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Masculinities in Play

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Militarism and Masculinity in *Dungeons & Dragons*

Aaron Trammell

The fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook* (Mearls and Crawford 2014) has done extraordinary work in diversifying a character set which had at one point typified the white supremacist and misogynist representations of Sword and Sorcery fiction.[1] When at one point fans like P. M. Crabaugh, a fan essayist for *Dragon Magazine*,[2] had offered instructions for including people of color in the predominantly "caucasian" settings of these fictive worlds, a cursory review of the new *Players Handbook* shows that this advice has been taken to heart. The inside cover features a dark-skinned Moorish warrior valiantly raising a sabre over the fallen and toppling bodies of a group of goblins (Mearls and Crawford 2014, 1). A well-armored "oriental"[3] female samurai stands holding a sword in the book's chapter on "Personality and Background" (140). A brown-skinned dwarven cleric stands with hands open conjuring a magical blade in the included spellbook (247). Of the 86 illustrations in the manual depicting characters, 63 depict characters posed with weaponry of some sort (76 if you consider magical evocations and ballistics). For all of the great strides that *Dungeons & Dragons* has made in promoting a more inclusive player base, this sense of inclusivity problematically reaffirms the patriarchal, militaristic, and masculine structures of our society. This chapter considers the construction of masculinity in *Dungeons & Dragons* and explains its ever-present connections to military weaponry, strategy, culture, and technology.

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Methodologically, I take a historical approach that is grounded in Foucauldian genealogy. I argue that the cultures of masculinity in *Dungeons & Dragons* can be discursively traced through published manuals and articles about the game.

I draw on manuals and fanzines from the 1970s located in the Ray Browne Popular Culture Archive as well as several volumes of *The Dragon*, which were published on CD-ROM as "The Dragon Magazine Archive" by TSR Hobbies in 1999. Here, I compare the representations of masculinity found in these historic texts to the ways that masculinity is represented today in the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*. In staging this comparison, I consider how depictions of masculinity have progressed over the 40-year life span of *Dungeons & Dragons* and also how they have stayed the same.

If we are to advocate for a feminist aesthetic of game design,[4] it is important to understand how masculinity is represented, ritualized, and shared longitudinally. Despite its roots in a homogeneous and sexist gaming community, *Dungeons & Dragons* has changed significantly in the past 40 years. The game no longer assumes a male player and has taken several steps toward implementing an inclusive gender vocabulary. Still, other representational spaces of masculinity remain: the game continues to feature heavy militaristic and patriarchal overtones that are now inclusive of both men and women. Does gender reform in the language and representation of role-playing games adequately address the insidiousness of patriarchal institutions like the military? And, as game design aesthetics have moved toward a more inclusive understanding of gender, what understated and perhaps counter-hegemonic practices of masculinity have been lost to our culture?

Although questions of gender in gaming were, once upon a time, located squarely within the representational practices of the software industry—see Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins' (2000) collection *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*—questions of gender in games today have diversified. The new diversity of approaches toward understanding gender in games encompasses many new voices in the queer games movement—where queer and trans players, authors, and designers have questioned the relationship between games, gender, and sexuality[5]—and approaches, like those contained in this volume, which seek to understand masculinity as an invisible and under-theorized social norm.

By better understanding masculinity, feminist scholars, players, and designers can hope to better participate in an earnest and candid conversation about identity in games. Games scholar Benjamin J. Triana (2015, 33), when writing about masculinity in the Western genre *Red Dead Redemption*, explains, "The artificial environment of a video game provides the opportunity for

reproducing a Western environment and procedurally exploring claims about appropriate masculine values and beliefs about the world." I would push this claim one step further, and suggest that the artificial environments of games reproduce the environments, biases, and norms of Western Civilization, and in so doing reveal much about what masculinity scholar R. W. Connell (2005) would refer to as the invisible and hegemonic characteristics of masculine identity (xviii).

Although the invisible pressures of hegemonic masculinity certainly affect us all, it is important to consider how the negotiation of these pressures often results in the emergence of alternate in-between identities. Sociologist Lori Kendall (1999), for instance, discusses how the "nerd" identity is a mash of masculine and feminine characteristics, "The nerd stereotype includes aspects of both hypermasculinity (intellect, rejection of sartorial display, lack of 'feminine' social and relational skills) and feminization (lack of sports ability, small body size, lack of sexual relationships with women)" (265). Kendall argues that the negotiated nerd and geek masculinities occupy a subordinate position to hypermasculinity on a continuum of gender performance. This chapter shows how similar forms of subordinate masculinity are reinforced through game manuals and paraphernalia, but holds back from embracing the same sort of granular analysis that Kendall evokes. To show whether or not one performs hyper- or subordinate masculinity is secondary to this chapter's main goal. This goal is to reveal the descent of masculinity across media and consumer, showing how similar constructions of masculinity emerge within *Dungeons & Dragons* sourcebooks and within the discussions of *Dungeons & Dragons* players.

I will sketch a blueprint for understanding the way that masculinity has been constructed within the *Dungeons & Dragons* player community in this chapter. First I will show how masculinity has been established as a sort of glue that was able to join lonely men looking for friends across America. Then I will note its recurrence as a style of writing that assumes a masculine subject via a militaristic and patriarchal set of game rules. Finally, I offer some player accounts of masculinity from within the structure of *Dungeons & Dragons*, specifically *Dragon Magazine*.

Lonely Men Seeking Other Lonely Men

To understand the militaristic and masculine mechanics of *Dungeons & Dragons*, it is important to first consider the community that the game is embedded within. Before there was *Dungeons & Dragons*, the same hobby

communities played *Diplomacy*. *Diplomacy* was a strategic board game that was released commercially by Avalon Hill in 1959. The game takes place in Europe during World War I. In it, each player controls the military of a European nation and schemes, plots and strategizes with the other players to dominate the map. Although *Diplomacy* couldn't be considered a role-playing game like *Dungeons & Dragons*, it did contain role-playing elements. Notably, as players assumed the roles of nations, they would take on the roles of leaders and diplomats, play-acting their reaction to combat and conflict.

Because the core game mechanics of *Diplomacy* were perfectly tuned to the social dynamics of negotiation, *Diplomacy* games were best played in with complete groups of seven players. When the game was played with less, players reported strategic and experiential wrinkles that found the game to be slightly unbalanced and less fun. Additionally, the social skills required by *Diplomacy*—negotiation, trust, and trickery—improved after repeated play; the game rewarded devoted players more than it rewarded casual play. For these reasons, it was difficult for many to find a group to enjoy *Diplomacy* with. *Diplomacy* played best with seven, and this left players around America with less than seven friends with an exciting yet infrequently played game. To make matters worse, those who could find a group of several players were seldom rewarded with the challenging and rewarding gameplay offered by that in a full and experienced group. In this way, lonely men across the country sought other lonely men to play *Diplomacy* with.

In Sherry Turkle's (1984) study of hackers at MIT in the 1980s, she found that loneliness often worked to create strong community bonds. Counterintuitively, loneliness serves as an anchor for counterculture: "It is a culture of people who have grown up thinking of themselves as different, apart, and who have a commitment to what one hacker described as 'an ethic of total toleration for anything that in the real world would be considered strange'" (196). A thriving several hundred person underground play-by-post community of board game enthusiasts would certainly appear odd to most. But for many lonely men across America seeking to play *Diplomacy*, nothing could be more exciting!

The solution to the community's geographic isolation lay in the pages of *The Avalon Hill General* which published a column entitled "Opponents Wanted" in order to help lonely players across America find friends to play *Diplomacy* with. Although the first "Opponents Wanted" column dated back to May 1964, and only contained one entry for Afrika Korps (another Avalon Hill game) the column boomed in the months that followed. Best described in a letter by International Federation of Wargamers president Len Lakofka (1971):

> In the United States the hobby of wargaming has always been a fluid entity. Prior to the emergence of Avalon Hill Games, the hobby of wargaming was limited, almost exclusively, to small groups of miniature figures collectors who, on occasion, would create rules so that they could recreate battles for their collections. When the Avalon Hill Company pioneered the adult wargame, in board game style, many more persons were introduced to the competitive aspect of wargaming. Still, a person would by an AH game, play it with a friend or two, but then, most often, find a void in which no new competition could be found.
>
> *The General* was the first step in creating a broadly based permanent market of "hard core" wargamers and a means via which persons, interested in the hobby, could contact one another. Of course I refer to the 'opponents wanted' column of this magazine. (2)

After making these points, Lakofka explains that the fanzines which were inspired by the "Opponents Wanted" column went on to inspire player groups across the country to set up play-by-mail *Diplomacy* games within fanzines that they would self-publish. This "hard core" contingent of *Diplomacy* players would be instrumental in developing *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson are widely credited with the development and invention of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The two were familiar with one another from the play-by-mail *Diplomacy* scene, and even began distributing rules for the early variant of *Dungeons & Dragons*, a wargame called *Chainmail*, via fanzine to other interested players who subscribed to their fanzine, *The Domesday Book*.

Although the game would mature and develop over time, it's important to note that Gygax used the publishing model of *The Avalon Hill General* to support *Dungeons & Dragons* in its initial runs. Where fanzines such as *Alarums and Excursions*, *The Dungeoneer*, *The Haven Herald*, and *The Wild Hunt* would take on the role of the supplemental fanzines that had at one point been directly associated with play-by-mail *Diplomacy*—supporting non-canonical modifications, supplements, and fictions—*Dragon Magazine* would take the role of *The Avalon Hill General*. *Dragon Magazine* became the in-house publication of TSR Hobbies establishing a quasi-official dialogue around the company's role-playing products.

Reflecting upon the networks of fans that constitute the role-playing hobby, it's hard not to notice the impact of isolation and loneliness on the development of gaming. The "hard core" gaming market noted by Len Lakofka is notable for both their purported zeal and their reported isolation. Alongside the affective dynamics, which surround loneliness, lie many of the insights that Sara Ahmed (2010) points to in her essay "Happy Objects." For Ahmed,

a happy object is notable less for what it represents, and more for what feelings we expect it to invoke (33). Role-playing games (and *Dungeons & Dragons*, in specific) are happy objects insofar as players expect them to evoke feelings of camaraderie and fun. The nature of this construction as an expectation and not necessarily an evocation is key, based on whether or not the expectation is met players might react to playing the game in any number of ways.

I refer to role-playing games as a happy object here, because the expectation of community was a clear catalyst for the games' embryonic networks. This expectation cuts both ways, as the community that players expected to engage with reflects many of the values that the community itself had built into its games. Specifically, the militaristic tropes of combat worked to produce a specific sort of player—one that valued the rational, quantitative, and oppositional mechanisms that were constitutive of the game's rules.

These brief historical notes point to the ways that role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* relied on an infrastructure of players to curate and maintain its rules. Just as the fan communities that played *Diplomacy* took on an active role in modifying the game's rules, so too did the player base of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The corporate interests who curated these fan bases, Avalon Hill (*Diplomacy*) and TSR Hobbies (*Dungeons & Dragons*), were attentive to the ideas, ideals, and modifications produced by fans, and often allowed engaged players to publish in their official magazines, *The Avalon Hill General* and *Dragon Magazine*. The participatory dialogue between publishers and fans is key to understanding the longitudinal dynamics of these products, given the circulation of ideas invoked by the form. As this chapter turns to the representation of masculinity in game mechanics, it is important to note that these ideas were actively cycling both through the official products published by TSR Hobbies and the fan communities that would later consume and modify them.

Learning to Dude

As Mia Consalvo (2007) notes in *Cheating*, hobby publications were not only sources of news about games, but also a way to groom inexperienced players into the techniques and skills necessary to play various games (31–33). Articles in the "Classified Information" section of *Nintendo Power* magazine were a way to cultivate a fan base of players that understood how to advance in games that would have been otherwise too difficult to navigate for beginning players. If we consider how strategies of cheating had been cultivated through industry publications, we must also consider how industry and hobby publications had encouraged players to take on other attitudes when playing games.

This section considers how *Dragon Magazine* cultivated an ethic of masculinity within its constituents that was intended to both thwart loneliness and preserve the militaristic and patriarchal values that lay at the core of *Dungeons & Dragons* gameplay. By examining these early moments where masculinity is incorporated into the rules and practices surrounding gameplay, we can ascertain a sense of what elements of masculinity have continued within cultures of gameplay in the present.

Early editions of *Dungeons & Dragons* took on a tone that assumes that the players participating were men. For evidence, one need search no further than Volume 1 of the original ruleset—*Men & Magic*. Aside from the obvious—the casual invocation of "men" in the title—the illustrations contained within the volume also spoke to a deliberately groomed sense of masculinity. Almost all of the heroic characters contained within were muscle-bound men (Fig. 8.1), except for one small exception: an illustration of a voluptuous witch and a nude Amazon (Fig. 8.2) (Gygax and Arneson 1974a). The assumption here is that the game would be played in casual groups with locker-room interests. The character archetype which would later come to be known as "Fighters" was described in this edition as "Fighting-men," yet another minor yet important mode of cultivating and grooming a player audience (6).

Other manuals in the series maintain this somewhat sexist and implicitly masculine tenor. The second manual *Monsters & Treasure* contains a reference table for the different monsters one might encounter in the game. It explicitly

Fig. 8.1 A barbarian from the original D&D rulebook

Fig. 8.2 A witch and an amazon from the original D&D rulebook

lists "men" as a type of monster that might be encountered during the game's adventures. Interestingly, the often female-gendered "mermen" make an appearance on the list with no mention of their female counterparts, mermaids (Gygax and Areneson 1974b, 7). Women are included on the list; they are generally denoted through rules that allow for the control of the assumedly male player characters. Pixies and Nixies can "charm" player characters and lure them to a watery death. Dryads are referred to as "beautiful tree spirits" and have similar powers (15–16). Medusa are listed without gender as "it", but depicted in the manual's imagery as female (9, 28). Finally, female werewolves or "lycanthropes" are thrust into a presumably feminine role fighting at three times their normal power to protect their young. Similarly, female centaurs are infantilized and grouped with centaur children—preferring not to fight at all (14).

The final rulebook in the original series of manuals was *Underworld & Wilderness Adventures*, which contained rules for how characters were encouraged to interact with their environment. The manual continues to list "men" as a distinct and womanless category distinct from others. Combat and referee

tips are included here as well. Given that *Dungeons & Dragons* had been developed as a merger of some of the role-playing elements native to *Diplomacy* and the hard statistical combat elements borrowed from other wargames like *Napoleonic Wars* and *The Kriegspeil*, a dice-based statistical combat system was core to the gameplay. In addition to this system, *Dungeons & Dragons* inherited a system of authority through which players would be forced to accept the world-making decisions made by the referees (Gygax and Arneson 1974c, 12–14). This authoritative and somewhat patriarchal structure saturates all gameplay—it is derivative of military structures of authority that require soldiers to report up the chain of command to superior officers.

These various elements are key to understanding how masculinity is constituted in early role-playing materials. Players are assumed to be male, interacting in a world where men are the primary social actors. Militaristic abilities are an important part of the natural order of this world, as players are expected to defeat other mystical creatures through martial combat. When women enter the martial sphere, they are made monstrous (lycanthropes) or forced to seduce men through a set of abilities keyed in to their beauty. Finally, players are made to adhere to the militaristic dynamics of command as they report to the referee and await a description of how they are interacting with the environment.

The early rules of *Dungeons & Dragons* reinforce group dynamics that allow for an organized and ordered expression of masculinity. Players are given the agency to act through violent and sexual fantasies with rules that focus on combat and construct women as seductresses looking to control men. Because women are absent from the above description it seems apt to describe it only as an ordered space of agency, where expression is possible only insofar as group dynamics and authority figures can condone and allow it.

The Infamous Harlot Table

Perhaps the most famously sexist example of the gendered dynamics of *Dungeons & Dragons* is the "Harlot" table which was published a half decade later in 1979 within Gygax's *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* manual *Dungeon Master's Guide* (see Fig 8.3). This table expands on the random encounters already established in the basic rules of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Specifically, it details rules for randomly generating the socioeconomic backgrounds and motivations for a variety of "harlots" that players might encounter in the game. The table's clearly misogynist language has been widely criticized by a variety of web sources,[6] and is often cited as an example of gendered rules in *Dungeons &*

Goodwife encounters are with a single woman, often indistinguishable from any other type of female (such as a magic-user, harlot, etc.). Any offensive treatment or seeming threat will be likely to cause the woman to scream for help, accusing the offending party of any number of crimes, i.e. assault, rape, theft, or murder. 20% of goodwives know interesting gossip.

Harlot encounters can be with brazen strumpets or haughty courtesans, thus making it difficult for the party to distinguish each encounter for what it is. (In fact, the encounter could be with a dancer only prostituting herself as it pleases her, an elderly madam, or even a pimp.) In addition to the offering of the usual fare, the harlot is 30% likely to know valuable information, 15% likely to make something up in order to gain a reward, and 20% likely to be, or work with, a thief. You may find it useful to use the sub-table below to see which sort of harlot encounter takes place:

01-10	Slovenly trull	76-85	Expensive doxy
11-25	Brazen strumpet	86-90	Haughty courtesan
26-35	Cheap trollop	91-92	Aged madam
36-50	Typical streetwalker	93-94	Wealthy procuress
51-65	Saucy tart	95-98	Sly pimp
66-75	Wanton wench	99-00	Rich panderer

An expensive doxy will resemble a gentlewoman, a haughty courtesan a noblewoman, the other harlots might be mistaken for goodwives, and so forth.

Fig. 8.3 The infamous "harlot table," taken from the first edition of *AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide*

Dragons. This chapter considers how the harlot table helps to reveal the depth to which a patriarchal order has been embedded within the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons* and therefore how the games rules foster a sense of masculinity amongst the players.

The "Harlot" table is embedded within a master list of random encounters entitled the "CITY/TOWN ENCOUNTERS MATRIX," which explain the various types of encounters that players might have in a city environment. Within this master list are several other clearly gendered townsfolk that players are liable to encounter when exploring an urban space. A patriarchal and heteronormative social order is inscribed within these descriptions. Women occupy one of three stereotypical and archetypical roles in the list, they are "harlots," "goodwi[ves]," or "night hags". Meanwhile the other folk of the city are either assumedly or explicitly men and therefore respon-

sible for a majority of the commerce, intrigue, and crime taking place in the city on a day-to-day basis.

Rules for including "harlots" in the city adventures of characters are interesting as all included "harlots" are given an adjective descriptor which implies a relationship to a presumably masculine player character. Harlots are "slovenly," "brazen," "cheap," "typical," "saucy," "wanton," "expensive," "aged," and worse. In addition to these problematic descriptors, the harlot table offers explicit rules for adding additional depth to "harlots":

> Harlot encounters can be with brazen strumpets or haughty courtesans, thus making it difficult for the party to distinguish each encounter for what it is. (In fact, the encounter could be with a dancer only prostituting herself as it pleases her, an elderly madam, or even a pimp.) In addition to the offering of the usual fare, the harlot is 30% likely to know valuable information, 15% likely to make something up in order to gain a reward, and 20% likely to be, or work with, a thief. (Gygax et al. 1979, 192)

Not only are harlots given descriptions, which situate their value to a presumably male player, but there is also a slight chance that they can possess additional value as an information source. Set this positive value against the alternate possibility that the "harlot" encountered might be a liar or thief and degree to which women are treated like juvenile sex objects in the rules of *Dungeons & Dragons* is made clear.

The "Harlot" table concludes by explaining that, "An expensive doxy will resemble a gentlewoman, a haughty courtesan a noblewoman, the other harlots might be mistaken for goodwives, and so forth" (192). Harlots find utility in the patriarchal social order by only by self-objectification and sexuality; otherwise women must accommodate the positionality of noblewoman or goodwife.

Rules for goodwife encounters are straightforward; goodwives are prude and fragile. The rules explain that, "Any offensive treatment or seeming threat will likely cause the woman to scream for help, accusing the offending party of any number of crimes, i.e. assault, rape, theft, or murder" (192). Additionally, goodwives are written to be "indistinguishable" from other females, interchangeable and practically objects. "Noblewomen" are found being doted upon by their servants, "[they] will have a sedan chair, carriers and linkboys (at night)" (192). Also like the "goodwife," noblewomen are indistinguishable from other women of a similar social strata; "noblewomen can likewise be mistaken for a courtesan or procuress" (192). "Goodwives" and "noblewomen," the two examples of women who cleanly fit into the patriarchal

order, are indistinguishable and interchangeable with other women in the game, relegating them to the role of background flavor.

"Night hags" are to be used rarely in the game, only in suitable narrative moments and locales (192). Despite being typecast as a monster encounter as opposed to the social encounter one might have with a "goodwife" or "harlot," "night hags" exemplify the only remaining role for women in patriarchy—if women cannot be objectified, they become obstacles for men to overcome.

The social order implied by the list positions men in positions of social and economic value throughout. Take the laborer for example, "Laborer encounters are with a group of 3–12 non-descript persons loitering on their way home to or from work. These fellows will be rough customers in a brawl. There is a 10% chance for each to be a levy in the city watch, with commensurate friends and knowledge" (192). Men are "fellows" who work and brawl with one another, while women can either acquire independence by marketing their sexuality as "harlots," or maintain the patriarchal structure by acting as a "goodwife."[7]

Many other men can be encountered in the city. The list includes a "Press Gang" of typically macho and "burly sailors or soldiers," ruffians with clubs, "guardsmen," "watchmen," "gentlemen," and "tradesmen," among others (191–192). Typical to the descriptions of men operating around the city are rules noting the respect they command from others, their likelihood to engage in combat, and material wealth.

The rules governing city encounters in *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* offer a snapshot of how the game's designers construed urban life and how it replicates and typifies a patriarchal structure. Not only do the examples within this section show how limited female agency was in a typical *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign, but they also show how masculine agency is constructed along the lines of material wealth and martial power. The men that players are likely to run into command respect because of the ways that they fit into a city's thriving (or failing) economy as skilled tradesmen, merchants, or military.

The social order produced by *Dungeons & Dragons* city encounter rules is a microcosm of the social order produced by the game's authoritarian and patriarchal structure. These early city settings cultivated a sense of masculine empowerment amongst the players experiencing them. They represent a world where men have access to powerful economic positions, modest (yet socially integral) positions as craftsmen, and, of course, positions in the always relied-upon military. The tables for random city encounters are paired with an illustration that accurately depicts this social order (Fig. 8.4). In this illustration a rampaging magician-bandit blasts a member of the city guard while heroes and brawny ruffians pour from a tavern. A lifeless body burns in the fore-

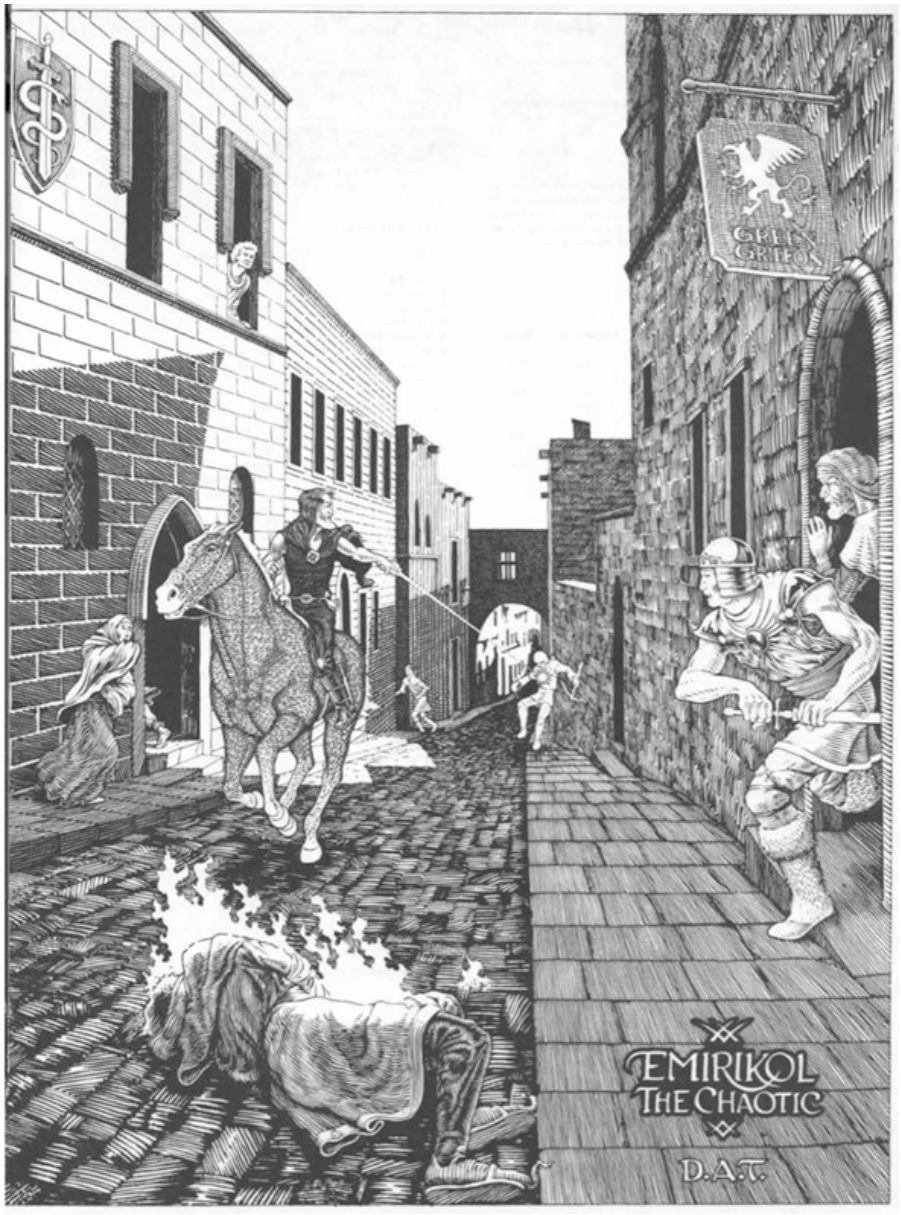

Fig. 8.4 An illustration following the "harlot table," taken from the first edition of *AD&D Dungeon Master's Guide*

ground. In the background a covered goodwife shrieks and flees while a common tradesman watches with stoic interest from his window (193). When examining this illustration, I cannot help but see it as a reflection of the play spaces typically engineered by players and referee of a typical *Dungeons & Dragons* game. Players have significant freedom to enact their masculine fantasies in a bounded world that allows them to traipse, romp, and cavort through a world where the most important social actors are men.

On Beards, Dwarves, and Women

In *Dragon Magazine* #28, published August 1979, an article entitled "The Dungeons Master's Guide—Developers' Notes & an Interview with the Author" offered developers notes on the newly released *Dungeon Master's Guide* from several members of the design team. In addition to the notes left by author and designer Gary Gygax, other notables like Jeff Leason, Len Lakofka, Lawrence Schick, Jean Wells, Allen Hammack, Mike Carr, and James T. Ward were given some space to explain their thoughts on the design process. Notably, Jean Wells, the first and only woman to be employed by TSR Hobbies at that time, left an enigmatic remark that reflected many of the debates occurring behind closed doors. Apart from complaining about what, in her opinion, were overly frivolous representations of elves in the *Dungeon Masters Guide*, Wells ended her notes with a strong point: "Finally, let it stand that I say, 'Dwarven women DO NOT have beards, Gary!" (Gygax et al. 1979, 4).

Some of the other designers offered their thoughts on the topic, too. The other twelve designers, all men, were in consensus—they claimed that dwarven women DO have beards and that the new rules reflected this point. One designer Allen Hammack wrote quite smugly, "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" (4). Gygax also was sure to weigh in on the controversy, as in the same column the editors of *Dragon Magazine* inquired what his thoughts on the topic were. His reply assumed a typically patriarchal tone as he assured readers that his account of dwarven women was more reliable than any other:

> It's fairly common knowledge. I don't believe I know anyone who *ever* met a female dwarf who *didn't* have a beard, so I don't know what more there is to be said about the matter. I'm not quite sure what the hoopla is—perhaps somebody who is uninformed or who has never dealt with dwarves *en masse* would assume that because *homo sapiens* females generally don't tend to have beards, dwarven females are likewise. But they all, of course, have beards. They're not so bald as the males, though. (46)

Not only does Gygax insult Wells' intelligence in this note—he refers to her as "uninformed"—he also assumes a tone reminiscent of locker-room horseplay and gatekeeping. He grants authority to those who agree with his account, and belittles the intelligence and logic of those who would hold a different opinion. In this quick design note, Gygax reinforces many of the group dynamics of masculinity—specifically, maintaining a hierarchical and patriarchal pattern of knowledge.

The debate did not soon let up. Four months later, in December 1979, in her column for *Dragon Magazine* Wells recounts how players had stopped her at conventions to weigh in on the debate with her. She wrote:

> [At Gen Con[8] m]any people stopped me in the hall to either agree with me wholeheartedly, or disagree with me and then tell me that I was crazy. Everyone knows that dwarven women have beards, they said. It did not stop there. Oh, no! We have even been getting mail on the issue. It is not too bad, but I don't like being accused of making an issue out of the subject. (Wells 1979, 14)

Reading between the lines, it's clear that Wells was receiving both internal pressure from TSR Hobbies about the fans that she had catalyzed against Gygax on the topic, as well as external pressure from fans hassling her and mimicking Gygax's language—calling her crazy, stupid, and worse. Wells shuts down future conversation on the topic by telling people writing with their thoughts on the topic not to bother and to "save your breath" (14). She closes by explaining, "Dwarven women may indeed have beards, Gary, but not in my world" (14). Wells writes as if she was being bullied, using curt language and cutting off further conversation.

Because Wells was being hassled by fans as well as critiqued by the management of TSR Hobbies, it's important to take seriously the ways that this historical vignette highlights the forms of patriarchal gatekeeping coalescing around *Dungeons & Dragons*. The question of whether or not female dwarves have beards is ridiculous and fictional, and it highlights the degree to which spurious argumentation plays into masculine group dynamics. Not only did figures within the design team of TSR Hobbies take arbitrary sides on the topic, and dismiss Wells' perspective as foolish, but Gygax's public statement catalyzed some fans to mimic his stance and publically approach and belittle Wells. The bearded female dwarf stands as an example of how knowledge is disseminated in patriarchal structures, and shows how game rules—however insignificant they may seem—are often taken to heart and replicated by players in surprising, literal, and occasionally spiteful ways.

The rules, game, and brand of *Dungeons & Dragons* are happy objects. They catalyze a community of excited fans around them and establish a set of normative protocols for how they should be challenged and interacted with. And, because of the positive affects they produce in most players, when Jean Wells challenged them, the community passionately turned against her. Within this processes, some ideas (like bearded dwarven women) are normalized, and used as a form of social gatekeeping—thus maintaining the order of hegemonic masculinity.

Passing in a Masculine Culture

Aside from being a fiction, the bearded female dwarf stands as a symbolic representation of the pervasiveness of masculinity within the early cultures of *Dungeons & Dragons* players. 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. All players of *Dungeons & Dragons* have to don the dwarven beard to some degree and accept these masculine tropes as self-evident in the game's world and rules.

There is a sense that the hierarchical and cooperative structures of the *Dungeons & Dragons* system are undoubtedly complicit in priming workers entering the technological sector for the forms of management that they would encounter throughout their careers. Although some like Doug Thomas and John Seely Brown (2009) have argued that the tools of cooperation developed by players of MMORPGs (and thus, by association, *Dungeons & Dragons*) are highly sought by managers in the technological sector, I remain critical of this trend. Drawing on the feminist scholarship of Sally Hacker (1989), I feel that it is important to recognize the degree to which the bureaucratic structures of role-playing games are fetishized in the masculine technological sector. White-collar workers learn how to work within patriarchy from role-playing games. They become aware of the ways that unspoken social rules are connected to systems of representation that prioritize a patriarchal social order.

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: can these tropes of masculinity be subverted? To some extent, it's clear that designers and players still have a great deal of agency in this area. As noted in the introduction, much of the representational tunnel vision of *Dungeons & Dragons*' early design has been abandoned in favor of an ethic of diversity. No longer do women exist only to tantalize teenage consumers as sex objects in the pages of the games manuals, now women are represented as heroic equals to men. In this sense, there has been a great deal of progress regarding the way women are represented in *Dungeons & Dragons*. Although the problematic trappings of the "Harlot" table have been all but abandoned, the games designers have opted to pull women into the space of masculinity as opposed to illustrate or design for a broader array of masculine tropes. Jakko Stenros and Tanja Sihvonen (2015) have done tremendous work in

depicting representations of queer characters in the history of role-playing games; it could be a strong starting point for game designers seeking alternate visions of masculinity in role-playing game design.

Despite these valiant efforts toward patching the game's representational design, I still find myself troubled by the prevalence of militarism in *Dungeons & Dragons*. Combat is still relied on as a central mechanic for conflict resolution, and play is still organized through a hierarchical chain-of-command. These militaristic tropes saturate the games representational strata as well, as pointed out earlier, with "badass" depictions of women and people of color maneuvering though combat zones in a number of masculine and macho poses. As fan communities and designers continue to ponder and discuss the politics of inclusivity in games, new questions can emerge from questioning masculinity as opposed to simply maleness. As representation in games comes to be inclusive of all, we must inquire what the politics of the worlds are: Are we including players of diverse backgrounds? How does appearance become a problematic and dominant approach for understanding who is included or excluded in gaming culture? When masculinity is reduced to appearance, as the example of bearded dwarves proves above, we lose track of its most toxic aspects, including the silencing of feminine and minority voices and the circulation and affirmation of baseless knowledge.

Notes

1. Robert E. Howard, author of the Conan series, has been critiqued for incorporating his racist beliefs into his character and world design. Please see Gary Romeo's (2002) "Southern Discomfort," for a thorough yet forgiving overview of how Howard's racist beliefs affected his writing.
2. *Dragon Magazine* was TSR Hobbies and Wizards of the Coast's flagship magazine for all things role-playing. Intended to cultivate an audience of role-playing fanatics, *Dragon Magazine* was first published in 1975 as *The Strategic Review*. It took on various titles during its history, including *Dragon* and *The Dragon*. The magazine's final issue was published in September 2013.
3. I have argued elsewhere that despite the manual's excellent work in developing an inclusive and multi-ethnic world, it still falls prey to what Edward Said would refer to as "orientalism." It reduces the complexity of various "exotic" Asian, African, and South American cultures to a single stereotypical imaginary (Trammell 2016).
4. There are a number of approaches that might help flesh out this category. For the purposes of this essay, a feminist aesthetic of design is any that seeks to cultivate an appreciation for difference in a game's representational and mechanical

content. This is perhaps best reflected in the work of Gillian Smith (2016), who writes, "A feminist and proceduralist approach to game analysis lets us examine more than just the ways that diversity is *shown* to the player by designers, artists, and writers, it also helps us see how players can *perform* and *play* with identity." Others like Naomi Clark and Merritt Kopas (2014) have argued that the turn toward queer game design is itself a turn toward approaching and appreciating non-normative identity.

5. Bonnie Ruberg (2016) maintains an excellent collection of essays and books central to queer game studies.
6. The "harlot" table has been the object of much consternation in the past few years, appearing in websites like *Boing Boing* (Donovan 2014) and *Vice* (Johnson 2008).
7. I have intentionally left out a few descriptions of positions on the list that accommodate both men and women such as "beggar" and "thief" as I felt that they were both more or less interchangeable as poor and invisible in the city's landscape.
8. Gen Con is a hobby convention devoted to role-playing and role-playing enthusiasts. It was developed by Gary Gygax to help support *Dungeons & Dragons*. Gen Con is an annual event that persists today.

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9

At the Intersection of Difficulty and Masculinity: Crafting the Play Ethic

Nicholas A. Hanford

An Intersection of Performances

The Skulls battles in *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (MGSV; Konami Productions 2015) are a well-known pain in the ass. These supersoldiers who surround Snake take incredible amounts of damage and show up periodically throughout the game. They move fast and have heightened senses, pushing the skills learned through previous missions to an extreme. In many cases I was unable to move past them or kill them. Between their quickness and damage resistance, the Skulls repeatedly closed the distance, killed Snake, and left me in frustration. Dying three times in a row in these fights meant being prompted to lower the difficulty. The tradeoff for submitting to the system is to look upon Snake wearing a chicken hat while running through the desert of Afghanistan as well as a cap being placed on my score for the mission.

Donning the chicken hat in MGSV makes me nervous that I am doing some disservice to the game at hand. The same hesitation is present when I select "Cakewalk" prior to starting *Binary Domain* (Yakuza Team 2012). I am reminded quickly that my preferences for smooth playthroughs without a constant chorus of failure and punishment are not accepted as completely legitimate. My performance does not pass the tests of dedication these systems require for entry into the gamer world.

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Video games are a medium built upon challenge and difficulty. Whether that difficulty emanates from the artificially intelligent actors within the game world or from a human player, players are expected to overcome. Through hard work and the gathering of skill within a system, the player must face their challenges, learn from their mistakes, and change their actions to continue within the game. Like this general performance of video game play, the performance of gender is based upon what Butler (1999) calls the "stylized repetition of acts" that are either accepted or demeaned.

When it comes to men playing video games, two performances intersect to create meaning and shape identities. For both of these performances challenge and effort are key forces in the shaping normative notions of both masculinity and play. As Adrienne Shaw (2013) has noted, the "gamer" identity is strongly wrapped up in the amount of work and investment one puts into gaming. The effort that gamers put into their play becomes a badge of commitment and their abilities merit their use of the term. This cycle of legitimacy and work has a multitude of effects, from the shaming of women at gaming conventions to the common critique of Anita Sarkeesian not playing enough games to critique them (Rouner 2014).

The performativity of gamers and the accompanying boundary policing works concurrently at these interpersonal levels as well as at a textual level. In this chapter I will investigate the interrelations between effort and challenge in the context of the "gamer" identity by discussing the strategies games employ to celebrate or demean certain players or kinds of play while legitimizing others. By expanding on the work of Jesper Juul (2009a) in his discussion of punishments within game systems, I propose a broad category of *gender offense punishments* that demonstrates the various ways video games have crafted an image of the gamer that is contingent on the effort of players.

This study further contextualizes how we understand the "hardcore" male gamer as the audience of video games. A great deal of work has been done to show how the figure of the gamer is instantiated throughout gaming discourses, but there is a lack of work that describes how video games themselves influence the position and enforce particular viewpoints on the role of play in people's lives. After discussing previous research that explains the work of difficulty in games and situating this gamer audience, I will describe three genres of gender offense punishment: menu embarrassment, character attacks, and restriction of textual completion. Additionally, I will show how these textual strategies converge to create a *play ethic* for gamers. This ethic grounds the legitimacy and boundary policing in the texts gamers encounter and the experiences they draw upon.

This analysis allows for a more extensive view on how the gamer audience is created and sustained. Elucidating how representations of difficulty and work within video games inform concepts of gamer legitimacy provides a different angle on the masculinities games create. This study informs our knowledge of gaming culture, while also exposing an arena where play can be used to subvert meanings of games. Additionally, this work can afford clarity for designers to craft different representations of difficulty and challenge in the future.

Constructing the Gamer

Erecting the norms of gaming has been a long process and generally revolves around the establishment of the white, heterosexual male as the sole legitimate audience for games. From the work of Cassell and Jenkins (2000) to Sarkeesian (2013), the textual strategies for ensuring the masculine gendering of games have been analyzed and explained in great detail. These studies have emphasized the lack of equal representation within game worlds, demonstrating how games themselves contribute to a sexist gaming subculture.

The gamer identity has formed through a variety of means. Analyzing how the popular magazine *Nintendo Power* displayed the gaming populace in the 1990s, Cote (2015) showed a significant skewing toward a male audience. During the studied timeframe (1994–1999) male contributions to the magazine in the form of letters, articles, artwork, or as subjects of photographs were the clear majority of content. This is only one demonstration of a pervasive trend throughout the history of games.

Even though the journalistic representation of games is largely steady, both Diane Carr (2005) and Helen Thornham (2008) demonstrate that the appeal of games to men and women is complicated by game genres and player preferences. By looking at young women's preferences, Diane Carr (2005) concluded that access to certain genres was a simple way to break down the proposed gender differences in playing preference. In a study of gaming's place in multiple households over the course of several years, Thornham (2008) demonstrates the internalization of the marketed gender roles in various households, impacting the norms of how games are played as a social activity. These studies show that while the marketing of games clearly gender what games men and women should play and that the preferences might be internalized, they are not the final say on performing gameplay.

The ideal gamer is not solely male, but also identifies as a "hardcore" player (Kerr 2006). Even as audiences have expanded over time, this hardcore gamer

is one that plays a routine subset of games. As Vanderhoef (2013) summarizes, "The video game industry treats the term casual as a beneficial target consumer, a potential profit, but this enthusiasm is tempered by the subtle devaluation and more blatant feminization of this same market." These processes of separating the casual and hardcore markets by the industry have worked their way into the gaming subculture, furthering the stratification of gamers by gamers. The formal, gamic qualities (Juul 2009b) and informal, social rules (Consalvo 2009) have crafted a distinct hierarchy of how games are viewed.

The separation of players along the casual/hardcore border has been an important force in the legitimacy of individuals and this stratification takes place in a medium where legitimacy is seen as being earned through effort. The more a gamer plays through a game, the more social capital and gamic credibility they receive in support of their identity. James Paul Gee (2007) celebrates the space that video games afford people in that they offer a safe space for failure. Here the credibility gamers earn is tied to skill or the time invested within the game.

However, praising the presumed meritocracy of games does not take into account the issues arising from this viewpoint. Discussing the role of leveling systems in crafting this meritocratic façade, Paul (2013) writes, "Under a presumption of proper balance, leveling systems work as an alibi for video games and the inequality that can be wrought in their meritocratic spaces by making abstract effort result in concrete, visible results." This challenges the validity Gee (2007) lends games as a space for learning and the actual place of work within gaming. As Paul further points out, more generally, the discourses of meritocracy have long maintained paths to salvation that are built upon the necessity of inequality. Although gamers earn their credibility through various social methods, the work that they do within games is always directed as challenges are made evident.

Guiding Gamers Through Difficulty

The study of difficulty within video games has largely focused on the experience of gameplay and the basis of engagement with the medium. Video games, according to Espen Aarseth (1999), are an ergodic medium, composed of texts that require effort to move through them. This resistance is where many locate the pleasure of gameplay. As Costikyan (2002) notes, difficulty in games acts as a means of keeping the audience engaged. Further, Naomi Clark (2014) writes, "Overcoming difficulty is deeply appealing to us as human beings for good reason: it can give us confidence in our own ability to learn

and even master difficult aspects of our lives" (118). Through the coding of difficulty and creation of challenge, games create spaces where work is a necessity to alter behavior and overcome challenge.

Game studies enforces understandings of difficulty and challenge that are tied to the learning of the game system and game world. The ideal player is constructed through the rules and situations presented to them by the game world with a core loop of failure, punishment, and the alteration of player action providing players an avenue for progression in the game. As Juul (2013) writes, "Though we may dislike failure as such, failure is an integral element of the overall experience of playing a game, a motivator, something that helps us reconsider our strategies and see the strategic depth in a game, a clear proof that we have improved when we finally overcome it" (9). Thus, it is through failure that the play of the game is determined and valued, while the player is constructed through this process.

Further, game worlds provide players with a variety of means for how they should engage in order to progress. Kristine Jørgensen (2013), in expanding our understanding of interfaces by looking at various gameworlds, writes, "Gameworlds use processes and behaviors with which we are familiar in other contexts as representative of game-system processes. This approach contextualizes the game mechanics and provides a framework for how to understand them" (144). By using the gameworld as an interface, players are directed along with their behavior for the purposes of overcoming resistance, their performances melding with the needs of the system.

The building of resistance within a gameworld is how difficulty is crafted and communicated to the player. Games will often employ a variety of strategies, like hints and tutorials, in order to guide the player through. These strategies, described by Carl Therrien (2011) as slowly developing as games left the arcades and entered the home, aid the player in giving implicit and explicit directions to the player. Although this may be the norm for games, Christopher A. Paul (2011) has described the inaccessibility of *EVE: Online*, which obscures the basic rules and actions players must know in order to succeed by presenting them with a deluge of information upon beginning. Only through hard work and the investment of time can these kinds of systems be understood.

The difficulty and challenges of games have also often been used to discuss the relationships between games and social relationships. Roger Caillois (2001), in discussing the social work of merit and chance, links the rise of games of skill, *agôn*, with the emphasis on equalitarianism in Western societies. Where Caillois (2001) reads games as the social means many cultures used to eliminate the divine will of chance and emphasize meritocratic ideals, some

recent authors have looked to games as allegories for forces of privilege and oppression in the real world. John Scalzi (2012) discusses the easy difficulty in video games as a means to explain the privilege of straight, white men by picking apart generic video game mechanics of skill points, abilities, and leveling up. Building off of this, Samantha Allen (2013) writes on how to explain the complex interrelations that are a part of understanding intersectional oppression through *Halo*'s Skulls mechanic. She writes, "Each sort of marginalized social identity comes with its own set of 'skulls' that can interlock and produce a complicated and unpredictable effects." Establishing and furthering the links between difficulty and social relationships are necessary as games become more dominant parts of our media ecology.

Situating the Gamer

The focus of this chapter is not on masculinity *per se*, but it is important that we situate where the gamer masculinity I am building on interacts with theories of masculinities in general. Masculinities shift and are translated along geographic and temporal lines (Reeser 2010). While the gamer masculinity is something that emerges from contemporary Western spaces, its intersections with other masculinities flow through the valuation of work and effort.

The place of hard work and effort in the performance of gender has long been a central theme for the creation of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1990). Men's worth has been tied to the work that they perform and the power that it possibly affords them. Successes that derive from men's work are often attributed to strong work ethics or the overcoming of adversity (Harris 1995). Even as this work and its effects have been largely used to establish male power and dominance over women, the success of some men also creates hierarchies of how different work is valued (Tolson 2004). These cultural undercurrents had kept masculinity in a certain stability, at least into the last decade of the twentieth century.

However, the place of work in the Western world changed as industrial jobs became replaced with more precarious service-based work. As Susan Faludi (2000) writes, "The shipyard represented a particular vintage of American masculinity, monumental in its pooled effort, indefatigable in its industry, and built on a sense of useful productivity, or work tied to service" (p. 55). The tying of masculinity to a strong work ethic, one that generally derived from industrial imaginings of labor, sustains the drive for work to be a central part of masculine identities. This sentiment is echoed by Catano (2001), who emphasizes the connection of work with self-reliance in the portrayal of steel

workers. With the fracturing of masculinity that coincided with the emergence of a globalized, postindustrial economy, the crisis of masculinity is snugly tied to the decrease in stable opportunities for work.

Even though the existence and extent of contemporary crises of masculinity have been questioned (Hanke 1998), we must still note that the shifts in the last several decades have been important. Michael Kimmell (2008) situates the crisis of masculinity in the liminal space between boyhood and adulthood, emphasizing the importance of media on crafting new hegemonic masculinities. In this world old ideas of effort and work are somewhat shirked and spread off into different areas of a man's life. Kimmell explains away video games as time-wasters that hold men back, but the satisfaction of effort within these realms cannot be denied.

Gender Offense Punishments

Within the study of games, difficulty and effort have been positioned as objects of game design. In describing how game difficulty functions as a result of various punishments, Juul (2009a) outlines four kinds: energy, life, setback, and game termination punishments. These mechanisms work by punishing the player through the loss of their time, what he notes as being "the most fundamental currency of games" (p. 238). These punishments require the player to recomplete parts of the game and alter their behavior in order to continue playing.

The strategies outlined below are not direct expressions of challenges or difficulty within game worlds; instead, they are ways that this difficulty is represented to the player. Whereas the punishments Juul (2009a) outlines are manifested in the rules and mechanics of the game, gender offense punishments generally operate at a representational level, giving name and image to the challenge mechanics being communicated to the player. Whereas Juul's punishments emerge solely from the relationship between the player and the software, the punishments I outline draw upon masculine ideals of work and effort to create meaning.

While this chapter presents a theoretical extension of Juul's taxonomy of punishments in games to demonstrate the link between gender performance and difficulty, it is largely a work of interpretation and identification of consistent, but unrelated, examples. The theorization relies on various textual analyses, all read with the theoretical lenses of Juul's punishments as well as Butler's (1999) "stylized repetition of actions" while searching out the areas of games where masculinity, meritocracy, and challenge or difficulty cross paths.

It must be stated up front that the readings of these texts are inflected by my own perspective as a straight, white man who is a part of the intended audience for many of the games listed. Because this is an act of interpretative theory-building, the textual analyses are limited in their applicability to the different audiences who play games. Additionally, this study does not seek out possible means of challenging or subverting the design decisions and their effects. I hope that this can act as a jumping off point for further research of how the effects of difficulty, challenge, and skill interact and converge in the experience of video game play.

Menu Embarrassment

The difficulty menu is a powerful tool for the display of meritocracy and an expedient method for establishing the meaning of various levels of resistance a game offers. Menus establish a clear pecking order to gamers, providing them with a hierarchy of presumed or necessary skill. Many games use some variety of easy-normal-hard designations for difficulty levels, but it is also a common convention for games to use different words or phrases to convey these levels of difficulty. I will discuss a few examples to highlight the various masculinities that these signifiers relay.

One of the most famous examples of this kind of gender offense punishment can be seen in *Wolfenstein 3D* (id Software 1992), *Wolfenstein* (Raven Software 2009), and *Wolfenstein: The New Order* (MachineGames 2014). The four settings given to the player in these games at the outset are, from lowest to highest difficulty, "Can I play, Daddy?," "Don't hurt me," "Bring 'em on!," and "I am Death Incarnate!" These four difficulties are paired with a particular avatar image of B. J. Blazkowicz. The lowest difficulty settings, "Can I play, Daddy," portrays Blazkowicz wearing a baby's bonnet while sucking on a pacifier. This sort of infantilization of the player in difficulty selection screens is a common affair, with games like *Viewtiful Joe* (Capcom Production Studio 4 2004) and *Doom* (id Software 1993), both using infantile or childish descriptions as signifiers for their lower difficulty settings. By stratifying difficulty in these ways, and the necessary effort and skill for being successful, games stratify masculinities according to age, emphasizing the connection between skill and manhood.

Difficulty setting labels often mirror the subject matter of the game itself. For example, many military shooters use a scale that is comparable to that which is used by *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward 2003): Greenhorn, Regular, Hardened, and Veteran. These classifications often question the skill or proficiency of the player at hand. Although these difficulty ranges may be accurate

to the subject matter, they normalize and legitimize higher difficulties by connecting them to socioeconomic positions within a profession. Rhetorically, the difficulty settings employed by these games offer a simple way to establish the boundary for legitimate play and the level of social capital gained through the playing of a game. Playing *Halo 4* (343 Industries 2012) on its "Legendary" setting easily dispenses a player's bona fides in the game, legitimating their use of the gamer identity.

On the other side of the spectrum, many games describe higher difficulty settings through words and phrases that create senses of power or raw manliness. Additionally, *PO'ed* (Any Channel 1996), a first-person shooter for the first PlayStation, alluded to Bruce Feirstein's (1982) *Real Men Don't Eat Quiche* with its highest difficulty setting being called "I don't Eat Quiche."

This kind of gender offense punishment occurs prior to gameplay in many cases, as a player is just beginning the game or franchise. Demeaning and mocking those who play on lower difficulties establishes the barrier for legitimate play. Players are directed to a particular style of engagement and openly mocked if desiring an easier or faster game type. These designations often call into question a players' willingness to commit to the game or their developmental abilities and progress. Additionally, a lack of skill within the game or a desire to learn the game from easier difficulty settings is portrayed as undesirable for the gamer being projected by these texts. Where the seeming objectivity of the game system dispenses life or setback punishments equally, these punishments are meted out to create a distinct hierarchy of play.

Character Attacks

Gender offense punishments also occur during the course of the playing of a video game. These often take the form of transforming player-characters themselves or giving the character items that directly impact the play of the game and the player's score or rating of particular levels or missions.

Punishing the player by transforming the character often occurs after the player has selected to play the game on a lower difficulty setting. For example, when the indie game *I Wanna Be the Guy* (O'Reilly 2007) is played on "Medium"—its lowest difficulty setting—the player character is given a bow in their hair, while save points, which are labeled "WUSS," also appear. Going along these lines, after failing a level multiple times of *'Splosion Man* (Twisted Pixel Games 2009), the player will have the option of skipping the level completely. Named "Way of the Coward", this option forces the player-character to wear a tutu for the entirety of the next level if this option is chosen.

In addition to games altering characters or the game world, demeaning items are often given to a player who fails several times in a row. As discussed above, after failing three times during a single mission, players of *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain* (Kojima Productions 2015) are given the option of wearing a chicken mask that allows them to go unseen by a few enemies. However, the player is ultimately penalized for this through their mission score, which is directly tied to how much in-game currency is made for completion of a mission. In this way character attacks resemble the punishments outlined by Juul (2009a) more closely. They do not directly attack a player's time, but devalue the time and effort put forth.

Restricting Textual Completion

Lastly, many video games have employed the strategy of restricting certain levels or endings from players who choose to play games on lower difficulty settings. These sorts of punishments range from having different plotlines available to different difficulty levels to completely cutting off progression within the game when on lower difficulties. This practice enforces the view that gamers must earn the content that they have paid for.

One extreme example of this kind is in *Twisted Metal 2* (Sony Interactive Studios America 1996). When playing the campaign on the lowest setting, the game will show a large stop sign and display the following:

> NO LOSERS ALLOWED BEYOND THIS POINT
> YOU MUST SWITCH TO MEDIUM OR HARD TO CONTINUE.

This prevents the player from continuing on easy for the remaining three levels of play. Like this game, *Contra 4* (WayForward Technologies 2007) stops the player before the regular ending with a screen that reads, "You'll never see the ending on Easy!" These endings are surprising and harsh in order to correct the sinful practices of the player.

These sorts of strategies deny completion of the game, serving not only as gender offense punishments but also as Juul's (2009a) game termination punishments. Through these restrictions, the time invested by players becomes completely devalued. If searching for textual resolution, the player must atone for their choice of difficulty setting by starting the game over at a new difficulty and playing it in its entirety. Where legitimate gamer masculinity was challenged by lack of effort, the priest in the machine offers reconciliation with a Hail Mary and a few more hours of gameplay.

Crafting the Play Ethic

The examples of gender offense punishments that I discussed above are only a small sampling of how effort and difficulty are portrayed in games. They are the textual sites where difficulty becomes gendered, which act as intersections between the performance of gamer masculinity outside the game and that of the player within it. The learning that occurs within a gameworld, as well as the learning of gender roles, transpires through performance and response. This learning occurs over time, through the experience of multiple texts and their convergence with various social forces. In his discussion of how MMORPG guilds are built and played, Jeremy Aroles (2015) writes, "belonging to a virtual community is not given but consists in a performance that relies on a multitude of factors. Therefore, the notion of belonging is best expressed in terms of becoming rather than being" (p. 13). The player experiencing these is always becoming a part of the system while also becoming part of the gamer masculinity.

Performing at this intersection is how a particular *play ethic* is created by video games. This is the play ethic that spawns the idea that certain levels of investment are required to be considered a gamer. Like the boundaries that are created between masculinities when work ethic and merit are contested, the play ethic erects the borders between gamer and non-gamer. Through the textual strategies outlined, these borders are mirrored back to the gamer who accepts and performs them.

Because of their strong representation within the medium, the space of the video game has long been seen as one of freedom for men. Cassell and Jenkins (2000) discuss this intersection, writing:

> Boys can use games to escape into a fantasy world which allows them to prepare themselves for the requirements of adult masculinity. … The cultural prescriptions for masculinity are harsh and exacting. Few boys can feel secure about achieving a sufficient degree of masculinity. The pressure is relentless—and these games provide a fun, painless opportunity for boost their sense of masculinity and let off some steam. (86–87)

I agree that the ease of identification with characters may provide men with a greater feeling of escapism in games; we must realize that deviations from the norms of gamer investment are met with different pressures. Their play is infantilized and emasculated as their space of leisure is questioned on the grounds of labor.

When we understand gender offense punishments as being tied to the labor of play, we can see that video games are an important space for the retaking of the masculine subject. Where hard work was often entailed through a man's profession, a postindustrial society creates a world that does not involve the same images of masculinity. Writing on these trends specifically in the United States, Susan Faludi (2000) demonstrates how this shift has infected the work of Hollywood, discussing Sylvester Stallone's desire to do his own stunts as a reinforcement of real work. The increasing reliance on immaterial labor has left hegemonic masculinity searching for new spaces where labor and effort would be apparent.

Video games offer a space where the increased mixture of leisure and work provides fertile ground for the rededication of Western masculinity to the subject of hard work and mastery. As the video game became more and more of a private function, moving from the arcade to the living room, the rubric for their legitimacy of gamers had to be resituated. No longer could the pecking order of masculinity be determined by watching over the shoulder of someone at a cabinet. Instead video games themselves ensured that skill and personal investment would continue to be emphasized as determinants of gamer credibility. This is not a new phenomenon, as Lori Kendall (2000) demonstrates by looking at masculinity in Multi-User Domains (MUDs). Kendall finds pliability with the word "nerd," but stresses that "[e]ven when used pejoratively to support structures of hegemonic masculinity, it can confer grudging respect for technical expertise" (p. 262). The hierarchies of legitimacy that emerge from gamer and nerd spaces use gender offense punishments to craft a play ethic, maintaining hegemonic boundaries to gamer credibility.

Conclusion: Valuing Different Masteries

In *Tomb Raider* (Crystal Dynamics 2014) I was a graceful soldier; my Lara Croft danced between enemies and was unwavering in the face of danger. She was out for vengeance and could not be stopped. While the avatar might often mutter her unwillingness to kill and desire to leave the island, the character I was molding was ruthless. She didn't have to learn the ways of the island because it was within her the entire time. This Lara Croft did not have to produce and grow to perform her place in the world. My avatar occasionally skulked across the island, but I had no reason to fear traversing this world. Instead of worrying about positioning or sneaking enemies, I could focus on the environment around me or create new metrics of success on the vicious island.

Mastery in the study and design of games is often seen as the result of investment and practice in a gameworld. It is the stuff of speedrunners and high score pursuers. It has spawned aphorisms like "a game should be easy to learn but difficult to master" and models like the flow channel (Clark 2014). Mastery is the absolute knowledge of a system and the muscle memory to defeat it at its best. These notions put the difficulty of the game and the effort of the player front and center in the study of games and the valuation of their kinds of engagement.

However, we must resist only studying mastery. Focusing on the configurative notion of difficulty that prevents boredom and promises progression restricts the possibilities of gameplay and game studies. Playing on easy affords players and researchers new avenues for studying and playing. However, it is only through further disruption of the gamer identity and its ties to the play ethic of games that these avenues can be valued and their own masteries understood.

Low difficulty modes could offer researchers a place to expand on the boundaries that video games offer for performance. Like Kücklich's (2007) suggestion of using cheat codes to investigate how different modes of play alter the game text, lower difficulties allow us to expand the limits of play within a game world and to focus on the performances and creativity of players. Further, by understanding play at lower difficulties as resisting normative gamer masculinity, we are able to understand this play as being valuable for creating alternate play styles and player outlooks.

This study shows that the performance of the masculine gamer is seen not only within who plays or for how long but in the intricacies of the games players engage with. As Eskelinen and Tronstad (2003) have noted, games act as systems that configure and direct the performances of players. While the authors restrict their conceptualization to the performance within the game space, it is necessary to expand these configurative practices outward from games themselves into the construction of particular masculinities. Expanding legitimacy to different performances of gameplay is one way to slowly alter the gamer identity.

Ultimately it will not solely be the work of game developers to cease using tired stereotypes in describing difficulty settings or mocking a player who cannot finish a level without mechanical aid. Instead, there needs to be an additional thrust within the gaming subculture that accepts and encourages the playing of games on lower difficulties. Respecting these play styles allow us to further our understanding of how different individuals can use games and how meaning is created in different ludic situations where overcoming challenge might take a backseat.

Even in places where mastery is not the end product of gameplay, further study of those playing on low difficulty modes allows for new understandings of how games fit into people's lives. Putting *Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater* (Kojima Productions 2011) on its "Very Easy" mode guaranteed that my inability to master the forced perspective of the game would not regularly cause backtracking. Because of this, the game did not become a burden or chore to get used to and melded with my life. For a player who has little leisure time, lower difficulty levels allow for games to not be huge time investments, closing the gap in usage between typical "casual" and "hardcore" games. Furthering the humanistic study of games requires understanding the wide range of engagements that video games afford individuals. Whether games are played at their highest or lowest difficulty level provides different angles on their possibilities for creating meaning by the designer and the player alike.

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