your most expensive splurge was:
 - A. A pair of Manolo Blahniks
 - B. A kayak
 - C. Night vision goggles and a nanny cam
 - D. A sensei
4. In social situations you:
 - A. Mix and a' mingle
 - B. Show slides of your latest adventure
 - C. Pick pockets
 - D. Are often asked to not come back. Ever.

continued on next page

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uses his charm to avoid paying late fees. He's the kid who followed you to school making fart noises, told everyone you slept with a teddy bear and a nightlight, and copied your math homework. You probably had a crush on him.

5. Alcohol gives you:
 - A. Beer muscles
 - B. A handy disinfectant
 - C. Easy prey
 - D. A reason to get up in the morning
6. If forced to help out your community, you would:
 - A. Tutor kids after school
 - B. Pick up litter
 - C. Move
 - D. Teach self-defense classes
7. If a fight broke out next to you, you would:
 - A. Get the hell out of the way. The sight of blood makes you queasy, especially the sight of blood on your new shoes.
 - B. Get your first-aid kit from the car and wait on the sidelines for the loser
 - C. Be at the center of it
 - D. Have thrown the first punch

RESULTS

Mostly A's: If you answered mostly A's you should start your D&D life as a sorcerer or a cleric. If you answered A to question seven, you're probably inclined toward the sorcerer persuasion. B would lean toward a cleric.

Mostly B's: If you answered mostly B's, you and Chuck Norris are what fine rangers are made of.

Mostly C's: Mostly C's sees you as a rogue.

Mostly D's: Mostly D's would imply you've got some anger management issues. Oh, and you'd make a great fighter.

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Figure 3-6: A quiz in *Confessions of a Part-Time Sorceress* (Mazzanoble, 2007).

Mazzanoble talked to me about the response to her book when it came out in 2007:

When that book was announced, I wasn't prepared for how the community would respond to it. It was a much different community than the community that exists today. We did not publish products that had the word "girl" in them. We didn't have things that were for girls and actually Wizards wanted to call it...One guy in the publishing side wanted to call it *A Hip Girl's Guide*, and I was like no, it's not. That's not what it is. It's already a pretty narrow audience and now you've made it even more narrow and I don't want to be that girl.

She added that women D&D veteran players were also critical of the book:

I never claimed to be the first woman to discover *Dungeons & Dragons*, but there was a lot of negativity coming from those women as well. Kind of like, whoa, Whoa, Whoa. This is our turf. We've been here a long time. We don't need you coming in here and pinking the place up. A lot of those women, I think, have been playing with men for years and were probably the only women at the table and probably experienced a lot of discrimination and misogyny and sexism. I don't know this for a fact, but I know anecdotally, I think some of them did not portray themselves as feminine. They hid that side of them more because they wanted to fit in with the guys because they just want to play D&D. Then here I am out there literally doing the opposite. I wanted people to see such a stereotypical person that you would think is the opposite of a D&D person. I am all those things. I love TV and makeup and whatever.

Mazzanoble acknowledged that the book speaks to a particular audience, and a particular type of girl or woman. The purpose of *Confessions* was to make *D&D* approachable to women who had never played before, and it was written by someone who was a relatively new D&D player. Although "pinking" entertainment media and toys may be, at first, distasteful to feminists or longtime fans of a franchise, it may also reach an audience who had been excluded or made to think that they were not welcome within a fandom. Writing on computer games, Cassell and Jenkins (1998) pointed out that "it's exactly the girls who are attracted to pink and lavender, hairspray and nail polish, who need to be turned onto technology...the challenge is to reach girls who would have previously displayed little to no interest in technology" (p. 20). The unilateral dismissal of "feminine" media is

grounded in a distaste for women's aesthetic preferences toward character relations and emotional issues, and they are rooted in the assumption that nonprofessional women (whether they are housewives who read Harlequin romances or their daughters who buy Care Bears) are mindless and uncritical consumers of patriarchal culture (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998, p. 21).

Games and other entertainment media marketed to an imagined girl or woman excludes other imagined audiences. At the same time, intention in marketing does not always mean that unintended audiences will be repelled by the product. They may, instead, use a media object in ways not imagined by its producer – such as playing house with Legos or creating a sorcerer in D&D who spends her coin at the town spa getting a pedicure. Children and adults may also enjoy toys and media *in spite of* things that to authority figures and academia may be distasteful: Rigid gendering, sexism, and violence may be overlooked when the person finds other pleasures therein. A personal example is over about two decades, I have played and kicked ass in several versions of *Mortal Kombat*, a video game infamous for its graphic violence and sexualized costumes. Susie (41, Asian American) had also been an avid player of arcade fighting games and first-person shooters when she was younger. She talked about their appeal:

I think a part of it is the simplicity of it. It's very straight, right? You win or lose, the game is time limited, and it's not really the violence as much as it is the concept, or not the concept, but you know, it's kind of like you have these technical skills which really depend on your hands to beat the other opponent. And that's really what it was about. It wasn't really the kill scene or the, you know... And first-person shooters, the same thing, you know?

Mortal Kombat is a game without much narrative – it is not a roleplaying game. The critique of violence in video games lies on the assumption that what is experienced in a video game will transfer into the real world. It is this same fear of transference that influences the dislike of “feminine” media for middle class parents. If you don’t want your daughter to be a “mindless and uncritical consumer of patriarchal culture,” (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998, p. 21) keep her away from Barbies and other “pink” media. There are two things that this assumption erases: 1) The ability of audiences to be critical – even as they continue to derive pleasure from a media object and 2) That genre and form influences the extent to which audiences can mold media objects for their own use. As Shaw (2014) found, the extent to which gamers care about representation in gaming varied with different games. Players are usually more invested in identity and representation in games that have narrative and character development. Tabletop roleplaying games (and playing with Barbie dolls, for what it’s worth) contain such potential where a game like *Mortal Kombat* does not.

Most of my respondents talked about understand tabletop roleplaying as a tool. It helped them gain confidence, make friends, or explore identity. For some in the cohort of players who started to play in the 1990s and 2000s, the Internet was a space to play with identity and anonymity. The space of the early Internet felt like a roleplaying game: No one could verify where the player ended, and the character began. In the next section, I discuss the affordances that access to the Internet allowed gamers in this cohort to play with identity and how it influenced their roleplaying.

Anonymity in Online Gaming

The introduction of the internet and personal computer to private homes changed gaming for players in several ways. First, it meant that they could become involved and learn about roleplaying games without having to leave their homes. One of my respondents, M (34, Mexican/Japanese/Osage), grew up in a military family and lived in rural locales as a child. They played roleplaying games on BBS (Bulletin Board Service) forums, which reached the height of their popularity in the late 1980s and early 1990s, before dial-up internet service was widely available. Second, online text-based roleplaying offered anonymity for the player. The image of the D&D player as a White male nerd, or the image of D&D as a dangerous game for outcast loners mattered a little less in an online space, where users could interact with others who had the same interests. One's "real" identity need not be shared in an online text-based roleplaying game. For femme players at the time, adopting an online persona was, as M put it, a "safety mechanism":

I started getting interested in what I would later understand as roleplaying and character development, because the nature of being a relatively young, precocious child interacting on the internet with a lot of people who are much older than you and male, and it's a very particular society. I started, I guess, adopting persona just as a safety mechanism.

Many respondents spoke about online participation as a tenuous situation – offering a lot of opportunities for women, while at the same time, opening up women to online abuse. Jean (46, White) said:

In particular, the online game playing has allowed females a lot of anonymity to be able to play these things, which is just absolutely fantastic in that regard. At the

same time, it's also emboldened the guys to wag on the girls and say – no, you don't belong.

Jean and M's comments touch on the safety of anonymity and the online persona; the player feels shielded from the harassment they might face as a femme-presenting person offline. Jean also suggests that online play meant more girls were playing roleplaying games (sometimes anonymously), so that it appeared that fewer women were playing games. When women's identities were presented online, male players may have felt their space was being encroached upon.

Like M, Kora (33, Hispanic/White) started her roleplaying experience online, but her gateway to roleplaying was via Massive Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games (MMORPGs). When I asked how she got started playing roleplaying games, she excitedly described her first encounter with *Guild Wars*:

So, I think it was half hour before the computer store, Fry's, was going to close, I put on my shoes. I grabbed my car keys and I said, "I'll be right back, Mom. I got to go to the store." And I went out and I got my copy. And being able to create a character, customize exactly how I wanted them to be, how I wanted them to look, was different for me. In every other game that I've ever played to that point, I was told: You are this Purple Dragon. You are this White dude running around. You are Mickey Mouse. Or whatever it was, but it wasn't ever me. So, suddenly, having the ability to design a character that I could embody was just like mind-blowing.

Kora has been playing *Guild Wars* since 2005, but she didn't get into D&D for a while because she wasn't sure how to get started without a group. Not yet knowing how

to play, she worried about the “weird dudes in someone’s basement” and certainly didn’t consider herself to fit that image of the D&D player. She’d had some bad experiences online and felt that playing in person would make that experience worse. Anonymity online felt safer, but people made sometimes made assumptions about Kora as a player or character:

I knew this [Dungeons & Dragons] is going to happen in real life. The difference is, I don’t have the computer screen and potentially however many thousands of miles and the anonymity between us, they’ll be right there. I will literally be looking at them if they make a crude comment or belittle me in some way, because I am female, or make a crude comment about my character. The first time that happened when I was playing an online game. I was like, are you kidding me? What do you mean I have nice boobs? They are pixels. What are you talking about? Or to be doing really good in a game and not have introduced my gender...there was an instance I was doing great at a dungeon with some random person. I got invited to party up with him and his friends, and was proceeded to be introduced as a guy, because I was talented. So clearly, I had to be male. And realizing, I could correct him but it’s probably safer for me not to because I want to keep playing, and I don’t have the easiest time finding people online to play with. If they’re going to be willing to party with me, then this is the safest option for me to do right now.

Early internet gaming, while certainly not a utopia, offered players a relatively safe space to roleplay. This safety in anonymity was possible in part because internet users were less identifiable for the average user than they are today. Though trolling and

harassment occurred, it would take a resolute hacker to find someone's personal information unless they had willingly put it online. As I discuss in Chapters 4 and 5, the culture of online spaces has shifted dramatically. In his book *The Filter Bubble*, Pariser (2011) described that in the early days of the internet,

not exposing your identity was part of the appeal. In chat rooms and online forums, your gender, race, age, and location were whatever you said they were, and the denizens of these spaces exulted about the way the medium allowed you to shed your skin (p. 110).

Still, the unspoken letdown of this atmosphere was, what if a marginalized gamer *did* present their real identity, or at least a roleplaying identity that you valued and cared for? As Kora detailed above, she'd had a female character harassed – and though she hadn't at the time revealed her gender – was assumed to be male based on her presence as an avid and successful player of *Guild Wars*.

Although respondents lauded their early Internet experiences as a driving force for their interest in roleplaying games, news media from the 1990s and early 2000s paints a picture of concern for teens' use of the Web. Internet access – and how and what teens should be accessing would come into the conversation of media violence in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The notion that children and teens could search for anything – including, infamously, “how to build a bomb” – was a terrifying notion for parents (Bober, 1999). This fear appeared in headlines frequently after the mass shooting at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999.

Columbine High School Shooting

In 1999, following a mass shooting in Columbine High School in Columbine, Colorado, concern about youth violence and media's influence on violent behavior was at a fever pitch and a familiar folk devil reared its head. Instead of D&D and heavy metal, this new moral panic involved violent video games, internet access, and shock rock. This was the primary focus of an April 25, 1999 episode of "Meet the Press" featuring private interviews with Attorney Janet Reno and second lady Tipper Gore, as well as a separate panel discussion between Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman, author James Garbarino, former secretary of education William Bennett, and GOP Presidential candidate Pat Buchanan. As with the Satanic Panic in the 1980s, the two young shooters, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, were White and the violence happened in suburbia. On *Meet the Press*, author James Garbarino, author of *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them* (1999), points out that "inner city kids have been killing and getting killed for years and years for some of the same reasons, and now we're seeing that epidemic spread to the heartland of America." Though I don't think it's his intention, Garbarino's statement emphasizes that White suburban America sets the media agenda. Garbarino claims that the spread of violence to America's heartland is the result of "vulnerable boys...[who] exhibit a kind of spiritual emptiness," and feed a culture of rage and violence. Host Tim Russert doesn't mention spirituality or religion, but he presses all of his guests about the influence of the internet and violence in media – primarily violent films, video games, and shock rock (a la Marilyn Manson) on children.

When the tragedy of Columbine struck suburban America in 1999, parents, politicians, and media scrambled to respond to it and to find motives, just as they did to teen suicides in the 1980s. *Meet the Press*'s host Tim Russert was eager to ask questions

about violent media and the use of the internet, and even brings in some Marilyn Manson lyrics that appear to glorify school shootings. But the interviewees and panel don't always respond directly to Russert's prodding about media. Janet Reno and Tipper Gore, in their individual interviews, encouraged parents and authority figures to take more time to connect with children. Reno rejects notions that banning anything will work, while Gore considers the entertainment industry at least partially culpable for violence among children. Gore also adds that getting help for mental health problems should be destigmatized and that better access is needed, a conversation that was not happening during the 1980s Satanic Panic.

Conservatives Pat Buchanan and Bill Bennett spoke more directly to a Satanic Panic and echoed Reagan's "Evil Empire" speech when they blamed the violence in schools a cultural and moral failing to protect Christianity. Bill Bennett stated:

If these kids were walking around that school in black trench coats saying, "Hail Hitler," why didn't somebody pay attention? I guarantee you if little Cassie Bernall, the little girl who was asked "Do you believe in God?"—she said yes and then was blown away—if she and her friends had been walking through that school carrying Bibles and saying, you know, "Hail the prince of peace, king of kings!", they would have been hauled into the principal's office, so some questions need to be asked by the people on the ground.

Buchanan called the actions of the Columbine shooters "Satanic," and argued that the "fundamental problem" was the absence of Christianity in public school and therefore, the presence of Satan:

The fundamental problem is the poisoning of our culture, and secondly, that God and the 10 Commandments and Christian instruction and all moral teaching had been removed from these public schools, and into that vacuum has gone the law of Satan. I mean, as Bill mentioned, if you've got someone who looks at a little girl and asks her if she believes in God and then shoots her in the face, that is Satanic, and I think we gotta get some of this government out of the public schools and get God and the 10 Commandments and traditional moral instruction in.

Cassie Bernall was 17 at the time of her death, but both Buchanan and Bennett refer to her as a "little girl," reinforcing her image as a God-fearing innocent. Different reports at the time claimed that Harris and Klebold had asked victims if they believed in God before shooting them, and this led to some Christian Evangelicals holding up victims as Christian martyrs (Watson, 2002).

The boys of the Satanic Panic in the 1980s were framed as victims of a manipulative game. After Columbine, this victim/perpetrator dichotomy got murkier, but I would argue that in many cases of a young White mass shooter, the language of victimization was still present. Young white men were influenced by violent media; they were outsiders and loners. They were – diagnosed or not – suffering from a mental illness and hadn't gotten the help they needed. Lacking evidence of definitive motivation, young White murderers were framed as victims of a society where media violence appeared to be an inescapable element of their atmosphere.

Who *allowed them* to live in such a society? Both conservatives and liberals in the 1990s raised their eyebrows at the lack of parental oversight regarding children's media

consumption. As the assumed primary caretakers for children, mothers were implicated in criticism of the value of children's media or how much media children should consume. Seiter (1993) argued that "young children's consumption of television and mass-market goods must also be understood in the context of child care, as mothers' work" (p. 13). Without childcare, television and toys occupied children while mothers did housework and other familial administrative tasks. As more women entered the paid workforce, their responsibilities at home did not decline, so entertainment media assisted with childcare. As with moral panic over media violence, which arose only after teen suicide and violence was deemed an epidemic in the suburbs, "media and scholarly attention to the plight of the working mother only increased when large numbers of White, middle-class women found themselves working the double shift" (Seiter, 1993, p. 19-20). In the 1980s, some parents blamed teen suicides on media influence, but in the 1990s, the new moral panic placed more responsibility on the parent to monitor children's media consumption, and to know when to intervene.

Bill Bennett tells *Meet the Press* that "Professor Garbarino said earlier to me 'the costs of bad parenting today are much worse than they used to be.' You have got to get into your kid's life." The insinuation here is that being a "bad" parent is one who doesn't really know what their kids are doing or that they don't intervene before tragedy happens. The past is evoked to highlight how this moment in time is unique – that never before have parents had to worry so intensely about young people's behavior and media influence. Except that, of course, they had and did only a decade ago.

Toxic Nostalgia

Reflecting on the US government's role in regulating the entertainment industry, Senator Lieberman waxes nostalgic on *Meet the Press*: "This is not the America we grew up in. This is not the America we want our kids to grow up in." Lieberman's statement of "this is not the America we grew up in," said in slightly different language remains the banner cry of many politicians, including former president Trump, as a way to signal "the good old days," when White suburbia was supposedly free of violence. Literary theorist Svetlana Boym (2002) defined nostalgia as a longing for a homeland that never existed. The America invoked by Lieberman and by Trump is imaginary and whitewashed.

A cookie cutter image of America's past creates imagined and rigid demarcations between generations, where it appears that one generation is stuck in the "good old days" and the another demands rapid change. As Edgar and Johnson (2018) point out in their study of Black Lives Matter and #AllLivesMatter affiliates, misremembering history "has the effect of encouraging dichotomous thinking in the present and future" (p. 113). Lieberman is simultaneously correct and incorrect: It isn't the America he grew up in during the 1950s and 1960s. At the time, it *is* the same America, continuously engaged in international conflict, still with deep divisions in race, class, and gender. What does change is mostly technological and, without deep reflection, frighteningly new: The advancement of the internet, mobile phones, and more realistic special effects in movies and television. Changes in technology inevitably influence culture because they change landscapes of access and visibility. The notion that never before has there been a more dangerous or frightening moment for young people erases a history of violence against marginalized and vulnerable populations, including overlooking something that *did* happen during Lieberman's youth: The Vietnam War. Misremembering is connected to a

stubborn nostalgia, getting stuck on in a cultural treadmill that erases or smooths over the past without understanding how it is vitally connected to the present.

I am not the first person to touch on the concept of toxic nostalgia. It's been applied to labor management practices (Stewart, 2001), politics and national identity (Emba, 2017), and entertainment media (Hassler-Forest, 2020). I find the term toxic nostalgia useful in this project to indicate a general cultural phenomenon that is called upon during times of upheaval or difficulty. Toxic nostalgia is also used by fans to express displeasure with change (or even demands for change) to a beloved franchise. Because Dungeons & Dragons has existed for over four decades, there are several generations of players – each with their own ideas of what tabletop roleplaying should be. If you take social media's word for it, toxic nostalgia in fandom is commonly seen between generations of fans. However, it was not a common sentiment expressed by my respondents. They had adopted new editions, and while some lamented the shift of a small hobby to a large mainstream industry, they understood that TRPGs were changing to reflect a more diverse group of players.

Intergenerational fandom is possible as long as media objects are preserved and passed on – via physical copy (records, DVDs, etc.), syndication, and later, through digital access (YouTube, Netflix, etc.). For D&D, the physical objects of D&D books never went away and were boosted by later digital access. Younger generations started to play using digital tools either exclusively or to augment their offline play. They also came to roleplaying with the expectation that roleplaying games should allow for a multiplicity of identities and to be sensitive to real-world inequalities. Older players – whether they had kept playing for decades or returned after a long hiatus – reflected on

changes to roleplaying games, finding both points of positivity and of resistance. Some of the differences between the ways that generations of players understand roleplaying games can be understood as differing expectations. For players in the 1970s and 1980s, there was not a sense that fans' voices could impact how games were created. With social media, fans feel that they can affect gaming content quickly, sometimes before its released to the public. They can also easily broadcast themselves to others online, which has been crucial for the visibility of marginalized communities of gamers to see themselves represented as players and creators.

At the same time, social media also allowed for gamers who preferred to keep Whiteness as the status quo in fantasy roleplaying games a place to air their grievances. Much of the pushback to changes in gaming lore amounted to longstanding arguments that fantasy games had to attend to historical correctness, whether that meant actual history or the history of D&D. Another common argument was that players who didn't like a particular roleplaying game didn't have to play it; no change was needed on the part of game or gaming community. As with #gamergate, I argue that this small, but vocal minority of gamers demonstrates a toxic nostalgia. In this case, a defense of the image of the White male nerd and the protection of a sacred space in which to exist untouched by the introduction of diverse representations of both identities and worldviews. This framing unsuccessfully attempts to keep the gaming community small and homogenous under the guise of protecting something precious and grassroots and expresses a distaste for roleplaying as a popular, mainstream, and profitable enterprise.

Gaming as a whole has become more mainstream; identifying as a gamer no longer something most people feel the need to hide, but the defense of Whiteness and

maleness in games now appears to reify the White male nerd as an outcast *among gamers*. The claim that Whiteness and maleness is now ostracized in gaming was a reinforcement and a reclaiming of the White male gamer as an outcast *within* gaming. The identity of outcast and scrutiny about his use of media, especially when it is applied to White men has been used to explain deviant behavior, a trend that did not stop in the 1980s.

Outcasts and D&D

In media coverage about the Columbine High School shooting, the perpetrators, two young White men, are framed as outcasts. The outcast is an isolated individual who is clearly identifiable by their manner of dress, taste in media, academic or athletic involvement, and perceived social ability. News media was overwhelmed with examples of violent boys and young men who were outcasts and loners. Dungeons & Dragons had long been associated with outcasts, but girls were not perceived as gamers. When I asked respondents about their impressions of D&D around the time they started to play, they sometimes mentioned that it was for nerds, but added that they identified that label:

I don't think we called them gamers. I think we were all called nerds. But it was typically a boy who was perceived as having trouble getting a girlfriend, even though that was not necessarily true, because I had a boyfriend who played well before I started playing...So it was...yeah, and most of the boys were also band geeks. So, they were the boys who were in the advanced classes and not into sports. Because you know, some boys were in the advanced classes *and* playing sports. And they were the guys playing Dungeons & Dragons, so... There was a perception of them as misfits. And that was just the general perception. That's just what I assumed, but I mean, I also assumed... I was also a misfit, so I identified with that label (Bonnie, 47, White)

I was really nerdy kid, as you can probably imagine. Given my parents were intellectuals, and their friends were intellectuals, and my cousin was an engineering student who did wargaming in his spare time...I was a nerdy kid from

a nerdy family. And I had big Coke bottle glasses. Let's see, every boyfriend I had except for two of them, I met through gaming (Shannon, 46, Caucasian)

I think as many people who self-identify as geeks and nerds, I was bullied very, very badly. And so, my parents were able to pull me out of public school, put me into a very, very small private school. And so, we were grades five through eight and then eventually nine, but there were only maybe forty of us total. So, it was incredibly small and we were all very close to one another. And someone got the books for D&D. (Megan, 40, White)

Respondents knew that the master narrative about D&D players was that they were nerds and outcasts. Those who began to play before the mid-2000s said that it was not a hobby that players would publicize to everyone. Some players described their early roleplaying game community as kids who might not fit in otherwise who had a love of D&D in common. Others acknowledged the image of the stereotypical D&D player but did not consider themselves to fit that personality stereotype. In any case, the master narrative of the "outcast" – the one that parents should be concerned about – was still a White male. The kids who were susceptible to violent media were boys, because they were the assumed audience for action/adventure games.

Takeaways from Moral Panics over Media

Moral panics about the influence of media over vulnerable outcast boys has had a lasting impact on the ways that news media reports on violence. From a feminist perspective, the language about White boys who were supposedly brainwashed or encouraged by violent and Satanic media is similar to the language used about perpetrators of sexual assault. Recall that one of Cohen's tenets of a moral panic is that the victim must be "someone with whom you can identify, someone who could have been and one day could be anybody" (Cohen, 2011, p. xii). Young White men who took their own lives were described as bright but troubled, and would have probably lived if not for

becoming involved with Dungeons & Dragons (Isikoff, 1983; Witt, 1985). When young men committed murders, defenses blamed the influence of “occult” materials like D&D, which, they argued, encouraged susceptible players to blur the line between fact and fiction. In the case of Daniel Dower, who murdered his foster father in 1985, Dower’s own claim was that “the shooting grew out of allegations that he had sexually molested his 3-year-old niece” (Enstad, 1985), a fact which is buried in a Chicago Tribune article which focuses mainly on the fact that he was a frequent player of Dungeons & Dragons. The Columbine High School shooters, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, were described as “bright, but with a dark side” and described as having potential and “lofty goals” in a court report less than three months before the shooting, when Klebold and Harris had broken into a van (“Pair Placated Court” 1999, p. A4). The same *Star Tribune* article quotes a fellow student who said that the two boys were “constantly insulted and harassed” in school (p. A4), framing them as outcasts who took revenge for being bullied.

Unlike the panic over D&D, news media analysis of the Columbine High School did not usually blame entertainment media as the *sole* cause of violent behavior. Some news outlets labeled the Columbine shooting as a hate crime, as it appeared that Klebold and Harris may have targeted students for their presumed identities such as students of color, Christians, and “jocks” (“Selective Disdain Drove Killers’ Choices,” 1999). Nonetheless, the focus on mental illness and the influence of violent media added to the discourse of “lone wolf” gunmen, a term rarely connected to gunmen who were not White. The term “lone wolf” originated to “connote unorganized individuals who committed violent crime to further white racist/white nationalist aims,” but expanded in the 1980s and 1990s to include “violence as part of decentralized tactics” or “leaderless

resistance” (Gardell, 2021). The terms lone wolf or lone actor(s) suggests that tragedies such as Columbine were infrequent occasions perpetrated by troubled individuals rather than a social symptom of White supremacy. It also gave weight to the idea that the outcast can be identified by their personality, clothes, taste in music and movies.

Framing perpetrators of violence as outcasts has had lasting effects on how they are framed in news media. The *potential* and talents of a young men accused of sexual assault or rape are usually front and center in their legal defenses. In the cases of the 1980s Satanic Panic and of the Columbine High School shooting of 1999, young men who were allegedly influenced by dangerous media were White and framed as socially alienated. When perpetrators are not White, their potential and talent is evoked when celebrity and/or wealth can shield them or lessen the punishment – R. Kelly and Bill Cosby are recent examples. In 2012, two high school football players in Steubenville, Ohio –Trent Mays, who is White, and Ma’Lik Richmond, who is Black – raped a sixteen-year-old girl. Images and video of the crime were circulated on social media. Richmond received a one-year sentence and rejoined the football team in the fall; Mays received a two-year sentence (“Steubenville High School Rape Convict Released from Custody,” 2015). Across social media, people were split, largely because high school football was framed as the shining light of the economically depressed town of Steubenville (“Rape Case Unfolds on Web and Splits City,” 2012). As with the fictional depiction of rape in *Game of Thrones* committed by a beloved character, the defense of the two boys leaned on the ontological security that fandom provides. For the city of Steubenville, the stakes were also tied into economic security that the football program provided for the high school and the community. Meanwhile, it was abundantly clear that the school

administration in Steubenville cared more about protecting the football team than survivors of sexual assault (Reynolds, 2013).

As fandom entered the #MeToo era, where the loudest debates occurred on social media and “to cancel” became the new verbiage for casting out a member of the tribe, gaming communities grappled with ways they have failed some communities in the past. Both fans and creators are having identity crises and asking questions about who games are for – but also *what* games are for and what sorts of messaging they contain regarding race, gender, and (dis)ability. In the next chapter, which focuses on tabletop roleplaying game communities 2010 to present, I talked to respondents who are active in the online TRPG community as creators, writers, and activists. Their perspectives demonstrate that TRPGs are taken seriously by younger generations as socially influential media.

Chapter 4 : Digitalization and the Creation of Audience and Fandom (~2010-present)

I think [Covid has] done oddly, wonders for the TTRPG community. A lot more people are getting into tabletop roleplaying games because they have the time and now they realize that there are a lot of people out there who are online and want to play games online, so they don't have to do the old fashioned...you go down to the local game store and see if there's anyone who wants to play a game. There has been a lot of people getting interested in TTRPGs as well. A lot of famous people as well, I've noticed, on Twitter, have been talking about how they picked up D&D recently (Sara, 23, White British)

I think that's been a shift in that three to four years that I've been in the space is kind of seeing that change and...it's expected that you seek out marginalized people to be part of your community, to be part of your productions, to be in your spaces. It's no longer acceptable the same way to just be monolithic, in that sense. So that's definitely something that I've noted over the past years. Obviously, different people from different generations of gaming have different ideas of what that looks like and what does inclusivity and diversity, in terms of gender, looks like or why you would do it. (Kienna, 22, Chinese)

There have been a lot of things that have happened. Not all of them have been good, but I think in the overarching scheme of things, I do see a slow progress towards doing things like getting marginalized people on the ground level for designing, getting more people in games or in more public-facing events to promote roleplaying games, getting people of color and other marginalized identities playing and showing more diverse casts of more diverse DMs and more diverse players. (Zoe, 21, Filipina American)

The growing pains that tabletop roleplaying has experienced were inevitable and necessary. Tabletop roleplaying games started as a small endeavor in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin around 1974 and expanded to be a global transmedia phenomenon. What was once played around a table can now be played with anyone in the world on video conferencing software. The impact of fast streaming internet and shows like *Critical Role* on Twitch and YouTube shot Dungeons & Dragons into an international spotlight and brought forth a new generation of players who not only wanted to play, but also wanted to have a say in how games were created. While most roleplayers still enjoy private

games, others have taken their games to a public forum, spawning audiences, fandoms, celebrities, and public communities of roleplayers. Roleplayers of marginalized identities are more visible, and that's good for new players who see that anyone can play tabletop roleplaying games. But with increased online visibility came increased vulnerability to harassment. For the newest generation of adult roleplayers, toxic nostalgia appeared in the form of backlash to calls for change to gaming lore, and the calling out of racism and sexism in gaming communities. As with #gamergate, the impetus for [toxic] nostalgic reactions in tabletop roleplaying partially derives from the hobby becoming more mainstream, more diverse, and more publicly visible.

Demanding A More Diverse Canon: Roleplayers 2010 and Beyond

This was my smallest group of interviewees, but their voices were incredibly important to understanding an “extremely online” generation of roleplayers (Hedge, 2021, p. 58) This group is characterized by their involvement in roleplaying games as a transmedia phenomenon which doesn't require being in the same space as others or even physical materials like dice. I had found one respondent via personal connection; the rest I contacted after finding them on Twitter. I contacted a lot more people than three on Twitter – and I tended to contact those who were regularly active in tweeting about roleplaying games. They were faces I'd seen on livestreams of actual play videos, voices demanding better representation for racial minorities and disabled characters in D&D – in other words, these respondents participated in several aspects of the public roleplaying community, including a lot of unpaid (and emotional) labor tweeting passionately about their visions for roleplaying games.

Three players were in their early 20s, one was 42. One respondent identified as Black, one as White British, one as Filipina American, and one as Chinese. Two identified as female and two as nonbinary. Three respondents identified as bisexual, and one as asexual. In terms of religious affiliation, two respondents were agnostic, one atheist, and one Christian. Three had attained a bachelor's degree, while one had attained a doctorate. All players worked at least part time in gaming as writers, designers, and/or streamers. Most held multiple freelance positions (though at least one has attained full-time employment since our interview), highlighting the trend of creative work as precarious. At the time of the interviews, two worked occasionally as sensitivity readers for games and/or literature to ensure accurate and respectful depictions of marginalized identities.

There were two overarching differences between this group and previous generations of respondents: The first is that most of them knew exactly what tabletop roleplaying games were – and had seen them played online – before starting to play. The second was that they conceptualized roleplaying games as impactful to understandings of race, class, gender, and sexuality. This is not to imply that previous generations didn't mention that impact, but it is notable that this generation began roleplaying with this expectation. Their entry into the world of tabletop roleplaying was a world where the hobby is not only cool, but like other media, a market becoming more sensitive to its players' demands. Gen Z players are aware that putting pressure on gaming companies to change *can* have swift and concrete effects.

The Imaginary Boys' Club

The use of “boys’ club” to describe tabletop roleplaying and early gaming in general is a term that presumes that there were more boys than girls playing, but also signifies an exclusivity reinforced by the fantasy genre as a place of European White male power. D&D’s image as a boys’ club for outcasts and misfits allowed for misogynistic behavior in gaming groups and later, supported the toxic nostalgia used to defend games called out for racist and misogynist content. In their study of Live Action Role Players (LARPer)s, Martin et al (2015) studied how “masculinity is constructed among...men who self-define as nerds” (p. 293). The authors draw upon Kinney (1993) who found that group interaction helped “shed stigmatized labels, such as ‘nerd’” (Martin et al, 2015, p. 295). The LARPing group in this study gave men opportunities for “epic glory” in battle, while women were relegated to supporting roles, such as scribe or musician (p. 302). Women who did participate as combatants often disguised themselves as men, which “reflected a general desire...to be taken seriously as warriors” (p. 302). The masculinization of women warriors is a frequent trope in mythical and historical fiction: Amazons reputedly removed their right breasts to draw and fire arrows more effortlessly; women enlisted in the American Civil War disguised as men. And yet, despite fantasy and science fiction representations of women warriors who did not physically disguise themselves – television’s Xena, for instance – there remains a connection between masculinity and combat. Many roleplayers across Gen Xers and Millennials described themselves as being “one of the guys,” or not enjoying stereotypically feminine or “girly” activities. This was used to explain the interest in D&D and why they felt that their gender identity had not affected their gaming experiences negatively:

Well, and I think for the most part, my early tables where I was the only female at the table, I never felt othered for what it's worth. I never felt like there were things that happened because I was there. But I also grew up very much the tomboy that was part of the guys (Brandy, 33, Hispanic).

One, I am not short, I am 6 ft 3. I have never been feminine, and I have been... was a metalhead for at least most of my roleplaying career. I think that all of those really overshadow the fact that I was a woman. Because I never really encountered anything. But I was also the only woman in our gaming groups. So, I was aware that it was a rare thing, but I never really had any negative experiences with it. But I'm not really the type that most people would jump and try to assert predominance, if that makes sense (Maria, 46, Caucasian).

None of my interviewees who began to play after 2010 mentioned being "one of the guys." In part, this reflects the growing number of individuals who publicly identify as gender nonconforming and who are comfortable challenging gendered norms.

However, their relationship with biological sex and gender performance when it comes to labels differed among individuals. Across generations, gender nonconforming individuals used the terms "agender," "nonbinary," and "genderfluid" on the demographics survey.

One individual further specified "nonbinary (femme)" and another "female (non-binary)." Across generations, no two gender nonconforming people identified themselves with the same terminology in my open-ended survey. When given the opportunity to self-identify, many gender nonconforming individuals chose terms outside of typically prescribed survey categories. The two individuals who identified themselves as "femme" or as "female" *and* nonbinary may be acknowledging that there are still social forces that constrain understandings of gender presentation and performance even if one identifies as nonbinary. These responses may have also been primed by my call for respondents, which asked for "women and nonbinary individuals," and therefore may have appeared to exclude nonbinary individuals who identify as masc or who were assigned male at birth.

Gendered presentation and performance have also taken on a new life in the digital landscape, where it is now common on social media to embrace and announce identities such as transgender, disabled and queer. Even though it is possible to conceal one's identity online, many choose not to – and this has added to the diversity and visibility of online communities. As I will discuss later in this chapter, contemporary digital life is shaped by the tension between authenticity and irony; in online spaces this plays out as clashing performances between speakers and audiences.

Gamergate and the Evolution of Consent in TRPGs

If gaming and other geeky pursuits were sanctuaries to socially awkward outcast boys, the increasing number of girls, women, and nonbinary players might be interpreted by male players as an infiltration of a sacred space. That rhetorical space was made more narrow by the dismissal, discrediting, and harassment of “anyone who presented views that contradicted the straight white male majority”(Condis, 2018, p. 1). This sentiment was illustrated by the incidents of #gamergate, in which femme-presenting game designers were harassed and doxed¹⁵ online. There were a few events that are credited with triggering #gamergate, but the most relevant to this chapter is the blowback against Anita Sarkeesian's video series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, which examined and critiqued the representation of women in popular video games. The series' first video in March 2013 called “Damsels in Distress Part 1” gave a feminist analysis of the decades-old Mario and Zelda video games (Feminist Frequency, 2013). By 2014, Sarkeesian had been forced to move to another home because of the amount of death threats and

¹⁵ “Compiling and released a dossier of personal information on someone” (Honan, 2014). Doxing almost always has a negative connotation, and concerns releasing or publicizing information that was meant to be kept private, such as a home address.

harassment she received in response to her videos (Campbell, 2014). It's not unusual for fans to defend their favorite media from critique, but the extent of the harassment that Sarkeesian and other femme game designers faced in the aftermath of #gamergate were personal attacks rather than defenses of the games in question. In male-dominated spaces (or spaces perceived as being male dominated), women and people of color were outsiders, a threat to the identity of gamer as White and male. Moreover, a someone who criticizes a game for misogyny or racism shakes the foundation upon which gaming is assumed to be built. Respondents who had started playing TRPGs in the 1970s and 1980s knew that sexism was baked into the history of fantasy roleplaying:

Well, in early D&D, because there was a lot of sexism in the literature that D&D was based on, not just Tolkien, but also things like Jack Vance, Robert E. Howard, all of those early pulp writers, had a very sexist worldview, because they were mainly writing for men. And so, there was this huge unspoken assumption that if there were girls in sword-and-sorcery stories, they were mainly there to be eye-candy or goals, or strategically undressed. And that bled over into the earliest works of D&D (Carolyn, 48, White).

Why did [Dungeons & Dragons] appeal more to men? Well number one the D&D games were sexist. They discounted females and I think that girls who cared and who were feminist might've been pretty turned off by that. I wasn't feminist so I was like, "Oh yeah, girls are weaker than boys." (Olive, 48, Caucasian).

Hilary (40, White), who worked at game publisher *Dream Pod 9* from 1999 to 2002, talked about the feedback she received after publishing an essay titled "A GamerGrrl's Manifesto" in issue 48 (November 2000) of *Knights of the Dinner Table*, a comic book dedicated to roleplaying games. In the essay, she wondered ("ranted," as some letters to the editor called it) why games were still primarily devoted to attracting male players when girls and women who gamed were quickly growing in number (Doda,

2000). During our interview in 2020, Hilary described the feedback that rolled in after the publication of her essay:

A lot of complaints that just because a girl had her tits out didn't mean she was passive. That just because a guy was standing strong and holding a sword didn't mean he was the active one in the picture. That my methodology was skewed because I saw what I wanted to see. Lot of nitpicky arguments about what the pictures represented. And then of course, well, it doesn't matter anyway because girls don't play games.

Complaints against Hilary's calls for inclusion amounted to something like *get over it and don't be so sensitive*. A self-identified gamer girl responded to complaints about sexualized character artwork in this way in Issue 50 of *Knights of the Dinner Table*:

I have to agree with you in that I wouldn't mind seeing some beefcake up on the walls, BUT I can also look at the pictures of women and NOT take it to heart, the way you seem to have, in that I realize that's what most guys like, and it is predominantly a male market (Kettir, 2000, p. 83).

It was a familiar argument – one which I had seen in the May 1980 issue of *Dragon* magazine, where editor Jake Jaquet said that 98% of magazine submissions were from male writers – if women wanted to be represented, they would need to represent themselves. Other readers wrote into agree with Hilary, saying that they understood where she was coming from, but that they hadn't had problems with the guys in their gaming groups.

Many stories about negative experiences with tabletop roleplaying involved a violation of players' consent. The concept of consent in early D&D mostly emphasized that one player could influence, but not control another character's actions or behavior. Beyond that, there wasn't much nuance. In the era of #MeToo and with the visibility of playing TRPGs online, a more complex discussion of consent and safety tools emerged into the discourse of tabletop roleplaying. Gen X and Millennial players spoke about instances in which they felt their consent as players had been violated in groups that were predominantly men.

I guess my freshman year, I started playing a vampire LARP because I was like, "Oh, well, this is interesting, and this is different." And the storyteller basically was creeping on all the girls he thought were cute and blood bonded my character at his character without my permission or consent. And then it was like, "Now you have to act like you're in love with me." And I quit that. I was just like, "Well, I don't know what this bullshit is, and I'm creeped out and I don't like this guy." (Isabel, 43, Jewish/White)

One of my best friends, one of my oldest friends just last year had her character assaulted in game. And was not told this was going to happen. And was not asked about it. They were live streaming and had this happen. And I remember her talking about the anger she felt. And there's always that fear of, "Okay, well, what if somebody is going to cross that line with me?" And we teetered on it in one session where our characters all got drugged. We were in a hallucination. And my character was the only one that woke up chained to a wall. And all of our armor had been stripped from us. All of our weapons had been stripped from us, but I'm the only one chained. I was the only one that was objectified in that way by the villain. And for me, it was teetering really close to an uncomfortable zone, because my character wasn't the only female character there, I was the only female human character there (Kora, 33, Hispanic/White).

Although one player cannot control what another player does or thinks, the situations above illustrate that there are still ways that the GM or fellow players can fail to recognize when consent is necessary in situations even if they are not officially "against the rules." Brandy (33, Hispanic) talked about an instance where the GM *did*

obtain consent from players for a situation that would potentially involve the rape of a character:

The basis of this adventure was that you were going to explore an area of the world where there was a prominent red dragon whose modus operandi was to basically have as many children as possible and create this army of half dragons, so that he could continue to do terrible things. He was absolutely not beneath coercion, rape in some cases...I was playing a high charisma character who was seen as very attractive, and therefore I was a target of this... And to the credit of the person running the game, they started the entire game with the social contract of, "We're going to cover a topic not everybody's comfortable with. If you are not comfortable with it, you can leave the table at any time." As a GM, there was consent. For the character and the experience that happened, there was not. And that was a very real question I had to ask myself was I was like, "Okay. I as a woman at this table, am I uncomfortable with this as a player? Is it okay to be exploring this? How were other people at the table feeling?" ...And I was the only female player at this table. I was not the only female *character* at this table. And it was a very interesting experience for me to be the one person at the table who felt like I'm the only one who gets an opinion on what's going on. And I'm like well, that's not true. That is holistically not true. There's somebody else at this table who is currently identifying as a female character, who very much has a say in what's happening.

The experience was unforgettable and uncomfortable, but Brandy was more reflective than upset; it hadn't turned her away from D&D. The dynamics of being the

only woman at the table (though not the only female character) created a specific kind of tension. If there had been no players at the table who identified as women – would a conversation about consent have taken place before beginning gameplay? Fine’s (1983) interviews with male roleplayers suggest that the answer is usually no. In Fine’s respondent groups, male players resisted having women play in their groups because it would inhibit their behavior. Fine muses, “It is striking that players consider inhibitions that prevent characters from engaging in fantasy rape to be a problem, but such is male informal interaction” (p. 69). In 1983, such interactions at the time were limited to mostly private spaces where all players and, rarely, observers, would be in the same physical space. Actual play games are now viewed by people all over the world. As of June 2022, *Critical Role*’s YouTube channel has 1.72 million subscribers, with an additional 1 million on Twitch.

As actual play became a legitimate and profitable form of entertainment and TRPG fandom went mainstream, roleplaying games and their communities became platforms for discussing the world at large. Founded in 2006 on MySpace by activist Tarana Burke, the Me Too Movement went viral on Twitter in 2017. The movement has laid bare how common and systemic sexual harassment and assault is. The power of Me Too relies on personal disclosures of sexual assault and rape culture, and it influenced a culture of speaking out, speaking up, and calling out abusers on social media. Me Too went beyond a catch phrase to become a zeitgeist and awareness of how rape culture touched every organization and community.

In the tabletop roleplaying community, roleplayers reflected on consent and safety in tabletop roleplaying games. The dungeon master in early D&D was a godlike figure;

they made the final call on any scene or decision. This is why many players, like Vivian (45, White), would simply leave games if the game master behaved in inappropriate ways:

Well, if I had a problem with a particular player, then I could usually deal with it. If I was a player, and I had a problem with the GM, I just wouldn't play with that GM... In the '80s and even in the '90s, the idea is that the GM is boss. So, whatever the GM says, happens. And if you don't like it, rocks fall, and you die. And so, that power structure which people are getting away from in modern gaming... It's becoming more collaborative, and people are actually taking into consideration that everyone needs to enjoy the game, which I think I always did, but I had the power structure to back me up when I was a GM, and that helped... But if the GM is a jerk, and I played with a lot of GMs that are jerks... to a greater or lesser extent. I mean there's like dude who has my character raped by minotaurs. So, that's like, walk out in the middle of the session... And then there was dude who gave me a pre-gen character who was a dark elf, and then proceeded to lovingly describe my leather lingerie that I wore...

It became clear that more women were playing D&D and becoming game masters themselves when social media amplified their visibility. Social media also amplified discourse on sexual harassment and sexual assault in many fields and industries, including TTRPGs. Consent and the use of safety tools were being encouraged. Yet for many players, no tool could replace *trust*, which experienced players gained over years of playing with the same group.

Trust within the gaming group is crucial in roleplaying. How trust was cultivated might depend on the situation. In many cases, D&D is played among friends and family who have relationships outside of gaming. Playing on Zoom, players lacked contextual clues about turn taking and had to work around technical lags and fewer visual and physical cues from fellow players. On actual play (streamed) games, players felt that they had to be more performative and theatrical for the viewing audience, and they limited side chatter and tried to avoid talking over one another. There simply wasn't time to build trust over time as one might with a private game. While early roleplayers said that they had simply walked away from games if they faced harassment, roleplayers who committed to being regular players in online series were under more scrutiny. Simply put: There's more at stake in a streamed game, which might involve the commitment to play on a regular basis at an assigned time with an audience watching and revenue being generated. Gaining trust and establishing a comfortable and collaborative group dynamic needs to happen quickly. To make this process easier, gamers have designed and implemented tabletop roleplaying safety tools.

One of my respondents, Kienna Shaw curated, with Lauren Bryant-Monk, the *TTRPG Safety Toolkit*, an open source collection of safety and consent tools for tabletop roleplaying games. The language surrounding consent in tabletop roleplaying games is the same as discourse on consensual sex: Gamemasters are encouraged to obtain players' "enthusiastic consent" (Gault, 2020). The use of safety tools and open discussions of consent acknowledges that games can be intimate spaces with intense subject matter. Two of the most common safety tools referred to by respondents are X-Cards and Lines and Veils. The X-Card, created by John Stavropoulos, is simply an X drawn onto an

index card, which a player can hold up or tap if they want the direction of the narrative to stop because they feel uncomfortable (K. Shaw & Bryant-Monk, 2021). When playing online, typing an X into the chat would work the same way. This can be combined with Lines and Veils, first introduced in *Sex and Sorcery* roleplaying game supplement by Ron Edwards (2004). Lines and veils work to establish what players will absolutely not roleplay (lines) and scenarios which are okay to bring up, but not described in detail or descriptively roleplayed (veils). There are also many other safety tools and techniques detailed in the TTRPG Toolkit, but these serve as examples as the type of consent tools that might be used in tabletop roleplaying games.

Many respondents welcomed increased awareness and the need for consent among groups of roleplayers and their gamemasters. Actual use of the safety tools depended on the group. Playing online or at conventions, especially with a new group, warranted more of a direct conversation about consent and safety. Isabel (43, Jewish/White), who has used safety tools at conventions, talked about the difference between playing with a group of close friends versus with strangers:

Depends on the game and depends on the people I'm playing with. So, I have a very close group of friends who I've known for...almost 20 years, and we are extremely experienced at roleplaying together. We have a great deal of trust in each other. And so, we don't really have formal method. It's one of those things where we trust each other that if something's uncomfortable, we're going to say so, and it will get addressed, right? If I'm playing with people I don't know as well, then we'll do a more formal method...but honestly, except for in con[vention] situations, I don't play with people I don't know and I don't trust...I

actually think my problem with it [formal consent tools], so to speak, is that it's not as good as 20 years of mutual trust, which of course, how could it be?

With the growth of actual play streamed online for an audience, the need for safety tools and consent has taken on a new significance. The safety tools protect players, but they may also protect audience members who share a trigger with one of the players. Scenarios that depict women as sex objects, slavery, and combat violence – all of which are possible in Dungeons & Dragons – may have been acceptable or unquestioned in certain homogenous groups who share common social experiences and views. Susie (41, Asian American) commented on situations where a femme player's consent is violated that

It may be that when the DM, GM, is a guy who hasn't played with anyone except guys usually, that there's not that thought of, you know, I need to make sure like the situation is okay with everyone before I kind of just launch into it.

Thus, formal consent tools in tabletop roleplaying games may try to circumvent violations of consent *especially* when players do not have the established trust of a long-term relationship with other players.

As with any change that is interpreted by some gamers on social media as the work of “social justice warriors” (SJWs), efforts to make gaming more inclusive and welcoming to new players was not popular with everyone. According to Condis (2018), SJW, a term used to describe a person with “socially progressive views,” became “a popular shorthand way to discredit anyone who presented views that contradicted the straight white male majority” (p. 1). Sometimes players who had been involved with roleplaying for generations resented changes to gaming culture. Mikaela (46, White),

who has been playing roleplaying games since 1982, explained that the tabletop roleplaying game community had become much more inclusive, but that old school players sometimes came out of the woodwork to complain about it:

The old-school resurgence—and there’s a lot of toxicity there—is worrying. Even in the eighties and nineties...now we call them Grogards, or Neckbeards, or any of those kinds of terms, but yeah, people would throw around how long they’d been playing and if they’d lived through the Satanic Panic, and that kind of stuff. It’s kind of a badge of honor. It was like, “This is how big of a nerd I am.” And now that you don’t have to be a nerd to play, and there’s a level of acceptance that never was, a lot of those folks are still holding onto those, “Well, I’ve been playing 20 years.” And I’ve thankfully been able to shut some of them down by saying that I’ve been playing for 40, and they can go back into the basement, because I don’t want that in my current games. I’ve evolved and changed, and I don’t still try to play and think that it was some great nostalgic time. It’s not mechanically and it’s not necessarily culturally.

Mikaela suggests that some players have a fondness for the wrong things about roleplaying and are resentful that a new generation could come along and change the culture of gaming, even if to be more mainstream, inclusive, and diverse. Her comment points out that toxic nostalgia is not new, that marginalized players have always had to navigate the assumed cultural norms of roleplaying game culture as White and male. Many women had stories of been talked down to, ignored, or having their contributions erased, purely because they were overlooked as being tabletop roleplayers at all. Shannon

(46, Caucasian) emphasized this by describing how uncomfortable it was to go into a hobby shop as a teenage girl. Years later, she was still justifying her identity as a gamer:

I still choose to identify as a gamer even though I'm somebody's mom. I'm not in the PTA or anything, but I'm definitely somebody's mom and you wouldn't guess that I was going to a gaming store to buy stuff for me if I go into one because of the erasure. I choose to say, oh yeah, I play D&D because I'm tired of people pretending that I don't exist. I have dice older than some of the people who tell me that women didn't play to start out.

Gatekeeping is not limited to middle-aged women. Zoe (21, Filipina American) had a similar experience at a convention where she was appearing as a speaker., but was assumed to be an attendee:

One of the panelists went in, and he's a pretty well-known D&D creator, stereotypical, middle-aged White cis male. He walked in. And then me, and then two of the other panelists who were both femme presenting walked up, and the enforcer at the door was like, "Oh, the queues are in the back." We had our special guests' badges and everything...Then the next day I went to a networking event with my [now ex-] partner who is a cis male. We were talking and networking, and I'm the one in the industry out of the two of us. He plays games for fun. He's just there...But I remember going to that meetup and everyone just talked to him, all the time.

Although tabletop roleplaying games have become ever more diverse, the stereotype of the typical player as a White cisgender male is a perception that is, as Sara Ahmed (2017) would say, "sticky" (p. 54), and it remains sticky because of toxic nostalgia.

Players who have lived through a moment in time when *D&D* was for outcasts and nerds, and even dubbed Satanic, have fond feelings for having slogged through the mire.

Nostalgia transforms into something problematic when the nostalgic affect serves as resistance to meaningful change.

Fantasy is More than a Genre

The fantasy genre as epitomized by the works of JRR Tolkien are Eurocentric in their centering of Whiteness and European notions of power and wealth via colonization, war and violence, and inherited nobility. The world of fantasy is often depicted as a power struggle between those who have wealth in the form of commodities (money, land, labor) and those who want wealth, but do not have it. In *D&D*, the adventuring party is often rewarded for completing a mission with *loot* – magical items, gold and silver, and weapons. When media and spaces dedicated to the fantasy genre are critiqued on the basis of being Eurocentric, they are often defended by fans as being historically accurate (H. Young, 2014). Of course, fantasy is *fiction* and includes many elements that are not historically accurate, such as dragons and other magical creatures. Nonetheless, arguing that fantasy works engage with primarily White characters and European cultures because it is historically accurate is not only incorrect, but it also shuts down the possibility of including other narratives.

Fantasy's sister genre science-fiction imagines alternatives both in the present and future and asks, *what if?* It is often presented as diametrically opposed to fantasy because science fiction looks ahead to the future, while fantasy is characterized by its settings that mimic the past. As a noun, fantasy is also used to refer to an imagined world – one that isn't currently possible or might never be. Fantasy is a genre, but it is also – just like

science fiction, it is a vehicle for imagining possibilities. In the past few years, gamers of color and disabled gamers have taken to social media, Twitch, and YouTube to expand the meaning of fantasy.

After George Floyd's murder by former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin in May 2020, Omega Jones started the "BlackAF Roundtable" series streaming on Twitch. Jones and fellow Black gamers discussed racism at large and in games, especially tabletop roleplaying games. The genre of fantasy, as it has been presented in the US, has long been structured by Whiteness and European mythology. Michael Sinclair, speaking on the June 4, 2020 Black AF roundtable, commented that he almost always plays a Black human in D&D because "it's almost just a fantasy to play a Black character in a fantasy game...It's not something I see in the fantasy genre or in these games, and I have to insert myself into the narrative" (Dungeons & Dragons, 2020a). For White players, playing another race in D&D another is fantasy. As Sinclair pointed out, players of color may want to see a version of themselves welcomed in that space before taking on another role.

TK (33, Black/White), who plays frequently in streaming games, was on one of the first livestreams on Twitch where players announced their pronouns in their introductions. In answering my question about how gender identity affected their experiences of playing, TK said:

The first streamed show I ever did, I was a player. I played Gillebertus, who was the only male character in a group of all female characters...I'm nonbinary, I'm agender. The DM was also agender, and we had a transwoman on our team. And then the rest of everybody else was ciswomen. And we used pronouns in our...in

our introductions. We were like, hey, I'm TK, they/them, and I play this character. And the internet fucking lost it. We were one of the first...we were on the D&D Twitch for that, and we were one of the first streams to really do that on the D&D Twitch. And we ended up with over 10,000 views on the YouTube video that came out after it. And hundreds of comments that were just like "kill yourself," things like that, all incredibly misogynistic, transphobic, and some racist comments. And D&D closed their comments after that on YouTube videos.

Since TK's experience where the "internet fucking lost it," using pronouns on overlays or introductions on Twitch livestreams of roleplaying games has become more common, though not universal. As TK mentioned, the backlash against a fairly simple move to introducing pronouns was tangled up in transphobic and racist discourse that is part of the toxic nostalgia for Dungeons & Dragons where newer editions or homebrew elements became shorthand for progressive, liberal, and SJW. In the newest season of *Critical Role* (Season 3), some of the players' characters as well as several non-playable characters (NPCs) were nonbinary and used they/them pronouns, as announced by their players. D&D as a stereotypically medieval fantasy genre has been unraveled in various ways, of which specifying pronouns for characters is only one example. Social media made it possible for the growth of a steady audience and fandom for tabletop roleplaying games – and with that, changing relationships between gamers/fans and games like D&D.

Fans' relationships with the media objects they love must constantly be renegotiated in light of changes to the object (Williams, 2011). Debates about a protagonist's behavior, such as Jaime Lannister's rape of his sister Cersei in *Game of Thrones*, reflect ways in which fans condemn or defend the fan objects they love when

faced with a problematic change in character or plot (Ferreday, 2015). The fifth edition of Dungeons & Dragons was published in 2014, but older versions and supplements are still available to players via used bookstores and online sources like DM's Guild from DriveThruRPG. Fifth edition is by far the most popular, especially with new players, but some groups still play with or collect older editions of D&D, preferring the mechanics of one edition over another. The availability, visibility, and monetization of older editions has also called attention to racist depictions in earlier editions and supplements, most notably *Oriental Adventures*, a rulebook for *D&D* set in the Far East. While D&D received good reviews and accolades for the *Oriental Adventures* (1985) setting at the time of its release, contemporary players have pointed out its use of stereotypes of Asian characters. In a panel streamed on Twitch called "Weaving Asian Stories," sponsored by Wizards of the Coast, host Daniel H. Kwan says that *Oriental Adventures*, as well as *Al-Qadim* (1992), a rulebook for a general Arabian setting, "serve as an escapist fantasy, primarily designed for people who don't look like us [the Asians and Asian-Americans on the panel]" (Dungeons & Dragons, 2020b). Kwan conveyed a similar sentiment as Michael Sinclair when he stated that playing a Black human in D&D was a fantasy, because he hadn't seen it often in fantasy roleplaying. The fantasy genre, both Kwan and Sinclair stated, is too often a White escapist fantasy. As a multi-generational fandom, D&D players must reckon with previous editions of the game and certain modules like *Oriental Adventures*. Fandoms can be resistant to change because there is a strong affective bond between fans and fan objects. Kienna (22, Chinese) found this was true when she criticized *Oriental Adventures* on Twitter:

I've noticed where people equate the potential loss of a game or product that, especially if they have nostalgic ties to it, as equally harmful as content within the game being racially hurtful for someone else.

If a player has positive feelings for a game that has been called out as having racial stereotypes, they may interpret critiques of their favorite game as a personal attack. Defense reactions also imply that the part of the game which has been identified as racist is crucial to its enjoyment. It is true that race in D&D has effects on the mechanics and histories of characters, and in that sense, race has been important to the structure of D&D.¹⁶ Brandy (33, Hispanic), who works as a community manager for D&D at Wizards of the Coast, talked about the difficulty in changing the concept race in D&D because of how it is gamified:

I do think it's a very archaic holdover from 30 years ago that we probably need to grow past at this point. So, it's a very interesting question, but it's a question that isn't just a social fix. There is a mechanical game design fix that needs to happen too. Because there is power for your character. There's customization for your character that ties into it. And I know one of the things that players are very resistant to is losing power from a place or losing the ability to customize their character in a way that feels meaningful. And I guess the question that we have to solve at that point is should race be a part of that equation?

The notion of "race" as it appears in D&D is derived from Tolkien's mythology, which draws heavily on European history and mythology, as well as Judeo-Christian notions of morality (good vs. evil). In Tolkien and in D&D, creatures have different

¹⁶ Since writing this chapter, race in D&D has had some overhauls which are mentioned in the Conclusion.

lineages which influence their behavior. One notorious example which has gotten more attention since the increased scrutiny on race in gaming are orcs. In the latest edition (5e) of D&D, player characters can only play half-orcs, as full orcs are, like their depiction in *Lord of the Rings*, brutish, aggressive, and presumably too monstrous to join any band of comrades. In the 5th edition of the *Dungeon & Dragons Players' Handbook (5e)*, half-orcs as often having scars that mark them as “a former slave or a disgraced exile” (Wizards of the Coast, 2014, p. 40). Mentions of orcs' and half-orcs' lack of intelligence is not mentioned in this edition, though the previous edition from 2000 describes those with orc lineage as “dull and crude” (p. 19), unable to appreciate poetry and other “refined enjoyments” (p. 18). In both editions, orcs are describing as having “no lands of their own” (p. 19) and no written language. In short, orcs and half-orcs are described in D&D as inherently evil and full of rage, though a bright enough half-orc might be able to suppress these instincts. The notion that race in D&D determines moral alignment, behavior, and personality –a bioessentialist view – is what players like TK (33) have been calling out on social media:

I've been yelling about Orcs being racist for like two years, or something like that. But with the influx of more big name, independent people coming into the community, and getting big on their own and stuff, there's a lot more queer representation, vocal queer representation, a lot more BIPOC representation that's incredibly vocal nowadays. And now you're seeing even big names be like, yeah, you're right. We should probably change orcs. They're kind of racist...So, it feels like in this last six months since the pandemic, and people are starting to focus

more on tabletop RPGs. It's come under a lens a lot more, that stuff's just getting done. It's wild.

Gamers in their twenties want to see themselves represented not only in gameplay, but at all levels of game creation. Zoe (21, Filipina American), talked about the importance of bringing in writers of color "at the base level" to avoid correcting things later:

I saw today there's a Kickstarter going around in the community, and it looks great. But the core writing team is I think three White guys. I'd have to double check. And they do have a stretch goal. It's their like eighth stretch goal, and at that eighth stretch goal, at over double their original Kickstarter amount, they're like, "Here, we will add these writers," and they're all marginalized identities. I was like, why didn't you put them in at the first goal? Why did you make them a stretch goal? Don't do that. Bring us in at the base level, because if you bring in people of a marginalized identity at the base level, they're able to correct things that maybe people who haven't had those racial experiences that just pervade a lot of what D&D is based on.

Many tabletop roleplaying game books and supplements are indie endeavors, created and published on shoestring budgets, via crowdfunding, or released for free, such as Sara Thompson's (2020) *Combat Wheelchair* supplement for *Dungeons & Dragons*.¹⁷ D&D's publisher, Wizards of the Coast, frequently relies on contracted labor for its creative work including writers and artists. TK (33, Black/White) commented on the

¹⁷ The supplement for *D&D* is meant to be compatible for the fifth edition of *D&D*, but it was released by Thompson for free; it was not published by Wizards of the Coast.

trend of seeing a diverse group of freelancers, but not seeing that same diversity among full-time employees for large gaming companies:

I don't want to see this thing where we're like, ha ha, hashtag BLM, for all of the rest of May and then some of June. But then we don't change anything about the people we're hiring. Why is it that all of the freelancers and contractors are like Black and queer, but all of the people on salary are White cis dudes? Like, come on. You ain't got extra health insurance laying around? Really? I don't like seeing that. I don't like seeing the only representation for a lot of these publishers and stuff being only their contractors. It's like, y'all got to look at some, we got to look at executives, we got to look at the people who are doing the hiring. We have to look at the people who are in your HR, because the people who are in your HR are the ones who are more likely to, or to not, take issues seriously in the company. So, it's... I just want to see genuine inclusion, because it's like, yeah, sure, bring us to the table. But also, let us eat.

The tension between Wizards of the Coast and its diverse group of freelancers came to a head in the summer of 2020, when game designer Orion D. Black left their freelance position at Wizards, accusing the company via their Twitter of “paying lip service towards diversity and change while exploiting BIPOC...and silencing and ignoring criticism of systemic problems” (Stubby the Rocket, 2020). Wizards made a public apology to Black (Baird, 2020), but contractors continued to speak out, and Wizards, a subsidiary of Hasbro, was unable to climb its way out of mounting controversy.

In 2020, Wizards said that it would no longer approve new novels under the *Dragonlance* name from Tracy Hickman and Margaret Weis (C. Hall, 2020). *Dragonlance* is one of the longest running settings in the D&D universe, *Dragonlance*, first published by TSR in 1984. Weis and Hickman speculated that the move was a reaction to the summer of racial reckoning, though no reason was formally announced (Wilde, 2020). This move, along with addressing some of the problematic racial tropes in D&D and Wizard's most profitable franchise, Magic the Gathering, was an attempt to distance the company from its past, even if it meant potentially losing revenue from some of its most historically popular products. The lawsuit that Weis and Hickman filed was eventually voluntarily dismissed in early 2021 (C. Hall, 2021).

A growing number of publishers, including Wizards of the Coast are now using sensitivity readers to ensure language and content is inclusive. Two of my interviewees, Jasmine (42, Black) and Sara (23, White British) are sensitivity readers, a job title that gained recognition around 2017 (*Subject Guides*, 2021). Although some have expressed skepticism about the purpose of companies employing sensitivity readers (Dubno, 2021), it continues to be a growing practice in publishing. Jasmine explained diversity consulting in this way:

Say you have a woman in a game or you have a Black character in the game and you want to make sure it's authentic, you don't have anything in there that's offensive. So, you would bring in me, and you evaluate this to make sure that we're not doing anything wrong. And the way I approach diversity consulting is I want to point out things that are problematic, but I also want to point out things

that are being done really well because I want to encourage the developer to keep doing that. And also, I like to give a historical and cultural context for something.

Most sensitivity and diversity readers are writers and game designers themselves.

Sara (23, White British), who currently works for R. Talisorian Games the publisher of *The Witcher* RPG, designed a combat wheelchair for use in *Dungeons & Dragons*. She spoke to me about what inspired her to create the combat wheelchair:

... I always played very able-bodied characters, and never thought about my own disability, despite the fact I've been disabled since I was 12. I had a lot of internalized ableism myself that I kind of went to therapy for and got through in university. I realized, hey, I would really like to play a disabled character who's like me, and I asked my DM at the time, and he just looked at me and went, "There's no rules for that, so you can't." I was like, that's pretty weird for a roleplaying game. It's meant to be creative.

About a month after our interview, Sara published her combat wheelchair design on August 12, 2020. Almost as soon as it was published, it received attention from online gaming outlets who praised it for encouraging inclusivity. Shortly after, Matthew Mercer, the GM for *Critical Role*, introduced a non-playable character, Dagen Underthorn, who uses a combat wheelchair in Season 2, Episode 114 of *Critical Role* (Solorzano, 2020). The visibility of the combat wheelchair and disability in tabletop roleplaying, both of its players and of characters, got a huge boost. Sara's outspokenness about including disability in roleplaying games wasn't without its critics who exhibited both toxic nostalgia and ableism. According to Sara,

I find that people are a lot more confident being ableist online than they are racist, at the moment. Because it's very ingrained in society that disability is bad and when that's kind of been the only mindset you've been given about disability, it's very hard to accept that when a disabled person comes along and isn't ashamed of their disability or feels that they shouldn't have to hide it or anything.

The backlash against disabled characters in roleplaying games connects to the erasure or marginalization of players and creators of color – as well as the bioessentialist representations of “race” in D&D. It boils down to a narrow vision of fantasy that sometimes is reluctant to let go of a narrow imagining of medievalism – whether that be the treatment of disability, race, or notions of nobility and wealth. At the same time, “fantasy” is more than a genre. When I asked players how they would compare the characters they typically play to themselves, nearly everyone said that a character was part of them. M (34, Mexican/Japanese/Osage) told me that “you try to find some aspect of your personality that you can use as a touchstone, a lodestone.” A player may not take on every aspect of their “real” identity, but for marginalized players, it can be important to them to see themselves in a game that has a history of ignoring or marginalizing certain identities. Both Kora (33, Hispanic/White) and Brandy (33, Hispanic) told me, sometimes *seeing yourself* in a character is part of the confidence-building:

I get to choose what I'm going to stand up to or what I'm going to stand up for, and what would bother me and what wouldn't. And I mean, for sure when I was younger, getting to play for just hours, this is my distraction. This is my escape from whatever home life problems that I was having. I get to go into this fun world, this exciting world where I'm a hero, where I am confident, where nobody can hurt me (Kora, 33).

I have a tendency when I create a character to take a very specific characteristic or aspect of myself and flesh it out into a full-blown character...the very first

character that I played, I realized I was kind of exploring my sexuality as an individual. And trying to figure out, I spent most of my life being the girl next door in class, or the last girl at the dance. Or the one that didn't really go out on dates in high school. This could be a script from any nerd drama of the girl that didn't get the attention in high school. And I realized that the first character I played was a very sassy, very forthwith female sorceress Bard that was biracial—and I'm biracial—and was very open with her sexuality and would use it as a tool for situations. And she wasn't necessarily always a good person in that regard. But it was that side of myself...if I had less inhibitions, who would I be? I think this might be what that looks like (Brandy, 33).

Zoe (21, Filipina American), who had been recently diagnosed with autism at the time of our interview, spoke about how playing games on stream helped her to better understand facial expressions and improve her game master skills because she could rewatch the streams later. Zoe commented that the stereotype of the socially awkward gamer is used to dismiss autistic players:

I know a lot of people don't think autistic folk can play games that are roleplaying games because it's the stereotype that you see on TV. It's like, oh, they're really good at math and they can't lie. And they're awkward and they don't know how to socially interact. So of course, they can't play games that are social and based around pretending to be someone else. It's really wrong and it is a fundamental misunderstanding of what makes an autistic person autistic.

Anecdotal evidence as well as academic research has found that autistic and neurotypical individuals alike benefit from practicing social skills through tabletop roleplaying (Fein, 2015). *Game to Grow*, the non-profit I gamed with for a year, uses a system named “Critical Core” to instruct community game masters who want to use therapeutic roleplaying in educational, institutional, or personal settings. In their statement about Critical Core, Game to Grow adds that “Critical Core helps game masters

align their games to provide specific support to autistic players, supported by the methods and strategies used by experts in the field” (“Critical Core,” n.d.). Although Game to Grow serves all adults and children, regardless of diagnosis, their primary goal has always been to encourage players to practice social skills. This differs from the “deficit model,” which only focuses on life skills (e.g., making eye contact), but not the social skills needed to make and nurture lasting friendships (Davis & Johns, 2021). Focusing on moving from cooperation (“not tearing each other down”) to collaboration (“building on each other’s ideas”), facilitators with Game to Grow use Dungeons & Dragons to help kids and adults make and maintain friendships.

From being a game designed for wargamers that appealed to geeky teenagers to becoming a worldwide phenomenon that one could play around a table in various modalities. From slaying monsters to learning how to share or teaching history, roleplaying games have run the gamut of audiences and purposes. In the next chapter, the conclusion, I revisit how roleplaying games and their communities have changed over time. Additionally, I reflect on my original purpose – to tell the story of women in the history of tabletop roleplaying games – and think about how audience studies might consider changing concepts of gender.

Chapter 5 : Leveling Up (Conclusion)

You have to grow. You have to expand because if you stagnate, you're going to die. We have to keep changing and evolving as a culture, as a company, as a hobby, as humans. Because if we don't grow, we shrink and diminish. (Megan, 40, White)

Across age categories, I asked respondents their impressions about how gaming culture had changed over time. It's a big question and maybe not a fair one, since there is no single gaming culture when it comes to tabletop roleplaying games. Tabletop roleplaying games don't rely on software; they will never be technologically obsolete. There is no new hardware to buy for each new edition. Whatever changes players feel obligated to make are likely socially influenced. If you play with the same group you've been playing with since high school, you adopt new perspectives if your group does – or you leave that group if their gaming style no longer suits yours. Participating in social media added urgency to the feeling of and the need to change, but even respondents who expressed fear or distrust of social media spoke about growing inclusivity as important and inevitable. For example, Olive (48, Caucasian) reflected on how thinking about gender has changed over time and how this has affected gameplay:

In the later D&D...they've acknowledged that there are women with extraordinary strengths, and men who also have extraordinary strengths. They've tried to encourage people and they actually out and out say, you know, you should think about playing somebody of a different gender or a different sexuality, and I think that's a really interesting choice for them to have come out and said that. It's definitely a move forward on their part. I think that it allows people to try different things and also it allows people to start to see gender as just one aspect

of who you are and not necessarily more relevant than any other part of you. Instead of being, you know, when you see a baby for the first time—*is it a boy or a girl?*—is like the most important part, right? It's the first thing anybody ever says about a baby - is it a boy or a girl?

As Olive points out, in fifth edition *D&D*, gender or sex is not important mechanically, and only holds importance insofar as the players determines. In this way fifth edition *D&D*'s imaginary world pulls ahead of "real world" when it comes to gender equality. Olive's comment suggests that roleplaying games are spaces that one can experiment with gender, but that the world outside of the game is slower to adapt. Older roleplayers with children gained new perspective when witnessing the differences in how their children play *D&D*. Helen (58, White) observed:

I watch my daughter and her friends and that is always more complex anyway because we can't just say female, because everybody's gone completely non-gendered or many gendered. How many different genders have we got now? I have no idea - in her own domestic environment it's not so much a thing. Or it is such an important thing it transcends, there isn't male, female in their lives.

There's every shade. When I watch them gaming they are living for real possibilities that were there within the games.

Helen's reflection touches on how the changing constructs of gender are played out in when younger people play *D&D*, and fantasy is more than a genre involving magic and antiquated weapons. When Helen said that younger players "are living for real possibilities," it sounded as though she found an incompatibility between her daughter's

experience and her own, but I was reminded of how roleplaying encouraged her to join the voluntary police force in the UK, and helped her learn how to stay calm amidst chaos:

I learned, mainly from my character, I'm triaging, I'm going who needs the help most? The guy who's running around going, "Oh, I've been stabbed," is not the one I'm going to run to. The one I'm running to is the one who can't get up because he's been hit over the back with the back of the axe... So I'd go to him and do what I can for him and get attention to him. That was my real-life stuff, so that kind of took over from roleplaying.

Although practicing emergency medical scenarios and experimenting with gender expression may not be analogous, I would argue that they are both "playing at the world," (Peterson, 2014) engaging in activity that can be frightening and dangerous. In a world that is more connected but also extremely polarized and where individuals are often physically isolated, it is no wonder that Gen Z has been dubbed "the most anxious generation" (Gupta, 2019). Roleplaying games help us try out how we might react in situations that are potentially chaotic and anxiety-inducing. I can personally attest that playing a theatrical character with +4 Charisma helped me get through a recent job interview without crumbling under pressure.

The material and conceptual notion of what gender *is* or how individuals do gender has changed, and this has implications in roleplaying games and audience/fan studies. In her book, *Where Millennials Will Take Us*, Risman (2018) interviewed Millennials about their conceptions of gender. Risman finds that girls are still allowed more freedom than boys to transgress gender, but that "their bodies could carry the weight of expected femininity, even if their behaviors did not" (p. 45). More women are

in the workforce now, but any caretaking responsibilities still run counter to many workplaces' expectations of dedicated employees. Although legal and employment policies are presented as gender neutral, there are subtle ways that policies apply to different genders inequitably. Risman (2018) described the extent to which her interviewees desired to queer gender or dismantle a gender binary. Out of 116 interviewees, Risman describes 17 (14%) of them as “rebels,” or those individuals who want to “dismantle the gender binary...or at least decouple it entirely from biological bodies” (p. 74). Of my own 37 interviewees, 5 (about 14%) reported having gender nonconforming identity, the same percentage as Risman’s sample. Although this is a small percentage, “their very existence is changing cultural norms” (Risman, 2018, p. 75), such as the expected routine of asking for pronouns on the first day of class and the use of *they* as a single pronoun. Additionally, it becomes ever more difficult to use terms like masculine and feminine without putting scare quotes around them.

Growing awareness and shifts to rejecting binary gender were made possible in part by digitalization and social media. First, the emergence of household internet connections in the late 1980s to mid-2000s made it possible for women and nonbinary individuals to engage in text-based roleplaying games and preserved any level of desired anonymity. This did not mean that all experiences in online roleplaying at this time were harassment free, but there was a level of distance and safety for players. M (34, Mexican/Japanese/Osage) mused on the difference between participating online today (especially during the Covid-19 pandemic) versus Internet 1.0:

I think in the past, if you were mean online, you could just log off and then go hang out with people in the real world. And now you can’t do that, and it’s like

being mean to somebody on the playground. Nobody else wants to play with you, if you're that person who is being mean on Facebook.

Indeed, the notion of "logging off" no longer applies offline and online life have collapsed into each other. Losing the capability to log off influenced the desire for and production of authenticity in a digital world. More of our personal and professional connections exist digitally, sometimes exclusively so. In turn, this material reality generated the desire for and performance of sincerity, authenticity, and honesty in online spaces. Desire for online anonymity or purposefully misrepresenting oneself is now suspect and is assumed to be the cloak of online trolls and harassers.

The loss of online anonymity has a cost. Pariser (2011) pointed out that social media platforms encourage users to have a single, trackable identity so that advertising and news can be curated to the individual in the hopes of keeping users engaged. In his words, "You have one identity, it's your Facebook identity, and it colors your experience wherever you go" (p. 110). The statement might be a little outdated, but still applies to any site where users post pictures, stories, or quips of their most intimate moments, serving up personal data which companies gobble up and spit out tailored ads. Moreover, spilling your guts online or sharing that pic of your newborn is an act that leaves users open to vulnerability: Not all audiences will respond in kind ways.

The above perspective may be some old Millennial cynicism, and there's another way of seeing it through the eyes of younger roleplayers: When more roleplayers "put themselves out there," there's a positive snowball effect. More *potential* players understand that anyone can be a gamer. This was something that both Kienna (22, Chinese) and Sara (23, White British) mentioned as being important for them, as they

both had negative experiences with groups dominated by men during their first games. How gamers thought about representation was also influenced by their participation in social media. When Adrienne Shaw collected ethnographic data through participant observation of queer gamers in 2009, her interviewees did not articulate its importance through market logic. As Shaw (2014) states,

by this logic, if a player identifies as both a woman and as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, their video game wants are presumed to be different from those of the (assumed) heterosexual women appealed to previously by games made for ‘female players’” (p. 18).

Within the same logic, “identifying *as* a member of [a] group is also assumed to shape how players want to identify *with* video game characters” (Shaw, 2014, p. 65). Players did not always care if an avatar looked like them or had the same sexuality. Rather, affect played a significant role in how Shaw’s interviewees connected to media and fictional characters. The desire for representation was “about seeing ourselves reflected in the world and relating to images of others, both of which are critically tied to arguments for representation that focus on media’s ability to create possible worlds” (Shaw, 2014, pp. 70-71).

It has now been over a decade since Shaw collected her data and in a more recent presentation, she admitted that thanks to social media, gamers have more streamlined demands for representation in video games (A. Shaw, 2021). In particular, on Twitter – a space where businesses, entrepreneurs, and consumers alike mix – the discourse about representation *is* usually wrapped up in the push and pull of market logic, where consumers appear to have more power than ever to influence games even before they’re

released to the public. Respondents in my project who began to game in the 1990s and later – and especially if they had only begun to play after 2010 – were active on social media in demanding changes to games, often simultaneously while promoting their own work that enacted the changes they wanted to see.

In the 1980s, it was easy for game companies to ignore demands from gamers who wanted to see gaming improved for women gamers. The answer that editors of *Dragon* magazine always gave when presented with demands for change was that there simply weren't enough women playing to make any sort of changes worthwhile. With social media, a space where anyone can yell into the void – and sometimes with enough links, retweets, or upvotes, your scream is amplified – it is possible for the individual to be heard. Importantly, for marginalized players and creators of TRPGs, this amplification means that it is now possible to argue for “*equal*, not proportional, representation in games” (Nielsen, 2015, p. 46). In the case of Wizards of the Coast, the largest publisher of tabletop roleplaying games, it appears that publishers are listening and attempting to implement changes.

In December 2021, Wizards of the Coast released new errata for its fifth edition of Dungeons & Dragons. This is not an entirely new edition of D&D but implemented changes to the fifth edition. The biggest change has been the removal of racial alignments for all playable and non-playable characters (darjr, 2021). Racial alignments described the tendencies of a race of characters as good, evil, or neutral. While players and game masters had the ultimate say on how to play characters, the removal of alignment was to discourage players from relying on stereotypes – (i.e., all orcs are brutes, or all drow elves are evil). Predictably, all players and game masters did not welcome this change,

but it was a big win for advocates who had pointed out the racist depictions of some creatures in D&D.

Stretching the Meaning of Fantasy

As Helen said in her description of her daughter playing TRPGs, contemporary roleplayers “are living for the very real possibilities” in roleplaying games. For younger respondents, advocating for marginalized gamers engenders possibility. In Sara Ahmed’s (2017) words, “a queer girl stretches the meaning of girl” (p. 55) and queer fantasy roleplayers stretch the meaning of fantasy. In the 1980s and 1990s, there was concern about the *escapism* of roleplaying games; it was a large part of the Satanic Panic, when it was claimed that young boys *lost themselves* in playing a character and were brainwashed by playing D&D into committing suicide. This type of escapism was contingent on the notion of fantasy roleplaying as embodying a dangerous Other. Fantasy has commonly been the target of Satanic panics because of its representations of otherworldly arcane power like witchcraft and sorcery. Escapism used to be a part of this fear – a concern that children would get “lost” in games. Some of that fear is still around as a question of what it means to have a health relationship to gaming. More recently, the term *addiction* has been used in place of *escapism* to describe a player who loses themselves in a game (Kuss et al., 2012).

Addiction is much more frequently a concern about video games and online games than tabletop roleplaying games. Indeed, escapism seems to be a natural part of TRPGs for many players in fantasy roleplaying. For adult roleplayers, like Kora (33, Hispanic/White) it can be a crucial part of mental health and self-care

It's magic when I get together with my D&D groups and I get to play a different character, and I get to be a different person. And they don't have my worries. My cleric does not have to worry about – oh, shoot, I have 19 subtask user stories assigned to me for work. I haven't started any of them. That is not my cleric's worry. And my cleric's worry is – not enough people are praying to my goddess.

When it comes to published narratives in roleplaying games, White, straight, able-bodied players have always been able to see themselves represented in tabletop roleplaying games as the hero, but the same wasn't always true for players of color, disabled players, or queer players. That has changed, in large part because of the outspokenness of gamers on Twitter and the visibility of diverse casts in streamed games.

Having an online presence that is synonymous with one's offline presence has consequences. For gamers who play publicly, every utterance and alliance is scrutinized. When asking about how gaming culture had changed, I found that gamers who had begun to play tabletop roleplaying games pre-1990s had positive feelings about how accessible and popular gaming had become but had concerns about how such popularity had thrown open the doors to vitriol in online spaces. Some of them, like Hilary (40, White), didn't participate or consider themselves part of any online gaming community:

In terms of gamer culture, I think a lot of it has moved online, and I don't play most of those games. You couldn't pay me enough. Mostly because I have the feeling that the internet unleashes a lot of the kind of vitriol that people feel safe to unleash when they're behind a screen. And I saw enough of that on RPGnet. So, if that's what's going on in online spaces... I've always felt respected in real life spaces, so I'm going to keep my gaming to women only spaces or real life,

basically. I suppose my reaction to it has been truncating experience. I've curated my boundaries carefully.

In a follow-up email in 2022, Hilary clarified that she had briefly participated in an email-based roleplaying game which was a "majority female space" where she experienced "no gender-related problems," but quit due to time commitment.

Jessica (45, Caucasian) also had mixed feelings about the impact of social media, because she thought that it played a key role in both expanding the hobby, but likewise unearthed more harassment and misogyny:

So, I think there's a lot of misogyny, but there's also a lot of expansion ... I'm going to say something that may sound contrived but it's kind of like society in that the deeply entrenched misogynistic crap is even more deeply entrenched but there's more acceptance of other people playing, if you look at a broader community.

Jessica's comment speaks to some negative reactions about diversity in gaming, which I have characterized as toxic nostalgia. There is sometimes a friction between generations, the older generation having been through the mire of the 1980s and playing D&D before it was cool. That someone's fantasy could be playing a disabled character might appear outlandish for players who thought of D&D as based on a notion of the European medieval period, which as it turns out was not without its share of disabled citizens (Stiker, 1999). Marginalized gamers want to see themselves as the antagonist in their own stories; this is no different from any other player, including those who had begun to play earlier editions of D&D, when disability was only framed as negative. Being blinded, deafened, or having a missing limb were traumas that happened to

characters through injury and seen as a weakness. Disabled gamers are working to change the script on disability in gaming.

My respondent Sara (23, White British) founded Heroes without Limits, “a community of disabled, chronically ill, and/or neurodivergent table top gamers and abled allies” (*Heroes without Limits*, n.d.). Sara gave an example of a gaming scenario in which players had to be reminded of the need for accessibility when playing the adventure *Curse of Strahd* for D&D fifth edition:

One of my friends played a character that was in a wheelchair, and one of the things that really stood out to them and stuck with me as well, as a GM, is they went to Strahd’s Castle, to have a dinner with him basically, and he invited them in. He went down the stairs into the dining room, and then realized one of the players wasn’t there, because they were in a wheelchair and they were a full-time user, so they couldn’t get out and walk. I took it upon myself to think, well, he has a lair action. That means he can change his lair at will, whenever he wants to. And the castle is a lair. So, I basically made him apologize to that player, and he basically did a kind of gesture and the stairs moved down into a ramp, so that the wheelchair user could get down. That’s always stuck with me as a storyteller, as well, just because it made that player so happy. Because they themselves were also in a wheelchair and were disabled.

Sara’s example is useful in thinking about expanding what counts as fantasy. In particular, there are opportunities for practicing empathy and awareness – moments to learn from missteps and apply them first in a game, but also take such lessons beyond the

gaming space. Megan (40, White) emphasized that it was important to have the space for people to learn during roleplaying games and gave an example:

My DM and I actually had a kind of, not a falling out, but a big disagreement. Because there was an NPC [non-playable character] who was just being horrible and we we're trying to be like, "dude, all of your female NPCs are just awful people. Like they are just these straight up mean bitches. And like, there's nothing wrong with being assertive, but they're mean. Like, what's your problem with women?" And he's like, "I don't have a problem." It's like, but these women have had to come up and be strong and taken care of. And then he had the light bulb moment of, they don't have to have had been oppressed. And this is a world that I'm creating and I'm inadvertently bringing in the sexism that's in our culture, and I don't want to do that. So, he changed it and corrected it and did a really good job. But that only came up from conversations. And if you think about D&D being a people growing machine, that's one of the things is like it... We confront ourselves.

Megan's comment illustrates that through roleplaying, players and GMs—if engaging in open and reflective dialogue—"confront themselves" and are afforded the opportunity to change. She also emphasizes that fantasy roleplaying games, rather than being worlds that are rigid with the same rules and inequalities as our imagined history or contemporary society, can be worlds in which those oppressions *do not exist*.

While demands for more inclusion of identities that had previously been left out of roleplaying lore seems new, I would argue that the notion that fantasy roleplaying as a way to explore possibilities – both mythical and worldly – has been an important part of

roleplaying since its inception. A straightforward example came from Jody (63, Caucasian), who started playing D&D in 1979 when we discussed motivations for playing D&D:

So, you could be somebody and work out your frustrations, or you could be the person you always aspired to be, or you could engage in a little, I don't know, larceny, if you felt like being a thief.

Note that linguistically, there is no distance between character and player. *You could be the person you always aspired to be.* Roleplaying games are immersive and everyone I spoke to communicated that feeling of *becoming* a character or using a character to get through a part of their lives that was difficult. Kora (33, Hispanic/White) talked about channeling her most confident character when she faced difficult choices. When Jean (46, White) had a condition that gave her brain fog, she played a character with a low Intelligence score so that she didn't always have to be closely focused on the action. Zoe (21, Filipina American) gave one of her characters depression so that she had to “play through that and deal with depression and self-worth.” While no one suggested that tabletop roleplaying was a replacement for professional counseling, *working*, *practicing*, *experimenting* were all verbs that I heard over and over again.

Our Current Moral Panic?

In Chapters 1 and 2, I discussed two moral panics which I argued were crucial in maintaining the White male status quo—and gamers as outcasts—in geek culture in the 1980s and 1990s. Although these panics happened over a decade apart, they had much in common. The victim of both panics were the young white males who were “brilliant, but troubled” and held promise were it not for the influence of Satanic or violent media.

While concerns about Satanic media have largely faded, the idea that media has an outsized power over children and other vulnerable populations has not. Certainly, the image of the young White man, while not one of innocence, has remained an image in which humanity is usually protected. This is evident in the way that the legal system has rarely prosecuted White police officers for shooting fatalities. Another recent example is the verdict from the Kyle Rittenhouse trial, where Rittenhouse, then 18 years old, was cleared of all charges despite shooting and killing two men during the protests that occurred in Kenosha, Wisconsin in 2020 after a White police officer shot Jacob Blake, who is Black, seven times in the back as he was climbing into a vehicle (Bosman, 2021).

Cohen (2011) defined a moral panic as having a “suitable victim” as well as a “suitable target” – both of which need to be easily accepted by the status quo. Children have most commonly been figured as the victims of moral panics. In the case of a suitable target, Dungeons & Dragons was an easy bullseye in the 1980s. TSR was a small company with temperamental leadership, and its players had little social cachet. In the 1990s, shock rocker Marilyn Manson, who was implicated in influencing the Columbine High School shooters, looked the part of a bad influence. Cohen says that for a successful moral panic, there needs to be “a consensus that the beliefs or action being denounced were not insulated entities.... but integral parts of the society or else could (and would) be unless ‘something was done’” (p. xi). Teen suicide and child abuse were blamed on Satanic influence and cult activity in the 1980s, and the epidemic of the late 1990s and beyond was school shootings.

It is easier to blame a folk devil than it is to consider the more complex systemic reasons for a social problem. Moral panics rely on slippery slope logic that argues that

one small thing (i.e., playing a fantasy game or violent video game) leads to more concerning behavior (i.e., suicide or mass violence). Gun safety and mental healthcare were all but absent from conversations about teens who had committed suicide in the 1980s, supposedly influenced by Satanic media. Discussions of mental health *were* happening in the fallout of the Columbine High School shooting, but media coverage that brought up mental health concerns were not consistent. Little was done to improve access to mental healthcare in the US, where the cost to access care was prohibitive for many people, especially before the Affordable Care Act was enacted in 2010, long after the tragedies blamed on Satanic media and the mass shooting at Columbine High School. Yet linking mental illness on its own as a cause of violent behavior stigmatizes mental illness and distract from other factors, such as gun access (Metzl & MacLeish, 2015).

Furthermore, framing a mass shooter as mentally ill is not applied equally to shooters of all races; White shooters are most likely to be framed as mentally ill and therefore presented as more sympathetic than non-White perpetrators (Duxbury et al., 2018).

The response to the Columbine shooting and the threat of mass violence was fractured and unclear and put most of the responsibility on parents who weren't spending enough time with their kids and therefore had no clue what sorts of violent media they were consuming. Yet there was no discussion of practical ways to encourage parents to spend more time with their children, such as a shorter workday or paid vacation days. Instead, new technologies emerged as tools for the surveillance of children's media use, such as the V-Chip, which allowed parents to block television shows based on their ratings category on their own sets, popularized by the Clinton administration in 1996 (Hendershot, 1998). Parents who wanted to monitor their children's internet activity

could now do so by purchasing software that could record sites visited or even incoming and outgoing email (Burns, 2001). Instead of systemic change that could offer parents and kids more free time to spend with each other, America did what it did best: Sold parents a product that appeared to be a quick fix and a time saver.

After a moral panic has passed, it is framed as a ludicrous reaction, so it's difficult to identify what is or isn't a panic without the benefit of hindsight. Because a moral panic, for those who buy into it, feels real in the moment. Moral panics help people make sense of something senseless, and it's not ludicrous to be concerned about suicide and violence. For audience studies scholars, reflecting on moral panics over media – and how media spreads moral panics – is crucial because it involves asking how audiences interpret media rather than assuming their interpretations. How powerful are media representations and messages – and how much credit do we afford audiences? When it comes to entertainment media, the relationship between content and ideology has been primarily one of economic value. Speaking about children's television, Kline (1993) states that there is “no simple ideological structure” that “dominates children's narrative because the scripting of children's television is mediated by business objectives...keeping the costs down, keeping the regulators out, and moving the product off the shelf” (p. 304). Media narratives based on business objectives doesn't indicate how audiences interpret its content or what exactly appeals to them.

When it comes to entertainment media, are White men still the mascot victim for moral panics, and what *is* the moral panic of our decade? I don't have a clear answer, because what is or isn't a moral panic is usually only identifiable in hindsight. In a world of fragmented media, where news cycles don't appear to have any central source, moral

panics are smaller and more fragmented. When someone commits suicide, no one's blaming D&D. Debate over the influence of violent video games continues, but rarely are they cited for a direct cause of violence. In the 1980s, there were claims that Judas Priest albums contained *subliminal* messaging. But fading are the days of subtly and irony, and in are the days of sincerity. For an audience to engage with moral panic, the focus is now on more literal invocations – death threats online, hate speech on internet forums and social media. Moral panics exist across the political spectrum. While the moral panic over Dungeons & Dragons was most astutely felt within Evangelical Christianity, it only gained widespread recognition when covered by mainstream media. A moral panic often centers very concrete and real fears: Teen suicide, violence in schools, for instance – but it's the *cause* that's too simplified or too exaggerated.

Contemporary scholars have expanded moral panic theory by complicating some of its elements. deYoung (2013) points out that in a traditional moral panic, folk devils are Othered *before* being identified as folk devils, and that the “‘otherness’ of folk devils is reified by their treatment as objects, rather than subjects, as powerless rather than agentic” (p. 146). In other words, the folk devil or scapegoat of a moral panic is already marginalized in some way. deYoung also argued that the *agency* of folk devils is undertheorized. In a traditional moral panic, it is the moral entrepreneur who is the agent of social change and control. Becker (1963) described a moral entrepreneur as someone who creates and enact rules. The type of moral entrepreneur typically at the helm of a moral panic – especially the Satanic Panic – was the “crusading reformer,” for whom “the existing rules do not satisfy...because there is some evil which profoundly disturbs him” (Becker, 1963, p. 147). Joosse (2018) argued that charismatic leaders, such as

former president Donald Trump can “*subvert* traditional moralities...overturning established value tables in the ways that ‘bedevil’ traditional moral leaders, refashioning them as folk devils” (p. 3). Trump demonized immigrants and women *and also* attacked others within the Republican party (Joose, 2018). I am particularly interested in the way that victims of media moral panics are framed as being without much agency. This image is harmful when it takes away agency and responsibility from the victim. This seems most apparent when the *offender* is also the victim of influential media (J. Young, 2009), as in the case of the Columbine shooters.

In a similar way, media aftermath of the storming of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 centered President Trump as a charismatic entrepreneur and his supporters as falling victim to his incendiary rhetoric at rallies and on Twitter (Barry & Frenkel, 2021). In the 1980s and early 1990s, moral entrepreneurs like Pat Pulling were claiming that Dungeons & Dragons was a Satanic medium, through which young boys would be lured into Satanic ritual suicide. After Columbine, violent entertainment media was blamed for smothering young people in an atmosphere of violence, but it also spread the blame to authority figures who weren’t paying attention. With the framing of those who stormed the US Capitol in 2021 as both offenders and victims of Donald Trump’s rhetoric, they too were also trapped by “online echo chambers,” and plotted in digital spaces, seemingly unchecked, until everything came to a head when Trump tweeted ‘Big protest in DC on January 6th’ (Barry & Frenkel, 2021). Unlike the influence of Marilyn Manson lyrics or violent video games – which are ostensibly entertainment – these Tweets appeared as a literal invitation to protest (and commit violence) from the president.

The lessons of moral panic have implications for considering audiences' agency in media studies. Contemporary media studies obliges the inclusion of new media, which Shaw (2017) describes as a "constellation of technologies that are networked, computerized, social, mobile, and interactive" (p. 593). Building on Stuart Hall's (2009 [1973]) model of encoding and decoding, Shaw (2017) suggests using an "affordances perspective," asking questions about what types of interactions media encourage and allow users to do (p. 597). Rather than being limited to audience reading positions, an affordances perspective considers how *use* of interactional media falls within hegemonic, negotiated, or oppositional use (Shaw, 2017). Although tabletop roleplaying games are not "new media," they are inherently interactive and have the potential to be transformed and used in ways that its designers may not have intended. Furthermore, they are influenced *by* social media, where innovative ideas and new ways of playing circulate. Social media can flatten and limit context for audiences (Phillips & Milner, 2017), and influence the rise of a moral panic. If one game, genre of music, one tv show, an internet forum, or a bunch of tweets are solely to blame for the tragedies of the world, then a symptom could be mistaken for a cause. Savvy audiences could equally understand the opposite; for instance, that racism or sexism in Dungeons & Dragons has been influenced by racism and sexism outside of the game but is not cause.

Considering players' resistance or complacency to game texts is useful when so much emphasis and weight has been placed on the content of media messages and how to change them rather focusing on the interaction between texts and audiences. Writing about board games, Booth (2020) asks scholars to consider the "interactive potentiality" of analog games, or that "the rhetorical argumentation games make must be facilitated by

the players' own interactions with the game" (p. 39). In this way, the object under study is not only the game or the players, but what is created through their being brought together. Neither reception studies nor textual analysis divorced from each other can sufficiently address the study of social games.

Toxic Nostalgia: The Legend Continues

Throughout *Gender Rolls*, I have used the term *toxic nostalgia* to indicate a sentiment that reappears again and again. A key part of moral panic, toxic nostalgia is often a reaction to events and epidemics which *appeared* to be dramatic changes in the moral fabric of society but were in fact only new or visible to the White middle class. As a social reaction to tragic epidemics such as teen suicide or school shootings, toxic nostalgia frames a fuzzy and idealized past as safer and more wholesome and treats new communication technologies (i.e., the Internet and mobile phones) and evolutions in entertainment media (i.e., better graphics for violence in movies and video games) as catalysts for the dangerous new present.

Toxic nostalgia is often invoked by politicians in order to promise a return to "the good old days" of prosperity, recently seen in former President Trump's motto "Make America Great Again." The reference to a great America leaves out groups of marginalized Americans – people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, immigrants, disabled Americans – for whom America was not always great. Many in these communities still face discrimination and a precarious day-to-day existence. The fictional America invoked by Trump is a narrow one: White, middle class, and suburban (Mukherjee, 2018)

Nostalgia is an effortless way for entertainment media to cash in on previously successful franchises. Our current media nostalgia appears to be for the 1990s and 2000s, but media nostalgia is nothing new. Williams (2011) discussed how fans react to a fan object's "death" through rewatching and through discussions in forums – in the case of her article, the finale of *The West Wing*. Some media, like *Friends*, has lived on endlessly in syndication, which has made it possible for several generations of fans to continue to experience a nostalgia for the show (Fitzsimmons & Smith-Frigerio, 2020). With streaming networks like Hulu, Netflix, and HBO Max, reviving "dead" media is now common. In just the past ten years, several television shows from the 1990s and 2000s have released revivals or reboots including *Gossip Girl*, *The X-Files*, and *Gilmore Girls*. The viewing landscape is inundated with nostalgia even as it seems more poised to take chances with streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime funding independent projects not bound by the same regulations as broadcast television. Even so, with each new season, more ghosts of television's past are being resurrected on digital media.

Fans' ontological security can be shaken by the death of a fan object (Williams, 2011). The current media nostalgia revival is partially a revisiting of "a simpler time," but is also an attempt to reclaim older media from some of the problematic tropes they contained in order to reach out to old fans while attracting new ones. Unlike previous generations, where older media was only available in syndication on broadcast television or VHS/DVD, streaming technology makes it possible for younger generations to access older media at their leisure. In fact, a lot of older media remains popular *without* updating. *Friends* (1994-2004) and *The Office* (2005-2013) remain fan favorites among

emerging adults for precisely the reason my co-author and I found in our interviews in with Millennials in 2016: Sitcoms are still the banal laugh tracks to our quotidian, and if contemporary media doesn't offer the same repetitive warm fuzzy blanket, audiences will return to what they know (Fitzsimmons & Smith-Frigerio, 2020; Saraiya, 2019).

Roleplaying games have gone through a similar trajectory, though I would not argue that they have *always* been popular in the way that *Friends* has, but perhaps more of a continued cult favorite like *The Office*. While older editions of D&D are less popular since the publication of fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons in 2014, they are still available for purchase online for gaming groups who prefer to use them. Older editions' availability and visibility have called attention to problematic stereotypes therein, some of which carried over to the newest edition of D&D. Most notably, demands for Oriental Adventures to be removed from marketplaces drew attention to material that had for the most part languished in secondhand bookstores and was never updated for fifth edition. In 2020, Geek Native published an article on the criticism of Oriental Adventures and noted that there had been Google searches for "Oriental Adventures 5e," suggesting that users were searching for an updated edition of Oriental Adventures, which has never been published by Wizards of the Coast (Girdwood, 2020). Wizards of the Coast continues to sell copies of the original Oriental Adventures, but added a disclaimer to the product in 2020:

We (Wizards) recognize that some of the legacy content available on this website does not reflect the values of the Dungeons & Dragons franchise today. Some older content may reflect ethnic, racial, and gender prejudice that were commonplace in American society at that time. These depictions were wrong then

and are wrong today. This content is presented as it was originally created, because to do otherwise would be the same as claiming these prejudices never existed. Dungeons & Dragons teaches that diversity is a strength, and we strive to make our D&D products as welcoming and inclusive as possible. This part of our work will never end (“*Oriental Adventures (1e)*”, n.d.).

Many recognized this as a PR move – after all, the book was still for sale. The increased scrutiny on the decades-old adventure module also caught the attention of defenders of Oriental Adventures, who responded with a common retort: *If you’re so offended, don’t buy it*. Online responses to calls for inclusion often engage this reflex, and vitriol in some form has become an expected reaction.

In their book, *The Ambivalent Internet*, Phillips and Milner (2017) wrestle with the complexity of the attention economy in online debates. Writing about the racist harassment that actor Leslie Jones suffered on Twitter in 2016 after the release of the all-woman *Ghostbusters* remake, they pose a flurry of questions: “Should antagonistic posters be named and shamed? Counter-antagonized? Should their impact be minimized, so the broader public can’t see the offending posts? Should their impact be maximized in order to call the greatest amount of attention to bad behavior?” (p. 183). Social media “lend unprecedented immediacy, public visibility, and at times, outright ferocity to familiar ambivalence” (p. 192). If visibility and attention is sought, then social media will deliver, especially if a topic appears to be imminently debatable. Online silence might be interpreted as complicity with injustice, but “engaging with vernacular ambivalence online, one is always on the precipice of amplifying ugliness, even inadvertently” (Phillips & Milner, 2017, p. 56). Social media’s ambivalence and antagonistic landscape

renders almost anything up for debate, regardless of an author's intention. Recall Kienna's (22, Chinese) comment on the negative reactions she received after demanding that *Oriental Adventures* be removed from WotC's marketplace:

It's not about you, sometimes. It's not about you and your feelings sometimes, especially if you are of a non-marginalized group. It's about the people who are being actually affected negatively by these things. Again, nothing is stopping you from doing a thing, as long as it's not hurting other people around you.

Kienna's critiques of Orientalism in *Oriental Adventures* were not presented for the sake of debate, though some responded as though they were. This is a problem of audience, both in the sense that tweets cannot really be limited to a particular audience (if one's profile is public) and, for some audience members, the compulsion to respond, regardless of whether they are the intended audience (Ott, 2017). This raises an uncomfortable question: Would letting *Oriental Adventures* fall into digital obscurity have been a more fitting end? As Phillips and Milner (2017) point out, doing so would also risk "extinguishing important critiques, which can only spread if their audiences give them life" (p. 56). It is this ambivalence that characterizes online discourse and the reaction of toxic nostalgia in a longstanding hobby such as D&D.

Is All Nostalgia Toxic?

In the examples I have discussed that pertain to D&D communities and of reactions to the Satanic Panic, I have characterized the sentiment of [toxic] nostalgia as maintaining the status quo or "going back" to a vague, unreal, rose-colored past. This desire is especially evident in the abusive language used online against players who call for changes to make gaming more inclusive and diverse. The expression of toxic

nostalgia maintains the acceptance of misogyny and racism in media, but it also paints a false picture of the past which erases both historical injustices and the achievements and participation of marginalized populations in gaming.

All nostalgia is based in emotion, a simple fact that often gets lost in online discourse, where “logical” answers like *you can just log off or if you don’t like it, don’t buy it*, is just as much driven by affective connections to a particular media as those “SJWs” pleading with Wizards of the Coast to hire more writers of color. All are fans of D&D, and all are emotionally invested in D&D. Nostalgia is often characterized by an attachment or fondness to “old” media and technology. In his article, “The Are No Old Media,” Natale (2016) argued that the differentiation between old and new media is relational and based on perception, not an empirical attribute. It is the “perceived oldness of media” that elicits nostalgia for audiences (Natale, 2016, p. 596). Niemeyer (2014) characterizes media nostalgia in the 21st century as a reaction to rapid change, and the “desire to slow it down even while exploiting the opportunities offered by novel technologies” (Natale, 2016, p. 596). So much of the notion of the nostalgia – including in how I’ve used it in my dissertation – describes it as a feeling that holds back progress, but Pickering and Keightley (2006) argued that “nostalgia can be both melancholic and utopian” (p. 921). That is, that nostalgia has the potential to be response to loss and longing, but also be “the basis for renewal and satisfaction in the future” (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 921). Because fandoms (and honestly, humans) are so primed for nostalgia, I certainly would prefer for there to be an optimistic way to understand it. For D&D, its longevity and previous cult status has bathed it in nostalgia. A positive nostalgia for D&D would be a reverence for Rule Zero: Anything is possible.

What's next for gender in audience studies?

Discourse around gender has changed; there is no simple binary or even spectrum of gender, but more accurately, a matrix. What does this mean for audience studies and social science in general? How do we study gender when the categories of gender are endless and mutable? These were not questions that I had in mind when I started my *Gender Rolls*. In trying to be inclusive in recruitment, I sometimes learned that I might have been exclusive, specifically when it came to my assumptions about gender. I did not consider including nonbinary individuals until Jean (46, White) responded to my call, after which I added the term *nonbinary* in future calls for participants. I certainly wanted to focus on marginalized identities in tabletop roleplaying but stumbled in my attempts to put those identities into words because of the plethora of gender identities available. Framing my calls the way that I did resulted in responses from nonbinary individuals who identified as “femme” or “female.” Limiting the population was necessary but finding the right language that doesn’t exclude a potential respondent was difficult. In future calls, I would probably do what Adrienne Shaw chose to do with *Gaming at the Margins*, where she chose “not to signal” to interviewees why she chose to speak with them, because in the past, “interviewees often rejected the responsibility of representing that group.” I certainly saw something similar when women assumed that I was looking for negative experiences with tabletop roleplaying. As mentioned above, recruiting “women and nonbinary” individuals probably excluded potential respondents who identified as nonbinary masc.

Much of qualitative social science research hinges on a newness and of categorization. In scrambling to find an answer to the question *why is this significant*, I

felt I needed to find something that would speak to online harassment and #gamergate – and yes, I did hear about those things. But here’s the question I ended on in every interview: How have tabletop roleplaying games been significant for you? And not a single answer was about harassment. A big question that drew me to audience studies was *why do we love the things we love?* But also, what keeps us from them? Who tells us that we can’t be a fan of *x*? Who tells us we can’t enjoy slinging imaginary swords and beating up imaginary bad guys? Why do we love hobbies in spite of those dipshits? I think it’s because, for all of the gatekeeping – both overt and subtle – players have the possibility to make the game their own. It’s about the transformative power of immersive, collaborative storytelling.

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Appendix: Respondent Demographics

All items were open-ended except for education. There was a lot of variation in the terminology that respondents used to describe themselves. For clarity, I have condensed some of their categories, but have included footnotes about the variations. All demographics were indicated around the time of the interviews which took place from 2017 to 2021.

Table 1
Respondent Self-Reported Demographics
 Total number of respondents included = 37

Demographic	Number	Approx. percentage of total sample
Age		
18-24	3	8.1%
25-40	7	18.9%
41-56	23	62.1%
57-75	4	10.8%
Race		
Asian ¹⁸	3	8.1%
Black	1	2.7%
Hispanic	1	2.7%
Multiracial ¹⁹	4	10.8%
White/Caucasian ²⁰	28	75.7%
Gender		
Female or Woman ²¹	32	86.4%
Nonbinary ²²	5	13.5%
Sexuality		
Asexual	1	2.7%
Bisexual ²³	13	35.1%
Heterosexual/Straight	17	45.9%
Lesbian	1	2.7%
Pansexual	2	5.4%
Queer	1	2.7%

¹⁸ Filipino American; Chinese; Korean

¹⁹ Hispanic/White; Black/White; Mexican, Osage, and Japanese; Asian/White

²⁰ Including: Ashkenazi Jew (White passing); Jewish/White; White/Celt; Human non-aligning; White British

²¹ Including: Female (transgender)

²² Including: non-binary (femme); agender; genderfluid; female (non-binary)

²³ Including: Bi/Queer; Bisexual/pandemiromantic

Questioning/Heteroflexible	2	5.4%
Religion		
Agnostic	4	10.8%
Atheist	3	8.1%
Christian ²⁴	7	18.9%
Jewish ²⁵	3	8.1%
None/No Response ²⁶	12	32.4%
Spiritual/Multiple ²⁷	3	8.1%
Wiccan/Pagan ²⁸	5	13.5%
Education (Highest attained)		
Some college	5	13.5%
2-year degree (Associate's)	2	5.4%
4-year degree (Bachelor's)	16	43.2%
Master or Doctorate	9	24.3%
Professional Degree	5	13.5%
Location		
United States ²⁹		
Midwest	10	27.0%
Northeast	5	13.5%
South	6	16.2%
West	9	24.3%
Canada	3	8.1%
Europe	4	10.8%

²⁴ American Baptist; Catholic; Anglican; non-denominational

²⁵ Including: Conservative Jewish

²⁶ Including: Former Catholic

²⁷ Jewish Pagan Daoist; Quakerish, but not really at all; raised Jewish, kind of a practicing Buddhist, attend unitarian universalist services semi-regularly

²⁸ Including: animist; kitchen witch (which I assume is a joke...?)

²⁹ Regions as defined by the US Census Bureau: https://www2.census.gov/geo/pdfs/maps-data/maps/reference/us_regdiv.pdf