

Hooligans at the Table: The Concept of Male Preserves in Tabletop Role-playing Games

Abstract: This paper examines the nature of conversations that occur at gaming tables in tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) and the degree to which gendered communication impacts how individuals participate in gaming sessions. There is a host of research discussing barriers for women and minorities in terms of full representation and interaction in gaming and “geek” spaces (Garcia 2017; Reagle 2015; Stang and Trammell 2019). I assert that one rationale for this limitation is the domination of gaming spaces by men, particularly middle-class White men, and the subculture that comes along with this demographic. Dunning (1986) discusses the concept of male preserves, how sports in particular create subcultures that prize behavior and language that are associated with men and embodied in the male form. I discuss how the TRPG table is a male preserve, encouraging a level of dominance that colors table talk and acceptable norms (Dunning, Murphy and Williams 2014). The masculine nature of the discussion style of this table talk is more difficult by subaltern groups because of the clear association with “stereotypical” gamers, commonly White and male, and this difficulty is demonstrated in various ways (Bowman 2013; Hendricks 2006; Ilieva 2013). I surmise that while diversity has always existed and proceeds to improve in tabletop gaming, the subcultural elements of a male preserve remain difficult to uproot.

Keywords: masculinity, discourse, sociology, inequality, gamer characteristics, tabletop RPGs, role-playing games

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1. INTRODUCTION

Despite evidence to the contrary, the gaming subculture has overwhelmingly been perceived as a male space (Vermeulen, Bauwel, and Van Looy 2017). Past characterizations of role-playing games in popular culture have highlighted stereotypical examples of particularly White men and have correlated excelling in role-playing games to a lack of interest in more physical activities, reinforcing the gaming nerd stereotype (Kendall 2000; Kendall 2011). While women and racial minorities have always been present at the gaming table, the preponderance of belief stemming from stereotypes and social stigma have coalesced into a system of norms that both centers and privileges what is considered “nerd” or “geek” behaviors commonly associated with White males. As such, other populations have employed prefixes and suffixes (PoC gamer, gamer girl) to clearly pinpoint the convergence of their differentiated identities (Witkowski 2018). While research has looked at the demographics of who is participating in tabletop role-playing games and examined the erasure and inclusion of populations from gaming materials, there is a lack of in-depth research on the nature of the interactions at the game table; nowhere near the amount of public facing critical work on the topic. (Garcia 2007; Long 2016; Stang and Trammell 2019).

This paper examines the subcultural space of role-playing games through the lens of Eric Dunning’s (1986) male preserve. Using this sociological concept allows for the examination of two distinct aspects of the discussions at the table, otherwise known as “table talk.” First, if the role-playing subculture, and specifically the gaming table, is a male preserve, then there is a style of discussion that actively privileges men, particularly the stereotypical White male nerd. The white male nerd is characterized as “a person who pursues an unfashionable or highly technical interest with obsessive or exclusive dedication” (Lane 2018, 1). Elements of dominance are demonstrated through a display of knowledge acted out via *gamesplaining*

and *rules lawyering* – the discursive effects of mechanics recitation from memory, arguing over game mechanics, and a draconian adherence to established game rules. These elements prize knowledge over experience and can serve as barriers to those who do not perceive themselves as having sufficient command over information related to the game. These knowledges inherently create a space of unequal cultural capital, as rulebooks in tabletop role-playing games can prove expensive, with complicated and extensive rules that take time to comprehend.

Second, the male preserve has a degree of “hooliganism” that is allowed at the table. While this discursive hooliganism can be displayed in various ways, in games a character “acts out” in a manner that could be interpreted as crude, crass, or inappropriate and would spark a discussion in a more socially conscious culture. The reticence to apply contemporary social norms to gaming worlds (e.g. discussions of race, feminism, sexual assault), but to frame these conversations as comedy or in-game behavior can lead to uncomfortable situations for a diverse gaming population, as in depth conversations can be interpreted as “ruining the fun,” and treated as some form of “bad sportsmanship.” In game, this can result in characters doing inappropriate things (e.g. non-consensual sex or treating an NPC of a different race poorly), and then those actions breaking into humor, comments, and commentary centered around the act at the gaming table.

Overall, the discussion in this paper challenges, in part, the idea that representation matters. The act of bringing individuals to the table must be understood as secondary to a consideration of what is happening at the table. If the gaming table is a male preserve, then the discourses occurring could be understood as masculine and catering to the dominant idea of what is a “gamer,” regardless of the demographics of the table. The indoctrination that occurs in the gaming subculture is what needs to be examined, and a fundamental shift of “who” is at the table makes little difference if the aspects of dominance persist as valued aspects of role-playing gamer culture.

2. RACE AND GENDER IN GAMING

Contemporary issues have been noted as signaling the inherent gender inequality that is present in the fields of entertainment and gaming. Concurrently, research and discussion has examined how role-playing games have handled the issue of race and gender in their subculture. Women and racial minorities have rarely been presented as integral or mainstay parts of the gaming community. As Salter and Blodgett (2012) note, the “silencing of marginalized voices is part of a larger trend in the hardcore gaming public. The digital representations of women and other marginalized figures within the public are rarely rich or complex” (411). Women and minorities in role-playing games are commonly portrayed in submissive, secondary, and unremarkable ways, making more complex imagery and rare and noteworthy (Long 2016; Stang and Trammell 2019; Trammell 2018). The role-playing game community suffers from the power of a stereotype that persists outside of the subculture but is also internalized within its confines. Thus, “there is agreement that the majority of players are male, and almost unanimous consensus that game players are young, and along with these there is evidence that players may have a tendency to be white, pale-skinned, middle-class, educated, and with poor social skills” (Curran 2011, 45). The acceptance of this stereotype allows for the subculture to center White men for two reasons: 1) it reflects what is seen as the dominant population among role-playing gamers, and 2) game masters can use White men as the common antagonists in games as well, reducing any possibility of being

perceived as sexist or racist by designing adversaries that are members of minority groups. Recent discussions, however, have discussed the ways in which other groups, such as the drow and orcs, have been used as discriminatory substitutions which allow for permissible racism and discrimination as these groups come from “evil races” (DiPlacino 2020; Limborg 2020). Wizards of the Coast has decided to change much of its past behavior and mythology, as understandings and portrayals of these groups are promised to change (Marshall 2020).

3. GAMER MASCULINITY

As an outgrowth of feminist theory, men’s studies have deeply interrogated the question of masculinity, and the effects of masculinity constructions on the lives of men. Contemporary masculinity arguments operate from a critical theory model, demonstrating how masculinity is reified through the social world, and how expressions of masculine ideals can be harmful to both women and men. Prominence surrounds the theories of Raewyn Connell who defines masculinity as a collection of configured practices that are understood as best embodied by men. Connell also suggests the existence of hegemonic masculinity, an idealized sense of how men should behave in Western society representing a near-impossible litmus test for all men. Hegemonic masculinity penalizes a more feminine performance; the less “manly” one is, the more likely they are to be critiqued. While most will not achieve the romanticized and epitomized ideal of male behavior, it remains as a guidepost that situates behaviors of men in all aspects of society.

Nerd masculinity, or acts associated with those Western society refers to as nerds, strays far from the hegemonic ideal, but still retains power. The stereotypical imagery associated with the nerd has evolved in the ensuing generations. Once thought of as a “broken” form of masculinity accentuating characteristics such as meekness, passivity, and awkwardness, the concept of nerd masculinity has grown to be seen as a relevant and acceptable example of how manhood can be displayed (Almog and Kaplan 2017; Bendele 2019; Gruys and Munsch 2020). A key factor involves those performing a nerd masculinity still hewing to elements of hegemonic masculinity. Scott Kiesling (2007) theorizes that masculine discourse has four components: dominance, heterosexism, gender difference, and male superiority. Common discussions in nerd subculture touch on all of these elements, as there is a significant amount of gatekeeping that occurs to establish the embodiment of nerd masculinity as very White and very cisgender male (Kendall 2000).

While the nerd is a marginalized masculinity, the stereotype does possess some measure of power. For one, nerds are stereotyped to be intelligent, having a greater command over intellectual fields that are not common among either other men or the general population. This provides a level of parity in the nerd’s masculine presentation; that which they lack in physical prowess or knowledge of sports is made up for by brilliance in their area of focus.

4. MALE PRESERVE

It was the study of sports that led Eric Dunning to develop the idea of male preserves. Overall, Dunning believed that in some social spaces, dominated by men, a set of norms and values reign as dominant that not only privilege men, but may exist independent of conventional social norms. As a result, actions, topics of discussion, and behaviors that might be seen as unacceptable, lewd, or deviant elsewhere are coded as perfectly fine in the male preserve. Dunning initially looked at the area of sports, where men engage in a much more physical,

raucous, and uninhibited manner that would be for the most part inappropriate in other parts of the social world. However, not only are these social performances accepted by others in the male preserve, those who are not a part of the subculture dismiss and compartmentalize the behaviors as part of the experience.

A critical function of the male preserve, according to Dunning, was a space where men “could bolster up their threatened masculinity and, at the same time, mock, objectify and vilify women, the principal source of the threat” (Dunning 1973, 12). Men are given free purchase in the male preserve to denigrate women and other subordinated groups (such as gay men) without fear of being labeled as sexist or homophobic. The male preserve, then becomes a “non-player character” space where social hiccups that would cause scrutiny elsewhere are simply dismissed as “boys will be boys”; a social circumstance where one can blow off steam and not be saddled by judgement of one’s fellows, because while it is not a space where “everything goes,” there is more leeway to express oneself.

As Dunning notes in his research of rugby clubs, some of this leeway might be expressed as public nudity and lewd acts to other men. In the space of the male preserve, men are provided insulation from claims of homosexuality because the behavior can be attributed to the uniqueness of the circumstance (and likely the presence of copious amounts of alcohol). Regardless, actions (unless they are extreme, such as sexual intercourse with another man) are beyond reproach because they are dismissed as all in good fun, and products of the subculture. Indeed, men who were more sedate, non-participatory, or critical (and as such, adhering to more contemporary norms and values) would be under significantly more scrutiny than those who behave in a more bawdy manner (Dunning, Murphy and Williams 2014).

Using Dunning’s theory as a model, I argue there is something of a *geek male preserve*, a subculture that is created (in the gaming space) that provides a similar freedom from normative behaviors as seen in Dunning’s more sports-centered examples. While not as physically involved as a rugby club or sports bar, there is a performative misogyny that is present both in sports settings and gaming settings. These spaces both assume a lack of female presence and capitalize on the dearth of women and femme gender expressions through discursive acts, what Kiesling (2007) would characterize, in terms of masculine discourses, as gender difference and male superiority. In geek settings, this allows for less critique of the objectification of women and a reinforcement of historically sexist portrayals and storylines populated by women. Moreover, when “having a laugh,” humor can center on explicitly sexual and lusty actions, conversations that would be otherwise muted by social norms.

I would further argue that in the geek male preserve this reinforcement of a man-centered and male-dominated space means the behavior will occur even when women are present. When called on their behavior, some will dismiss their actions as “what happens” in geek spaces, and an assertion that the behavior as always been similar. In effect, geek spaces employ the same “boys will be boys” idea Dunning saw in his study of sports subculture. The overarching discursive style permeates not only conversations around gaming and geek activities, but the activities themselves. Women, and increasingly people of color irrespective of gender, must commonly adapt their behavior in this geek male preserve, as the subculture appears to be highly resistant to change regardless of increased diversity.

5. SCAFFOLDING DISCOURSE

An idea supporting the notion of gaming space being a male preserve is the language which is used at the table. Hendricks (2004) began the conversation about the talk around the table: how

individuals represent themselves and how that conversation expresses immersion and power relationships among players and game masters (GMs). “The GM and the Players cooperatively construct the game, which includes a complex negotiation between the GM, the Players, and the rules” (Hendricks 2003,72). A role-playing game, with individuals around a table either physically or virtually, involves several types of conversation occurring at the same time in the conceptual space of the game: as Trammell (2020) notes, “once a common communication infrastructure can be identified, key actors can be located within that infrastructure” (189). While some of the conversation might not be germane to the game, e.g. side conversations about pop culture references as Hendricks notes in his work, these conversations would not occur if it were not for the game (Hendricks 2006). While a multi-level discourse involves a panoply of conversations between multiple people, not all conversations at the same have the same level of importance. In his foundational work, Fine (1983) theorizes that all gaming occurs on a multi-level structure, involving the social aspect of people playing a game, the gaming aspect of the players, and the imaginary/role-play aspect inhabited by the actual characters.

It is in that gaming aspect that James Paul Gee would contend gamers see the process of gameplay in terms of game mechanics. As he argues, “game mechanics are what you can do with things in a game. So, gamers see the game world in terms of verbs (actions): crates are good for breaking, ledges are good for jumping, shadows are good for hiding, and so forth” (Gee 2015, 33). In the sense of role-playing games, this speaks to the declarations a player can make about what a character is going to do, and how possible this can be within the confines of the game reality. The communication of these game mechanics around the table constitute what I call *scaffolding discourse*, where players engage in a conversation with the game master relating what their character does, and the mechanisms that allow the character to do this. For example, if a character says they want to get to a second floor of a building but needs to fly, then the player would indicate “I am going to cast a fly spell.” Or if the character attempts to lie, he is instructed by the game master to roll a die to initiate a Bluff check. Scaffolding discourse is important to the role-playing game, because it moves the action of the gaming table along. The more scaffolding discourse that occurs, the more play that is possible between those at the gaming table.

Scaffolding discourse, then, is a very distinct form of discussion, and what theorist Deborah Tannen would refer to as report talk. Men, according to Tannen, are socialized to communicate in this report talk, as there is greater prestige in this manner of communication than rapport talk, which Tannen theorizes as the means women are taught is preferable in communication. “The act of giving information by definition frames one in a position of higher status, while the art of listening frames one as lower” (Tannen 1990, 139). The nature of scaffolding discourse is the consistent question that hangs over the gaming group: *What are you going to do?* Players are required to continually narrate their actions and work through the mechanics of these actions. Scaffolding discourse is centered on talking and communicating “to” someone, and not necessarily an interchange of information or listening. As Tannen (1990) describes in rapport talk, the method of discussion women are more commonly socialized to employ, the focus is on listening rather than talking. Rapport talk is “a way of establishing connections and negotiating relationships. Emphasis is placed on displaying similarities and matching experiences” (Tannen 1990,76). This is not a function of scaffolding discourse.

What is, interestingly, not required in this scaffolding discourse is a rationale or justification – the why of the action. The premise of scaffolding discourse requires individuals to outline the steps they go through and deal with the repercussions. Further, scaffolding discourse is

highly technical and filled with jargon that is buttressed by a significant knowledge of the game. Lack of familiarity with scaffolding discourse can be overwhelming to new players, and those who are not used to the intensity associated with this type of report talk. Scaffolding discourse, by its very nature, is not only demanding, but requires some sense of alacrity. If one is not quick with responses and functions, an individual can be accused of slowing down the game and sully the gaming experience of those around them. This unfamiliarity can result in negative comments from other players, and further imply the dominance of those who have a greater comfort for the game overall, through the scaffolding discourse they seemingly master.

6. DOMINANCE IN SCAFFOLDING DISCOURSE

Sociolinguist Scott Kiesling notes that men, in communicative circumstances, have the advantage of an expectation of dominance. “Men are also more likely than women to be positioned by others as having authority and power before any interaction begins” (Kiesling 2007, 662). Therefore, men are naturally expected to assert authority lest they refrain from doing so, meaning the male gamer begins any interaction from an assumed position of power before he opens his mouth. Value, thus, is in report talk rather than rapport talk. Dominance in conversation is then an aspect of male privilege; an unrealized set of affordances providing for simply being male. The ability to automatically assume dominance in communications would be very useful in a role-playing game. This is because, according to Montola, “as role-playing games are seen as communication constructs, information is the basic building block of the imaginary game world” (Montola 2009, 31). Scaffolding discourse, and the purposeful discourses at the gamer table, express the bartering of information, and as such, dominance in these types of conversations becomes vital in the assertion of manhood.

Kiesling points out that “there are many different kinds of power that men may use to create dominance, and there are therefore many corresponding ways to perform this power” (Kiesling 2007, 665). The role-playing game is a multi-leveled discourse, and strategies to preserve the embedded structural power can occur in any of these conversations at the table. Stang and Trammell (2019), for example, note how descriptions of the female monstrosity perpetuate sexist tropes in game settings and the discussions surrounding them. During the discursive circumstance of scaffolding discourse, two of those ways men may display dominance is through *gamesplaining*, where a player corrects or instructs another player with less knowledge on a topic, and *rules lawyering*, or the circumstance where players argue over interpretation of the governing policies of the role-playing game.

7. GAMESPLAINING

An assertion of male dominance, evident when individuals who either lack experience with the game or the discourses surrounding gameplay display inadequacy, can be distilled into what I call gamesplaining. Gamesplaining, derived from mansplaining, results when an individual actively corrects an individual who is erring in game play or scaffolding discourse. Thus, if an individual is either doing or explaining something incorrectly, another player has the ability to step in and “assist” the incorrect player. While this manner of exchange may have helpful connotations, the interaction is rife with dominance overtones. The player who is wrong is slowing down the process of the game; moreover, the player is incorrect in how they are proceeding, and damaging the flow of what is considered appropriate gameplay. To

take the moment and insert a course correction, as it were, allows for an individual to do three distinct things. First, the interceding player is modeling behavior and the idea of correction as a component of collaborative play. Second, the player implies dominance; they know more than the player they are “helping.” Third, the player displays their overall knowledge and skill to the entire table through this corrective action. The power dynamics of gamesplaining are shifting, as being more knowledgeable than any other given player is not an absolute: “the status of a participant as ‘more knowing’ or ‘less knowing’ is fluid, shifting as the interaction proceeds” (Hendricks 2003, 80). It is possible that someone in the midst of gamesplaining could overstretch their knowledge, and as such, find themselves the recipient of the same discursive tactic used against them.

The nature of gamesplaining reinforces “how particular rhetorical constructions of skill and virtuosity in connection with ‘gameplay’ were inflected by gender ideals and subsequently came to reinforce and imprint norms of masculinity” (Kirkpatrick 2017, 465). Men, and moreover, stereotypical White male gamers, through use of technical and practical knowledge are in a better position to dismiss alternative arguments and reinforce their opinion. Quite simply, being a male provides the gamer several affordances as discussed above. First, he is more likely to be trained in report talk, which is the elevated method of discourse at the game table, and thus the one most likely to be accepted by his peers and the game master. Second, he recognizes the benefit of dominance in these discourses, and uses discursive tools (e.g. louder voice, sarcasm, historical narratives) to stress the validity of his comments. Lastly, this mechanism of gamesplaining can take the form of disagreement and collective knowledge of the gaming system, quickly devolving into what is commonly known as rules lawyering.

8. RULES LAWYERING

While most role-playing games have a comprehensive set of governing rules, the nature of role-playing games, and the infinite possibilities in how actions can be done in the role-playing scenario, engender the gaming table as a space where guiding principles and written rules can be interpreted differently by any two players. Montola (2009) reminds us that “no participant of a role-playing game can have access to all information present in the game.” Therefore, players must rely on the written rules and cogent interpretation of those rules to provide precedence for any gaming action that might be up for debate (31). In every game setting there are those who have a specific interpretation of the gaming rules and believe that in order to preserve the relationship between the game master, the players, and the game itself, a clear understanding of the rules must be reached by all persons who participate. The rules lawyer is defined as a player “who interprets rules in an overly literal sense or in such a way to significantly reduce the thematic or logical aspects of a game” (Berman 2011,187). Often the real-life impact of a rules lawyer is seen as negative, and there are resources and articles online that discuss ways game masters and players can “handle” rules lawyers (Attansio 2020; Heinz 2018). Even Gary Gygax, one of the founders of *Dungeons & Dragons*, was critical of rules lawyers, saying “never hold to the letter written, nor allow some barracks room lawyer to force quotations from the rule books upon you, if it goes against the obvious intent of the game” (Gygax 1979, 230).

While being a rules lawyer is sometimes seen as a negative, and to be referenced as one is interpreted as derogatory, the power of the report talk and dominance embedded in rules lawyering as a discursive feature in scaffolding discourse provides esteem to those who employ it. In other words, “another way to view rules lawyering is as a means of reinforcing masculine

power, thriving at the game table, a field of practice where one's years of experience codes as a badge of honor" (Dashiell 2017). Berman (2011) notes that while rules lawyering is at times seen as negative, the technique "also displays cleverness or exploits carelessness by one's opponent" (187). In this manner, rules lawyering is not only about being correct to sustain play, but, similar to gamesplaining, serves as a mechanism to assert dominance over others at the table through cunning: "Rules lawyering, conversely, pushes the game structure and rules to the fore, calcifying the power of the social structure" (Dashiell 2017).

Technically, the game master has the final say on the interpretation and disputes that would arise in scaffolding discourse; however, "much of the game master's social power in the arbitrations concerning the state of the game world is derived from this information access" (Montola 2009, 32). While game masters are expected to have a considerable command of the information and the application of rules in scaffolding discourse, they are not infallible, and as such, the interpretation of the game master is seen as just as valid as any player at the game table provided said player has demonstrated a knowledge of the rules. Moreover, rulebooks and errata are information any player could have, and when coupled with experience, rules lawyering could become a circumstance in any game.

9. GAME SPACES & RACE/GENDER DISCUSSIONS, BLEED IN DISCOURSE

A concern, given the implications of dominance in scaffolding discourse, involves the degree to which embedded discursive techniques make their way into other types of communication at the gaming table. The complex, multi-level conversations are happening simultaneously, and shifting instantaneously through the types of communication that occur in the frames of play Fine described. The discourses at the table are not necessarily dependent on the game, but only occur because the game is in session. One could easily recognize that scaffolding discourse is game-dependent and would be out of place without the context of the game. However, the intra-player conversation, like the pop culture references Hendicks (2006) mentions, represents discussions between players that may take on the report talk markers seen in scaffolding discourse.

Sarah Lynne Bowman (2013) discusses the concept of bleed, or "the phenomenon of the thoughts, feelings, physical state, and relationship dynamics of the player affecting the character and vice versa" (4). While a critical component for understanding internalizations and their impacts on players and their characters, Bowman's concept of bleed becomes useful in understanding how the dominance that is evident in scaffolding discourse might impact other discourses that are occurring at the gaming table. As stated before, gamesplaining and rules lawyering are useful because of their ability to assert authority of a player over others at the table, supported by a professed superior knowledge of game systems. This dominance could, in theory, bleed through to more mundane conversations among people at the table, or into the narrative factor of play led by the game master. In her research, Bowman (2013) describes circumstances where "participants described 'alpha' or pack hierarchical behavior with regard to rules disputes and other contested areas within the game, resulting in leaders emerging and dominating play" (3). The bravado here could be the result of successful gamesplaining and rules lawyering, which gives the player implicit permission to disrupt game proceedings with shows of power. Therefore, not only does the dominance of those savvy in the male preserve bleed over into other discussion, but so too the submission of those populations who are disprivileged in the preserve of the gaming space by not embodying the stereotypical middle-class, White male gamer.

10. PLAYING THE GAME – BUILDING A BETTER GAMER

Participation in the male discourse, for subaltern populations, poses its own perils. Women, for example, are particularly targeted in the gaming world. The stereotype of the “gamer girl” persists in the subculture, and while many examples refute this idea, constancy of the image in the male preserve causes harm to women. As Harrison, Drenton, and Pendarvis (2017) note, “female gamers struggle to gain a foothold in gaming due to the socially and culturally constructed masculine dominance of the field. Female gamers engage in cultural reproduction of stereotypes while simultaneously coping with the practices of masculine dominance” (61). In effect, as a byproduct of participation in the male preserve of a gaming subculture, women reproduce the types of communication encountered in scaffolding discourse, employing gamesplaining and rules lawyering when circumstances permit. However, the question could be raised as to how effective these communications could be, when not buttressed by the dominance that is a socially constructed component of their male counterparts. In gaming circles, research has shown that the female gamer voice is open to more criticism and critique (Kasumovic and Kuznekoff 2015). This suggests that while a female gamer can attempt to engage in report talk methods during scaffolding discourse, the inherent privilege that comes along with the embodied male form and voice reduces the effectiveness of her dominance at the game table. Neither women nor minorities can afford to be wrong in terms of gamesplaining or rules lawyering: “Women and minorities, often outnumbered at the gaming table, might demur from rules lawyering behavior because of their internalized marginalization coupled with a sense of what capital they might lose if proven wrong” (Dashiell 2017).

Moreover, many women and minority groups have to come to accept systems that implicitly and explicitly push a misogynist narrative. As Trammell (2018) notes:

If women were to play *Dungeons & Dragons*, they had to accept much of the masculine baggage that came along with the game. Patriarchal authority and knowledge structures had to be accepted and taken for granted, homosocial representations of masculinity were everywhere in the game’s rulebooks, and martial prowess was the definitive mode of conflict resolution and self-worth (144).

Thus, operation in the male preserve of role-playing games does not only involve modification of discursive patterns to be effective, but also a passive acceptance of a game with a structural system that is rooted in male power and the subordination of other groups. As discussed before, Wizards of the Coast and other game developers are making efforts to change the mechanics of gaming systems to address sexist and racist circumstances. Yet, the problematic components adding to support of dominance as a discursive feature in gamesplaining and rules lawyering are embedded in the subcultural capital; changes of rules will have a slow effect, if any.

It should be noted that the strategies discussed in this paper are not universal; they will not be present in every game and at every gaming table. Tabletop role-playing involves a mesh between player characteristics, gaming culture, and social culture (e.g. country, region) that could provide an experience where gamesplaining and rules lawyering are muted, modified, or nonexistent. Ad hoc or “pickup” gaming at conventions, for example, might not exhibit this behavior blatantly due to overall unfamiliarity between players. However, I must stress this circumstance is not about a phenomenon occurring at every gaming table; moreso these behaviors in scaffolding discourse are a social circumstance that could, and are more likely, to

occur in tabletop role-playing games because of the subculture surrounding the male preserve. Further, because the behaviors of gamesplaining and rules lawyering are an acceptable form of “hooliganism” in scaffolding discourse, these compartments are less likely to be challenged or discouraged if they do occur at some point in a gaming experience.

11. CONCLUSIONS: ADAPT, FRAGMENT, OR EVOLVE

Communication and discourse play a critical part of the role-playing game experience, and as Fine (1983) argues, “because gaming fantasy is based in shared experience, it must be constructed through communication” (3). The notion of the gaming world, and the subculture that surrounds gaming, is complicated by the real and imaginary nature of the conversation. As Ilievia (2013) notes:

Role-playing language is different from everyday language because the worlds created in role-play are not merely a reflection or extension of everyday life; they are fictional. The essence of role-playing lies in the endeavor to be someone else, and/or at another place, and/or at another time, and quite often that necessitates a simulation of a world very different from the everyday one; the knowledge of that world is outside the range of the individual live memory and is unavailable to players’ biographic experience” (28).

The discourse at the table discusses a world of fantasy, and as such, individuals may feel certain liberties and freedoms are afforded their characters regarding actions that might be deviant in the contemporary social world. However, considering there are multiple types of conversation occurring at the game table, these liberties may bleed into other discourses, notably as discussed in this paper, into the scaffolding discourse that is central to actual play of the game.

The argument of the presence of misogyny, racism, and discrimination in games being proportional to reduced participation of minority groups in role-playing games has been discussed in research but appears to be a false assumption (Schott and Horrell 2000). The player demographic is diverse: for example, as Curran (2011) has noted, “although [gaming] is still perceived as a hobby which is almost entirely dominated by male youths, almost 40% of all game players are women” (46). Moreover, evidence demonstrates women and minorities have always played a part in gaming, though this participation has been masked by the larger representation of the stereotypical young, White men. While there are scant academic sources indicating the demographics of early play, primary sources from women note early participation (Garcia 2017; Hepler 2019; Vermeulen, Bauwel, and Van Looy 2017). Perhaps, I argue, this is an incorrect nexus of the question, as the presence of women might be secondary to the amount of social compliance that is required of gamers, which does not erase their participation, but masks it.

A limiting factor of visibility of more diverse play was the result of outspoken sources involved in the highest levels of role-play development. Salter and Blodgett (2012) remind us that “the gaming publics remain a contentious area where identity, as viewed from the outside, is continually negotiated and bounded by the many groups” (413). However, as this paper argues, the social norms of gaming publics are increasingly moderated by norms and expectations set by what could be understood as a male preserve, with report talk and dominance expressed through gamesplaining and rules lawyering in scaffolding discourse.

Women and minorities are present, but as a matter of course are expected to act in ways that allow them some measure of agency in the gaming space (Gray 2017). As such, their presence is only clearly visible when their behaviors and actions are transgressive, as they have been “going along” with the social expectations of gaming as a subculture which places value, or a subcultural capital, on these behaviors at the gaming table. Trammell (2018) directly asks us: “If all players have to accept the customs of masculinity that come along with the game, it’s important to question the degree to which players still have agency” (144). Simply being “at the table” does not inherently change culture. The degree to which a more macro sense of a male preserve has changed, or can change, with structural changes to games or player demographics will be clear only in time.

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