

Dungeons, Dragons and Chainmail Bikinis

***A reconsideration of women's fan experiences
with D&D***

By

Elisa Armstrong

Master of Arts (Women's Studies)
Bachelor of Behavioural Science (Psychology)
Bachelor of Business (Marketing)

Supervised by Professor Tara Brabazon

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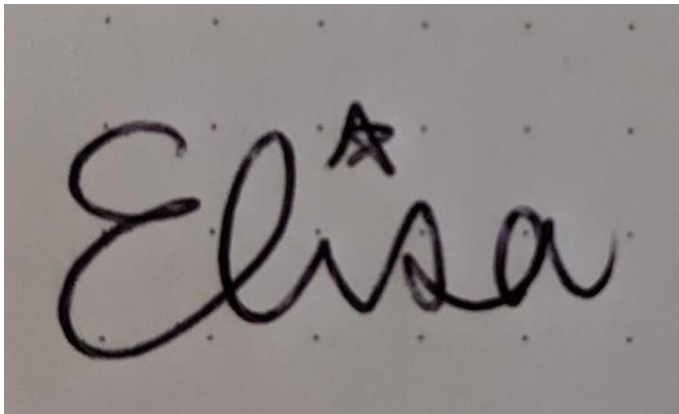
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Declaration

I certify that this thesis:

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2. and the research within will not be submitted for any other future degree or diploma without the permission of Flinders University; and
3. to the best of my knowledge and belief, does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed:

A photograph of a handwritten signature in dark ink on a light-colored, slightly textured surface. The signature is written in a cursive style and reads 'Elisa'. Above the letter 'i' in 'Elisa', there is a small, stylized star or asterisk symbol.

Elisa Armstrong

22nd March 2022

Abstract

Women who play the tabletop roleplaying game *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) face harassment, exclusion, and toxicity, but nevertheless they have persisted. Their voices are often silenced in popular culture and the research literature due to sexism and the perpetuation of misogynistic methodologies, epistemologies and ontologies. The original contribution to knowledge made through this thesis is the inclusion and magnification of women D&D players. Women and their experiences playing D&D are absent in existing D&D research, which tends to focus on men and ignore gender completely. Fandom and tabletop roleplaying game research has suffered from a lack of feminist research that goes beyond the white straight men that dominate stereotypical geek, nerd, and fan cultures.

Four research questions focus this thesis:

- 1) What forms does women's exclusion from D&D and fandom take?
- 2) What purpose does women's exclusion from fandom serve for other fans?
- 3) What barriers do women face when playing D&D and participating in D&D's fandom?
- 4) What are the consequences of women's exclusion from D&D?

Chapter 1 established the methodology used for this thesis with a robust discussion of the challenges faced in conducting the research. Over 44,800 survey responses were collected from a wide range of D&D players, providing a rich source of qualitative data. A study of this scale has never been undertaken into D&D and tabletop roleplaying games. Feminist autoethnographic methodology was combined with thematic analysis to investigate the survey responses. Quantitative analysis was undertaken to provide a profile of the survey's demographics. This approach to fandom studies was novel and an original contribution to knowledge.

Chapter 2 demonstrated how pop culture's presentation of D&D's history has led to the erasure and/or villainization of the women that were part of the game's development. Popular history frames and shapes a version of history that enables exclusionary fans to justify sexism and gatekeeping. By making women historically absent (when they were not), gatekeepers justify women's contemporary exclusion.

Chapter 3 built on the understanding of how popular cultural histories can be weaponised or employed to advance a narrative through nostalgia. D&D's history has been heavily romanticised with modern players lusting after 'the good old days' of D&D, wearing vintage t-shirts, and re-enacting through Old School Renaissance products. Nostalgia is a tool used to bury D&D's problematic histories and pave over the contributions of women to D&D's development. Nostalgia was found in this doctoral research to be a significant driver for D&D players' engagement with the game, challenging the commonly assumed dominance of paratexts in bringing in new players. The social experience around the table and the people involved in D&D in some form, such as friends and family, are powerful factors in the emotional attachment players often form with the game. D&D then becomes a facilitator of nostalgic recollection – playing the game is linked inextricably with fond memories of the people (when the experiences were positive).

Chapter 4 presents a profile of D&D's community built from the survey results to explain the desirability and benefits of fandom membership. This chapter moves beyond the historic and legacy research of Jenkins, Hills, and Bacon-Smith to provide a more contemporary understanding of fandom. Fandom activities are described, and the purpose of these practices clarified. This outline of D&D's fandom is important, as it challenges the representational centrality of the white, straight, cisgender man as the core fan. The enjoyment that fans get from participating in fandom and the impact it has on their gameplay is crucial to understand so that the gravity of exclusion can be appreciated.

Chapter 5 introduced the wide range of paratexts that exist for D&D and how these can impact play. Paratexts influence players at every stage of their experience – from learning about D&D's existence, deciding to play and the actual activities of play. The perspective offered on how paratexts influence how players play D&D is an original contribution to knowledge. Whilst there has been media reporting on how streams like *Critical Role* inspire emulation, there has been a lack of thorough academic investigation. This thesis fills that gap in knowledge and extends the current understanding on paratexts' relationship with D&D.

Chapter 6 establishes the mechanisms of gatekeeping, exclusion, and group member identity as they apply to D&D's fandom with a gendered focus. Gatekeeping is the primary tool used to discourage the presence of women in D&D's fandom, and it takes a multitude of forms. Issues such as the term 'fake geek girl' and the devaluing of women's contributions

and knowledge are covered. Chapter 7 then builds from this foundation to show the consequences of gatekeeping for women as they play D&D and engage with the fandom. The experiences and testimony that women shared in their survey responses include feeling unwelcome, sexual harassment and even the rape of their characters. It can be incredibly unpleasant for women at the D&D table, and even dangerous. Methods for managing gatekeeping and mitigating discomfort were also discussed. The theme was that women were responsible for altering their approach and choosing where they played – to enable their safety and comfort - rather than the community being held responsible at a collective level.

The original contribution to knowledge configured and confirmed in this thesis lies in the use of feminist autoethnographic methods, the volume of rich data from the more than 44,800 survey responses, and the revisioning of a contemporary fandom study. This thesis created a vital insight into the experiences of women who play D&D at a moment in time where D&D is being considered as an educational and therapeutic tool. There is a need to understand how gender affects women's fandom experiences, and this thesis offers an approach that can be activated to the understanding of other marginalised groups and other fandoms.

Publications disseminated during the Candidature

Memes to A Darker Shade: Dark Simpsons, Un/Popular Culture and Summoning Theories of Darkness - Elisa Armstrong & Tara Brabazon. International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies ISSN 2520-0968 (Online), ISSN 2409-1294 (Print), December 2020, Vol.7, No. 4

The Pandemic PhD Programme Reading and Thinking About the Celebrity Intellectual (And Covid-19). Brabazon, T., Cornelius-Bell, A., & Armstrong, E. (2021). International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies, 8(12). <https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v8i1p165>

Deeply digital in shallow times: Writing communities in the shadow of a pandemic. Brabazon, T., Armstrong, E., Baker, N., Batchelor, S., Brose, J., Charlton, S., Carpenter-Mew, R., Jackson Collett, M., Cooper, A., Ganzer, S., Hayden, C., Hammond, L., McLeod, A., Phillips, J., Thomas, J., & Witt, S. (2021). International Journal of Social Sciences & Educational Studies, 230–253. <https://doi.org/10.23918/ijsses.v8i4p230>

Presentations

DocFest Competition

September 2020

I participated in Flinders University DocFest poster competition. This required producing a poster summarising my research and giving a two-minute speech then answering questions.

Gender, Sex, and Sexualities Conference.

September 2020

I presented at *Gender, Sex, and Sexualities Conference* on women's experiencing playing D&D. I focused on early qualitative and thematic analysis of survey results. This was an online presentation.

Flinders CHASS Spring Conference.

November 2020

I presented at the Flinders University CHASS and BGL Spring Conference on paratexts and D&D using preliminary findings from my survey data. This presentation occurred in person, and I answered questions after.

Sara Ahmed Reading Seminar

March 2021 – May 2021

I collaborated with Professor Tara Brabazon and Dr Aidan Cornelius-Bell to facilitate a nine-week reading seminar program where we read and discussed the work of Sara Ahmed. These seminars were hosted over Zoom with participants from all over the world. They were recorded and then uploaded to YouTube.

Playlist of the nine seminars available at:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLi8qXbVLrHrWEnNMw2Ju8G8wdLf5mmtq7>

Presented at Popular Culture Association Annual Conference 2021

June 2021

My presentation was titled "Hiding Online – Netnography and Ethics", and it focused on gaps in the ethics of netnographic research. Research on Netnography often fails to recognise the difference between online platforms and the need for tailored ethical approaches. The research methodology of netnography is still evolving, but the ethics are not keeping pace with developments in technology and research.

Interview with Tara Brabazon for the Flinders University Office of Graduate Research vlog series

November 2021

Tara Brabazon interviewed me for a vlog entitled "Research with a Passion". We discussed the PhD process and what it means to engage in a "passion project" research topic.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXk_d26F3sU

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Chapter 0:

Introduction

This thesis was inspired by my experiences as a woman playing *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D), interacting with gaming, nerd, and fandom communities. I grew up struggling with exclusion and gatekeeping when participating in fandoms. For my passion for *Star Wars*, science-fiction, video games, and all things nerdy, I have been harassed, bullied and excluded. In the last decade, I have witnessed the nerdy and geeky behaviours I enjoy become integrated in and with popular culture. Through working in the gaming industry, interacting frequently with nerds, my feelings of exclusion were both reinforced and challenged. Men often mansplained simple concepts to me, tried to assess my knowledge, and made me uncomfortable. I also had the opportunity to meet nerdy women, help foster inclusion, and feel a greater sense of belonging in the community. I want women to feel comfortable in gaming communities – without having to fight through the harassment and negativity.

For the past decade, *Dungeons & Dragons* has been an important part of my life. In my early university years, it was the centre of my social life. It was how I made friends, met new people, and spent all my free time. Unfortunately, D&D eventually became toxic for me. I felt uncomfortable at the table and unsure when trying to interact with the community. It was a sad time because I lost access to one of my favourite leisure activities. I returned to D&D eventually, but I have become more selective about who I will play with. I am resolutely unwilling to play with strangers because it feels too risky. I get anxious thinking about what might happen. I have watched groups play Adventurer's League, laughing and having fun, and wished I felt safe to also do so. I want to be part of the change that means women do not feel like this in any area of fandom – starting with the D&D table.

Long before I possessed the scholarly terminology to explain what was happening, I was angry with the sexism I faced. Feminist theory and writing gave me the framework to contextualise my experiences and the understanding that I was not alone. The most powerful texts that I have read revolved around women's lived experiences rather than theory – which I often find detached and cold. I wanted to bring the illuminating and connected approach that I have often found in feminist writing to my experiences playing D&D. I had a strong urge to connect my experiences with greater structural injustices and trends of discrimination. I needed to know why I faced vitriol and rejection when interacting with other nerds or tried to join fan communities that were not dominated by women. I found acceptance and joy in fandom when I interacted in women and non-binary dominated spaces – websites such as

Tumblr that seemed more open to feminism, strong women, and nerdy women. I know, and found in the survey results, that women regularly choose to interact only in dedicated safe spaces, rejecting the mainstream community and the sexism rife within it. I do not want to have to make that choice. I feel grateful that these spaces exist, but I strongly believe that women should feel safe in all fandom spaces.

My intent through this doctoral research is to shed light on the experiences of women who play D&D, create discussion around the issues that we face, and trigger change. This thesis goes beyond looking at how women are represented in the books and play materials to understand the lived experiences of players. This is a significant avenue of exploration to create understanding and facilitate meaningful change.

Importance of topic

The history of Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) begins with Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson, and grew out of tabletop miniature wargaming. D&D was first published in 1974 by TSR (Tactical Studies Rules). It was the first roleplaying game and roleplaying game company (Appelcline, 2014, p. 6). This was the beginning of a new, unique category of game that has become a global industry, influenced popular culture, spawned hundreds of other derivative games, and ultimately has brought tabletop role-playing games to the masses (Witwer, 2015, p. 2). D&D is like Kleenex to tissues, Polaroid to instant cameras, and Coca-Cola to soft drinks – it is the brand that represents (or eclipses) all others in the category, ubiquitous in roleplaying.

Dungeons and Dragons is now more present in mainstream popular culture than any other time in its long history. Fantasy and science fiction are popular genres in television, movies, and books. These genres have long been the stereotypical territory of the “nerd” or “geek” but are now openly appreciated in mainstream culture. *Game of Thrones*, *Lord of the Rings*, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Stranger Things*, *Black Mirror*, plus other television shows and movies have brought the dawn of the era of nerd-chic culture. Creative Director of D&D, Mike Mearls, confirmed, “geek culture is being demystified by the internet, there are so many people who grew up loving comics, loving science fiction and fantasy, and they are now the ones crafting mainstream entertainment, and they're bringing that stuff and placing it in the mainstream. We're seeing a lot of people now who [in the past]

would never have been exposed to D&D” (Biggs, 2019). D&D has spawned board games and video games set in an expansive setting, further increasing its reach beyond the tabletop roleplaying game. It has also featured in hugely popular shows such as *Stranger Things*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Riverdale*, and *Community*. Massively popular celebrities such as Vin Diesel and Deborah Ann Woll have proudly stated that they play D&D, thus helping push aside negative stereotypes around who plays D&D. The rise in Twitch and streams or podcasts dedicated to watching/listening to people play video games or tabletop roleplaying games have been a significant factor in the “demystification” of geekiness. *Critical Role* has been profoundly innovative in the streaming of D&D gameplay, and its following is not only massive but not limited to hardcore geeks or even D&D players. As of May 2019, more than 1.5 billion minutes of D&D streams have been watched on Twitch (Biggs, 2019). That exposure would never have been possible at any other point in D&D’s history, making this an interesting and provocative time for D&D. It is therefore a timely moment for a doctorate in this area. Therefore, it is a timely moment to summon a doctorate in this area.

D&D is currently highly commercial and proliferating through traditional and social media. According to an infographic created by Wizards of The Coast (D&D’s current publisher; AKA WOTC) in 2021 about the 2020 year, there are, “More than 50 million players to date” and “D&D is more popular now than it has ever been in its 47-year history”(Corliss, 2021). I will add a caveat here: WOTC’s infographics are distributed through press releases and are a marketing material rather than a statistical analysis of their consumers. They also make these infographics difficult to compare to previous years through changing wording, the boundaries of categories like age, and by using vague wording. Stating the number of “players to date” is potentially a little confusing – how are they counting? And what number of *current* players are there? The 2020 infographic claimed, “over 40 million fans around the world” which sounds like a more current estimate of player numbers or fans, than the historical leaning of “players to date”. D&D has grown consistently for the past seven years (a 33% annual growth in 2020), and I do not see any reason that would change in 2021 – a year when D&D has continued to seep into popular culture (crossover products have boomed) and seems to have thrived during Covid-19. WOTC produced free materials for their ‘Stay at Home, Play at Home’ program to encourage D&D as a covid-safe activity. There is no data yet released for 2021, but if they achieve a similar growth in fans/players/whatever they are counting, then it would

be in the realm of 65 to 70 million fans/players/whatever. It is incredibly hard to track the number of D&D players, and although Wizards of the Coast conduct regular surveys, they keep a tight control of the data and feed little information back into the community.

When comparing the 2019 and 2020 D&D infographics, WOTC found an increase in the percentage of women players from 39% to 40%. This is not a major increase in a year. This information is made more questionable, as WOTC has presented no methodology or source from how or where this information was sought, sourced, discovered, or collated. Its validity is questionable. But – even if wildly inaccurate – it reveals that Wizards of the Coast has noticed or recorded an increase in women playing D&D. The demographic data for my survey does challenge WOTC's results. This may be due to different collection methods and channels because their survey is just through their website (if that is where this data is drawn from). I had 7.6% of my respondents identify as non-binary, with 0.9% expressing they would rather not disclose their gender, and 1.7% choosing a different identity that they provided. WOTC had less than 1% non-binary, which is far lower than my findings. My research disrupts their findings. They are potentially not reaching a diverse audience in their data collection. Consequently, their quantification of women players may also be under-reported. This absence of certain demographic groups links back to their claims around numbers of players or fans, because as a result the numbers might be too low. There was a strong theme in my survey's responses around D&D's popularity with the queer community – if WOTC is missing these communities then that skews to the company's perception of who their target audience really is.

Ultimately, D&D continues to gain traction in popular culture and if 40% of 50 million fans are facing exclusion or sexual harassment and feeling unwelcome in the D&D community, that is a large group of players. Women's experiences with D&D are not those of a small minority – they are not a niche gaming community. Women are almost half of D&D players. Women's experiences should not be conflated with overall D&D player experiences, because there are vital differences.

The gap

Part of the original contribution to knowledge emerging from this doctoral research is derived from my analysis and interpretation of survey results. Surveys are a common

instrument in research. Yet what happened in the circulation of my survey requires further attention and consideration. To dismiss this component as ‘data collection’ undermines how this survey circulation was – in and of itself – a complex and intricate part of the research. After distributing the survey for only 17 days, I received more than 49,000 responses for my player survey, and 6,200 for the non-player survey. Additionally, I was able to collect data on more than 145,000 builds of D&D characters. This massive response demonstrates the popularity of D&D and the keenness of players (and even non-players) to share their experiences. My survey results are of an unprecedented scope and size. There is an incredible amount of rich qualitative data that I was able to explore and analyse through my chapters, and – indeed will continue to explore after the completion of my PhD. Official surveys by Wizards of the Coast or casual surveys by bloggers or news sites tend to be very narrow in focus. Though academic research into D&D is booming, I have not found any other research project with such a large survey response and consequent data sets. My interrogation of the relationship that players maintain with D&D and the fandom is unlike any existing research. I draw from a multitude of disciplines, perspectives, and angles then underpin my novel understandings with the survey data.

Fandom is expansive, and constantly growing and developing. The way consumers interact with favoured (or despised) television shows, movies, games, books and celebrities is changing. Research is needed that reflects these new complex approaches. Betz (2022) describes how fan activism is spreading beyond media focused protests (for example, to save television shows at risk of cancellation) to broader political activism. ‘The Harry Potter Alliance’ has campaigned on issues such as equal marriage, the prevention of genocide, and fair trade (Betz, 2022). Fandom is potentially a vehicle or rallying point for a new era of participatory politics, especially for young people (Betz, 2022). The seminal works in fan studies are those by Jenkins. Hills (2002) and Booth (2015) build on his work. I have also included *Enterprising Women* by Bacon-Smith (1992), which was written at the same time as Jenkin’s *Textual Poachers* (1992). Bacon-Smith and Jenkins both cover the same fandoms – *Star Trek*, *Blake’s 7*, *Beauty and the Beast*. Referencing Jenkins when discussing fandom is expected, but Bacon-Smith is less visible. I found *Enterprising Women* (Bacon-Smith, 1992) to be a compellingly women-focused exploration of fan community – a perspective otherwise lacking in fandom studies since its publication, with the caveat of *Archive of Our Own*

(Organization for Transformative Works), and their associated academic journal, *Transformative Works and Cultures*. Bacon-Smith (1992) uses an ethnographic approach to engage with women-led fan communities and explore topics such as vidding, conventions, the creation of fanzines, and the figure of the 'Mary Sue' in fanfiction. The major difference between Jenkin's work and Bacon-Smith (other than the latter's gender-centred approach) is the claimed fan-status of the author. Bacon-Smith took measures to remain external to the fan communities – she does not identify as a fan and describes the ever-present visible cues of her tape recorder and a button with "Intergalactic Ethnography". Bacon-Smith's investigation is threaded through firsthand experiences, but the experiences are of an ethnographer. Jenkins identifies as a fan, even creating the term "aca-fan" to describe his hybrid role. Hills' (2002) *Fan Cultures* builds on Jenkin's work and discusses the 'scholar-fan' positioning. This duality is presented as a contradictory positioning – which is not an idea I agree with.

It is important to acknowledge how dated that these foundational texts on fandom are when probing current interfaces, behaviours, and communities. Jenkin's (1992) *Textual Poachers* was pre-digital fandom and treats fans as an underground culture. Fandom is now not a shameful, hidden activity separate from mainstream media consumption. Indeed, many brands aim to "develop fans rather than customers" to create affect and emotion towards their products and services (Booth, 2022). When Hill's (2002) *Fan Cultures* was written, *Usenet* and internet newsgroups were new media platforms. By 2006, when Jenkins released *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* and *Convergence Culture* the internet was less novel but still vastly different from its current ubiquitousness. *Convergence Culture* focuses on the multiplicity of media platforms and the flow of content between these services. This spread of a media text across different platforms is widespread practice in modern media. Movies often have linked television shows, novels, video games, comic books, and advertisements across social media. The binge watching and re-watching of television series is not an abnormal practice anymore. Streaming services are built on these consumer behaviours, whilst the VCR trading described in these fandom texts is now archaic. In *Convergence Culture* Jenkins describes trying to purchase a new phone – he was surprised he could not get a mobile phone that was solely for phone calls with no extra features. This shows how dated the book is in terms of technology. Fandom and technology have strong links, with fan activity heavily shaped by available

hardware and software. Pre-internet physical fanzines were often created to specifically enable the sharing of fanfiction, now fanfiction is shared through online archives. Due to the limitations of these 'core' texts in fan studies regarding gender and the datedness of the perspective, I have not used the work of Jenkins, Hills, and Bacon-Smith to the extent that might be expected in a thesis with fandom studies focus. I felt that although they included valuable perspectives on fans, they were more useful for appreciating the history of fandom than the current practices of fans. To understand fan practices, I relied heavily on the survey responses and the thematic analysis I undertook. I then contextualised this using my own experiences and the theories offered in texts from other disciplines.

Two texts that were useful in shaping my understanding of contemporary fandom were *Playing Fans: Negotiating Fandom and Media in the Digital Age* by Booth (2015) and *Bitches Ain't Gonna Hunt No Ghosts: Totemic Nostalgia, Toxic Fandom and the Ghostbusters Platonic* by Proctor (2017). Booth (2015) explores the relationship between fans and the media industry, presenting it as a complicated situation where fans cannot be dichotomously categorised as for or against the media industry. The book also includes investigations of how fans are represented, transformative fan behaviours like parody, and how fans represent/display their fan status. Proctor's (2017) article was central to shaping my understanding of the relationship fans can have with a text through the concept of totemic nostalgia. The idea of texts being threatened, and the emotional response fans might have to that, is a fundamental concept in how I understand the purpose of gatekeeping and exclusionary tactics in fandom.

This research is significant because gender and roleplaying or gaming scholarship is focused on video games, particularly massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs). Garcia (2017) studied gender identity and power in the tabletop version of D&D, but the study's reliance on the rulebooks as main resource renders the findings limited. Garcia's (2017) findings were an important start to the conversation, but the lived experiences of players were absent. I found Garcia's focus on what is happening around D&D games not just during/within play influential. In the introduction to *Gaming at the Edge: Sexuality and Gender at the Margins of Gamer Culture*, Shaw (2014, p. viiii) wrote "there is a disjuncture between how players are imagined and who actually plays games". This thought echoed in my head when I started this thesis, contributing to my decision to focus not on at how players

are represented within the text, but who really plays D&D. Scott's (2019) *Fake Geek Girls: Fandom, Gender, and the Convergence Culture Industry* demonstrated how intersectional feminism can be applied to fandom and the importance of acknowledging the scholar's own privilege to reveal how that might impact the study. The book also fleshed out my understanding of the 'fake geek girl' archetype, an idea I had familiarity with but did not realize the theory and ideas behind. Salter & Blodgett's (2017) *Toxic geek masculinity in media: Sexism, trolling, and identity policing* shaped my approach to the toxicity of fandom. They dive into how toxic masculinity remains deeply embedded in geek culture and how holding on to the victimised identity of the geek is fundamental to gatekeeping. The collections *Feminism in Play* (K. L. Gray et al., 2018) and *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (Kafai et al., 2011) contributed to my understanding on representation of women in digital gaming and barriers to women's inclusion in game creation, play, and performance-based platforms like Twitch. These texts provided a broader context of women in gaming and geek culture that I was then able to apply to D&D more specifically.

The main monograph on roleplaying games was Gary Alan Fine's (1983) *Shared Fantasy: Roleplaying Games as Social Worlds*. It is the seminal text on roleplaying games and D&D. Fine's ethnographic study is heavily focused on men, though it does acknowledge the sexism in the community briefly: "Women as female characters have little importance. Male players comment that female characters should be treated as property and not as human beings" (Fine, 1983, p. 65). Fine's work is a detailed exploration of a male-dominated D&D community in the 1980s, but it is inappropriate to apply the information within to contemporary D&D. The frequency with which it appears in online articles or even academic articles without an acknowledgement of its datedness is alarming. Mackay's (2001) *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* investigates the performance aspects of D&D and puts forward the argument that roleplaying games are an art form, not just a game. Mackay's (2001) work approaches D&D as a serious matter, underpinning argument with dense theory. Twenty-years later, D&D's status as a performance is established; there are Twitch streams, Podcasts and YouTube channels dedicated to sharing performances of D&D. However, Mackay's work struggles to remain relevant in this discussion as the technology that underpins these performances were not invented when his book was written. The seriousness

with which Mackay approaches the 'performing art' of D&D also does not feel appropriate for the tone of D&D's fandom.

The two most significant contemporary texts on roleplaying games that I utilized were Bowman's (2010) *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* and Grouling's (2014) *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. Bowman uses participant-observer ethnography to discuss the social and psychological functions of roleplaying games. Grouling's work examines not only how the participants collaborate to produce the game's narratives, but the cultural influences on tabletop RPG players. The book explores how gamers function as authors and the resulting shift in this relationship with the idea of a traditional author. Grouling's work is important for understanding how fans create and the power dynamic between creator and the media industry. Brown's (2015) *Sexuality in Role-Playing Games* is focused on erotic roleplay and how RPGs can interact with adult concepts. The texts are digital games such as *World of Warcraft*, but it does touch on tabletop games occasionally. Brown highlights the potential roleplaying games have outside their designers intentions and how fans modify/manipulate texts to suit their needs. Voorhees et al. (2012) focus on digital RPGs but the essays in the book where useful for understanding roleplaying, the development of narrative, and the complex relationship between a player and their character. Finally, the multidisciplinary approach that I have taken in this thesis was partially inspired by the work in Deterding & Zagal's (2018) *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations*. The book is a comprehensive collection of writing that includes a selection of the more prominent RPG studies researchers. There is a lack of gendered lens or inclusion of women's experiences, however the book includes investigations of roleplaying games from performance studies, science and technology studies, and sociology plus other disciplines. The diversity of perspectives demonstrates the broad appeal and application of roleplaying games.

There are three main texts consistently referenced for D&D's history. These are *Of Dice and Men: The Story of Dungeons & Dragons and The People Who Play It* by Ewalt (2014), *Dangerous Games: What the Moral Panic over Role-Playing Games Says about Play, Religion, and Imagined Worlds* by Laycock (2015), and Peterson's (2012) popular *Playing at the world: A history of simulating wars, people and fantastic adventures, from chess to role-playing games*. Ewalt's (2014) *Of Dice and Men* takes a negative tone towards D&D fans, despite the

author identifying as a fan. For example, Ewalt writes “Admitting you play Dungeons & Dragons is only slightly less stigmatizing than confessing cruelty to animals or that you wet the bed” and “but to many geeks, LARPs represent the obsessive, delusional side of fantasy role-playing—the actual freaks who make the rest of us look like freaks” (2014, pp. 5, 186). The history presented is interwoven with Ewalt’s own experiences playing D&D. The combination of deprecating tone and a sense of ‘unless you are one of us, you probably won’t get what I’m talking about’ makes this a tough read. Women are also absent from Ewalt’s account of D&D’s history, but he is reasonable in his presentation of Lorraine Williams. In *Dangerous Games* Laycock (2015) focuses on the cultural panic around D&D, particularly the ‘Satanic Panic’ and resulting negative cultural reception. The book has a religious perspective and the focus is confined to the Satanic Panic. Finally, Peterson’s (2012) *Playing at the World* takes a dense ‘factual’ approach to roleplaying game history – including wargames back to 1780. It provides a comprehensive historical context of the gaming industry and the past’s influence on the development of roleplaying games. The text’s value lies largely in the comfortable and familiar history book style. Peterson presents the ‘facts’ of D&D’s history but really offers no discussion of the social consequences, for example sexism and gatekeeping.

There are texts that flirt around the topics and theories in this thesis, but none that cover women’s experiences in/with/around D&D’s fandom. I have brought together the ‘almost there’ threads that I found in these books and tried to provide a contemporary take on the dated texts. This thesis fills a gap in the research on not only D&D, but on women’s experiences in non-digital gaming fandom.

Themes in D&D research

Focusing on fandom and how gender influences these experiences constitutes another aspect of my original contribution to knowledge. *Dungeons & Dragons* has been the attention of research in various disciplines and here I will establish a context for my research. To do so, I evaluated the trajectory of the research field, with close attention on the last five years of D&D research.

Garcia's (2017) paper investigated gender representation within the primary D&D rulebooks across 12 editions. This was to explore the exclusion of women perpetuated through the rulebooks; for example, the decision to use exclusively masculine pronouns in

earlier editions and the representation of women in images. Pinkston's thesis (2019) conducted a similar investigation, searching 14 editions of *Player's Handbooks* for "textual elements related to gender and sexuality". My research differs from these because I do not focus on the exclusionary content within the text, but the experiences of exclusion experienced by women players. Reviewing the various D&D rulebooks would be rehashing the work of Garcia and Pinkston, likely producing no new meaningful insights. Just's (2016) thesis used interviews with 12 women D&D players to explore how they might use the game to challenge and subvert gendered expectations with the goal being to achieve empowerment. There is a lack of published gender-focused D&D work, and that is one of the unique contributions to knowledge that my thesis addresses. The focus on women plus the breadth and depth of the survey data set this work apart from existing research on D&D.

Fantasy racism is a recent trend in D&D research, responding to increased criticism of racial dynamics and portrayals emerging in the media. Many products in older editions of D&D now feature a disclaimer about potentially racist content being included (see chapter 2 for a further discussion of this). Premont & Heine (2021) studied how race was portrayed in the *Player's Handbook* of different editions. They found that the game had heavy colonial European tones in the portrayal of races. Ferguson (2022) conducted a survey investigating how players felt about whether orcs and other 'evil' races were portrayed. Both these studies focus on the racism within the text – the portrayals of fantasy races and how that translates to real world races/racism. There seems to be no academic interrogation of the racism faced by players when they try to engage with D&D and its fandom. This thesis' scope does not include racism, but a similar approach could explore racist exclusion.

Recently published research has explored topics around D&D play in the queer community. The importance of D&D for the queer community was evident in the survey results, although it fell outside the scope of this thesis. Storm & Jones (2021) studied a group of high school playing D&D in a queer-led afterschool space. They focused on themes of queer futurity, queer utopian world-building, and enactments of critical literacies. Bosstick (2021) looked at the D&D podcast *Fast Times at D&D High* to explore how the queer community creates and performs identity, creates community, and shares cultural information to community members and others. The role of podcast as oral folktale genre and storytelling as part of community identity are also studied. Rabideau (2020) conducted interviews with

ten students (five who were part of the LGBTQA+ community, five who identified as straight and cisgendered). The research aimed to compare the experiences of queer and non-queer tabletop roleplaying game players. Whilst there is currently little academic research into the overlap between D&D, fandom, and the queer community, it has been written about in non-academic blogs, articles, and on social media. This will be an important theme in the future of D&D research.

COVID-19's impact on D&D play is a theme that I believe will become popular over the next few years. Scriven (2021) authored an article about the experience of transitioning from in-person to remote play through digital platforms. The impact on the social functions of D&D was also discussed. The importance of D&D to players as a tool for coping with the stress of COVID-19 related stress is a common theme of media articles written about D&D in 2020 onwards. WOTC took measures to increase D&D's accessibility (and popularity) by releasing free play at home materials. Survey distribution for this thesis occurred one month before COVID-19 restrictions began in Australia, so my results capture D&D pre-pandemic. Nostalgia-driven consumption increased during the COVID-19 lockdowns and this "rise in leisure nostalgia" was encouraged by the media industry (Berryman, 2022). Berryman (2022) studied the *Reunited Apart* series that brought together the casts and crew from 1980s and 1990s films to discuss their experiences. The success of *Reunited Apart* relied on viewer's nostalgia for the shows and this consumption motivation strengthened during the pandemic. It would be valuable to repeat the survey and examine the differences in responses to see how COVID-19 influenced play from a gendered and nostalgic perspective.

D&D is being deployed as a resource in artificial intelligence, machine learning, and other areas of computer studies. Rameshkumar & Bailey (2020) created a dataset from 159 *Critical Role* episodes for computational linguistics. Similarly, Louis & Sutton (2018) used roleplaying game transcripts (not limited to D&D) to examine the ability of computational models to "grasp the interaction between characters in a story and the actions they take". D&D games can provide rich, complex transcripts that can be used as a resource in studies. In a combination of computing and music studies, Ferreira et al. (2020) created a system called Bardo Composer that generates music for tabletop roleplaying games by using speech recognition software to classify player mood. A neural model generates music that conveys the appropriate mood for the moment in the game.

The two disciplines where the most research involving D&D has been recently conducted is education and psychology. In these fields, attention to gender and the experiences of marginalised groups would be valuable but it remains absent. I present here a summary of contemporary research to provide a context for how D&D is approached in the education and psychology disciplines.

Pedagogy, and how to introduce D&D or specialised tabletop roleplaying games into the classroom to aid learning, are focuses of educational research. Daniau (2016) proposed the 'transformative role-playing game (TF-RPG)' which is where a tabletop roleplaying game sessions is followed by a debriefing. The debriefing is valuable in the use of TTRPG in education because it encourages reflection on personal development. Overall, Daniau's (2016) research found that TTRPGs are useful in knowledge acquisition, team building, collaborative creativity, personal development exploration, and the development of role-playing skills. Clarke et al.'s (2019) research endorsed the use of D&D to support self-reflection learning processes. Woods (2017) investigated how TTRPGs can be introduced to the classroom and used D&D as the main example game. Cook et al. (2017) created a modified TTRPG (based on Pathfinder) to pair gameplay with a literature study to improve middle-school aged student engagement with the text, model non-traditional writing types, and encourage collaborative creative writing. Similarly, Kaylor (2017) found that D&D could be used to develop literacy and reading skills in teenagers. In response to COVID-19 and the concern children's time spent online contribute to social isolation, Spotorno et al., (2020) set out to create an educational social experience using D&D and the online platform Roll20. They found they needed to modify the rules to suit four 9-year-olds and a 12-year-old, reducing the violence and increasing the empathy towards non-player characters (even those that would not usually be friendly). Spotorno et al. (2020) found that D&D could be useful in promoting and developing life skills and suggest further research to create an evidence-based design methodology for using D&D for educational activities. Anecdotal evidence on the benefits of D&D in the classroom can be found with a web search, and it seems increasingly popular in educational settings as the stigma of the game has dissipated. From the academic and popular narratives, it seems logical to conclude that TTRPGs have a future in educational settings.

D&D's applications in psychology and the therapeutic setting have been researched in the past few years with a particular focus on autism spectrum disorder and anxiety. Henrich & Worthington (2021) undertook a literature review on the claim that D&D has psychological benefits using the Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) tool. They found that the results are promising but stress the preliminary nature of their findings. Polkinghorne et al. (2021) suggest that changes are potentially necessary for TTRPGs such as D&D to be appropriate for therapeutic applications. This includes investigating decolonisation of TTRPGs systems and considering the meaning that the games themselves carry. Katō (2019) investigated the use of TTRPGs as a tool for promoting social communication and the potential for a positive impact on quality of life for young people with autism spectrum disorder. Chaplan-Hoang (2021) also focused on adolescents with autism spectrum disorder, researching how D&D could be integrated with drama therapy in therapeutic settings for this population group. Similarly, Mendoza (2020) conducted a literature review on the use of TTRPGS and LARPS as therapeutic tools using the lens of drama therapy. Valorozo-Jones (2021) found D&D and other TTRPGs could be a useful tool for practicing self-autonomy skills and subsequently improving real-life self-advocacy in neurodivergent adults. Causo & Quinlan (2021) researched the potential role of D&D in assisting mental health recovery through restoring sense of agency and positive self-identity. Abbott et al. (2021) found that TTRPGS could be employed as a therapeutic intervention to increase social connectedness for adults, which serves as a protective factor against anxiety and depression. Recent psychological research has found myriad ways that D&D could be a useful tool in the mental health field, but it must be approached carefully.

If D&D is to be brought into educational and therapeutic settings, then an understanding of women's experiences with the game is valuable. For example, if a therapist is suggesting involvement with the D&D fandom for a client then they need to be aware of the risks and barriers to entry the client may face. Educators who introduce young students to D&D would benefit from knowing the potential content, harassment, and negative experiences that their student might face. This would enable them to protect them and ensure guardians are aware. It also offers the ability for educators and therapists to break down some of the barriers their clients might face. Gender-aware discussions of nerd culture and fandom practices could contribute to a more inclusive future for D&D players.

Writing popular cultural research

Popular culture is complex and intricate. Writing about popular culture shadows this complexity. Colyar (2013, p. 365) describes their relationship with writing: “Writing is, of course, a complicated endeavor. For me, it includes running, driving, sitting at the computer and standing in line for coffee.” This resonated with me because throughout the PhD thesis process, I have struggled to justify my process to onlookers – my friends, family, partner, and even my supervisor. There is the pervasive cultural stereotype of a writer tapping away at their keyboard, frantically spewing ideas, pausing only for coffee and snack breaks. Indeed, I expected (naively) that this would be how my days looked when I worked on my PhD. Throughout my high school and undergraduate education (and some of my Master’s degree), I approached assignments with a two-session approach. One day I would sit down and research, then the next I would write it all up. Sometimes I would come back to edit – and on rare occasions it might take multiple sessions to finish writing – but I had no issue pouring my assignments into Word documents. When this did not happen for my thesis, I thought I was broken. So often my supervisor’s advice was to just “write” – tease out the ideas until they made sense, break through writer’s block by smashing keys until it worked. I often could not make this technique work. I could not wrestle ideas into clarity through my keyboard and trying to write before I really understood where I was going was too frustrating to even explain. Part of this was my movement from “transactional writing,” the synthesizing “of other people’s ideas” and presenting “arguments that don’t require a lot of interpretation” (Colyar, 2013, p. 369). It was far more challenging to begin writing in a way that reveals something personal, my experiences, and the vulnerability that I feel is entangled throughout the PhD process. The “aha!” moments always came for me when I was nowhere near my desk. Lying on the floor, mulling over ideas, and just letting the thoughts play out worked better for me. Sometimes a nap would give my brain the step back it seemed to need. Whilst walking the dog or messing around in the gym, often evidence and arguments would gain clarity. I thought I was being lazy taking breaks away from my desk – and I got that feedback from friends and family. One of the most valuable revelations revealed through the writing of this thesis is that there are diverse ways to work, think, write, research – not just the brute force or ‘Inspired Writer’ approach.

A Revelation

I was struggling to strike a balance between the distanced position self-protection I believed was necessary and my desire to share my first-hand experiences openly and honestly. Shoemaker (2013, p. 521) asks: “What stories of ‘home’ do you share? Why? How? What are the stories you cannot tell, and why?” This led me to reconsider which subjective experiences I was choosing to include – and those I had been leaving out. I realised there were stories that I felt I should not, or could not tell, but were important to draw upon. Sometimes my silences contributed to exclusionary behaviour. It would be dishonest to pretend otherwise. This led to me moving more towards an autoethnographic approach – bringing my own stories into the thesis and being more honest whilst doing so.

Like most PhD students, I have faced the question “so what’s your thesis about?” numerous times. At the commencement, I was honest, and I said, “it’s about Dungeons & Dragons, the role-playing game.” I met dismissal and derision as though people were disappointed that my research probed what they deemed trivial or unimportant. I began simply replying that my thesis was on cultural studies. I am ashamed to admit that I hoped the questions would end there. My initial excitement about researching a passion transformed into an embarrassment. I knew what I was doing was important, but it was hard facing such hard criticism constantly.

My orientation towards/around D&D has shifted, and so has this research. When I started this journey, back when I had to write a proposal to even find supervisor, I was playing a lot of D&D. It was my primary social outlet. When I caught up with my friends it was to play D&D or discussions would be around what had happened in the last session. For a long time, D&D had been how I met new people and made friends. Over the course of researching and writing this thesis, my life changed and so did my relationship with D&D. When I began working at a gaming store just before I started my PhD my life centred around boardgames, role-playing games, and trading card games. It was not only what I did in my personal life, but it became my job to be knowledgeable. I spent a lot of time talking to customers about Dungeons & Dragons because I was the staff member who played the most. Also, it was exciting to meet so many new people who were so enthusiastic about D&D. Their love of the

game was contagious and fuelled my own desire to play but also to learn more about why it was so popular.

The further I moved through my PhD candidature, the less time I had to play D&D. A hefty part-time job combined with full-time study meant that I began to miss sessions and I no longer had time to play regularly. D&D stopped being a leisure practice and became a research focus. I remained connected to the community, but I also became detached because I so rarely played. There is a lot of discussion in fandom research about the dual position of fans and academics where two aspects of identity come to overlap. I felt as though my position as fan and player of D&D was subsumed or overpowered by my position as a researcher.

At times, I feared that I lost the project. I did not know where to focus next. I was overwhelmed by the work but I was struggling to identify the direction I wanted to move in. The idea of direction became especially important to me after I realised that I was falling into a pattern of being very descriptive in my writing. I was at risk of trying to explain what is going on or what might be happening in with D&D but without explaining why. My writing lacked a point. Struck by this crisis my supervisor told me to try and write my abstract so that I could refocus on what the thesis is a post to be about. I did, and it sparked a reflection on my orientation towards this thesis but also towards Dungeons & Dragons.

The purpose of this research

In a sense, Dungeons & Dragons serves as a frame or vehicle for understanding fandom more generally. There are parallels between fandoms but there are also unique qualities. Fandoms have similarities and tropes; there are shapes that we see repeated between them, but they form into their own unique structure or fingerprint. At their very core, fandoms are communities, but they are often considered aberrant. There has been an almost pathologized treatment of fandom especially nerd or geek fans compared to sport or music fans. I believe that this othering has served to obscure the normality of being a fan.

Since the beginning of fandom studies, particularly in recent years, there has been a change in media consumption as technology has altered how we access and share media and fan products. With the rise of streaming services like Netflix, consumption behaviour such as

binge watching is no longer the practice of only an obsessed fan. Whole seasons of shows now release in one drop so that viewers can sit down and watch hours at a time. It has never been easier to rewatch favourite episodes of old shows. We have come a long way from worn out VHS tapes of treasured episodes. If a show is missed, a consumer can watch it from a streaming platform or download it online. Consumers are not reliant on a preprogrammed VHS player catching the episode or having to trade tapes with a friend. *Game of Thrones* brought much of geek consumption culture into the mainstream because it was suddenly cool to be obsessively knowledgeable and constantly up to date with a fantasy TV show. Merchandise for *Game of Thrones* was pitched towards mainstream consumers not just fringe nerds. Another massive example of previously nerdy material finding mainstream acclaim is the Marvel Cinematic Universe. At the risk of digressing, the cultural penetration of the superhero movies was such that I had an enormous, serious, borderline falling out with my (not nerdy) family when we argued about *Captain America: Civil War*. The media industry is exploiting transformative fan activities to commodify them and “re-subordinate” fandom (Booth, 2022). Previously rebellious textual poaching and fringe fan behaviours are now encouraged by the media industry to increase profits and this has a marginalising effect on less socially acceptable practices.

Online fora and message boards centred around specific TV shows used to be the territory of nerds and geeks, but gathering online is now common. Social media has made finding communities easier than ever before and so it is possible to seek out niches on the Internet. We are witnessing a rise in consumption-based fandom as social media users build communities around brand worship. Reddit is based on the idea of finding content on specific subjects through its sub-Reddit structure. Hashtags on platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook allow users to search for specific brands in content.

Fandom is changing in its definition and trajectory. While respecting the theoretical and historical trajectory of fan studies, I have approached studying, researching, and engaging with the Dungeons & Dragons fandom with an understanding of the past, but a recognition of present trajectories. Originally, I framed this thesis as being solely about **women** and D&D – focused on women’s experiences, women’s voices, women’s responses. This emphasis was captured in the way I initially structured my chapters and overall approach. I wrote about fandom, then I wrote about women in fandom. Separate sections to show the distinctness of

experience. I even had a chapter entitled “Women’s Experiences”. When I stepped back from my thesis to move interstate, I read a book called *Wordslut – A feminist guide to taking back the English language* by Amanda Montell (2019). Montell (2019) references Robin Lakoff’s 1975 book *Language and Woman’s Place* when discussing gendered qualifiers for professions. I was struck by a sense that I was potentially contributed to the perpetuation of an othering of women in gaming – there are D&D players and women D&D players. This reification also plays into - and reinforces - the gender binary and erasure of other gender identities.

My thesis is not solely about the experiences of women, because they cannot be separated from the experiences of the wider community and other genders. By framing my thesis as being focused around ‘gender’ rather than ‘women’, discussions on the role of other genders – including masculinity and men – are more actively included. Gender is often treated as synonymous for women; men are treated the default gender and any other identity must be declared. Gender becomes a women’s issue (or that of women and gender diverse people). How can I discuss women experience playing D&D without acknowledging that it is almost always men who are perpetrating acts of exclusion? The noxiousness of geek culture is thoroughly tied to toxic masculinity and sexism.

This has not changed the scope and scale of women’s experiences and voices that I have aimed to include. My key goal has consistently been to amplify women’s voices that have long been silenced and ignored. However, rather than structuring the thesis so that these sections stand alone, I have woven gender and women’s experiences throughout every single section. I want to be clear that we cannot talk about D&D players without talking about women and the diverse communities that play. Much like gender mainstreaming in policy, this thesis aims to integrate gender perspective “in all areas and at all levels” (*Gender Mainstreaming*, n.d.).

Why me? A statement of positioning

This thesis exists because of the experiences my friends and I have had as women who play Dungeons and Dragons. I am inspired by those stories and the ones I have read that were bravely shared on the internet by fellow players. I was enchanted with the possibilities that D&D presented when I bought my first starter box back in 2010, but I struggled to find a group until 2011 when I gathered my housemates round the dining table and plied them with

snacks. Since then, I have played four editions, more sessions than I dare to count, and with numerous separate groups of people. I have also branched out to roleplaying games outside of Dungeons and Dragons. I consider myself a reasonably seasoned player despite my limited relationship with the rules and canon lore of the game.

A significant amount of my exposure to the D&D community came through my role working at a board games store. I helped host organised play (Adventurer's League) and private groups for D&D a minimum of three nights a week with bigger events occurring regularly. My position as facilitator afforded me the opportunity to discuss D&D with a wide variety of players. I heard their stories about their games, characters, opinions on rules, and experiences. As an external presence, a bystander to the events, I was able to watch the community interact from a position of knowledge without being deeply embedded in the relationships. I bring to this study not only my own D&D experience, but the knowledge gained from my relationship with my local D&D community.

I bring an eclectic mix of personal, employment and academic experience to this study, which strengthens my ability to engage with theory from an interdisciplinary perspective. My undergraduate degrees are in behavioural science and business (marketing particularly). I followed this with a Master of Arts (Women's Studies) where I undertook an 18,000-word thesis on polyamorous relationships and heteronormativity. My research training in behavioural science taught me research methods, survey design, statistical analysis, and how to critically engage with data and its context. My Master's thesis strengthened my skills in independent research, writing, and problem solving. I have varied interests and enjoy exploring disciplines outside of my own experience. My academic and personal backgrounds combined to make me ideal for the diversity of this thesis.

I was driven to research and write this thesis and endure challenging times because this subject is important to me, personally and professionally. I have been the only woman at countless D&D tables. I have faced sexual harassment and inappropriate DMs. I have sought out other women to play with and struggled to get friends who were interested in the game to play because they felt it was not "for them". I wanted to explore these experiences to build an understanding of the gendered differences for play and community experience with D&D. Only once we comprehend what is going on can we begin to correct the issues and create a positive environment for women to play D&D freely.

Research question and problem

This thesis is not ‘about’ Dungeons & Dragons *the game*. When I started this thesis, it really was about the game of Dungeons & Dragons. My primary sources and avenues of investigation were to be the various books, magazines, and materials that have been published. I set out to investigate women’s representation within those texts as though those texts were a reflection somehow of the reality of fans. Initially, I conflated textual inclusion with fandom or community inclusion. This thesis is still about Dungeons & Dragons but is about what people do *around* the game. The game is not some monolithic entity but a potentiality. More interesting than the source books or the rules, is what people choose to do whilst playing with them.

When I mention D&D in casual conversation, one of the first questions asked is typically: “Why do people enjoy playing that?” This taps into ideas of what benefits there are to roleplaying games and play for adults. I want to be able to answer this question, but also understand why women persist in playing in communities that are often unfriendly or even hostile. What perceived benefits outweigh the struggles/personal costs of continuing to engage in these environments? This study will explore these experiences and highlight the issues and/or barriers that women face when they try to play Dungeons and Dragons plus the work undertaken to claim space and overcome problems. This information can then be used in the creation of an approach to make D&D (and potentially other gaming communities) more inclusive for women.

This thesis is about people. The people that play Dungeons & Dragons and those who created Dungeons & Dragons. This research focuses on the communities, fans, and individuals around Dungeons & Dragons whilst amplifying women’s voices. By listening to the typically unheard, this thesis centres women in a way that no other research has done. The goal is to highlight women’s experiences playing D&D to produce a better understanding of fans, fandom, and inclusion. This knowledge will be instrumental in the creation of future approaches.

The questions addressed in this doctoral thesis are:

- What forms does women’s exclusion from D&D and fandom take?
- What purpose does women’s exclusion from fandom serve for other fans?

- What barriers do women face when playing D&D and participating in D&D's fandom?
- What are the consequences of women's exclusion from D&D?

The research that remains outside the parameters of this doctoral thesis

Doctoral research is defined as much by what is included in the research, as what is positioned outside the confines of the PhD thesis. *Dungeons & Dragons*, and tabletop roleplaying games more broadly, are such enormous topics that it is impossible to cover or touch upon every aspect. I have therefore been deliberate in my approach to the topic and focused specifically on women's interactions with fandom through history, nostalgia, a very narrow investigation of fan activities, paratexts, and gatekeeping. The intention is to keep the spotlight on women and the most relevant elements of D&D to their experiences.

There were so many responses that touched on transgender, queer, and racial experiences but I have chosen not to dive extensively into these issues for this thesis. They deserve greater care, attention, and space than I can achieve within the scope and time limits of this thesis. (Also, as I am taking an ethnographic approach to data interpretation, it would be inappropriate for me to claim any personal knowledge and experience with these identities) Where possible I have included a nod to these issues to acknowledge their existence, but I have intentionally limited discussion to avoid mishandling or misrepresenting the responses and experiences at this time. It is my intention to include the experiences shared with me in future projects and I will not let them gather dust – that seems disrespectful.

Absent from this study is any elaborate quantitative statistical analysis of the survey responses. This was my intent when I first planned my thesis, however qualitative approaches gave richer insights into the data. The survey used text responses for questions wherever possible rather than a format like Likert Scales that would have made for simpler conversion into numerical data.

Layout of thesis

There is no specific or standalone literature review chapter in this thesis instead I have taken an integrated approach. The snapshot of the state of D&D research in the introduction chapter illustrates the gap my research fills and emerging themes in D&D research. The research design necessitated that the themes that emerged through the survey and thus determined the literature to be summoned in this thesis. For a more reflexive and responsive theorisation, each chapter, and therefore each different subject matter, has the relevant literature incorporated. Dumping a large multifaceted literature review at the beginning of the thesis would have left the theory floating detached from the relevant data and discussion. This approach also ensures that arguments are developed through the arc of the thesis rather than stated and held static at the start. As the analysis of the surveys was undertaken, the theories included in this thesis changed and developed to respond to the themes found within responses. Rather than a linear movement from theory to data analysis to conclusions, I moved back and forth between data, theory, and conclusions. This was done to ensure I was not shoehorning my data to any preconceived ideas of what it should be according to theory.

Chapter 1 outlines the methodology and methods employed in this thesis. I begin with a discussion of autoethnography, feminist research, and how to best approach research participants. My method is then outlined, including how the survey data was collected and analysed. The chapter includes the challenges that I faced ethically, socially, and in conducting the research. I chose to include this here alongside the methodology and methods rather than in a separate results chapter because it kept the issues more clearly related. My results are woven throughout the thesis where they were most relevant rather than isolated in a separate chapter.

Chapter 2 is focused on the history of D&D and how the players understand this themselves. This chapter is not a retelling of D&D's history but instead uses survey responses to show the relationship that players have with the game's history. The women that are absent from popular accounts of D&D's history are highlighted in this chapter.

Chapter 3 follows on from history to investigate how players form and act out a nostalgic relationship with D&D. Findings from the survey about nostalgia prompting play are covered. D&D's potential as a totemic text is established and the impact this has on how

players feel about the game discussed. The reality of nostalgic recollections is challenged to understand the false narratives that might be advanced by D&D's fandom.

Chapter 4 establishes the identity of D&D's fandom using survey responses. This includes discussion of fan activities such as textual poaching, fan art, and fan fiction. Fandom identity and group membership are also discussed to provide a solid overview of how D&D's fandom is constituted.

After D&D's paratexts are defined, chapter 5 is split into five sections to cover: paratexts as an introduction to D&D, how paratexts prompt players to begin playing, the nature of play as a performance, the influence that paratexts have on play, and finally the idea of orthogaming. Paratexts are crucial for understanding not only how players begin with D&D, but all the activities involved. Each player's D&D experience is shaped by the paratexts that they interact with.

Chapter 6 concentrates on how boundaries and gatekeeping manifest for women in D&D's fandom. These are the two main mechanisms contributing to women's exclusion from the community. This chapter heavily features survey results that describe women's experiences to underpin existing theory on gatekeeping in gaming. Social identity theory and positioning are applied to the D&D fandom to understand the purpose of gatekeeping.

Chapter 7 follows on from the previous chapter to establish the consequences of boundaries and gatekeeping. This includes how these processes discourage women from initially playing and then restrict playing in public. Women's experiences of feeling unwelcome whilst playing D&D are discussed. These experiences involve sexism, mansplaining, exclusion, harassment, and themes of rape and sexual assault. The chapter finishes by discussing how women report managing exclusionary forces to feel comfortable playing D&D in public spaces.

Finally, there is the conclusion where I establish the success of this thesis and stress the importance of my findings. The research questions laid out in the introduction are answered, limitations acknowledged, and future research recommended. This thesis is a timely contribution to an important discussion. Before tabletop games and D&D are used in settings with vulnerable populations, it is vital to understand the potential for harm resulting

in contact with the D&D community. It is time for women's voices to be heard and the experiences of other marginalised groups to be probed.

Chapter 1:

Methodology

Introduction

When I began this thesis, methodology was an overwhelming concept and theoretical suite, full of confusing jargon, moral and ethical quandaries, and potential pitfalls. Through reading the reflections and approaches of researchers who have undertaken relatable research, I began to demystify the concepts. I was then able to configure the research in a manner that made sense for this thesis' needs. Developing a methodology and method for this thesis was a significant undertaking because there was no pre-existing template that I could emulate. Instead, I have taken elements of different approaches that best suit the challenges I faced, particularly resulting from the substantial number of survey responses. Feminist considerations and configurations have been present at every stage and every step; they permeate every aspect of the methodology.

This chapter outlines the methodology and methods that I have employed for this research. Throughout the research design, and through the data collection and analysis, I have reflected on the challenges, surprises, weaknesses, and strengths of this research. This was especially necessary as my approach needed to be responsive to the changes that resulted from the unexpectedly large amount of survey data and the COVID-19 pandemic's impact at a personal and practical level. I begin by reviewing the methodological considerations involved in this thesis before moving to a discussion of how the participants were approached in terms of ethics and respect. The practical aspects of the method including the survey design, data analysis, and challenges are then considered.

Autoethnography

When I began this thesis, I employed an autoethnographic approach. Autoethnography has been used to describe ethnography where the researcher was a member of the culture being investigated (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 72). After learning about the approach to autoethnography that encourages the researcher to include their experiences and explicitly reflect within the writing, I experienced a paradigm shift. I struggled throughout writing to understand where I fit into the research – I was discussing personal experience, but I was relying only on the described experiences of others. I desperately wanted to chime in and elaborate on what was being said, to discuss the potential impact on the individual, and share my own hurt. However, I did not see how this was possible

in how I understood autoethnography, or in fact academic researcher. My voice was muted, strangled, and reliant on the words of others – participants or other academic researchers' findings and theories. Through autoethnography, I feel empowered to use my memories to "ground" analyses and inform my methodology (Giorgio, 2013, p. 406).

Why choose autoethnography? Jones et al. (2013, p. 32) list the following benefits of autoethnography's method: "(1) disrupting norms of research practice and representation; (2) working from insider knowledge; (3) manoeuvring [sic] through pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty and making life better; (4) breaking silence/(re) claiming voice and "writing to right" (Bolen, 2012); and (5) making work accessible." Autoethnography challenges the idea of objectivity that underlies traditional research methods. There is the idea that researchers stand separate, looking in, and making objective, rational, impartial observations. In empiricism, the "object of knowledge can be entirely separated from the knowing subject – the researcher" (Bochner, 2013, p. 51). The accepted anthropological and sociological binary of observed and observer, but this is disrupted in autoethnography as the researcher is often both (Ettorre, 2016, p. 3)

Autoethnography is well-suited to popular culture studies because it allows researchers to explicitly use their own experiences with texts and as a fan, audience member, or even 'hater'. Manning & Adams (2015, p. 199) suggest this is particularly useful when texts do not match the researcher's own personal experience with a topic or when discussing engagement with a text. This thesis is focused on fandom – the interactions and engagement around D&D – and I am using my own individual experiences to guide and underpin the research.

When I first started exploring autoethnography and the integration of personal writing into research, I was concerned with how it differed from an autobiographical project. How was it possible to bring personal narrative to a research project whilst keeping it within the genre of academic work? Ettorre (2016, p. 8) draws the distinction with autobiography as "telling" the researcher's story, whilst autoethnography is "theorising" the story. Jones et al. (2013, p. 22) suggest characteristics that are distinctive of autoethnography versus personal writing: "(1) purposefully commenting on/critiquing of culture and cultural practices, (2) making contributions to existing research, (3) embracing vulnerability with purpose, and (4) creating a reciprocal relationship with audiences in order to compel a response."

Autoethnographic writing might prove cathartic for the author, but its purpose is clearly directed towards others – it is an exercise in sharing. This might be through “the offering of insight that might help those who relate to a person’s experience or in a desire for others to bear witness to particular struggles”. Jones et al., (2013, p. 36) state that for autoethnographers the goal is often to use personal experience to “describe cultural experiences with the explicit goal of *changing* experience” (emphasis theirs). This resonated with me for this thesis, because I want to change the experiences of other women who play D&D. I want to shatter the feeling of isolation, and highlight that sexism in tabletop roleplaying is not the responsibility of the individual woman to manage but a systemic, cultural, problem. I not only want to contribute to changing the culture of D&D’s fandom, but to change how women (and all players) understand their previous experiences.

In autoethnography, there must be a clear demonstration of “knowledge of past research” plus an attempt to contribute to this body of research and “scholarly conversation” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 23). Facts remain integral to autoethnography. Rather than simply reporting information, the autoethnographers makes “meaning” (Bochner, 2013, p. 54). Where the researcher fails to acknowledge or recognise that they are presenting the truth “as [they] understand it”, they “become the researcher who is fudging data” (Pelias, 2013, p. 388). Bochner (2013, p. 54) writes that “the truth of autoethnographies can never be a stable truth, because memory is active, dynamic, and ever changing”. Research is a snapshot of a moment in time – this is arguably true of all methods. Ettorre (2017, p. 361) suggests seeking “verisimilitude” because it is impossible to get “thoroughly right”. Recognising that truth is contested territory and negotiating the inherent multiplicity of perspectives is vital.

In autoethnography, the role of the researcher is personal as the “role of personal experience in research” is made visible (Jones et al., 2013, p. 33). *Why* the research was embarked on is clearer and the stumbling process of the *how* are laid bare for readers. A person’s identity can be a significant reason for their carrying out a particular thread of social science inquiry (Bochner, 2013, p. 53). Rather than denying the subjective, autoethnography embraces “uncertainty and emotionality” to consider how social identities impact how researchers “see, do, and say” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 35). By enabling researchers to openly reflect on their own subjectivity, they are more able to “reflect on the consequences of [their]

work” (Bochner, 2013, p. 53). This considering of impact is useful not just from an ethical perspective, but for ensuring meaningful research is undertaken.

Personal experience is summoned and shared to create the ‘thick description’ that Geertz (1973) proposes as integral to ethnography. This ‘thick description’ is “not over-written”, it should be “precise” and not weighed down by overdetailed prose (Colyar, 2013, p. 375). Autoethnography can preserve the richness of “the irony, comedy, tragedy, drama, ambiguity, and tension of real life” that is otherwise often lost in typical “social science reporting” (Allen & Piercy, 2005, p. 157). Whilst ethnography is located in “generalizations, reifications, or objectifications”, autoethnography is based in “the particularities of emergence and the bricolage of personal encounter” (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 58). This bricolage is formed by drawing from a range of materials – “personal memories and musing to more traditionally “objective” data like fieldnotes and informant interviews” (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 58). Anderson & Glass-Coffin (2013, p. 68) suggest that the variety of materials or sources that can be incorporated into autoethnography is limited “only by researchers’ interests and imaginations”. Experiences and other personal objects are not depicted as they were “lived” but rather meaning is extracted from them as part of the autoethnography (Ettorre, 2016, p. 15). It goes beyond replication and requires interpretation.

Reflexivity is a crucial element in autoethnographic research – there should be a recognition of how social identity impacts “what and how we study as well as what we see and how we interpret what we study” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 30). It is a recognition that there “is no neutral space from which we write, or from which we read” (Gannon, 2013, p. 229). This includes considering the researcher’s position within culture and academia, but also the relationship between the researcher’s “selves” and non-self-others (Berry, 2013, p. 212). This can often require working or presenting “in contradiction to who we feel we are in a current moment”, presenting a historical self might require bravery to honestly admit uncomfortable truths (Berry, 2013, p. 223). Allen & Piercy (2005, p. 156) describe it as “telling a story *on* ourselves” which exposes the researcher to “scrutiny and ridicule”. Vulnerability is created through autoethnographic research, not just for the subject population but also the researcher.

Reflexive ethnography

Tullis, (2014, p. 245) draws a distinction between autoethnographer and reflexive ethnographer, their own preferred label. The difference for Tullis (2014, p. 245) is how “thoughts and feelings” impact and influence data interpretation. For reflexive ethnography, the researcher’s experiences are less a focus of the work and the “research goals centre on the experiences of those I come in contact with and less on self-narration”. My work sits between feminist autoethnography and reflexive ethnography, but I will use the term autoethnography. I am centring the experiences of others rather than myself, which fits reflexive ethnography. However, I have been influenced by the theory and sensibility of feminist autoethnography.

Feminist autoethnography

Allen & Piercy (2005, p. 156) define feminist ethnography as “a method of being, knowing, and doing that combines two concerns: telling the stories of those who are marginalized, and making good use of our own experience.”. Metta (2013, p. 491) suggests that autoethnography provides feminist researchers an avenue to “reclaim their authority and sovereignty over their own narratives and knowledge-making. It is a tool for “creating new knowledges of women’s lives and experiences that have been marginalized”. Through bringing women to the centre of scholarly text, there is a “resistance of the masculinist discourses” in academia and wider “social, cultural, and political discourses” (Metta, 2013, p. 494). When autoethnography focuses on “lived personal experience”, the “appreciation of difference and intersectionality”, and values “rationality, emotionality, and multiple ways of knowing” it is feminist (Adams et al., 2013, p. 673). The goals to “disrupt harmful assumptions of normalcy, foreground identity politics, and take an activist-oriented” approach to understanding experience are deeply feminist (Adams et al., 2013, p. 673).

Ettorre (2016, p. 4) presents four mechanisms through which autoethnography is a feminist method:

- 1) The creation of “transitional, intermediate spaces” at the “crossroads or borderlands of embodied emotions.
- 2) It is “an active demonstration of the “personal is political”.

- 3) It is “feminist critical writing which is performative” and “committed to the future of women”.
- 4) It “helps to raise oppositional consciousness by exposing precarity”.

These transitional spaces allow for the “ambiguity, uncertainty and equivocality” that is inherent in – and critical to – remembering personal experiences and therefore is woven throughout autoethnography (Ettorre, 2016, p. 4). Autoethnography not only reveals how the ‘personal is political’ but how the “political is personal” (Ettorre, 2016, p. 115). By making visible the personal impact of political issues, and the political impact of personal issues, feminist autoethnography makes clear the inextricable nature of the personal and political. Personal stories are translated into “political realities by revealing power inequalities inherent in human relationships” (Ettorre, 2016, p. 2). The performativity of the work is constituted in the promise that it embodies – “a commitment to the future of women” (Ettorre, 2016, p. 9). The work has a purpose. This might be the creation or exposure of “new feminist meanings and new feminist subjectivities” because autoethnography “helps those uncared for” and “calls for political responsiveness” (Ettorre, 2016, p. 10). Precarity occurs as part of Othering processes, and it signifies the insecure and hierarchical social positionings created (Ettorre, 2016, p. 11). It is a vulnerable position that where individuals are “dependent upon each other”, but it can be “a vital force” (Ettorre, 2016, p. 12). Through awareness of precarity, there can be a positive recognition of social interdependency and susceptibility.

Information about identity can be complicated to source and interpret, and this challenge has influenced my approach. There is a challenge inherent in exploring marginalised identities, narratives, and knowledge. Part of my feminist methodology must be to recognise that patriarchal and dominant ideologies have long erased and minimised the voices that I am trying to amplify – of women and the feminine. These narratives need to be highlighted, but I must also be careful to treat them with the delicacy and respect they deserve.

Approach to ‘participants’

How to treat, handle, and approach the participants involved in my research was an important ethical consideration. Goodall (2013, p. 206) asks: “*When we write about others, who are we to do that? What gives us the right? What drives us to write in the first place?*” (emphasis theirs). Research should not be invasive for subject or reader – “do no harm”

(Goodall, 2013, p. 207). I wanted to ensure that at every stage I behaved in the most ethical and kind manner possible.

Handforth and Taylor (2016) probe how to refer to participants – they suggest that subjects, informants, respondents, and participants all seem ill-fitting for assorted reasons. I default to participant because I affirm the participation – whether it is a survey, an interview, a gaming session, or photography. There is an active involvement and choice to be a part of the research. Information is being passed from the participants to me through a level of engagement. If I were simply observing people, then perhaps participant would seem less appropriate. There is a level of detachment or hierarchy wrapped up with the label, but it is unavoidable without resorting to clunkier and potentially pedantic language.

Browne (2003, p. 138) discusses the issue of anonymity and pseudonyms when participants do not want to use them. As part of my ethics approval process, and in considering issues of participation, I agreed to guarantee anonymity for my participants and outlined how I would assure it. Browne (2003) had a participant who did not want to use a pseudonym, and Browne was conflicted with how to deal with this. By revealing the participant's identity, Browne could potentially divulge the other participants identities and experiences by association and through the content of the interview. However, by refusing to breach this anonymity and use the participant's real name they are also not respecting the wishes of the participant. It is a difficult quandary to resolve and illustrates the power dynamic between researcher and participant. In the surveys, I did not include a space for participants to include their name, however there were those who chose to give identifying information in their answers. This issue is discussed later in this chapter within the challenges I faced.

To operate within the parameters of my ethics clearance, I was not permitted to approach people through my own social networks whilst recruiting, however when friends/acquaintances heard the details of my research they usually wanted to participate.. There may be a peer pressure to participate in the study that results from friends encouraging their friends to participate (Browne, 2003, p. 137). It is hard for me to address this pressure if it occurs outside my field of vision, but I just must be careful to address it when I am discussing participation with individuals. Browne (2003, p. 140) found that they were often asked to complete favours in return for their friend participating in the study and felt that this played into a negotiation of power and resisting the 'hit and run' one-way exploitative relationship

that researcher-participant can often fall into. Ultimately I did not face these issues because my survey attracted an enormous number of responses without me doing any active recruiting. I was able to share my survey publicly and I did not ask anyone specifically to complete it.

Ensuring the community benefits from my research

Bochner (2013, p. 53) describes autoethnography as a “rallying point for those who believe that the human sciences need to become more human”. Autoethnography can “turn social science inquiry into a non-alienating practice” (Bochner, 2013, p. 53). Giorgio, (2013, p. 407) describes that “We bring the political and critical home through words, expressions, descriptions, remembering”. Autoethnography uses lived experience to “make sense of the seemingly senseless” (Giorgio, 2013, p. 407). When I read autoethnographic research, I enjoy the collision of theory and reality because lived consequences are typically centred. Often when reading abstracted theory or cold facts and figures, I find that I struggle to answer, “so what?”. In this thesis I did not want to just prove that sexism is rife within D&D’s fandom because that seems so simple and detached from the resulting sexual harassment, exclusion, and harm. It was (and is) important to share my experiences and those of my participants to bring gravity to the consequences of sexism in D&D’s fandom. There can be an accessibility to autoethnographic work that is absent from the “inaccessible and jargon-laden” traditional academic writing (Jones et al., 2013, p. 36). Allen & Piercy (2005, p. 153) explain that “a lot of research is so removed from human experience that it is eviscerated – disembowelled of passion” which renders it as “exciting as stale bread”. I have controversially admitted mostly hating reading academic books – they tire me out. I can read infinite science fiction, but I struggle with chapters of traditional texts or articles. I came to an important realisation when I read the *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Adams et al., 2016) because I absolutely devoured over 700 pages, eagerly returning to the book at every opportunity for two days. It is dry ‘traditional’ academic writing that I dislike, not academic books. I enjoy reading feminist books where the author threads their experiences through the book and/or tells the story of various real groups of people. There is a vitality to this work that brings the embedded theory alive for me. Autoethnographic work can appeal “to a variety of audiences, not just academics” through writing in “clear, concise and engaging ways” (Jones et al., 2013, p. 37). I am sure there are times when theory or subject requires a more esoteric or complex approach

– not all books are written to be read by everyone. I wanted my thesis to be readable for not just an academic audience, but by anyone who stumbles upon it. It was (and is) important to me that those who participated in my research, making it possible, can access and understand the results. This is part of fulfilling my commitment to fair exchange with participants and to being a meaningful part of significant cultural change.

There was a strong theme of survey participants being interested in the results of the research to which they were contributing. Responses repeatedly requested that results be posted in the group they found the survey in, and others even included personal email addresses¹ so they could be sent the results. It is important to me that the D&D community benefits from this research – partially as a big thank you for the overwhelming generosity of responses, but also because I think all research should have a net positive result for the communities involved. (Otherwise, what is the point of the research? It should not just be to benefit the reputation of the researcher. The curiosity of academics should not be the burden of communities.) Wizards of the Coast have been conducting annual player surveys and smaller regular surveys intermittently, but they do not seem to share the results. The only ones available were those distributed to the press or in marketing copy. This is a huge failing on the part of WOTC.

The most straightforward way to ensure that the D&D community can benefit from the research findings is to make them openly available and accessible, not hidden behind a paywall or left to rot on my computer. I will never make the raw dataset available. That is not appropriate and has not gained an ethical clearance. However, I will endeavour to release the results through multiple channels to target/reach different audiences.

This includes:

- Open-access publishing for resulting articles;
- Articles written in non-academic style and language to be more accessible for different abilities of reader;
- Creation of data snapshot posters and graphics that can be shared on social media.

Through these methods of dissemination, I hope that my research would be accessible for other academics, community members, and anyone interested in learning more. A key goal

¹ The issue of breached anonymity is discussed later in the chapter

would be to collaborate with D&D community groups and organisations to make improvements in accessibility and approachability for marginalised players based on my findings. Examples of research dissemination graphics have been included as appendices. These have been created specifically to suit social media – ensuring they are shareable and easily understandable at a glance.

Voice and Representation

My approach to the survey responses regarding the implementation and presentation of quotations in this thesis was influenced by participating in a weekly seminar series on the work of Sara Ahmed (Brabazon, 2021a). I questioned how Ahmed's work had been affected by interviews, particularly in her book *On Being Included* (Ahmed, 2012) (Tara Brabazon, 2021b). The quotes Ahmed included felt like they were supporting evidence for points she wanted to make rather than Ahmed's work supporting the issues raised by interviewees. There was a lack of engagement methodologically regarding the interviews – as Ahmed failed to describe who was interviewed and reflect on their positioning. The quotes felt shoe-horned into a pre-formulated agenda or idea rather than being the seed from which the ideas grew. I realised that it was important to me that I included the quotes in a manner that allowed the reader to disagree with my interpretation. They could not be trimmed and neatly sandwiched in a manner that reduced them to part of my conclusion or my sentence. Quotes needed to remain whole enough to be understood without my additions or any need for explanation. I do not want to make the mistake of sidelining the responses. People's lived experiences should be the skeleton that holds up the fleshy theory of this thesis.

I have an unprecedented wealth of information that thousands of people have taken the time to share with me. There is pressure to do the dataset justice and effectively use the opportunity to produce ground-breaking research. When I speak of treating the data appropriately, I am not just talking about the potential value that this has in an academic sense but also respecting the individuals who came together to answer the surveys and give such detailed responses. In my research into the ethics of netnography (and ethics generally), the idea of reciprocity or benefit to the target community appeared often. For completing my survey, the participants were offered nothing tangible in return as there were no chances to win vouchers or enter a prize draw that I have seen other surveys offer. The survey was not

long but there is still an effort for those who chose to complete it. I have often been asked why the survey got so many responses. I believe it is because D&D players want to talk about their hobby that they are so enthusiastic about. However, I also received thousands of responses to my nonplayer survey which does not fit this answer and has often left me wondering why so many chose to fill it out. I am not going to pretend to have the answer, but I suspect that participating in surveys and research touches on or satisfies a desire to contribute. It is important to acknowledge my gratitude and the debt I owe to the people that took the time to participate in my survey because without them I would not have produced this PhD thesis. I feel accountable to the community. I have a responsibility to take the data and use it in a way that matters, reflects the spirit with which it was so generously created, and offers alternatives for members of the community. Even using the term data serves to abstract it from the deeply personal nature of the information contained within.

From the beginning of my work on this thesis, I stated that the objective of my research would be to prioritise and champion voices that are not normally heard. Initially, I thought that just meant focusing on women and women's experiences but that has grown into a more complex engagement with the survey responses. I was struck by a statement by Evans and Stasi (2014, p. 14) where they commented, "When we produce research, what we're really doing is the work of representation, which means researchers are responsible for the way others are represented". When I take quotes from survey responses and embed them in a paragraph, I am recontextualising them with the comments that I make about the quote and the way I interpret it. Part of this consideration has arisen from my research into paratexts and the understanding of how texts interact to alter your understanding of them. When I include a quote and then explain it or what I believe it means, I am complicating that quote and reframing within my own agenda. I am not sure if it is possible to include a quote in a way that is truly neutral and lets the quote stand for itself. The idea of a quote standing for itself might be inherently flawed because it might be naïve to assume it can do so. The survey responses are still a filtered source of information because it is what the participants chose to offer. The responses are shaped by the particular moment in time that they were produced in. Mazzei & Jackson (2017) discuss the naivety of assuming that by including the voice of participants we are gaining access to the essence of the authentic self. Responses are also influenced by any motivations of the participant to portray themselves, their experiences, and

Dungeons & Dragons in a particular manner. We should not assume that simply by directly quoting someone we are providing their authentic voice or a deep, personal, semi-magical truth.

The conventional framing, shaping and citing of survey data serves to reconfigure the information within and irreversibly alter the meaning. There is the truth parsed through participants, the truth as represented by the researcher, and the truth that the reader takes away through the reading process. Information is refracted through these lenses, retellings, and presentations. When I discussed my concerns about how to *best* use the survey quotes with my supervisor, Tara Brabazon, she described the analogy of my role as being that of the conductor of an orchestra. I am creating a score, ensuring each part is heard, and each instrument can shine through in the final piece. I was warned against producing a cacophony where each part is indistinguishable and lost in the end piece. Initially, this made sense to me because I could link the idea of letting instruments shine with my desire for women's voices to be heard when they are normally drowned out. Then I began to wonder what score I am trying to create. What if I am trying to force my orchestra to play "The Imperial March" when they are more suited to "Peter and the Wolf"? There is no way to interact with the survey data without introducing a level of agenda, bias, or change but I have taken action to minimise that and keep it transparent.

Approaching Quotations

Rather than weaving quotes into my own analysis and using them as concrete evidence to justify points, I tried to consider an alternative that would allow the testimony to stand almost separate but still linked. The aim was to allow readers to make their own judgements about the quotes before presenting my own ideas. I think this allows greater potential for there to be disagreement and discussion rather than almost forcing one thread of thought or analysis. I do not want the statements from my respondents to be subsumed or devoured in my quest to present a cohesive thesis, as though they are a means to an end rather than offering voices and views with their own value.

With the substantial number of responses I have, it is impossible to include every response and every quote within the limitations of this thesis. Short of publishing the entire dataset this would be impossible to achieve and even that has issues in execution and outcome. This means that there are responses, truths, quotes, data, or whatever label fits

best that will need to be left out. Taylor (2011, p. 14) writes that the “omission is political.” It is vital to consider what is left out, because it makes a statement about priorities, positioning, and absences. Another issue that I am wary of is the potential of only including statements that I feel illustrate the point I am trying to make. This might obscure or overstate the representativeness of whatever I am discussing due to the exclusion of more moderate or even dissenting opinions. Additionally, I could fall into a sensationalist approach where I use the quotes that are shocking to elicit a response from the reader. This would be using the statements or voices for an agenda and might be a disservice to the person who chose to share potentially sensitive or personal with me. I acknowledge these issues and ensure a transparent discussion of data collection and interpretation.

I have chosen to use a distinct formatting for presented testimony so that the views of others are distinct from my own analysis. This involves using blue as an accent colour, a different font compared to the main text, and right alignment for extra emphasis.

This is an example of the formatting for quotations.

Most significantly and confirming the respect for the testimony of my respondents, I have also decided to keep quotes entirely in their original state – without correcting/altering any spelling, grammar, or formatting errors. I feel this is the most honest way to include the quotes and reduces any risk of affecting the meaning or tone of the quote.

The footnote attached to each featured statement from the survey includes the participant number to allow for tracing question responses back to their entire survey response. I have included my Player Survey response data as supplementary documents for this doctoral thesis. This includes an Excel spreadsheet, a Word document with the variable coding presented, and an SPSS format file that is the formatted database in its entirety. The SPSS file is the quickest way to access the data set, because the variable coding is easily understood and the program is able to manage the large volume of information sources. Whilst the Excel spreadsheet is also the complete dataset, the program is less able to process the file size without crashing or other issues. The dataset has been provided so that the doctoral examiners are able to verify the authenticity of responses, and review the statements within the context of the participant’s entire survey if they so wish. This transparency in presentation ensures and verifies the authenticity of my data handling

processes, thus highlighting the transparency and rigour of my methodology. As per ethics requirements, the dataset is not for wider circulation.

“Fieldwork” and Approaching the Insider/Outsider dichotomy

Fieldwork is typically configured as a series of actions or behaviour that takes place in a location somehow foreign to the researcher or different from their typical life. It is “elsewhere” or “detached”, but this is not always the case (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 95). The “field” in autoethnography can be “the “state of mind” that one assumes when recording one’s own experiences and how one is changed by these” (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 67). It can also take the form of “our worlds” and our life, the spaces and places that we interact with in our daily lives (Ettorre, 2016, p. 14). In my research, the fieldwork aspects are taking place in my own “backyard” – the participants and I exist in the same communities. Adelaide is often described as a large country-town because everyone seems to be linked by few degrees of separation, sharing mutual friends, schools, and overlapping social spaces. If the community is narrowed down to Dungeons & Dragons players, this becomes even more intense. When meeting another D&D player in Adelaide players might try to work out who they have both played with and compare experiences with DM’s. Without moving interstate, it is impossible for me to extricate myself from these webs of mutual acquaintances or friends.

For Cuomo and Massaro (2016, p. 94) there can be “concerns of trespass, misrepresentation, [and] reduction” when conducting research in places or communities that are close to the researcher’s heart. As someone who cares deeply about women’s experiences in the D&D community, I did not want to oversimplify or potentially misrepresent their experiences. I also was worried about overstepping the welcome extended to me as a participant when present as a researcher – even if it was not a role I was intentionally activating. This idea of trespass was particularly salient as I might have been invited to events that would not typically be open to an outsider (Taylor, 2011, p. 12). For example, a friend who is heavily involved in local Adventurer’s League events invited me to help organise an event for new dungeon masters. They wanted my help because of my experience with D&D and my role in the game store it would be hosted at, but there is no doubt that the experience was useful and offered insights for this thesis. Would I have been invited if I were a stranger who was researching the community? It is hard to tell, but probably not. I feel this then

complicates my relationship with my friend, the community, and the knowledge I gain from interacting with the community.

There is also an insider/outsider (false) dichotomy that exists when considering how a researcher is positioned relative to the population/group/culture they are studying. The dichotomies of insider/outsider and participant/researcher are inadequate and limiting when considering my positioning to the community, participants, and topic. The boundaries between insider and outsider are also permeable and the positions are not stable (Taylor, 2011, p. 6). Speaking broadly, I am an “insider” to the wider D&D community. My experience with D&D, as a woman and as a player makes me an insider to the D&D community and fandom. I am someone who participates in the kind of behaviours, groups, and communities that I discuss in this thesis. I actively consume social media content dedicated to various aspects of the game. This is not a culture that I am viewing from the outside looking in – instead I am inside looking around me. The identity of ‘D&D player’ has been part of my self-understanding and presentation for almost a decade. It is an integral aspect of who I am and has grown in importance or salience for my identity since I initially proposed this thesis. ‘Intimate insider researcher’ involves the researcher having relationships that are deeply embedded in the field, having “been and [remaining] a key social actor” within the field, and having “regular and ongoing contact” with the field in question (Taylor, 2011, p. 9). The level of investment of self in the field of study makes the research potentially a “process of self-interpretation” and “autoethnography” (Taylor, 2011, p. 9). I cannot pretend or claim to be an impartial observer – I am enthusiastic about this topic and my understandings are influenced by my own experiences. Instead, I must acknowledge these potential blind-spots or biases and act to minimise them, whilst taking full advantage of the benefits of my knowledge. There is a need to make the familiar strange (Martino et al., 2013, p. 395) My decision to research the D&D community serves to externalise myself, because I must take on a different non-participant role. To adequately consider D&D and the community, I need to take a step back to attempt a more objective view. (Not that I feel it is possible or desirable to be entirely objective). There is a multiplicity of identity that should not be oversimplified or overlooked. These considerations of position and identity helped shape my methodology.

Browne (2003, p. 135) writes about “sameness” in terms of sexuality, they argue that whilst sexuality can be a “salient axis of power, the assumption of equal research relations

based on categories of sexual orientation should be contested". It is important to remember that although one element of identity might be important and influential for an individual's experiences, sharing that element does not guarantee an equal footing for interactions. I may share the identity label of "nerdy woman" with a portion of my participants, but that does not negate other aspects of my identity that affect power dynamics – for example, educational level, class, race. When the researcher fails to reflect how they are engaging with the topic, they can "overlook or reproduce issues like sexism, misogyny, racism and homophobia" (Evans & Stasi, 2014, p. 16). There is the potential for autoethnography to over-focus on the individual's own feelings resulting in oversights regarding "the larger cultural structures that are interacting with those feelings" (Evans & Stasi, 2014, p. 16). Identity and intersectionality are complex and the nuances of power dynamic they produce must be carefully considered.

The first time I negotiated this insider/outsider participant/researcher was at a character creation session for new D&D game I was starting to play. I had hardly played D&D for the first year of my thesis due to my regular gaming group ending a campaign and taking a break. I leapt at the opportunity to play but was slightly nervous that the group would expect a certain level of knowledge from me due to doing my thesis on D&D or that they might feel uncomfortable playing with me around. I did not want to make the group feel like I was watching and making judgements for my research. I found myself straddling these positions even though I was not actively conducting observations. I could not help but consider how our discussion of house rules might fit into my understanding of textual poaching. Ultimately, I was forced to realise that my positioning to D&D had been shifted. I was no longer simply a casual consumer or player.

Prior knowledge can disguise or render attributes or behaviour invisible because they are so familiar or accepted, so there is a need to practice "unlearning the familiar" (Taylor, 2011, p. 16). I do not have to spend time learning jargon or slang, proving my intent as positive, or gaining credibility with the community. I have an advantage compared to someone who might approach this topic having never opened a *Player's Handbook* or played the game. Taylor (2011, p. 6) describes the advantages of being an insider as: "deeper levels of understanding afforded by prior knowledge", "knowing the lingo", easier access to and selection of participants, and "quicker establishment of rapport and trust". However, Taylor

warns that being an insider does not necessarily mean that the research holds an “absolute or correct way of seeing and/or reading the culture under investigation” (Taylor, 2011, p. 6)

As researchers we take elements of ourselves into our research, and that is both valuable and potentially problematic (Evans & Stasi, 2014, p. 8). We can use our experiences and knowledge to guide our research, but we must be careful not to let it cloud our perceptions or mislead. Pre-established friendships might influence the researcher’s positioning within the field, and close friendships might “shape” the work or create potential “insider blindness” (Taylor, 2011, pp. 8, 13). There may be a need to try and reconcile outside and inside views of an issue or community – the outside view is produced by books, media, and research, whilst the inside is shaped by experience (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 101). For example, whilst much of the research into D&D espouses its potential for exploring identity and social issues, my own experiences and that of many of my participants do not match this. As someone on both sides, I can try to understand the mismatches between reality to produce a new understanding of the topic.

In their discussion on methodology, Cuomo and Massaro (2016, p. 96) describe their role as a researcher as a temporary identity within the communities they were studying. This suggests to me that they think of their insider or community-identity as being the more permanent or enduring identity. I am not sure that I can ever truly remove the outsider or researcher label from myself after this thesis and go back to be a true insider. I feel that both labels or identities now apply to me. The perspectives I have gained from adopting the researcher identity have forever affected or shifted my positioning. For Cuomo and Massaro, when beginning research there was a need to transition between “resident to researcher” – a transition that probably needed to occur frequently back and forth over the course of the project (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 101). I have taken a different approach, in that I never tried to transition my role from one pole to another, instead occupying a blurry middle-ground. I then took up residency in my weird middle-ground and remained there, never purely a researcher or player. When analysing survey responses, I did not try to take on a removed position, instead I let my experiences inform my approach and understanding.

For Massaro, their complex position was made particularly salient or visible after an interaction with a friend/neighbour where they made a comment that “relied on [their] friendship” (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 101). It was a comment that involved dark humour

that could have been perceived as cold or callous if Massaro did not know the person and their feelings on the topic (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 101). This comment might not have been made or would have been made differently to a researcher who was an obvious outsider – “he would have explained the lived experiences of the drug economy much more thoroughly” (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 101). Friends can infer meaning of comments, but researchers cannot make such inferences (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 101). There are comments that might be made to a fellow D&D player that might not be made to outsiders. There are myriad jokes about groups being “murder hobos” in their approach to the game. This may sound sinister to those who do not understand or appreciate the trope. By acknowledging that responses are being shared with outsiders, participants are given the opportunity to consider how their stories might be received by the outside world (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 103). This might change what they share, the details they include, and how vulnerable they choose to make themselves through telling their story.

Establishing Boundaries

In autoethnography, the researcher is able to “explore [their] simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from the field and our research partners’ lives (Tomaselli et al., 2013, p. 579). This might not always be beneficial for those involved (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 103). It can be ethically important to establish and maintain boundaries to keep researchers and participants both emotionally and physically safe (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 103).

Cuomo and Massaro (2016, p. 95) both undertook research in communities that they were working or living in, and in their article they describe the processes they took to establish boundaries. They found these physical and emotional boundaries important for themselves as researchers and people, their participants, and ultimately their projects. This “conscious and deliberate” boundary-making became a “methodological practice” (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, pp. 95, 96). Boundary-establishing techniques can establish or reassert a position as researcher and outsider, not only for participants but personally (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 96). Massaro formalised their interactions with people using interviews with specific questions, explicitly asking for formal comments and reflections, and by physically presenting themselves as an outsider (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 102). Through scheduling an interview, choosing a formal location, and wearing business casual attire, Massaro gave participants cues that they were not engaging as friends but as researcher/participant

(Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 102). In a similar vein, Cuomo would pull out a notepad to signal change in positioning from colleague to researcher (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016). However, Browne (2003, p. 137) found it necessary to take a more relaxed approach to the research and interview process with their participants who were friends/acquaintances. Often interviews were rescheduled at the last minute or ended abruptly due to other responsibilities coming up (Browne, 2003, p. 137). Browne (2003, p. 137) reflected that perhaps if the appointments had been more formal and strict they would have been cancelled rather than postponed and then they would have ended up with fewer participants.

Where participants already know the researcher, they might see them as colleagues or friends rather than as a researcher, which can result in blurred lines (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016, p. 95). These blurred lines can help researchers gain access to the community/location/field that they are studying but there are also drawbacks. After posting my survey, people approached me and told me I would recognise their reply because of an inside joke or comment. This compromised my ability to preserve their anonymity and possibly influenced their replies because they were willingly shedding the protective veil of obscurity. It made me quite uncomfortable, and I told them that I would not be looking at responses and trying to decipher an identity from them. Thankfully I have such an overwhelming number of responses that even the most blatantly revealing responses will likely be rendered unrecognisable in the sea of responses.

There were survey responses that caused a double-take due to the locations they mentioned.

I play at a Games store in Gawler which has an excellent track record of creating including tabletop gaming spaces, including women's only D&D and kid-friendly tabletop competitions. I play MtG competitions there which I wouldn't feel comfortable doing in other spaces.²

My first d&d game was played at the Flinders University library which felt uncomfortable at first. My second game was played in a local games store and felt very comfortable as you felt more surrounded by people of a similar social setting to yourself.³

² 11158

³ 23474

I'm a woman, so when I run D&D at school many female students who might be nervous otherwise get involved. The game store I often go to when I'm in Adelaide (Table Top Warfare) runs a woman's D&D game and has taken a hard stance against sexual harassment- something I've had issues with in the past. In my current group, I was approached by a friend and started as the only woman, but we have had more join and I felt comfortable with the group.⁴

I am familiar with these places due to the small community in Adelaide. I have met the owners of the game stores mentioned and I likely know the people who run their women's D&D games (I decided not to check). Of course, I expected (hoped) people I know would help my research and complete my survey – I shared it on my own Facebook page. I did not trace these responses back to their complete survey, but it is possible that if they revealed enough about themselves, I could identify them or someone in an anecdote. In a way, it is fortunate that the locations are mentioned positively because it would have been uncomfortable if they had shared stories of harassment at places I have played, named people I know, or especially if my workplace was mentioned. These responses forced me to reflect on potential issues that can arise from conducting research in a community I consider myself embedded in.

There is a need to establish boundaries when I am playing D&D – not just for the comfort and benefit of those I am playing with but for me too. I want to be able to relax and play D&D in an enjoyable manner, not turn it into work. Ethically, it is important to create the boundaries for the people I am playing with. Blanket consent for their actions to be mentioned in my research cannot be assumed. If I want to use the game as research material, then informed consent must be established and periodically re-established. It is important to check with players that if something notable happens, they are comfortable for me to potentially discuss it in my thesis or wider research writing. Simply making the anecdote anonymous does not go far enough in terms of consent – there must be active permission. Friendships that result from fieldwork can be complex due to power imbalances, “inequalities in purpose and potential gain”, role confusion, and feelings of betrayal (Taylor, 2011, pp. 7, 8). There is a need to carefully manage these relationships, particularly where they are pre-established friendships that might be undergoing a transformation.

⁴ 347

Vulnerability

There is a vulnerability inherent in autoethnographic work that centres the researcher's experiences. Academic work is often peer reviewed, the findings presented at events or conferences, and discussed in classrooms – potentially even read by friends and family. Having one's own, often sensitive, experiences publicly critiqued can be emotionally challenging but also might hurt “personally, and professionally” (Tullis, 2014, p. 252). There is a risk calculation that should be considered when deciding what to include in autoethnographic writing. The remembering involved in using memories for autoethnography can be difficult and the researcher might feel as though they are “reliving” their trauma (Ritchie, 2019, p. 73). Ritchie (2019, p. 73) wrote “I am pained to find the best words to describe something that is otherwise seemingly indescribable”. It is a challenging endeavour to put words to traumatic or personal experiences.

Through autoethnography there is the potential for “autoethnographers to creatively (re)make *ourselves*) through the process of remembering, understanding, making choices of representation, and negotiating the past and future (Berry, 2013, p. 215). The ‘self’ curated and developed through the text is “an installation in the text, an artifact of textual practice” (Gannon, 2013, p. 232). There is infinite opportunity for self-questioning and self-interrogation as the autoethnographers probe their own experience in relation to others, what experiences to include, and the role of the historical self in research (Berry, 2013, p. 222). Through the research process there is the potential to alter our relationships with our own experiences (Gannon, 2013, p. 230). This can occur through interrogating “the political, historical, social and cultural injustice” within the autoethnographer's own experience (Toyosaki & Pensoneau-Conway, 2013, p. 565). There might be the wish to change the way we behaved in hindsight, and dissatisfaction or embarrassment that we did not.

Anderson & Glass-Coffin (2013, p. 57) describe the “emergent quality” of autoethnographic writing. They suggest that it “emerges from relationship and context” more than traditional ethnographic approaches (Anderson & Glass-Coffin, 2013, p. 57). The researcher's self becomes “an affective and cognitive opening” for inquiry (Pelias, 2013, p. 389). There is a swinging movement between “inner vulnerable experience” and “outward social, historical, and cultural aspects of life” (Allen & Piercy, 2005, pp. 155-156). Pieces of autoethnography that I read initially were often emotionally challenging, harrowing, and left

me feeling deeply uncomfortable. Whilst I understand emotional writing can be highly influential and illustrative, I was slightly concerned. Gingrich-Philbrook (2013, p. 616) recounts his description of autoethnography's sometimes extreme emotion as "emotional kitsch", likening elements to the "big eyes on those sad little cats in dime store paintings". Whilst he admitted that he was "such an ass sometimes" after this description, but what he was leading towards was the idea that the "gestalt is in the news, not the tears" (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2013, p. 616). The tears should move the reader towards *something*, not just invoke sadness but encourage change and deepen the connection the reader has with the topic.

Jenkins, Citations, and Inheritance

When I began this thesis, I knew my bibliography would be crucial. Failure to cite **the texts** would undermine the research. Ahmed summarised the prevailing perspective effectively when she wrote: "Good habits in citation are about extending a line: you show how much you know of a field by citing those deemed to have shaped that field. To extend a line is to reproduce an inheritance" (Ahmed, 2019, p. 168). This led to an overwhelmed spiral of research as I traced ideas further and further back. What were the seminal or landmark texts for each idea I touched on? And what if I did not agree with the ideas or find them to be relevant? Initially I tried to read only articles that were well-cited because I figured that rendered them somehow more valid than those that had only one or two citations. However, in more niche fields, there might be few other studies that touch on the same ideas or follow on in a manner that warrants a citation – even if it is widely read. It also reduces the ability to use more recent work because a paper published in 2021 or even 2019 is unlikely to have many citations by the time this thesis is finished. As this thesis touches on contemporary events, the thought of ignoring recent trends, ideas, and findings is ridiculous. Gingrich-Philbrook (2013, p. 621) argues that not citing a particular scholar "isn't always a vote against it; the piece may not be right for the nuanced focus we mean to create in our own essay". I chose to resolve my approach by following two principles: 1) Follow ideas back to their originator as far as possible. For example, rather than citing a scholar referencing Goffman, I return to the original and engaged Goffman in his context, and then deploy the secondary citations. 2) Judge research not by citations, which can be an inelegant proxy in the humanities, but by methodology and methods. For me this meant reading whatever I thought

was relevant and relying on my training in research methods to decide whether a source was reliable. If I read a paper and found myself disagreeing with the adequacy of their sample size, approach, or ethics then I would refrain from including it.

My most significant struggle was with how to approach the work of Henry Jenkins. It is unfathomable to conduct fandom research without mentioning his work and books. Jenkin's books are considered the origin point for numerous ideas in fandom and thus referenced throughout the articles I read. This meant I *had* to follow the ideas back to Jenkins as per my own principles for approaching reference material. Part of referencing Jenkin is to extend his line and "reproduce an inheritance" (as previously quoted) (Ahmed, 2019, p. 168). Jenkin's work, although he has produced updated editions, felt dated for a field that is constantly changing and evolving not just due to physical technology, but the way fandoms interact through/with/around online platforms. Even in the three years I have been working on this thesis, the way that *TikTok* is used by D&D fans has grown enormously. I therefore deployed Jenkins with caution, acknowledging the limitations of his work due to the rapid change of fandom studies. Care has been taken to reference more contemporary work wherever possible. This serves not only to ensure my research is appropriately contemporary but attempts to elevate other voices within the field of fandom studies. The importance of diverse voices, perspectives, and research was reinforced for me by this quote from Ahmed:

"we can think too of the use of a name as how a history is kept alive. Citation too is another way a history is kept alive. You are asked to follow the well-trodden paths of citation, to cite properly as to cite those deemed to have already the most influence. The more a path is used, the more a path is used. The more he is cited, the more he is cited" (Ahmed, 2019, p. 167).

Citation politics is an area I have become more aware of during the research and writing of this thesis, and I believe that citation selection can be an important consideration in feminist research. At the core of my doctoral research is the objective to amplify women's voices regarding D&D and fandom, it seems logical to do this through choice of resources and references. That is not to say that I am intending to ignore the work of men or only cite women – I am simply trying to ensure that there is diversity within my reading.

Method

Changes due to Covid-19

Writing this chapter began during the confirmation of the research design, to enable reflection on the writing of the survey, its dissemination, collection, and analysis. Therefore, COVID-19 was the frame for this research. Fortunately, much of the data were collected before the international scale and complexity of the pandemic was revealed. The large quantity of data I have from the surveys plus the logistical issues arising from group observations and interviews, led me to refocus my approach. Initially I wanted to complete interviews, observe gaming sessions, and take photos at conventions but these have been set aside in favour of focusing on the survey responses.

Surveys

Survey design

Initially I created four different surveys to configure greater flexibility and result in potentially more responses than if I create a one-size-fits-all survey. There was a survey for non-players, one for character builds, and then two aimed at players. There was a full and abridged version of the survey aimed at players because I was concerned about people's willingness to take the time to complete a longer survey. Both surveys touched on the same concepts, but the shorter survey used only Likert-scale responses whereas the longer survey had open-ended responses. Ultimately, I did not end up using the shorter survey because the response to the longer survey was overwhelming and it was not necessary.

All the surveys began with the same two demographic questions: age and gender identity. I chose to keep the demographic sections streamlined and straightforward because I wanted participants to feel comfortable with the amount of identifying information I was asking. I also clarified at the start of the survey that I would not be asking any identifying information at any point and that it would remain anonymous. I did this because I was concerned that participants might be worried that I would ask for details at the end which is a trend I have seen in surveys.

I provided a more thorough description of my research project at the end of the surveys. I did this because I did not want my research aims to influence people's responses. There can be issues with participants providing the information they feel the researcher needs or wants (especially when they know the person). I wanted participants to offer what they felt was relevant, interesting, or important without feeling pressured or guided in any direction. As there were no mandatory questions, participants were able to go through the survey and read the description then go back if they wished. I feel like this provided a balance in terms of informed consent. The fact that no questions were mandatory on the surveys means that I have different numbers of responses for the questions. I wanted participants to be able to skip any question that may create discomfort.

The character survey consisted of two questions, one of which a series of dropdown boxes, and the other an open response space. For the first question "Character builds" I provided a matrix of dropdown menus – ten rows for different characters with three columns: race, class, and gender. I populated these dropdown menus with the main options available in fifth edition. I received responses that questioned my decision to use fifth edition options because it potentially left characters from other editions unable to fit into the dropdown boxes. I kept the survey simple because there are so many options that it would be overwhelming to try and include every single one. I had to draw the line somewhere and choosing the most recent edition was the most straightforward decision. The space for open responses was designed so that if people's characters did not fall into the basic options, they could still include them. I asked people to put each response on a new line and made no limits on the number of lines they could create.

The survey for non-players of D&D was designed to gain external perspectives on the game and community. There were only 4 long-answer questions and 2 checkbox questions. I was concerned that non-players would be less interested in completing a survey for my research and I did not want an offputtingly long-survey. The questions are focused on what the respondent understands or knows about D&D, why they do not play, and gives them space to add any comments they want to include. SurveyMonkey estimated that it would take about 4 minutes to complete.

The surveys were hosted on SurveyMonkey and built using their tools. I chose this site because it is the most popular survey hosting tool, and it is simple to use. I felt that having

SurveyMonkey in the URL would be more approachable for participants than the more formal academic hosting methods. The surveys were also easily optimised for completion on desktop, tablets, or mobile devices which I felt was important. The data analysis tools built in were useful for quick insights into the data as I went, but I did not use them for the final analysis – instead I exported the data to other software as described further on in this chapter. The player survey was the only dataset used in this thesis due to scope and the unexpected number of replies.

Sharing the surveys

Initially I was going to share my survey through multiple social media platforms, at conventions, and through posters at local gaming spaces. I created a poster/image that could be shared on social media and decided to test the water by sharing it on Facebook. I posted it to my own wall with public privacy settings and in a women's nerdy fitness group that I am a member of. I made it clear the post was from a professional perspective rather than a personal project. Due to the number of responses that I got from Facebook, I decided not to post the survey on other platforms.

The post on my own wall was my first experience of posting with "Public" privacy settings, and I was surprised by how many people saw the post, commented, shared, and reacted to it. I posted originally at 10:22am on 7th February 2020. By the 12th of February it had over 2000 comments and 7600 shares. I decided to close the surveys on 24th February after they had been open for only seventeen days because the response was so overwhelming.

The fitness group I posted in has about 10,500 members from all over the world but seems heavily skewed towards an American membership. Despite the large membership I would say there are fewer active members. It is a supportive community that discusses topics that go beyond fitness (often with a nerdy pop culture focus). I posted in the group at 10:27am on 7th February 2020. I quickly got comments, likes, and promises that members would share the post to their own personal networks. I was overwhelmed by the support and the comments of encouragement. The post reappeared in the group at least twice more due to being shared by members who saw it elsewhere and thought it was relevant to the group.

In the results, participants often let me know where they saw my survey and I was surprised to see the places to which it had spread. These places included Discord groups and Facebook groups. I wish I had included a “Where did you see this survey?” question in the survey because on reflection it would have been interesting to see how it travelled. However, there was a limit to what I could include, and it would have further bloated the number of questions. Here are examples of where participants told me they saw the survey:

I found this survey when it was posted in the Discord server of a D&D streaming community that I am fond of. [...]⁵

I'm from Adelaide! Super cool to see Flinders supporting a PhD like this! I found your survey through 'Goblin Dice Hoard Acquisitions' facebook page in case you were wondering. Best of luck with it all :)⁶

[...] Also, I found your survey as it had been linked to a Danish TTRPG-group on Facebook. [...]⁷

I got this link off of Tumblr and curious if your results might be skewed by sampling bias. If the survey tells you what site participants came from, I'd compare groups to see if there's a difference.⁸

[...]I saw the survey posted on the CR facebook chat so that was a Nat20 on the Wisdom check ;)⁹

I learned about this from a Facebook group called “chaotic neutral D&D memes” [...]¹⁰

[...] I happened to catch wind of it from a tumblr post going around <http://tinyurl.com/sduodmc>¹¹

Please consider posting your work in the Facebook Group "D&D Ghent" when you're finished (that's how I found out about this). I'd love to see it!¹²

This was a fun survey. I appreciate you posting it to the Critical Role Fanclub. Bidet, fellow Critter!¹³

Found this survey on Chaotic Neutral Dungeons & Dragons Memes. Good luck with the PhD study!¹⁴

⁵ 2013

⁶ 27862

⁷ 34274

⁸ 34382

⁹ 1501

¹⁰ 15871

¹¹ 33535

¹² 29348

¹³ 2546

¹⁴ 15356

[...] i live in south australia and went to flinders myself, so it was a really neat surprise to see this pop up on my tumblr dash, reblogged by an american¹⁵

I found it interesting that someone who lives in the same state as me and went to my university, was led to the survey via an American on Tumblr. It speaks to the international reach that can be achieved through the internet. I did not share the post to any groups myself (beyond the one fitness group mentioned) and I wonder what groups I would have selected if I had chosen to. I am not sure I would have sought out the Critical Role Fanclub, I would not have posted on a meme page, and I would likely have kept to English-language spaces. Through snowball recruitment and allowing the survey to spread organically, I ended up with participants that I would not have reached if I had held on to control of sharing the survey. The survey ended up in front of people it would not have done if I had been limited to paper copies – especially with Covid-19 restricting travel and events.

I was inundated with Facebook messages, friend requests, and emails from people who had seen the survey. Generally, these messages were wishing me luck, encouraging my research, adding additional information, or offering an opportunity to interview them.

When I closed the surveys the response numbers were:

- Player: 44, 813
- Non-player: 6,294
- Character build: 31,098

This thesis has used solely the player responses due to the scope of the research questions and the number of responses the survey targeting player experiences achieved. Initially I had intended to use the non-player responses as a point of contrast to the player responses to investigate why individuals choose to engage or not with D&D. However, the richness of the responses in the player survey allowed me to focus on the experiences of players and amplify their voices without introducing non-players into the mix.

Data Analysis

After downloading my survey responses from SurveyMonkey, I imported them into SPSS for basic quantitative descriptive statistics and ensure the data was organised correctly. SPSS

¹⁵ 33922

was chosen because I have previous experience using the software and therefore felt comfortable with the interfaces and functions. To refresh and improve my skills with SPSS I attended sessions at Flinders University that were designed specifically for staff and postgraduate students with little to no previous experience.

The way that I set up the survey questions in SurveyMonkey led to challenges in SPSS. This could have been avoided if I had experimented more with how data was output by the service. For example, I created questions that allowed respondents to “Tick as many as appropriate”, this led to the results being output as multiple variables. Question 7 was “Who do you currently play D&D with? Tick as many as appropriate” and this appeared in SPSS split by the 6 different options. Retrospectively it might have been advantageous to have only the ability to select the **most** appropriate for ease of data analysis. However, I can still use the data – just in slightly different ways. Quantitative data is not the focus of this research because the qualitative data is more comprehensive, enlightening, and offers greater insight. Before conducting any analysis, I had to ensure all my variables were appropriately labelled and the correct values attributed to responses. I chose to remove the “CollectorNm” “RespondentID”, “CollectorID”, “StartDate”, “EndDate”, “IPAddress”, “EmailAddress”, “FirstName”, “LastName”, and “CustomData1” variables. The last four were blank and therefore useless, plus they would have compromised anonymity. I did not know SurveyMonkey collected “IPAddress” information and would have turned this off if possible. There is information that can be derived from someone’s IP Address, and I felt like this violated participant privacy. With how common VPNs are IP addresses are not necessarily accurate or useful; I personally do not have my IP address linked to my physical address (sometimes not even my own country) for security reasons. However, as Henderson et al., (2013) describes, the predictability of data traceability can be complicated. Although the IP address data currently seems unproblematic, in the future it could pose a risk for participant anonymity. I replaced the lengthy “Respondent ID” with my own labelling through the “CASENUM” functions. The sole purpose of this is to be able to track specific question responses back to their complete survey if necessary. Finally, I chose not to analyse the “StartDate” and “EndDate” information for the average length of time taken on the survey at this point.

Originally, I attempted to use NVivo for the qualitative analysis of my survey responses, but I ultimately turned to Excel for the bulk of the task. NVivo was useful for finding out what

terms/words came up most frequently in responses and then the creation of word maps or word trees to visualise this information. However, this was a very superficial insight into the data because the terms/words were rendered contextless and therefore scraped of meaning. “Comfortable” could appear in a response because someone was describing that they were comfortable, were not comfortable, were not concerned with feeling comfortable, or a multitude of conflicting reasons. This method also struggled with the misspellings heavily present in the results – particularly evident when looking at the myriad ways “Gygax” was spelled. “Guygax” or “Gygacks” would not count towards an appearance of “Gygax” – so for accuracy I would have had to go through and identify **all** the various spellings which was not feasible for this quantity of responses. An additional downside of using NVivo was the formatting of the file required to import the data. I had to remove all the commas from responses so that it would function as a CSV file and therefore be recognisable to NVivo. This led to garbled responses – even though I chose to replace commas with the tilde – it still impacted the readability and clarity. NVivo proved unable to manage the enormous quantities of data that I wanted to import and even on an upgraded computer I found the program unusable due to lag (and the frequent crashes) that persisted after splitting the data down into individual questions.

Question	Number of responses
Q6	42,733
Q10	43,772
Q11	42,421
Q12	24,583
Q14	38,821
Q15	41,493
Q17	43,181
Q18	42,577
Q21	43,467
Q24	24,060
Q27	42,903

Q28	41,304
Q29	11,718
Sum	483,033

I decided to simplify my approach and turned to Microsoft Excel for the data analysis. I could easily export questions individually from SPSS whilst retaining the identifying or contextual data

fields I desired. I created workbooks for questions 6, 10, 11, 14, 15, 17, 18, 21, 24, 27, 28, and 29. (All the open text response questions, leaving out the closed-end responses). I divided the data by gender identity so that I would be able to recognise any differences in response that might be linked to gender. It also helped reduce the number of responses in any individual sheet within a workbook and therefore minimise computing issues. For most questions there was a similar number of responses to the overall response number for the survey. Using the “Sort” function in Excel it was possible to remove thousands of blank responses efficiently where participants had chosen not to respond to a question. The total number was reduced after blank cells (indicating no response) were removed, but I was still left with an enormous number of responses to read. The responses were then sorted alphabetically for ease of reading. This meant that similar replies were grouped together which was useful for moving past hundreds (or thousands) of “No” or “Yes”. It also helped indicate the strength of a theme within replies. For example, if there were hundreds of replies that began with “It does not affect my character...” then I could identify that pattern more easily than if they were spread out.

Research colleagues confirmed that it was ridiculous to try to read so many lines of spreadsheet, and alternative solutions were offered. This included randomly sampling the responses to create a smaller data set, trying to get someone else to help read the responses, or even to just stick with what I could find from the NVivo percentages and SPSS quantitative analyses. I decided that it was vital for the integrity of the research to keep the dataset intact. The thought of missing any themes or interesting responses made me uncomfortable – I would always be wondering what I failed to include. It also seemed vaguely disrespectful to the people whose responses would be left on the cutting room floor. They took the time to complete my survey, sharing their personal experiences, and I did not want to discard them simply because it would have been easier. From mid-April to September 2021, I focused almost solely on reading responses. I set 1st September as a motivational deadline. This was the end of Winter and the movement to the next stage of my thesis. It helped me remember

that I had to complete this section of my research in a timely manner. There were definite limits on the number of responses I could read in a day. This was not just a factor of time but of meaningful attention. After a certain point (generally around 6,000 results), it would become hard to make sense of what I was reading. If I ever caught myself skimming over replies then I would go back to the last line that had a code, take a break, then start again from that point.

Whilst reading the replies, I used thematic analysis techniques to identify patterns in meaning. I chose to read all the replies for **each question** rather than **each survey** so that I could zoom-in on specific concepts rather than getting lost in the entirety of the response. This was a trade-off between the contextualising of a response within an individual's perspective and the narrow lens of a question. Whilst the responses were not divorced from the demographics and other answers of their provider¹⁶, it is true that I did not look at how an individual's answer on question 11 might be related to question 18. It could be interesting to do future research on how the topics on the survey interrelate by treating each survey as a data point rather than every single response being an individual data point. On the first sheet of each Excel workbook, I jotted down the themes in responses that became apparent. I also kept notes of my own reflections so that I could follow-up any queries or thoughts when I wrote up the analysis. To support these identified themes, I chose quotes that I felt were representative of the larger dataset and then assigned them a code. These codes allowed me to categorise the responses into their broader themes for ease of access later. To avoid confirmation bias or cherry-pick the data that suited a preconceived narrative, the codes emerged in an ad hoc manner. The coding system emerged from the content in the responses rather than being pre-determined. A small skeleton was designed to begin with, and this was based around the chapters I was planning to include in my thesis because they were associations already drilled into my brain. This did grow beyond the chapters I expected to be able to include so that I could broaden the themes and better reflect the ideas in the responses. I used 69 different codes to organise the responses I wanted to return to for further reflection and discussion.

¹⁶ This is due to the assigning of case numbers to each survey before they were split into the different questions. It would be possible to quickly find an individual's other responses without going back to their original survey simply by searching their case number in a spreadsheet.

After coding, I was left with 39,925 responses that were split between the 69 categories. This is more than I intended, but it is still only 8.57% of the total responses. Obviously not all these responses make an appearance in the thesis, but they guide the thematic analysis and underpin results discussions.

Demographics

The survey respondents were diverse in terms of gender identity, age, and the length of time they had been playing D&D.

Gender Identity	Percentage
Women	35.4%
Men	54.4%
Non-binary	7.6%
Would rather not say	0.9%
Other	1.7%

Age	Percentage
Under 18	2.5%
18-24	26.4%
25-34	46.5%
35-44	16.1%
45-54	6.5%
55-64	1.5%
65+	0.3%

How long have you been playing D&D for?	Percentage
Less than a month	1.5%
One month to six months	7.4%
Six months to a year	9.5%
A year to two years	20.9%
Two to five years	26.5%
More than five years, but less than a decade	12.1%
More than a decade	22.0%
Total	99.9%
Missing	0.1%

Challenges

Trolls and the perils of being a woman conducting research

It is not that I did not expect troll responses to my survey. That would be naïve for someone researching the harassment of women in fandom. However, the number of nasty responses and the degree to which they affected me took me by surprise. I was prepared for harassment on the Facebook post where I shared the link to my survey, but I did not think that anyone would take the time to complete the survey just to call me rude names. It just seemed like too much work. However, I saved 201 responses that were obviously designed to insult me or make me feel uncomfortable. It is a tiny percentage when we consider the overall number of responses to individual questions or total survey responses. I strongly believe this number would have been much higher if I had chosen different platforms for sharing my survey or if it had been online longer (the potential to attract a swarm of angry bullies goading each other on increases as time goes on). I initially shared the Facebook post in a group full of women that frequently promote feminist values and many of them shared it onwards to groups with similar values. If I had attracted the same level of attention (more than 7600 shares) on Reddit, then I believe it would have appeared on the radar of toxic subreddits. These subreddits habitually “brigade” targets - which is where a group rally together specifically to harass someone or a specific subreddit. Such practices, along with doxing, underpin toxic social movements such as *#Gamergate*. It is not that I expected that level of attention by any means, but I was keenly aware of the potential dangers of being a woman conducting research on gender online.

The unpleasant comments were generally left in response to question 29, which was where I invited any other comments that the respondent felt were important. Whilst many chose to leave helpful and insightful replies, others took the opportunity to insult me and my research. Initially, I found the comments amusing – it struck me as humorous that I had managed to make someone so angry that they had wasted their time leaving an asinine comment. How could an invisible internet person hurt my feelings? They did not know me. There was no substance to the insult. But they wore me down. The comments wormed into my consciousness and played off insecurities I already had.

Based on the wording of this quiz I highly suspect the writer is far too bias by their own agenda to objectively study gaming culture. I fear you will not be able to see the forest because of all the trees.¹⁷

“Enough of this horseshit. It has zero bearing on a survey about d&d¹⁸

I think the very concept of gender identity is absolutely retarded and I have an extraordinarily low opinion of people who push this bullshit on a daily basis as if it isn't indocative of mental illness.¹⁹

Fuck you some more, and your daddy issues.²⁰

Important is that your PhD is worth shit because social justice and gender studies ain't a real thing. 2 genders. Since humankind exists. Only 2 of them. Go fuck a peanut you stupid ass hoe. Fucking snowflakes like you disgust me ugly looking motherfucking cunt²¹

“I didn't realise how much sjw propaganda they feed you in uni²²

I hope your not using the medium of DnD to make broad generalizations of gender perception. That seems like a ludicrous paper. Welders make 70,000 dollars and have plenty of free time mate.²³

If you're going to make a survey how about you dont target people with these stupid fucking gender studies. Idiot I hope you fail at getting your PHD.²⁴

“The standards for PHD research appear to be waning quite a bit.²⁵

Yes this is sounding more and more like a genders studies paper ! If so change feilds as it is only going to lead to Maca's or being a gender studies teacher !²⁶

It was intriguing to be described as a “social justice warrior.” It was alarming and disturbing to be described as a “cunt.” The criticisms of the quality of my research and the validity of a PhD with a focus on gender landed solidly. They hooked onto insecurities I already held and reflected comments I had faced from people in my daily life. Despite this, I was able to shake

¹⁷ Ppt 16141

¹⁸ Ppt 39678

¹⁹ Ppt 41094

²⁰ Ppt 11689

²¹ Ppt 32846

²² Ppt 5408

²³ Ppt 12422

²⁴ Ppt 40884

²⁵ Ppt 22032

²⁶ Ppt 4035

them off and they did not upset me greatly. The negativity was exhausting but I was so lucky that it was offset by so many kind and positive responses to my survey. I cannot imagine how I would have managed a greater number of cruel responses.

There was one response that did hurt me.

It's very obvious what bent the survey has. Go kill yourself.²⁷

When I read the words “Go kill yourself”, I felt shaken... breathless. In Australia, the leading cause of death for those aged 15 to 44 is suicide (Black Dog Institute, 2021). The National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (2007) found that 13% of Australians (aged 16-85) had experienced serious suicidal ideation, 4% had made a suicide plan, and 3.3% had attempted suicide (AIHW, 2020). Suicidal ideation is something I have battled as part of my mental health. This comment hit hard at a gap in my defences. It came at a terrible time – I was trying to support my best friend and my partner after a suicide in their workplace. It was all too much that day and I had to take a break. I managed to get back to the results after a pep talk from my partner, but the experience left a bitter taste in my mouth.

I was lucky. I had support. These nasty comments are dangerous. I was not prepared for how they would affect me. I would approach reading survey results with more caution in future – especially where there is the potential for trolls. I had to complete extensive ethics approval to ensure for research participants and their emotional safety. Where were the mechanisms to protect me? Or at least make sure I was informed about the risks inherent in online research? As a postgraduate student conducting my first survey research, I was horribly naïve. I did not know enough to know that I did not know about online safety. I think that all PhD students conducting participant-based research should be educated on keeping themselves emotionally safe throughout the process.

Joke Replies

I was surprised (and part of me was a little saddened) by the low number of joking replies. Perhaps the length of the survey put respondents off because it would be too much effort to go through the entire process to agitate and circumvent a research project. The occasional joke answers added light and texture to the research analysis:

²⁷ Ppt 23255

My name is Yoshikage Kira. I'm 65+ years old. My house is in the northeast section of Morioh, where all the villas are, and I am not married. I work as an employee for the Kame Yu department stores, and I get home every day by 8 PM at the latest. I don't smoke, but I occasionally drink. I'm in bed by 11 PM, and make sure I get eight hours of sleep, no matter what. After having a glass of warm milk and doing about twenty minutes of stretches before going to bed, I usually have no problems sleeping until morning. Just like a baby, I wake up without any fatigue or stress in the morning. I was told there were no issues at my last check-up. I'm trying to explain that I'm a person who wishes to live a very quiet life. I take care not to trouble myself with any enemies, like winning and losing, that would cause me to lose sleep at night. That is how I deal with society, and I know that is what brings me happiness. Although, if I were to fight I wouldn't lose to anyone.²⁸

Thousands of results into the analysis I hit upon it – and in my fatigued state I thought it might be legitimate. By the third sentence, I realized there was something odd emerging through this testimony. I had a suspicion that it was something from *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, which is a manga and anime that I have never seen but the humour is oddly distinctive. I was correct and it was a monologue by an antagonist that featured in the show.

This might seem inconsequential, but it raised an important question for me in how I was approaching the survey results. How should I manage responses that seem non-genuine or unreliable? I expected part of the data analysis process to include rooting out obvious joke responses, but I did not delete a single survey. Even the surveys where nasty comments made an appearance were included. I felt secure that with the large volume of data I had they would not skew any quantitative analysis. I also felt uncomfortable with starting down the slippery slope of removing survey replies that I did not like. For the sake of preserving the integrity of the survey, I decided to limit how I interfered with the replies to as previously described. I chose to trust that the rest of the replies on that survey (and all the surveys with even a single troll answer) were valid data.

²⁸ 11074

Cultural considerations

I was incredibly surprised by answers that were not in English because it seems a little odd to complete a survey in a language other than the one the questions are in. I decided I would have to struggle through with a Googled translation for these responses.

Verlegen persoon die een manier vind om zijn eigen te tonen.²⁹

Sonaba entretenido³⁰

Porque da perspectiva. Amplia el horizonte, textura y sabor de la experiencia.³¹

There was also a need to be flexible in how I read the replies because there were slightly confusing statements. For example:

I like playing as a woman who can lick monster butt as well as the guys.³²

I decided that the “Lick” was probably a typo and the person meant to type “kick”. By the time I had finished data analysis I became skilled at deriving meaning despite unclear grammar, spelling, and other issues. Or at least I *felt* I was. Any interpretation is fallible. I must therefore acknowledge that I have done my best to discern the *most likely* meaning but there is the potential someone else could read the quotes and draw different conclusions. To minimise any error or reliability issues created by this, I have relied on the sheer number of data points to reduce the chance of misunderstanding overall trends. Whilst it might be likely I could misunderstand the intent of a single response, when it aligns with a trend of thousands of responses, I feel comfortable that error is minimised.

There were respondents who used the final question as an opportunity to apologise for their language skills. Most replies were riddled with typos and spelling mistakes anyway, so it was hardly unique to those whose first language is not English.

English is not my first language so sorry for any errors!³³

²⁹ 12967

³⁰ 21933

³¹ 3070

³² 13775

³³ 38355

English is not my first language, so hopefully the answers make sense :)³⁴

(sorry if some of the comments are badly written, English is not my first language)³⁵

Sorry my English is so messy. I'm from Mexico and it's been a long time since I last practised.³⁶

The issue I see arising from language differences is the use of colloquialisms or the more nuanced cultural meaning attached to words. I am concerned that “nerd” might conjure different stereotypes or stigma.

Totally OK. I don't understand the question. Is there some thought about nerds being ashamed? I don't believe that in Finland the general population would have an aggressive attitude against us.³⁷

I think in the US it's kinda widespread and it's grown more inclusive that it seems more diversified nowadays, so maybe the fat nerd in basement cliché is still the main thing on people's minds, maybe not. In France where I'm from people don't know the game so well so yeah definitely the idea of the nerd might still be more present, but somehow still coming from the US thing? [...]³⁸

I am a Brazilian woman, and I feel the culture in my country surrounding D&D is quite different from the American experience. The basic materials for play are extremely inaccessible here, most people only know it from brief mentions in American TV shows. All of that definitely influences the profile of the D&D players.³⁹

[...] I think you might have asked where your respondents are from, since you might get different answers in the US than the UK or South Africa. (I'm American and have a friend who plays D&D in South Africa. In fact, I'll try forwarding this to her).⁴⁰

Country: Finland, Denmark and Norway. The roleplaying cultures vary a lot depending on the country, and controlling for this would have been an excellent idea.⁴¹

³⁴ 14792

³⁵ 34750

³⁶ 4942

³⁷ 1096

³⁸ 14620

³⁹ 40878

⁴⁰ 17307

⁴¹ 15044

I feel this survey is very much meant for people from the US. As a player from another country and, in some regards, different culture some questions doesn't really apply.⁴²

I feel your questionnaire is way too founded in the "American" gender orientation. As a European I don't feel that the separation between male and female as your questionnaire suggests⁴³

There are also differences in attitudes towards gender in distinct nations, as confirmed by the testimony from the European respondent. I recognized this commentary and address this variability when it arises within my discussion of results. Future research into relationship between a country's gender attitudes/equality/perceptions and roleplaying would be potentially valuable.

Gaps in the survey

I did not ask about location or racial identity questions as part of the demographic questions. This was part of my desire to reduce the bloat of questions in the survey. I had to draw lines somewhere. Anything that I did not intend to explicitly address in the thesis was not part of the survey. It seemed rude to ask for people to take the time to complete questions and reveal information about themselves that I would not discuss meaningfully. However, in hindsight, I think it would have been beneficial to have asked about sexuality and race in the demographics. In a way, the demographic section of a survey is an opportunity for the respondent to declare important/relevant aspects of their identity. By not including sexuality and race I potentially sent the message that I did not consider them significant aspects of identity. Whilst this was not my intent, it speaks of white and straight privilege that I felt they could be set aside or left out of the discussion. Any future discussion of sexuality using the data is only possible because of the topic's inclusion in the textbox responses. Real-life race remains absent from this research.

This quiz touched on gender and inclusion of women, but it didn't touch on sexuality at all. I'd like to give a shout out to my current DM, who specifically includes LGBT characters in every campaign. As well, all NPCs are assumed to be bisexual so if a player character wants to romance them, gender isn't a factor, but alignment, personality, and other stuff still are.⁴⁴

⁴² 8973

⁴³ 38415

⁴⁴ 7576

I'm curious why you didn't include the subject of race as part of these questions. It's true that women and nonbinary people are excluded from average D&D spaces – don't I know it – but that's also true of people of color, perhaps even more so nowadays. Maybe that's not the focus of your thesis, but I'd highly recommend at least including a few things about that! I speak as a white person, so what do I know, but I've seen far more nonbinary and female voices in D&D than POC voices.⁴⁵

I'm speaking as a white person (I noticed race wasn't yet asked for - perhaps there's a further demographic survey coming?) I know the experiences of Black and brown people at white-dominant tables is very different, and there are a lot of colonial undertones throughout D&D, that I'm unable to address in my comments. (I know this from following prominent POC players and writers for Wizards of the Coast). I believe it is worth considering, and would highly recommend looking at comments from @DungeonCommandr on Twitter (Orion, a non-binary Black narrative designer for WoC).⁴⁶

Whilst I did try to be as inclusive as possible with the gender options, upon reflection I would add more choices. I saw the “Other (please specify)” option to ensure nobody was left out, but there were respondents who felt that it still lacked nuance.

As a transmasculine nonbinary person, it'd be nice to be able to tick more than one box for the gender question! I figure it's a multiple choice so you can do data analysis, (I've run studies like this myself) and it's a small qualm, but I hope you don't mind my mentioning it.⁴⁷

It might be helpful for your grouping of data to give a little more detail on my gender identity. I'm assigned female and perceived that way socially. I don't seem to have much internal feeling of gender (there isn't any gender that feels particularly right or wrong), but I've grown up socialized as a woman.⁴⁸

I, ignorantly, expected that transgender respondents would not want to include that they are trans. My assumption resulted in the decentring of transgender identity – which can be an important and prominent aspect for sense of self.

(first I suggest that this Q might want to be updated to say "to make women/trans/nonbinary/genderfluid people" because women are not the only marginalized gender in D&D) I play in my own home or that of my brother-in-law's, so we're all comfortable with each other already.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ 43951

⁴⁶ 9667

⁴⁷ 41535

⁴⁸ 21246

⁴⁹ 42103

In the spaces for open responses, many participants took the time to specify that they were speaking as a trans person – highlighting how important they felt it was to their experiences. Martino & Cumming-Potvin (2018, p. 688) state there is a need to create spaces for the perspectives of “transgender, genderqueer and non-binary people” to be articulated in ways that allow for their diversity to be acknowledged. I did not provide options or space for non-cisgender men and women participants to speak to their unique experiences regarding gender and D&D. Trans experiences and roleplaying turned out to be a massively important theme. I regret not including more options under gender identity. Rather than being inclusive, I ended up othering anyone who did not fit into the four options I listed (one of which was “Would rather not say”). I am grateful that thousands of trans respondents took the time to share their experiences despite this error. Before conducting any future research, I need to educate myself more on inclusive and respectful demographic questions.

There are gaps in the data where I could have captured demographics more accurately or appropriately without needing additional questions. For example, question three asked how long respondents had been playing D&D for. I offered small brackets for the newer players, but I grouped together those who had been playing 5 to 10 years and then only provided an option for “More than a decade” for everyone else. There were players who took the time to clarify how long they had been playing in later questions and query the broad grouping.

Considering how long D&D has been around I'm kind of shocked that the highest answer to #3 was "More than a Decade." It lumps over Three decades of players together.⁵⁰

Providing an “Other” option where they could type a response, would have been simpler and potentially avoided any offense I may have caused.

I think that the edition of D&D may have an impact on the answers you receive. There's a different approach to how you think about a character when it's a 1st edition character who you roll up randomly, takes five minutes to create, and can die quickly, vs a 5th edition character who you build in detail, can take an hour to create, and is much harder to kill. I liken early edition characters to discovery writing,

⁵⁰ 42866

where you learn who they are through play, and 3rd - 5th edition characters as character concepts you bring to life. [...] ⁵¹

[...] I'd also ask people which rule systems they have played with. I'd argue that a better measurement of experience than number of years playing. ⁵²

A theme emerged of edition being a more important way to measure experience than simply the number of years. Whilst I do not think it would be a better measure, I think it would have been a valuable point for comparison. The experiences of someone who has been playing only 2nd edition D&D for the past twenty years would be quite different from someone who has tried all the editions released over the same timeframe. There is the risk that asking people which editions they had played would have come across like gatekeeping or as though I was 'checking their nerd cred'. Questions 14 and 15 asked about D&D's history and there was an abundance of feedback from respondents who felt uncomfortable with the gatekeeping-like framing.

I know this is for survey soundness, but phrasing it like this in a study about gatekeeping and exclusionary behaviors is real shitty. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. ⁵³ Referring to q14

LOL, Gatekeeping question? JK Gary Gygax, David Arneson, Zeb Cook, Larry Elmore, Jeff Easley, Tony DiTerlizi, I know I spelled that wrong. Clyde Caldwell, The Hickmans ⁵⁴ Referring to q14

I also failed to ask about players taking hiatuses from D&D and then returning.

[...] Can I use this space to say that you need more poll options for older folk who played when they were young and then picked the game back up after of a hiatus of about twenty years or so? ⁵⁵

In the how long have you played question, you do not address a large population of people who played DND as kids and then picked it back up as adults. ⁵⁶

Whilst I can discuss this from a qualitative perspective, it would have been illuminating to also measure it quantitatively. There is the potential that the length of time played results are

⁵¹ 35345

⁵² 8604

⁵³ 1865

⁵⁴ 26534

⁵⁵ Ppt 25972

⁵⁶ 40135

skewed because there is no way to discriminate between players who have played consistently for 30 years and those who played a couple of times 30 years ago before returning recently. There is a vast difference between those experiences, but they are grouped together if the respondent did not provide a clarifying comment in one of their text responses.

Criticism from participants

I received a significant amount of feedback about the survey's focus on D&D rather than RPGs in general. I specifically chose to focus in on *Dungeons & Dragons* to narrow down the experiences to a single game because there is such variety. Roleplaying experiences with *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s dark themes, focus on storytelling, and tendency towards adult themes would be incredibly different to D&D's (generally) more light-hearted hack and slash.

D&D and RPGs are terms often used interchangeably. It's worth noting that there are hundreds of different RPG systems other than D&D. I was unsure completing this survey if you meant RPGs in general, or specifically meant the D&D system. It's similar to referring to any movie as "A Star Wars".⁵⁷

Dungeons and dragons is only one out of like a million games in a category called table top role playing games, its generally just the most widely known. Please keep in mind that some people may respond disproportionately when saying when they last played specifically Dnd or last played and TTRPG. Like I don't play DnD much anymore but I am playing in a TTRPG almost weekly.⁵⁸

I used D&D as a catchall. I've played 20+ systems since the middle 90s.⁵⁹

There are a vast number of other RPG systems out there. The groups for those are as valid for this research as D&D players. I mentioned Pathfinder above, which is D&D 3.5 edition under licence to Paizo... it's so close to D&D we refer to it as D&D. [...] Including only D&D is sort of like doing research on fizzy drinks but only including Coca-cola: it's huge but not only are there other forms of cola but other fizzy drinks that aren't even that cola like!⁶⁰

Whilst reading the responses, it became apparent that people often grouped together all RPGs they had played under the umbrella of D&D or generalised their experiences. I was very

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deliberate in using “D&D” in all the questions and in describing the survey initially. I did not expect there to be any confusion, and beyond putting an explicit disclaimer at the start, I am not sure what else I could have done. I do not feel that it has had a significant impact on the validity of the responses but mentions of other games are significant.

Whilst acknowledging what I left out of my survey, I feel like it is important to also recognise the complaints about the length. I might have pushed the goodwill of some respondents. I cannot rely on the number of completed and incomplete surveys total from SurveyMonkey because there were “complete” surveys were marked “incomplete” where questions were skipped. It would be interesting to find out the number that did not submit their survey.

I'm a-gonna skip this one, the questionnaire was supposed to take 10 min...⁶¹ *In reference to Q15*

You're not paying me enough to write an entire essay. [...] ⁶²

Man, I'm not typing all of that. You think you can read and meaningfully interpret all these non-quantifiable results? For a question like this, you're not testing D&D knowledge; you're testing our patience.⁶³ *In reference to Q15*

[...] Word of advice, in survey design, participants will often feel mental fatigue if you have so many open ended questions. [...] ⁶⁴

Your questionnaire is too long. Respondents are likely to suffer from survey fatigue. I would have suggested a multi-part design. Short survey and focus groups or interviews. Your demographic items are not extensive enough. You do not have any items related to race/ethnicity. Perhaps include education item. Very cool subject of study though!⁶⁵

Originally, I had expected to conduct additional modes of research beyond the survey, but I changed my plan after receiving so many survey responses. The pandemic would have made in-person methods impossible/challenging so I was fortunate not to need these other avenues of research. Analysing the survey responses took far longer than I initially

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⁶³ 13383

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anticipated. This was the generosity of participants - I did not expect such lengthy and rich responses to so many of the questions. I thought people would write short sentences and then the themes of their responses would be focus points for other modes of investigation. With the benefit of hindsight, I would have made the survey shorter and more focused. This would have been more time-friendly for participants and resulted in more carefully curated data.

Breaches of anonymity

In writing about family members, partners, colleagues, and organisations it is not always possible to disguise identities. As such, there needs to be careful deliberation about consequences of these exposures, and sometimes “not appearing in a text or performance is the best solution” (Tullis, 2014, p. 251). Tullis (2014, p. 256) suggests considering: “Do you have the right to write about others without their consent? What effect do these stories have on individuals and your relationship with them? How much detail and which difficulties, traumas, or challenges are necessary to include to successfully articulate the story’s moral or goal?”. It is also important to consider who those involved might feel about the memory being shared, because they may not agree with the researcher’s interpretation. Ettorre (2016, p. 16) states “I am answerable to others in my story”. There are consequences and responsibilities inherent in including others in research and writing. For every event “each subject has differing vantage points framing his or her memories” (Giorgio, 2013, p. 411). There is the potential to misrepresent “what is going on for significant others” (Ettorre, 2016, p. 46). The conflict between “stories doesn’t many of them disappear, doesn’t make any of them less important to understand” (Gingrich-Philbrook, 2013, p. 614). That is not to suggest that researchers should not be able share their perspective of events, but that there might be conflict or disagreement over the version included in research. To mitigate this, researchers might consider allowing participants (or those in the memory) to review what is written before it is published. Tweaks or alterations might be agreed upon that suit both parties (or could be unnecessary), but the decision of whether to include the memory/story/anecdote falls to the researcher (whilst bearing ethics in mind). It is possible to preserve the meaning of stories, whilst “protecting those we write about” (Giorgio, 2013, p. 414). Ettorre (2016, p. 100) suggests that at minimum there is an ethical responsibility to present people “in the

most humane ways possible”, which can be incredibly difficult. I have kept my stories intentionally very vague about when they occurred to avoid identification.

Anonymity is critical to the ethics approval I received for this research. It is crucial to research into sensitive topics. At the beginning of the survey, I said that the survey was completely anonymous, and I did not ask anywhere for names or contact details. I even deleted the IP Address information that SurveyMonkey collected (that I was unaware of) just to be extra safe in my assurance of anonymity. However, there were respondents who decided to breach their anonymity and offer their contact details.

contact me if you need more! REDACTED#1855 discord <---- and good Luck!⁶⁶

REDACTED@gmail.com I am willing help with other D&D related pieces if i can.⁶⁷

I know it's supposed to be anonymous, but if you have any further questions, feel free to contact me.

REDACTED@REDACTED.com⁶⁸

[...] If you need someone to interview or would like to ask further questions here's my phone number:

REDACTED – Claudia⁶⁹

Good luck in your studies! Contact me, REDACTED, at REDACTED@hotmail.com if you would like any more information or need to connect with players or DM's. I will be opening up a professional DM'ing service in Adelaide very soon (website is nearly complete) and will have access to many players (both veteran and new).⁷⁰

The last breach felt particularly problematic because it was by someone who is establishing a business locally to me. In a small city like Adelaide (and small D&D community) it is likely we would cross paths eventually. Due to the way I analysed the responses (question by question rather than surveys as a whole), their identity was not linked to any of their answers. I could link their identity to their answers through their unique case number, but I have obviously chosen not to. As these personal details were offered freely and with the knowledge that their answers would be connected to their identity, I do not think there is an issue with keeping

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⁷⁰ 204

their surveys part of the collected data. I have not and will not be using any of the contact details offered because I think it would be a breach of ethics and inappropriate. This is a shame because there might have been interesting interview candidates if they had just emailed me instead.

For example:

“You'll find a clues to my identity in the answers to Questions 10, and 15. Feel free to contact me. :)”⁷¹

Their answers suggested that they were a long-time publisher of RPGs, but I decided not to investigate further exactly who it was. This was 99.9% to protect their anonymity and 0.1% so I would not be disappointed if it were someone who I would desperately want to interview but would not be able to contact. It seemed like a ‘fruit of the poison tree’ situation if I then reached out to them.

⁷¹ 39074

Chapter 2 - Rolling a History Check on *Dungeons & Dragons*

Introduction

The history of Dungeons & Dragons is a chronological narrative that has been constructed, taken apart, and reassembled over decades. It has also been commodified. Sources vary from newspaper articles, academic studies, official books, and even graphic novels. At this point, the individuals who were present when D&D was created are unable to tell us accurately what happened due to death, personal biases, and the passage of time rendering them unreliable narrators. This has allowed a multiplicity of history(ies) to flourish and grow. There are consistent themes within these narratives, but there are also places where stories divert or waiver from the popular tales. History is used as a tool for inclusion and exclusion, drawing a line between those deemed to have been present and those absent. For this purpose, the facts of D&D's history are less relevant than what is believed to be true.

This chapter focuses on the history of D&D as understood by fans and fandom rather than a retelling of the events from empowered sources. The multiplicity of history is approached through the creation of fandom myths and legends, including false tales that persist. History's personal nature is broached through the different eras that survey respondents split D&D's history into. How women are represented in D&D's history and the continued struggle for control over the uglier aspects of the past are also discussed. In reconstructing D&D's history, there is a reliance on the interviews taken at the time and all various retellings since to build a picture of the events due to the absence of reliable narrators. Brabazon and Redhead (2013, p. 32) wrote that, "Historians have access to representations of the past, not the past". One player, who has started in the 1980s with AD&D, said in their response to my survey:

["You never know what's real. It was all verbal lore until the days of the internet"](#)¹

This respondent admitted their knowledge of history was built from

["The word-of-mouth stuff"](#)².

Each time D&D's history is repeated a layer of inaccuracy, bias, agenda, and other such sources of distortion is added. Our "creative misrememberings" increasingly pile up with

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every successive recall of events (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 305). As memories are shared, affirmation and confirmation are sought that the offered version is accurate or correct. This verification is not just conducted by the audience who might be checking the veracity, but for the one who puts forth their memory or version of events. No memory can be confirmed with certainty and so “to remember at best credits a thing as probable” (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 312). Despite this, there is often a desire to have memories authenticated or corroborated as *the* truth because it increases the sharer’s credibility. In recounting memories, the storyteller may emphasise aspects over others or try to obscure details to serve an agenda or protect those involved in the events (or the sharer) from judgement. The very act of recounting or recording a memory deforms it and to imbue events with meaning some aspects must be forgotten (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 320). When journalists or historians present history as a “large, sweeping narrative” it can oversimplify the past and “fall into a celebratory narrative of progress” (Kocurek, 2020, p. 6). The creation of a singular narrative can mask experiences of marginalised groups and those who are critical to our understanding but are outside the spotlight.

As time passes, history becomes a simulacrum because it loses its relationship with reality and creates its own “real”. History is “one of a series of discourses about the world” that gives it meaning but it is distinct from the past (K. Jenkins, 2003, pp. 6, 7). Past and history are two separate entities that “float free of each other” (K. Jenkins, 2003, p. 6). The history is “that which has been written/recorded about the past”, it is the vehicle through which history comes to us as stories (K. Jenkins, 2003, pp. 7, 11). These stories about the past are accepted into history and begin to constitute reality. Versions of the history are “a product that is shaped ideologically and politically” (Brabazon & Redhead, 2013, p. 32). Our present is filtered through our past experiences, and used to make sense of the current. We can understand features and patterns because “we share their history” and every object “is made intelligible by previous encounters, tales heard, texts read, pictures seen” (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 86). The constructed past – or “an artefact that symbolises” it – is simplified and given stability (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 443). The past is “reshaped by today”, forged with “modern tools” and “its strangeness domesticated” (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 4). K. Jenkins (2003, p. 15) wrote “we in a way know more about the past than the people who lived in it”. With these techniques of “taxidermy” we make the past more lively after its death than it ever was before

(Lowenthal, 2015, p. 5). Baudrillard describes the successive phases of an image: from reflection of a profound reality, masking and denaturing a profound reality, masking the absence of a profound reality, having no relation to reality whatsoever, and being its own pure simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 4). This is a process that histories go through in their successive retellings until the history has no relationship to what really happened and becomes its own entity. Tropes and rhetoric devices of storytelling are also introduced. These are useful shortcuts in stories, but it means that retellings of history are influenced by all the stories that have come before and the associations we have with these tropes.

Performances of the past as history creates a multiplicity of histories. For example, interpreting events differently for varied audiences such as children compared to adults. Through the process of creating a version of history that is suitable for children, there are changes to what is recounted and thus a different performance of the history. The way that a history is told can give preference to ideas over others and thus alter the history. For example, stressing certain events over others or enthusiasm with which the stories are told. These continual performances and interpretations deny history a “fixed or closed meaning” because it is subject to “the continuous interpretations of situated (ideologically, spatially, temporally) actor-networks who engage with it and read into it with their interests at hand” (Durepos & Mills, 2011, p. 714). Histories gain legitimacy and is successful as it “enrols other actors into accepting the story it tells of the past” (Durepos & Mills, 2011, p. 714). A dominant version of history becomes a rolling boulder, gaining momentum until it becomes unstoppable.

Lowenthal (2015, p. 337) wrote that history cannot be checked against the past because it no longer exists, so the truth of events is judged by how reports correspond with each other and the events themselves. Historians select not “from the totality of what has happened” but from accounts of what happened (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 337). In this chapter I have taken how reports do and do not correspond to learn about popular and unpopular versions of D&D’s history.

Keith Jenkins (2003, p. 9) describes the process of a student who studies history using primarily one source to gain a “qualification for considering aspects of ‘the past’”. What the student ends up with is an understanding of that source’s reading of the past and their interpretation of history specifically (K. Jenkins, 2003, p. 9). Where one narrative dominates,

there becomes one version of history that is generally accepted. Around this main narrative, there are still other versions that might vary slightly or might be radically distinct due to the use of different 'evidence' or interpreting it differently. Evidence is here used to describe the traces of history that are used to support an argument. For example, a group's agenda might influence their interpretation of events and thus create a different narrative. This can be true for the mainstream narrative which can often serve to maintain a hegemonic status but can also lead to radical fringe histories. It is vital to consider the agenda of a history and to look beyond the dominant narrative.

Keith Jenkins (2003, p. 21) encouraged the question "who is history for?". I, therefore, am led to ask: "who is D&D's history for?". K. Jenkins (2003, p. 22) then reinforces this idea with Orwell's idea that "those who control the present control the past and those who control the past control the future". By controlling the identities of those who were involved with D&D in the past, there can be a legitimisation of exclusion in the future. Those who would refuse women a seat at the D&D table and in the fandom can call up the past exclusion as a justification. They can rely on the tired rhetoric that that is just the way it has always been - D&D has always been for men, women are an anomaly. It bolsters their sense of ownership over D&D and the spaces where it is played, supporting the exclusion of those who are supposedly "new". Women have been "systematically excluded from most historians' accounts" of world history, but feminists have been working to write women back into history (K. Jenkins, 2003, p. 10). Where we "destabilise the past and fracture it" cracks form and there "new histories can be made" (K. Jenkins, 2003, p. 79). My interaction with D&D's history follows this mission to find history's hidden women and make them visible.

The Histories of D&D

Hindsight shifts the focus and frame of our memories, moulding them to current needs or emphasising what now seems important but might have been deemed inconsequential at the time (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 321). According to Lowenthal (2015, p. 340), “history informed by hindsight not only adds to what could be known at the time, it makes the reconstructed past more comprehensible than when it happened”. In the retellings of D&D’s history, multiple sources are used, and there is more information available to use than when the events were occurring. It is possible to take an event in D&D’s history and combine Gygax’s perspective with Arneson’s, Mary Jo Gygax’s, Lorraine William’s, the Blumes’, and anyone else who is willing to give an interview or ever shared their memories of events. When the events were being lived, each person was limited to just their own perspective. We create a version of history that is realer than real, it is hyperreal and a simulation.

Recalling the past is filtered through “present-day mental lenses” and this can alter or reinterpret events (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 339). Explaining the past in the present requires taking into account what has happened since the time in question and the unfolding consequences (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 340). Lowenthal (2015, p. 127) confirmed that “the past has new consequences for each successive generation and so must be endlessly reinterpreted”. Popular culture’s relationship with D&D has changed over the past couple of decades. The game has gone from being condemned for satanic themes, to being scoffed at as a game for basement-dwelling nerds, to now being popular in the mainstream. It therefore makes sense that what we need from D&D’s history has changed. Gary Gygax now needs to be a hero palatable for the mass audiences – someone we can praise for his hard work, idolise for his creations, and build statues too. Before, Gygax was just a fringe nerd who dedicated his life to silly pursuits such as wargaming and happened to create a moderately popular game. Arneson’s contributions are sidelined because we do not need him. It is far more convenient to worship at the feet of one man – Gygax. It also fits a cultural preference for stories where one person succeeds alone, against all odds, relying only on their own skills and abilities. There is a multiplicity of histories around D&D’s creation and subsequent lifetime – each shaped or reshaped to suit shifting needs, changing agendas, and the passage of time.

From the survey results it seems that women have a different relationship with the history of D&D than men. Women most frequently replied that they were “Not sure” (43.7%) where they got their information about D&D’s history, and this was followed by discussions with friends (35.7%). Men had much higher percentages for their responses; they reported using information from *Wizards of the Coast* (66.4%), books (64.9%), and internet articles (63.6%). They also had a high percentage for “Not Sure” at 43.7% which was the same as for women. Men’s categories overall were higher and more varied in their selections. This seems to suggest that men are more likely to seek out information on D&D’s history and use a variety of sources to do so. It could be that men are more confident reporting their knowledge about D&D’s history, or that there are differences in how people consider what constitutes history.

Myths & Legends

A splintering of history was present in the survey responses through the different interpretations of the question: “What do you know about D&D’s history?”. Not only are there the varying narratives of D&D’s creation history, but there are diverse ways to define history that I had not anticipated.

D&D’s lore describes not only the canon fiction that builds the game’s universe, but the legendary stories players share. One story that was referenced enough times to be notable was that of the ‘Dread Gazebo’.

Mostly vague things, infamous stories like "Gazebo".³

The Gazebo⁴

The gazebo story!⁵ (three identical responses)

The gazebo guys.⁶

Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson are the big names that come to mind, as well as Ed Whitchurch and Eric Sorenson. Is there anyone that plays that doesn't know the story of the Dread Gazebo?⁷

³ 42108

⁴ 32073

⁵ 41690

⁶ 7083

⁷ 32839

[...] um...The Gazebo was a popular meme at some point (late 90's..?) [...].⁸

Not a whole lot, but I do love the gazebo story that inspired the monster in Munchkin⁹

[...] But I've wanted to play since I was little (maybe six?) and I heard that story about an adventurer trying to hail a gazebo.¹⁰

The Tale of Old Man Henderson, PunPun, and the Dread Gazebo¹¹

From memes of Sir Bearington to Gazebos. A lot.¹²

This is a story that I am familiar with from a meme that circulated some years ago. It was intriguing that it is mentioned in responses. It can be summarised as a player not knowing what a gazebo is and approaching the inanimate object as though it were a monster. It is a classic tale of hilariously ignorant player and long-suffering but patient DM. Aronson acknowledges that whilst it was originally based on events at a game, “the addition of several jokes moves it out of journalism” (Aronson, 2008). The story became infamous after Lee Gold insisted on its inclusion in the fanzine “Alarums & Excursions” (A&E) in 1986, and from there went on to be published in other places and eventually ended up online (Aronson, 2008). The Dread Gazebo encounter reportedly happened in the early 1970’s and is still being told roughly fifty years later (D&D started in 1974, so it is more likely to be mid to late 1970’s) (Aronson, 2008). In my experience, most D&D players will have their own legends and stories to share from their games in addition to these more mainstream, well-known, memeified tales. One of mine involves summoning an illusionary dragon as a player and almost causing a TPK (total party kill). Sitting around sharing these tales forms an oral tradition for D&D players, where personal histories are shared. Tales can transcend individual groups and take on a broader shared history. The *Dread Gazebo* is an example of a tale that is now part of the history of D&D’s community and sharing it is part of sharing the history of the game.

Knowledge of these stories can help players feel part of the larger community and connected to a personal side of D&D’s history. It is important for women to have stories that they can see themselves reflected in and connect to as part of D&D’s history. I am not saying

⁸ 817

⁹ 29731

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¹¹ 11996

¹² 31466

that women cannot relate to stories about men, just that the stories should not *all* be about men. Diversity at the table is normalised when it is reflected in the community's legends.

Legend of Gygax 'Cheating' on His Wife

The idea – the narrative - that Gygax's wife thought he was cheating on her when he was making D&D summoned a myriad of responses.

That dude whose wife thought he was cheating on her.¹³

D&D history? Yikes. I think the guy's name was Gary. His wife thought he was cheating but he and his other friends were creating what would become the game. That's the extent of people that I know from D&D history¹⁴

I saw a meme where the creator's wife thought he was cheating and found out he was making the game in a friends basement. [...]¹⁵.

Ummmm, I'm not really knowledgeable in the history aspect. I know the one of the guys involved in inventing it got in some hot water because his wife thought his late nights out meant he was cheating on her but nope, he was playing proto-DnD.¹⁶

This seems to be a popular misconception – historical accounts do seem to suggest that Gygax cheated on his wife when he was partying in Hollywood, but not at the time when he was making the game in his basement. It is not a legend I had heard before I started reading the survey responses. It resonates with people as true because it includes familiar tropes. It has the archetypical jealous wife and the innocent nerd who is suspected of something naughty but is being oblivious and doing something boring instead. These are sexist and heteronormative tropes that are often echoed through popular culture stories for cheap laughs. I do not really understand why people think it is a funny story particularly, except the misunderstanding is slightly humorous as it has a happy ending? This is a misremembering of history that has turned into a community legend about D&D's creation.

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¹⁵ 22528

¹⁶ 39304

Personal Legends

The ability to create personal legends is an aspect that appeals to players. It is also one of my favourite components about playing D&D because I enjoy recounting the wild stuff that my friends and I have done. They are often outlandish stories that can have negative outcomes for the characters, but they are funny because nobody got hurt.

[...] Also the stories that come out of us playing.¹⁷

[...] The social aspect of it being a shared story lends itself to creating legends that continue for years and years to come.¹⁸

It's fun! I've done it a few times at a cafe and at Extra Life at my college. It's cool sharing stories anywhere from five minutes ago to over a year ago¹⁹

I've never played in public sessions` but sometimes we will have spectators who will listen in. Which is awesome` to be able to share our stories and have others be interested in them.²⁰

[...] Most players also enjoy sharing their campaign experiences with other D&D players, and if you find out an acquaintance plays, it's fun to swap stories with them.²¹

After playing with a group for a while, players can action a behaviour that becomes associated with their identity. When a new player joins it will be the story that is told to explain your approach, or the story that always starts with “Do you remember when Elisa did...”. My legends include the time I thought I would be clever and prevent an ice giant statue from animating (then killing us) by chopping its legs off. “How can a legless statue pose a threat? Plus, it’s just a statue so it’ll be funny” I thought to myself. Turns out I did not do enough damage to take the legs off. And it was not just a statue. The – now awake - ice giant attacked the group, almost killing us. From then on whenever we saw statues someone would ask me if I was going to chop the legs off to “keep us safe”.

Apparently, I also made it into a cautionary tale that my last DM now shares with other groups and on Discord servers when people are talking about the item ‘Bag of Holding’. A ‘Bag

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¹⁹ 18237

²⁰ 23456

²¹ 26419

of Holding' is like Mary Poppin's bag, it is small on the outside with a massive carrying capacity that is essentially an extradimensional space. It is a common item for adventurers to have because it solves issues around the quantity of treasure and equipment that can be carried. My group were at the final boss battle of a hardback adventure that we had been playing for months and we came up against enemies that pulled opponents into extradimensional pockets to fight. When the creature used its 'Extradimensional Chamber' power, one of my teammates was pulled into an extradimensional space. He helpfully asked, "oh, what happens to my Bag of Holding? Does it explode?" Turns out that it did. You cannot put a Bag of Holding into an extradimensional space. It opened a one-way gate to the Astral Plane, thus dragging the monsters and two other players along. The three players ended up dying in the Astral Plane, whilst the other two had to run away from the boss, and it was game over. A whole campaign failed because of an exploding bag.

Eras

When researching the history of D&D, the different editions were prominent time markers rather than years or creative directors or any people involved. That said, before this project I did not really know much about the history of D&D. I just cared about how the rules changed and so editions became the organising framework for my discussions. I expected to see this reflected in survey responses about D&D's history, but it seemed more common to define eras through notable people.

Early: Gary Gygax... that's the only name I can think of for certain, though the name Steve is rattling in my brain...? Recent: Matthew Mercer (and all the Critical Role cast, though Matt's the one writing in-canon books and the like); Matt Colville; and once again my mind has gone blank even though I follow a LOT of the current developers etc. on Twitter. Excuse my leaky brain.²²

Gary Gygax for original history, and figures like Matt Mercer and the rest of Critical Role or the McElroy family for much of the current cultural phenomena that has led to the game's resurgence²³

²² 874

²³ 30348

Gary Gygax is the main name I think of when I think of "history" involving D&D. As for the current history that's being written, I think of Chris Perkins, Critical Role, Satine Phoenix, Ivan Van Norman, Joe Manganiello, Acquisitions Incorporated, etc.²⁴

There were also interesting titles for the eras in responses that suggested that the individual had drawn boundaries in the timeline of D&D's history. I have put these titles in bold to draw attention to them.

I come from the **Gygaxian** era, [...] ²⁵

[...] I live in the age of the **DnD rebirth**, [...] ²⁶

[...] And of course, there's the modern resurgence of the celebrity geek; Matt Mercer and the cast of Critical Roll; Chris Perkins and Acquisitions, Inc.; and Matthew Colville (The Chain, Running the Game) all spring to mind as figureheads of the **popular renaissance**.²⁷

"Gygax and Arneson are the **classics**, [...] I think the **modern history** needs to include a lot of the modern performative groups [...] ²⁸

(**For old stuff**) Gary Gygax, Frank Mentzer (**For the "rebirth"**) the cast of different podcasts/twitch streams like critical role, adventure zone, and dungeons with friends as well as wizards of the coast and to some extent the Netflix original series Stranger Things²⁹

The idea of a classic period and then a modern or renaissance was pervasive in responses, and it seems that for many players D&D's history can be split in two. I am sure there would be differences in where/when this line is drawn, but it seems to be a useful scaffolding that players use to consider D&D's history.

Women & D&D's Histories

Women have been present throughout D&D's history, from the first playtesters, community leaders, and now popular celebrity players. They were not always made to feel welcome or even acknowledged. Part of this may be due to treatment of women in the

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²⁵ 7316

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²⁹ 16189

wargaming community that D&D sprung from, but it is also typical of sexist tendencies of the era D&D was developed in. Whilst women should not need to prove their historical involvement with D&D to justify their contemporary involvement, the women who were pioneers in the tabletop community deserve recognition and acknowledgement. To complete this chapter without mentioning them would be an injustice and would leave the history(ies) with massive gaps.

I don't think there is a need to do this. Women have played D&D since the beginning (Arneson's group and the first D&D playtests) without problems.³⁰

No, it's my understanding that DnD has always been extremely inclusive from friends who've been playing for 20 years. It's only been recently on social media that people are claiming that DnD isn't inclusive.³¹

D&D and the tabletop roleplaying game fandom's approach to history might be influenced by the genre it partially sprung from. *Lord of the Rings (LOTR)* established many of the tropes that the fantasy genre is built upon and remains a source of inspiration. Vossen (2020, p. 44) writes that because *LOTR* is such a heavy influence on fantasy and games such as D&D, it seems logical that they are influenced by "the complete absence of women and people of colour" in *LOTR*. An understanding of fantasy heavily informed by a text that has no female characters, leads to the creation of fantasy worlds that follow this tradition. The dominance of "white cis-heteropatriarchy" in geek and nerd culture cannot be attributed to a single cause, but is rather a "multitude of layering and compounding factors" (Vossen, 2020, p. 42). Vossen (2020, p. 52) describes gamers desire for "historical accuracy" as not being linked to history or fantasy as a genre, but to "an established male world without women, queerness, or people of colour". A history of D&D without women reinforces the perceived supremacy of men and their contributions to culture. Badenoch and Skoog (2019, p. 27) give the example of the archives of British television which are missing many of the daytime television programs that were aimed at women. This can be mostly attributed to the perception the shows lacked "cultural value" and therefore did not warrant preservation (Badenoch & Skoog, 2019, p. 27). The same is possible for accounts of early D&D history, where the contributions of women may not have been preserved or acknowledged because

³⁰ 9348

³¹ 1872

they were not seen as significant. The hidden nature of women's contribution was referred to by many respondents – some of whom could recognise there were women who were important but did not know their names.

[...] I read an interesting article about how women have been part of shaping and marketing the game all the way back to the beginning but I do not recall a single name [...]³²

Gary Gygax and his family. Several female writers were involved early on, but I'm blanking on their names³³

Well, Gary Gygax, of course. But how about Jean Wells, the author of the first module that was then pulled because they deemed her work too scandalous. Penny Williams is another. Darlene, the infamous artist and mapmaker. Slice Norton, Rose Estes....I could go on. Women are the reason D&D exists as it is today. And yet...³⁴

Jean Wells was one of the first two employees hired at TSR as internal design staff, and contributed writing to the first *Dungeon Master's Guide*, designed modules and wrote the 'Sage Advice' column in *The Dragon* magazine (J. Peterson, 2014).

I know a fair bit about the women involved, like Jean Wells, first woman hired by TSR and the original "Sage" of Sage's Advice. [...]³⁵

Wells' contributions to the *Dungeon Master's Guide* went uncredited (J. Peterson, 2014). Failure to properly credit women for their contributions further marginalises and obscures their role in the creation and development of D&D. A dismissive approach to women's work in the past, influences our ability to see or acknowledge the work now.

The most controversial module in D&D's history was written by a woman – *Palace of the Silver Princess* by Jean Wells. Wells was asked to write an introductory module in the early 80's and wrote an adventure based on her own character (Kelly, 2019). Due to its 'racy' nature at a time when TSR were trying to escape a negative public image, copies of the module are incredibly rare because it was immediately recalled and buried in landfill (Kelly, 2019). Not only did the module feature an image of a scantily clad woman tied up by her own hair, but it

³² 38190

³³ 44058

³⁴ 26783

³⁵ 3585

had caricatures of TSR management. The illustration is said to have “alluded to recent terminations and employee unrest” (McLauchlin, 2010). Bill Willingham who was an artist at TSR thought the module was “ridiculous” and had called it to the attention of the editorial department before its publishing. However, someone on the business side did not want to deal with backlash from his wife who played mahjong with Wells if he was found responsible for not publishing the module so it went ahead (McLauchlin, 2010). Apparently, the module also had the protection of Gygax who was a friend of Wells (McLauchlin, 2010). According to Lawrence Schick (TSR’s Head of Creative at the time), the “actual content of it is only mildly eccentric by current standards” (McLauchlin, 2010). When asked about the module, Gygax said “There was no reason to pull the initial version of the *Palace of the Silver Princess*. The same was obviously true in the minds of the editors that sent it into production. Kevin Blume was responsible for recalling it – strange fellow he.”³⁶.

[...] I think there was an early campaign book written by a woman that was dumped?³⁷

Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson, Jean Wells (*Palace of the Silver Princess* is a laugh, look it up)³⁸

Reading the module now it seems innocuous, so perhaps it just hit the printers at the wrong time, or its retraction was the act of one person’s conservative agenda. One of the most iconic and well-known modules (*Ravenloft*) in D&D’s history was co-written by Laura Hickman (with her husband who regularly wrote for D&D).

Gary gygax, and I am terrible with names but I know 2 women were given an "impossible task" to make a vampire based adventure, since the males on the team thought it was an over used trope. The women also disliked this idea but ultimately wrote ravenloft, which is the most loved campaign of all time. In fact I am running it currently.³⁹

Gary Gygax and 'Mrs Gygax', Dave Arneson, Mike Mearls, James Introcase, Chris Perkins, the two ladies who wrote *Ravenloft*, 'Sly Flourish', Matthew Mercer, Matthew Colville⁴⁰

The confusion about it being two women who wrote *Ravenloft* might be because Tracy and Laura Hickman wrote it. They were a husband-and-wife team who wrote many books

³⁶ " #8265, 16th Oct 2007

³⁷ 41020

³⁸ 32076

³⁹ 111

⁴⁰ 725

together. *Ravenloft* is a module that has been adapted and revised for many different editions of D&D. It was published as *Curse of Strahd* for 5th edition, with the titular villain (Strahd von Zarovich) becoming one of D&D's most well-known bad-guys (McLauchlin, 2010).

There is the perception that Gygax did not think women would want to play – a respondent said,

Gygax didn't think women would ever make up a significant part of the gaming market⁴¹

This is significant when recognizing that Gygax's daughters were early playtesters for the game. In *Playing at the World* J. Peterson (2012) describes an exchange Jim Dapkus had with Gygax about women and D&D. Dapkus had criticised the lack of roles for female characters in the first edition of the rules and asked Gygax how he thought "women's libbers" would react (J. Peterson, 2012). Gygax apparently replied that he "will bend to their demands when a member of the opposite sex buys a copy of *Dungeons & Dragons*" (J. Peterson, 2012). Two years after this conversation was written about by Dapkus, the October 1976 issue of *Dragon Magazine* included an article about bringing "the distaff gamer into D&D". This article introduced women's versions of four classes – fighters, magic users, thieves, and clerics. The article included the statement "Only as fighters are women clearly behind men in all cases". This was because women's strength stats were capped which meant they were weaker. Women characters had their "Charisma" stat replaced with "Beauty", and those with low beauty could use their "Horrid Beauty" to cause enemies to flee. A character's charisma stat is supposed to describe their force of personality, so women's personality is almost reduced to their physical appearance. The levels for thieves were categorized such as "wench", "hag", and even "succubus". This was what women, or those who wanted to play their characters as women, faced at the gaming table. The exclusionary and othering tone needs to be acknowledged as an entry barrier for women.

There is an article by Jean Wells and Kim Mohan in issue 39 of *Dragon Magazine* (1980) titled, "Women Want Equality and Why Not?". Wells and Mohan claimed that women made up as many as 10% of all D&D or AD&D players but this low number is because women's exposure to the game is limited (Wells & Mohan, 1980, p. 16). There are then additional barriers when women try to play as they must be "concerned about their characters becoming

⁴¹ 7319

pregnant, or about their characters being ‘used’ as sex objects to further the ends of a male-dominated party of adventurers” (Wells & Mohan, 1980, p. 16). Frustrations are also voiced over the limitations placed on female characters and their strength which affects the fun of the game but can be fixed with house-rules (Wells & Mohan, 1980, p. 17). One of the women mentioned in the article, only plays with “family members and close friends” and thereby avoid the obstacles caused by being a woman (Wells & Mohan, 1980, p. 16). This strategy of playing with only private and trusted groups would have contributed to the low visibility of women who played D&D. It might have made their numbers appear much lower than they were and made it difficult for women players to find each other to play together and/or form networks.

Lee Gold is the creator and editor of *Alarums and Excursions (A&E)*, a monthly amateur publication started by Gold in 1975 that continues to be published (and has impressively only missed four releases in 45 years). The zine has won four Origins Awards and four Charles S. Roberts Awards (RPGGeek, 2020). Gold noticed that playing styles were beginning to diverge in different cities due to rule interpretations, and this meant that players could not participate in games when visiting other cities (Mason, 2012). Gold created the zine to include roleplaying game discussions and provide “guidance on dungeon design and interpretation of the often-lax rules” (J. Peterson, 2012). *Alarums and Excursions* set out to create a semi-unified approach to the gaps in D&D’s rules. The early issues featured articles written by professionals and even according to Gold “a couple of somewhat confused letters from E. Gary Gygax” (Mason, 2012). The approach was, and remains, focused on contributions from amateur roleplaying game fans and their work. It gave a platform for D&D to grow, evolve, and fostered an inclusive community. Gold’s work on *A&E* was immensely influential and has led her to being described as “the most important person in roleplaying games” after Gygax (Hartlage, 2020). Gold’s contribution is not commonly known about, but D&D would not be the game it is today without her ongoing work.

Gold was introduced to D&D by her friend Hilda Hannifen (and Hilda’s husband Owen). The Hannifens were active in the ‘Society for Creative Anachronism’ and the science fiction fan community. They travelled to LA and Hilda Hannifen ran a dungeon with Lee and Barry Gold as players (J. Peterson, 2014). This game was written up for the zine *APA-L* in 1975 where Hannifen was a regular contributor of play records. Hilda Hannifen’s stories showcased D&D

and introduced many players to the narrative potential of the game. Her game records were one of the prompts for the creation of *A&E* as a dedicated place for such game write-ups was needed.

The survey responses reflected the perception that has been historically difficult for women to get involved with D&D.

A lot. Too much to write here. I used to have the old TSR books. My mom has been playing since the beginning. Talk about a woman who had to stand up for herself in that world of older gaming⁴²

Another acknowledged this struggle saying,

I know it wasn't easy for girls to play⁴³

Part of this exclusionary nature was touched on by someone who had been playing since the 80's who said:

there was implicit racism and sexism. It never even occurred to me to ask a girl if she wanted to play⁴⁴

In an interview with *RPG Review*, Gold (2018) describes an encounter with GygaX that highlighted some of the struggles she had as a woman in the industry. GygaX called Gold in response to having been sent copies of *A&E*. GygaX apparently could not comprehend the fact Gold was a woman and acknowledged that he had written some “bad things about women wargamers once” (Gold, 2018). Gold was active in the science fiction fandom before playing D&D, and the community was largely male “but it wasn’t male-dominated” (Gold, 2018). Gold felt comfortable and confident in the communities that she did her roleplaying – not at hobby stores but at science fiction fandom spaces (Gold, 2018). The wargaming community at the time was far less welcoming to women. The history of women’s involvement in roleplaying games might be easier to find laced through that of science fiction fans rather than tabletop gaming

Lorraine Williams

In 1984, Kevin Blume was removed by the board as the CEO after GygaX accused him of poor performance (Witwer, 2015, p. 4). After Kevin Blume’s removal Lorraine Williams was

⁴² 111

⁴³ 2259

⁴⁴ 2323

brought in by Gygax in an attempt to stabilise the company through her management experience and financial assets as an investor (Witwer, 2015, p. 4). Gygax felt he could trust her because Williams was the sister of a close friend and business associate (Flint Dille). The initial plan was that Williams could run the operations-side of the business whilst Gygax could manage the creative-side (Witwer, 2015, p. 179). The working relationship between Gygax and Williams was tumultuous and full of issues. Gygax's first mention of Williams on the EN World forum was to describe her as "not what one would term a 'nice person' in any sense of the term I can envision"⁴⁵. Their relationship was apparently fuelled by "much personal enmity" on Williams' part because Gygax "dared to contest [her] right to control the company" and they did not agree on the direction for the company⁴⁶. Whilst Gygax wanted to focus on quality product "not aim at profits overall, allow employees ownership, etc.", Williams wanted to "milk the company for all she could gain from it"⁴⁷. This is a very damning insight into William's management style and approach to the game. Gygax presents himself as caring about the employees and D&D's quality, compared to the colder money-hungry approach of Williams.

Aside from the aforementioned debate over creator contributions, there were some other controversies over its history, such as Gygax' drug users and subsequent divorce, corporate mismanagement, the disdain eventual TSR owner Lorraine Williams had for gamers and her subsequent loss of the company. [...]⁴⁸

Williams is painted as a villain in reflections on that time in TSR's history. It is interesting to consider whether her treatment is fair or if she is simply a necessary counterpoint to the heroic figure of Gygax.

An issue of contention is regarding Williams is a perceived change in company culture after she began to work at TSR. TSR's offices had a gaming space that included Gygax's original sand table, and it was typical for employees to hang around the offices to game with their co-workers. At least 5% of the interoffice mail was used for games played between employees

⁴⁵ #539 3rd Nov 2002

⁴⁶ #541 4th Nov 2002

⁴⁷ #541 4th Nov 2002

⁴⁸ 20767

(Witwer, 2015, p. 137). TSR was a gaming company that was “run for gamers by gamers”, or at least it began this way (Witwer, 2015, p. 137). Gygax felt that Williams “held gamers in contempt”, believed they were “socially beneath her”, and did not like games or gamers (Witwer, 2015, p. 180). Williams admitted that whilst she did not understand the product completely, she did respect it, was fond of those she worked with, and importantly “understood intellectually that it was the right product for the right time” (Witwer, 2015, p. 169). For Williams, the strife between her and Gygax began when she attempted to address TSR’s financial issues shortly after her appointment (Witwer, 2015, p. 180).

[...] But they were bad businessmen, and they cared more about creating a good product than making a profit. They mismanaged their company then blamed the woman who came in to bail out their sinking ship (whose name I'm unfortunately forgetting without looking it up). Gary & Dave got in arguments that resulted in Dave being pushed out of the company and his name being removed from future Monster Manual iterations. But like, they got mad at a woman for telling them to stop buying expensive office furniture and first-class trips to Hollywood [...]⁴⁹

Williams wanted to sell a house TSR owned on the Isle of Man and faced down an aggressive Gygax when she told him that the bank would not advance any further funds for the Hollywood projects and operations (Witwer, 2015, p. 180). The decision came from the bank because they were operating under a “debt covenant” and the bank was upset enough to threaten removing the company’s line of credit (Witwer, 2015, p. 169). Changes that Williams tried to make to address the company’s financial problems were met with aggression and temper tantrums from Gygax (Witwer, 2015, p. 169). Possibly because the profit-sharing plans had been designed to benefit the shareholders – Gygax, the Blumes, and a few family members (Witwer, 2015, p. 169). Gygax proposed that when the financial crises passed, TSR employees should all gain share ownership to reward their loyalty. Williams declined this, and Gygax claimed she said “Over my dead body!” (Witwer, 2015, p. 169). Gygax described this event to highlight that Williams did not value employees as people and was instead greedy or cold compared to his magnanimous generosity. However, Gygax’s and TSR’s prior generosity was part of the reason that TSR was struggling financially. Under Williams there were major

⁴⁹ 21925

changes to how developers and designers received recognition. Rather than crediting individuals for their products, TSR began attributing “their creative output to the corporation” which is not an uncommon practice (Witwer, 2015, p. 235). Employees were no longer given a share in their product’s successes. These “generous royalty agreements” had been costing TSR heavily, and Gygax and the Blumes had begun tightening and reducing them before Williams began working at the company (Witwer, 2015, p. 181). Gygax himself was paid more than \$2 million one year in royalties and it was common for designers to get up to 10% of the “net receipts” on the game they designed plus company stocks and regular pay (Witwer, 2015, pp. 181, 126). The profitability of products was dramatically reduced by these royalties and caused huge issues for TSR which was only marginally profitable and rapidly accumulating debt despite producing some massively successful products (Witwer, 2015, p. 171). Reducing the royalties was an emotive issue but also a difficult business decision because they were key for the hiring and retention of talent (Witwer, 2015, p. 126). Gygax was potentially so vehemently against the changing of royalties because it threatened his own income.

Eventually, Lorraine Williams bought out the stock of other shareholders and orchestrated a takeover that resulted in Gygax’s ousting by the board of directors (Baird, 2018; Witwer, 2015, p. 2). Gygax’s exit from TSR is an event that is reported in many ways that range from amicable to being forcefully removed. Reasons include: a decision made by Gygax to sell his ownership interest and walk away to work on other businesses (Moore, 2015), being forced out (Baird, 2018), leaving due to the company’s financial struggles (Baird, 2020), and being “unfairly pushed out in 1985 by some suits who didn’t understand his genius” (Baird, 2018). The perception of survey respondents was that of Gygax unwillingly leaving TSR and his work on D&D.

[Lorraine Williams for destroying TSR from within. \[...\] ⁵⁰](#)

[Gary Gygax Dave Arnsen Lorraine Williams \(damned be her soul\) The Blume brothers \(never go into business with a lawyer\) ⁵¹](#)

⁵⁰ 8246

⁵¹ 37017

Lorraine pushed Gary out of the company. Lorraine was bought out by Peter Adkison of Wizards of the Coast, who had always wanted to own D&D and who named his own company after his gaming group. [...].⁵²

[...] Gary was forced out, and then eventually Wizards picked it up.⁵³

[...] Gygax leaving people in charge to try and get the cartoon going. Then coming back to be pushed out of his company [...].⁵⁴

I know Gary Gygax founded a company that owned D&D that Eventually went bankrupt after kicking him out. Then there was the Satanic Panic. D&D survived all this and seems to be thriving nowadays⁵⁵

Gygax avoided questions about his departure from TSR on the EN World forums or took a positive approach by saying that he had ‘moved on’ to another opportunity.

Although Williams has been blamed for many issues that plagued TSR post-Gygax, there were many successful years whilst she was “at the helm” (Baird, 2018).

It was started by Gygax in the 80s, it took off fairly quickly, then a lot of people fought for the IP rights, until Gygax left and Lorraine Williams took hold of the reigns spawning a load of spin offs and settings.⁵⁶

Williams aggressively protected the intellectual property owned by TSR – a standard business practice that is often reported as the unfair persecution of Gygax. There were “several legal actions to make sure Gary’s new fantasy novels, adventure modules or role-playing games relied on no material he’d generated while he was at TSR” (D’Anastasio, 2019). However, the pursuit of these intellectual properties was incredibly expensive for the company.

Lorraine Williams took over and releases 2e, which was fine until she started to think she knew better than everyone around her and started pushing the Buck Rogers IP super hard. Also a series of mediocre to bad releases led to the company selling out to WotC.⁵⁷

⁵² 43375

⁵³ 17598

⁵⁴ 44077

⁵⁵ 20304

⁵⁶ 21410

⁵⁷ 37017

Legal expenses combined with a string of failed products led to massive financial issues for TSR and Williams eventually sold TSR and D&D to WOTC in 1997.

I know how it started, how it expanded, when the games split into Basic and Advanced, when TSR was in financial troubles due to bad management, how Lorraine Williams made a series of terrible decisions and how TSR was bought by Wizards of the Coast, who made three more editions with much different design philosophy. (Not gonna describe it all, it would take ages)⁵⁸

Though there have been stumbles along the way, Wizards of the Coast have continued to grow D&D to a level of popularity unfathomable when compared to its initial release. Williams played an enormous role in the history of D&D – she was part of Gygax’s removal from the company, the subsequent flourishing and then fall, and D&D’s sale to *Wizards of the Coast*. Where Williams is mentioned in the history(ies) of D&D it is to typically to blame her for the failure of TSR or vilify her for the treatment of Gygax. Though, there were replies that simply included her name without comment or accusation.

Gary Gygax Kate Irwin Donald K Lorraine Williams⁵⁹

Gary Gygax, Ed Greenwood, Loraine Williams. Other names are escaping me.⁶⁰

Gygax, Lorraine Williams⁶¹

GYGAX, Williams, Mercer⁶²

Overall, this seems an unfortunate treatment of Williams, one of the few publicly visible women in D&D’s early history. The issue of why this is the dominant interpretation resonates throughout the rest of this doctorate.

A Disclaimer to Address an Ugly History

In December 2021, TSR announced that they were suing Wizards of the Coast for “Trademark Declaratory Judgement of Ownership” and pursuing the removal of a disclaimer

⁵⁸ 3904

⁵⁹ 21410

⁶⁰ 19999

⁶¹ 7553

⁶² 24472

that has been placed at the beginning of some older D&D content (Girdwood, 2021)⁶³. This is not the original TSR (because that is owned by WOTC), but a resurrection of the company's name led by Justin LeNasa and Ernie Gygax Jr. This version of TSR is attempting to fund the lawsuit through crowdfunding site Indiegogo (LaNasa, 2021)⁶⁴. In the description they state they are "taking a stand against Wizards of the Coast ("WOTC") and its wrongful bullying of TSR, our trademarks, and its public libeling (sic) and slander of all those who helped create TSR based Dungeons & Dragons and products" (LaNasa, 2021).

The libel and slander is attributed to the disclaimer placed at the beginning of digital legacy content from September 2020 (Girdwood, 2020b).

Here is the disclaimer:

"We recognize that some of the legacy content available on this website, does not reflect the values of the Dungeon & Dragons franchise today. Some older content may reflect ethnic, racial and gender prejudice that were commonplace in American society at that time. These depictions were wrong then and are wrong today. This content is presented as it was originally created, because to do otherwise would be the same as claiming these prejudices never existed. Dungeons & Dragons teaches that diversity is a strength, and we strive to make our D&D products as welcoming and inclusive as possible. This part of our work will never end."

TSR takes issue with the disclaimer as it:

"paints all of the writers, editors, artists and consumers of those products as supporting those alleged prejudices, stereotypes and bigotry, wrongfully claimed to be part of those products. This statement by Wizards of the Coast opens the possibility for the producers and players of these "Legacy Products" to face ridicule, and face the labelling as "bigots", "racists", "misogynists", and worse Cyber & Physical Attacks!" (LaNasa, 2021).

⁶³ From reading comments on the project's Indiegogo, it would seem there was previously a lawsuit in October 2021 that was dropped, and this is another attempt.

⁶⁴ Any leftover money is optimistically pledged to go towards building a memorial in Lake Geneva for the original creators.

According to TSR, the disclaimer and articles around it have divided the RPG community (Girdwood, 2021). The racism and misogyny in older modules and D&D's history were an issue raised in survey responses⁶⁵.

Has a bad history of misogyny and racism, unfortunately.⁶⁶

It was created by war gaming fellas in the 70's and has had a very problematic history. It's got a problematic narrative base (colonial white dudes = civilized saviours and monster slayers, beacons of hope, etc.) [...]⁶⁷

The Drow race is a commonly cited issue of racism in D&D as they are a dark-skinned sub-race of elves that are universally evil.

Things get real awkward when you look to closely at the origins of the drow.⁶⁸

I know it started out with problems of sexism, Drow being introduced issues of racism and were eventually made more fantastical and less African, but i know wild elves are in, described as dark skinned savages, at least as late as 3.5 in the 2000 noughts. [...]⁶⁹

They live deep underground and follow an evil religion. The 5th Edition Player's Handbook describes them as: "a race of demon-worshipping marauders dwelling in the subterranean depths of the Underdark, emerging only on the blackest nights to pillage and slaughter the surface dwellers they despise". Drow believe all surface-dwelling races are "inferior, worthless except as slaves" and find it almost impossible to overcome their prejudices to work with other races. The other common dark-skinned race is that of Orcs, which are not playable unless as half-orcs. Orcs are presented as being barbaric, living in violent tribes, and are commonly the enemy of players.

[...] Aaaaand also the attempts and Asian setting which definitely I don't think aged well for me as an Asian player haha.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ I address solely the racism here because this chapter presents plenty of evidence elsewhere for historical sexism.

⁶⁶ 38912

⁶⁷ 23267

⁶⁸ 467

⁶⁹ 22879

⁷⁰ 20825

The Asian setting this response refers to is *Oriental Adventures* for AD&D 1st Edition and rereleased for 3rd Edition. A podcast called *Asians Represent* read *Oriental Adventures* on their show in 2020, laying out their significant issues with the book. They spent 26 hours reading the book and providing commentary, it was streamed live on Twitch and then uploaded to YouTube. Issues include the stereotypical focus on honour, the appropriation and misrepresentation of spirituality, and the bundling of all of Asia into one setting despite the distinct cultures within the region. I cannot begin to do this topic justice within this thesis (or possibly at all, because I am not Asian and therefore lack understanding), but I highly recommend their YouTube videos for a thorough investigation of the racism in *Oriental Adventures*.

Conclusion

The past and history are different and distinctive tropes that cannot and should not be conflated – they float separately from each other as their own entities. History becomes a simulacrum over successive retellings and loses its relationship with reality until it creates its own real. Part of this process is the introduction of storytelling techniques; another is the reason the history exists. Histories are created to fulfil an agenda or meet a need, which influences what is or is not included. They grow from the social conditions they are developed in and are shaped by a purpose. Defining the past through history involves the creation, performance, and development of a narrative. Traces of the past are then giving meaning and used as evidence to justify or bolster interpretations. Histories are filtered through experiences and modified to please the historian and their audience.

The history(ies) of *Dungeons & Dragons* are built from the creative misremembering that has built up with the successive retellings. The retellings have tended towards the tropes of grand narratives to be good, compelling, and interesting stories rather than adhering to standards of fastidious accuracy. This has led to the introduction of tropes into the story. Tropes can be useful shortcuts, but they introduce emotion to the history, because they have cultural baggage. There are ideas attached to them that complicate their inclusion. Figures involved in D&D's history have become characters – oversimplified version of themselves that allow shortcuts in the storytelling process. Gary Gygax becomes the hero, fighting against naysayers and Lorraine Williams is reduced to a cold, hard, businessperson who hates nerds.

Williams is the woman most often mentioned in the histories of D&D, and she is vilified for her time at TSR. She is typically blamed for the downfall of TSR and decline of D&D before the sale to *Wizards of the Coast*. When this is contrasted against the glorification of Gygax it sends a strong message about the role of people in the development of D&D. Men were responsible for the successes, and women threatened the game's survival. Women like Lee Gold, Jean Wells, and Laura Hickman contributed massively to the early D&D fandom. (There are many other women who have been obscured and remain absent from D&D's history.) However, these women are not acknowledged, and this creates artificial barriers and divisions in the D&D fandom. There is a legacy created by these exclusions that influences the relationship that contemporary audiences have with D&D. Popular culture is obsessed with its own past, which is viewed through the lens of nostalgia. Concurrently, there is a pervasive craving for a sense of authenticity or tradition. The consequences of D&D's historical legacy and the relationship with modern patterns of nostalgic consumption is explored in the next chapter.

History(ies) cannot (and should not) be reduced to a singular and true version that demeans, marginalizes, and erases other narratives. This chapter has occupied an ambivalent space, 'telling the tale,' whilst revealing the spaces and alternative tendencies that are available. The purpose of this chapter has been to highlight the gaps in the popular version of D&D's history and find that which has been lost and obscured. We can learn about the agenda of those telling D&D's history by looking at what they have chosen to leave out, minimise, or emphasise. Women are often excluded from the history of D&D (and other events) because it suits the agenda of those who wish to create barriers to entry for women and other marginalised groups. A perceived or claimed historical absence from a movement, event, or in this case hobby, is used to justify ongoing exclusion. There are men who want to assert that D&D belongs to men and that the presence of women is somehow an aberration or anomaly to be created. These barriers to entry or gatekeeping in fandom are further discussed in chapter 6. By beginning to highlight the false wielding of history, we can attack the 'logic' used to bolster these arguments and thus begin to weaken the barriers to entry. Nostalgia is a powerful mechanism for the perpetuation of misleading histories, partially due to its deeply emotional nature. The next chapter follows on from this discussion to grapple with the impact of personal emotional histories on players' relationships with D&D.

Chapter 3 – Nostalgia

Introduction

Nostalgia can occur in public, but it can also be deeply individualized and personal. Relationships with history tend to be one of distance because without direct involvement, the association is automatically at least one step away. Time introduces additional distance so that even personally experienced events become blurred or warped over time. Nostalgia is a way to take history and bring it closer on an individual or broader level. It can be incorporated into identity and individuals can use history to tell their own histories and reminisce to evoke nostalgia.

The previous chapter revealed how history is framed, disturbed, interacted with, grown, changed, and manipulated so that dominant narratives can develop and flourish. I discussed the multiplicity of history and interactions that create these multitudes. The public history of the popular narrative is what people come to know or accept as the true events. These are the renderings of history that appear in popular articles and are repeated in casual conversation. Ultimately, the impact of what is left out or who is left out creates a marginalisation of those rendered invisible. With this chapter, the focus is narrowed towards the more private relationships that we might have with histories. I wanted to keep it theoretically close to the second chapter and make the link explicit. The inclusion of nostalgia was originally an umbrella under the history chapter, but the survey findings led to a need to give these ideas more space. Survey responses suggest that nostalgia is intertwined with the reasons for D&D's popularity and resurgence therefore in this chapter I explore nostalgia's relationship with D&D.

The chapter begins with a discussion of nostalgia, how it functions, and how it has become a part of consumption. This is followed with survey findings related to how players are first introduced to Dungeons & Dragons and the consequences of where the initial introduction came from. I then delve into how individuals relate to nostalgic texts and imbue them with meaning or emotion. Finally, these ideas are brought together with the discussion of the "Old School Renaissance" movement within D&D and how nostalgia fuels its popularity.

Nostalgia

When considering why individuals play Dungeons & Dragons and continue for many years or keep returning after breaks, nostalgia emerged as a theme. Nostalgia can be tied to the resurgence of D&D, an ongoing cultural attachment to D&D over other roleplaying game systems, and the popularity of systems such as Old-School Renaissance (OSR) D&D. A wistful longing for the past seems to be a potent force culturally currently, and this is evident in how popular culture is consumed and interacted with. There is a fight to preserve history and place value on it as a site of knowledge. The history of D&D holds personal value for its players and fans who often seek out books or articles to gain varying levels of knowledge.

This chapter focuses on the power of the nostalgic relationship that players have with D&D. Through survey results, this thesis establishes nostalgia as a powerful motivator for players to begin playing D&D. This emotional nostalgic relationship that players then have with the game can be expressed through the formation of a totemic textual artefact. Finally, the false past that nostalgia creates is investigated and queried.

History is valued culturally. Baudrillard (1994) wrote that “We require a visible past, a visible continuum, a visible myth of origin, which reassures us about our end” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 10). History has become a product, a commodity, and fetishized (De Groot, 2006, p. 411). It is packaged and sold to consumers through vintage remakes and nostalgia-laden advertising. Even tenuous historical connections are emphasised to add value to stories, products, companies, and people. There is a need to be able to see the past, because our culture is linear and accumulated (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 8). The past can be a resource for the future to draw upon (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 937). It interacts with the present and future as a tool for “taking one’s bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present” (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 921). Constantly moving forward through change after change creates a cultural sense of disorientation and dizziness. An ability to look back and anchor to the past helps steady popular culture against the spinning and shifting of the rapid modern world.

Nostalgia can be broken down into different forms – restorative, reflective, personal, and vicarious (Garda, 2013, p. 2; Merchant & Rose, 2013, p. 2621). Restorative nostalgia is linked to the desire to rebuild the past, recreating the moment, or feeling in the present. A

longing for stability can fuel a desire to return to a past perceived as being more stable, even if that was not necessarily true (Tannock, 1995, p. 456). Additionally, when individuals feel trapped in a static or “monolithic” present, they might long for a past they felt had more opportunity for change and exploration (Tannock, 1995, p. 456). Tannock (1995, p. 456) suggests that the type of past longed for depends on a person’s current position, “her desires, her fears, and her aspirations”. Beyond the individual, society at large can hold a nostalgic longing for an old social order, but this is not necessarily a conservative structure with a defined class structure. There have been radical movements in history that have taken a “resurrectionary” approach – a desire to restore “a gold age of social equilibrium and justice that had been interrupted by historical trauma or by ruling-class machinations” (Simon, 2011, p. xxvi). Reflective nostalgia does not try to drag the past into the present but accepts the distance. The moment is not recreated but savoured for what it was (or is remembered to have been). These nostalgic interventions can help individuals use positive perceptions of the past to bolster their sense of “continuity and meaning” in the present (Sedikides, Wildschut, Arndt, & Routledge, 2008, p. 306). Personal nostalgia is related to individual experiences and memories, but there can also be vicarious or collective nostalgia. This is where the nostalgic emotion for an event is shared by a group (Garda, 2013, p. 2).

[...] "Of Dice and Men" gave me a sense of nostalgia about it without ever having played it, and then listening to podcasts such as Critical Role and Adventure.EXE just made it even more enticing.¹

Both historical/collective nostalgia and personal nostalgia “idealise the imaginatively recreated past”, the scope is just different (Stern, 1992, p. 16). Further examples of vicarious nostalgia are explored in the discussion of OSR D&D further in the chapter.

The ‘old’ is continually resummoned, reconfigured and re-presented for new enjoyment and consumption. Part of the reason for increased nostalgia in the past two decades, is the “fin de siecle” effect. This refers to convergence of the end of the twentieth century, the end of a millennium, and the baby boomer generation reaching the age of fifty (Stern, 1992, p. 13). These temporal factors might have combined with our relationship with history and a generation’s existential crisis to fuel a nostalgia surge. However, an obsession with the past is not a modern fetish, each era has had their “own obsessions with antiquity”

¹ 243

(Simon, 2011, p. xiii). The Renaissance has a “veneration of Roman and Greek classicism” and the Gothic movement focused on the medieval (Simon, 2011, p. xiii). However, Simon (2011, p. xiii) suggests that “there has never been a society in human history so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its own immediate past”.

There is an idea or sense of lost that is central to our relationship with our past. Kingsepp (2007, p. 367) summarises this relationship as: “the world of today, our world, has lost something very important: its connection to reality, to history”. Modern culture has lost its relationship with referentials and instead faces endless hyperreality with a disappearance of “the object and substance” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). Nostalgia is produced through a relationship with a subject – it is an emotion-based experience (Garda, 2013, p. 2). A memory is imbued with emotions and meaning that can then later be tapped-into. The past is so glamourized and idealised through nostalgia and functions of memory that it should be hardly surprising that there is a disillusionment with our current reality. There is a sense of deprivation by comparison and so a search for perceived shreds of the past to cling to becomes necessary. Pickering and Keightley (2006, p. 920) suggest that modernity’s focus on “relentless supersession” does not allow for an “experience of loss” and that nostalgia might be linked to coping. The present is left unrecognisable, unfathomable in contrast to the stable and comprehensible past. So, the past is clung to in order to “assuage the grief of loss, the pain of rupture, the distress of obsolescence” (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 11). In the void of reality and loss of real, nostalgia can “assume its full meaning” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6).

Recent research suggests that nostalgia can be used as a coping mechanism (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2016, p. 319). Nostalgia can be a valuable resource in enabling individuals to make meaning of their lives (Proctor, 2017, p. 1114; Routledge, Wildschut, Sedikides, Juhl, & Arndt, 2012, p. 453). It can help mitigate the negative psychological or emotional effects when life meaning is threatened, for example by chronic illness (Routledge et al., 2012, p. 458). Research has also found that nostalgia can increase the “accessibility of positive self-attributes” and bolster the positivity of self-conceptions thus helping individuals respond “less defensively to the challenges and threats of the present” (Vess, Arndt, Routledge, Sedikides, & Wildschut, 2012, p. 281). Nostalgia shields individuals against psychologically threatening situations. Merchant and Rose (2013, p. 2623) found that there is a strong positive link between feelings of alienation and proneness to nostalgia. They suggest this

might be because vicarious nostalgia can address “insecurity and marginalisation felt by alienated individuals” (Merchant & Rose, 2013, p. 2622). Where there is a perceived lack of social support, nostalgia can serve to magnify perceptions of what support there is and help counteract loneliness (Sedikides et al., 2008, p. 306). Where identity or sense of community are threatened in the present, nostalgia can be mobilised to help escape or evade these feelings (Tannock, 1995, p. 454). Nostalgia is a resource that can be used when an individual feels alone or isolated to help summon feelings of community or a time when support was stronger. As such, nostalgic memories are often when “one felt, or imagined, oneself at home” and/or “feature the self as a protagonist interacting with others” (Pickering & Keightley, 2006; Zhou, Wildschut, Sedikides, Shi, & Feng, 2012, p. 922). Nostalgia could therefore be a valuable tool for those who are marginalised or feel isolated because of an aspect of their life – for example, the treatment of D&D players as being weird or deviant. Although D&D is increasingly acceptable, there is a long history of negative stereotypes around the game. The “satanic panic” of the 1980s forced many players into secrecy, and as discussed in another chapter there were perceptions around D&D players being basement-dwelling socially-awkward nerds.

For men in the early days of D&D, even if there was exclusion from wider society, there was still community to be found around the game table. There was a place for them to play their hobby and be accepted. This was not necessarily the case for women, who faced exclusion and barriers to being accepted as an equal player. It may be possible for nostalgia to address these issues and make the game’s history more palatable. Middle-aged (or older) white straight men can reminisce about when they began playing D&D and they dominated the community, and it went unquestioned. Men who are newer to the game and did not experience that time-period, might have a sense of vicarious nostalgia. Nostalgia is inherently a longing for something that cannot be attained because of the “irreversibility of time” (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 920). The focus of nostalgic feelings might be unattainable because it may not truly exist (or have existed) in the manner it is being imagined to. When engaging in retrospection, there is a likelihood for skewed perspectives to warp the subject. The positive aspects can be overstated, the negatives more intensely felt or even pushed aside in favour of a rose-tinted lens. This is especially true of vicarious nostalgia where we might be relying on how our community remembers the event or time-period. Unreliable

narrators or accounts written with an agenda serve to obscure the truth (if there is even a truth to be found). When they consume nostalgia-laden products, they are engaging with a community history. For women, this belonging is more complicated. It is a false history that most women would have to tap into to feel included.

Media preserve the “most important or best of the past” and this leads to aspects being edited out (Kitch, 2006, p. 105), as a form of ‘show reel’. Kitch (2006, p. 105) refers to this selective forgetting and remembering by the media as the media-memory process. The creation of a media-memory narrative is not without conflict. There can be rival views of what should be remembered and how. Ultimately, “some representations of the past achieve social and cultural centrality while others are eclipsed or marginalized” (Summerfield, 2010, p. 790). An “authoritative, cohesive, and homogenising journalist summary of the past” is created through print, pictures, and other media products (Kitch, 2006, p. 105). These media-memory objects can invoke a generalised nostalgia in consumers and provide a sense of context within a cultural and political landscape (Kitch, 2006, p. 103). Remembering the past “is a social practice” and memories are often partially derived from “mediated exposures to key events” (Davisson, 2016, p. 2). There is a tension between the personal nature of memory and the rise of popular memory. Media presented versions of the past can take root in an individual’s own memories – twisting and shaping personal experience to create a version of events consistent with the popular narrative. With rehearsal and repetition of these memories and representations of history, the “consistent depictions become realities” (Davisson, 2016, p. 5). Through the creation of fan archives and memory projects, it is possible for alternative narratives to persist and resist erasure. Archives can choose to memorialise different versions of events through the inclusion of objects and texts that are cast aside by the popular history. Fans can take action to reclaim or contest the conventional narratives that dominate. For example, Beatles fans flock to the famous Abbey Road crossing and the recording studios. These two sites are props in the safe and neat narrative “that has dominated histories of the Beatles written after Lennon’s death” (Brabazon, 2002, p. 5). External to these two controlled sites are the street sign and wall that fans graffiti with personal tributes and notes to each other. It is in these scribbles that the fan community become visible. The history of the Beatles is often rewritten to remove “the screaming girls” for a more “credible” history that focuses on “the ‘quality’ of Sgt. Pepper, or the artistry of Revolver” (Brabazon, 2002, p. 8). The

“obsessions and desires” of the girls and women who were fans of the Beatles are “exfoliated from the skin of memory” just as the graffiti on the wall is regularly painted over (Brabazon, 2002, p. 8). These actions preserve a “safe, ordered history” by removing ideas that threaten its “integrity and authenticity” (Brabazon, 2002, p. 10). Pop culture history is rendered more palatable to modern consumers with retrospective editing, tweaking, and erasing. Fans who would disappear or whose presence would shrink in this process undertake rogue action to remain present in their own past.

Nostalgic recollections can allow for the “reshaping of incidents and relationships ... so that they yield pleasure in the recollection, even if they were not pleasurable” when first experienced (Stern, 1992, p. 18). Nostalgia can render even horrendous memories of troubling times a source of flawless happiness as the events are ripped from their context and filtered through rose-tinted remembering. A challenging childhood can be replaced or overwritten with the “reconstructed fiction” of a happy one (Stern, 1992, p. 16). Lowenthal (2015, p. 40) describes nostalgia as “memory with the pain removed, the past’s evils and failures forgotten”. The past can be “fondly reconstructed out of selectively idealised features” and sentimentality, and this is often perpetuated by the media (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 925). There is the potential to erase the negativity of the past through the substitution of nostalgia. It allows for the rejection, abuse, and exclusion of women in D&D’s past to be overwritten by warmly glowing memories of time spent around the table playing with friends. It is not that women, or anyone, needs to be hostile towards D&D or cannot possess these memories – it is that the popular narrative needs to be interrogated. There are modern consequences for burying the past. If we cannot see the mistakes of the community in the past or acknowledge the struggles women have undertaken for their seat at the D&D table, then it becomes easier to deny the current issues of exclusion.

Survey Findings Discussion

When I designed the survey, I hypothesised that the most common first exposure to D&D to be through a paratext such as TV shows or movies. However, I was mistaken, and my research went in a direction that I did not initially expect. This biased expectation is reflected in the way I structured the choices, as I separately listed types of paratext but grouped together friends and family to cover all social routes of introduction. In hindsight, I should

have offered more discrimination within the categories of friends and family. Throughout the survey responses, respondents described their first introduction to D&D in detail and I began to recognise the importance of friends and family in players' D&D histories. From there I have considered the consequences of this introductory pathway on players initial and ongoing experiences of D&D.

The first stage of analysing the survey responses was to identify themes through quantitative methods. The patterns in these responses then guided me when I read the richer qualitative responses. I have chosen to present these findings in a manner reflective of my investigative process. This shows how the ideas initial quantitative results forced me to confront my own assumptions and shift direction when moving into the qualitative stage.

The relevance of nostalgia to Dungeons & Dragons becomes evident when considering how players were first introduced to the game. In the survey I asked: "What do you remember as your first exposure to D&D?" and there were six options given. These were "I saw it being played on a television show," "I saw it on a movie," "A friend or family member told me about it," "I saw a stream (e.g., YouTube or Twitch)," "I listened to a podcast," and "Other (please specify)." If respondents chose the last option, there was a small space to type a response. It was only possible to choose one option because I wanted to know about the first exposure specifically. The most common response overall was "A friend or family member told me about it" (55.3% of all responses), and this remained the most frequent response even when the data was broken down by age group and gender identity. The second most common response was "Other (please specify)" at 23.2% of responses. For the age brackets "54-54 and 55-65 there is more diversity of response, but "A friend or family member told me about it" is still the highest. Only 8.2% said they had seen it first on a television show, 2.8% a movie, 6.2% from a stream, and 4.2% from a podcast. Looking at results for how many people have watched a stream of D&D shows that 79% of total respondents have. This suggests that seeking out and/or watching a D&D stream follows having initially been exposed through another avenue (their friends and/or family). There were also descriptions of first times playing or seeing the game being through family members or friends in the "Other" sources of first exposure. I suspect that respondents chose to do this because they wanted to give greater detail than they would have been able to if they simply selected the box next to the relevant option.

In the age group 65+, the most common response was “Other (please specify)” followed by “A friend or family member told me about it”. As mentioned in the methods chapter, there were few respondents in this category, so it comes down to the experiences of only a few rather than confirmed through the considerable number of other age groups. This makes the finding less generalisable. In the younger age brackets, the “A friend or family member told me about it” response was dominant with an exceptionally low percentage choosing the other options

When breaking down the “Other” responses, 3.29% (2202) responses mentioned games or gaming. When these responses are explored, video games such as *Baldur’s Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights* which are closely related to D&D were typically mentioned. Despite “A friend or family member told me about it” being one of the options, many wrote in answers relating to friends (2.75%), brothers (0.61%), and/or dads (0.49%). Books were mentioned in 2.01% of answers (and read or reading in 0.94%) – books listed included the *Forgotten Realms* books or the core rulebooks themselves. There were many respondents who found the books in their local game store or another shop and found out about D&D because their interest was piqued. School was mentioned in 1.53% of answers, and this was school at many distinct levels from elementary school to graduate school. With the increase in the number of D&D clubs or activities in school, it would be interesting to see how many new younger players are learning about D&D this way. This idea is bolstered by the fact that 0.43% of responses mentioned “club” or “clubs.”

Another question asked respondents to name the source of their first exposure – for example if it was a movie the title. This was to elicit more specificity in replies. *Critical Role* was the most common response (“Critical” appeared in 2.09% of replies and “role” 2.03%²). “Adventure” and “Zone” were in 1.38% and 1.21% of responses, respectively. *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* are both popular gameplay-based D&D podcasts³. Friend is the most common term that appears (6.8%), but other family terms also feature: brother (1.26%), dad (1.05%), father (0.45%), kids (0.4%), cousin (0.39%), uncle (0.35%), and boyfriend (0.34%).

² Critical may have been used in a manner that does not link with *Critical Role*, the accuracy of percentages using this method are further complicated by spelling or typographical errors with regard to ‘role’ or ‘roll’. Similar logic applies to the results for *Adventure Zone*.

³ *The Adventure Zone* does feature other gameplay systems as discussed in another chapter. Further descriptions of both are in chapter 3.

Non-players were also asked about their first exposure to D&D, and the results were like the player responses. The most common response was “A friend or family member told me about it” and it was much higher than any of the other responses. The second most common was “Other” at 20.5%, followed by television shows at 15.9%. It is interesting that the results are so alike, but it suggests that it is not necessarily *how* someone is introduced to D&D that influences whether they decide to play or not. When asked to consider why they first wanted to play D&D, “friends” once again topped the list. The word “friend” (or something similar) appeared in 3.94% of responses.

It is important to note that although these percentages might seem small, this data set incorporates a substantial number of responses meaning they are still strong themes in the responses that are worth attention. After conducting the statistical analysis of quantitative results, I began the qualitative thematic analysis with a focus broadened from primarily paratextual to inclusive of social introduction. It did not necessarily frame or alter how I interpreted the responses, but it did prepare me for ideas that I was not otherwise expecting.

What made a player want to play D&D?

I expected to find that there would be significant varied reasons for why women wanted to play D&D compared to men. Reflecting, I am not entirely sure why I anticipated that divergence based on gender. It follows through from my mental ‘othering’ of women players and the idea that they are distinct from men in every way possible. The fact that these differences were not detected serves to strengthen my assertion that people of all genders play D&D for the same distinct reasons – differing on an individual or some identity factor other than gender.

The strong influence of family, friends, and social needs was further evident when conducting the thematic analysis of why players started with D&D. Three major themes were identified: friends/family/social (FFS), paratexts, meeting a creative need. The presence of responses around paratexts did support my initial theories about introductions to D&D, however they were far broader than the “I saw a Critical Role episode” (or another real-play stream) than I was honestly expecting. Additionally, the length and quality of replies regarding friends/family/social differed compared to paratexts in a manner that I did not expect. Where

responses detailed how someone they know (and sometimes love) introduced them to the game, they tended to be longer and involve an anecdote. The responses were more personal – they mentioned social relationships rather than the name of a podcast or book. This led me to reflect on the underlying assumption I had made about introductory sources – that they were all equal. I had assumed that the impact of watching *Critical Role* and being introduced by FFS would be comparable in a straightforward way. The long-term consequences for how players feel about D&D is built from their first experiences. There is then a notable difference between a potentially emotion-laden memory about FFS and watching *Critical Role* alone in your bedroom. For some, that might be an event that evokes emotions when reminiscing, but from the responses it became apparent to me that there is a greater emotional response when recalling memories of FFS than paratexts.

I conducted a thematic analysis of the responses, and initially sought to compare based on gender but decided to combine the analysis when differences were not detected. In this following section I present quotes that I felt were illustrative or representative of the wider themes.

Bonding with Family Members

Players mentioned D&D as a tool to bond with family members. It is a shared activity for people to engage with and create memories.

At first it was a way to bond with my dad, ave then to meet some like minded people. I love the endless worlds and characters that can be created, and the sheer creativity involved in all aspects.⁴

Dnd is a whole lot of fun. I recommend it to everyone. I even got my kids playing it recently. It's a wonderful bonding activity, whether that's as friends or as a family. [...]⁵.

I have spent more time with my son since we started playing than I have in years - and he still lives at home. Before I started playing DnD he was some ghost that was occasionally seen outside of his room.

We have something to do together again - we are together having fun. We are beginning to feel like family again. For that I am so grateful it would be hard to put into words.⁶

⁴ 39676

⁵ 32687

⁶ 7034

I have really good memories of creating characters with my dad and I wanted to try playing it with others so I could try and forge friendships (I took a year off and my friends all graduated) but also a bond with my dad (it's a whole story)⁷

Originally it was a thing I did with my dad, he encouraged me to DM from about age 10, I think now a lot of the story building ect was to encourage creative writing [...]⁸

Teaching my Mum how to play and run D&D so she could run it for the lunchtime club at her school was an enjoyable bonding activity for us. I was able to share something I loved with her, and she understood it in a way that she had not before. We spent time together chatting about the rules, discussing what her group had done, and plotting sessions. It was an excuse to spend even more time together, share memes that would not have made sense before, and something new that was "us" not just "me."

I really enjoy playing D&D and I've grown to love it because my first time playing was with my mom dad and sister. We have tons of fun and laughs when we play and we just focus on each other, it's a chance to connect away from the tv and phones that can be really genuine and nice once in awhile. [...]⁹

[..] I love it and have even taught my children to play modified kid versions of the game. They have been playing since they were 3 and I can see that it will be a lifelong passion for them and am so proud of that fact.¹⁰

After playing the Zanzar Tem game, my whole family moved on to playing AD&D 2e as a family activity. I was 12 years old.¹¹

I played a little when I was pre-teen. My sons are now 10&11, so I introduced them to it. I am the DM and 3 of their friends are in their party. All new to it. I love their imaginations and how the adventure always evolves in ways I could never have predicted. It gives me a fun way to spend time with my kids and their friends - perfect for lazy rainy Sunday afternoons.¹²

I play at home. My sister DM's most of the time. My wife, daughter, and stepdaughter are all learning, so they play. I alternate as DM with my sister so she gets ample chance to play¹³.

⁷ 9730

⁸ 19909

⁹ 37957

¹⁰ 4723

¹¹ 25544

¹² 38710

¹³ 15504

I play with mostly females that include my sister, sister-in-law, and mother. My father also plays. I also recently got my nieces into dungeons and dragons and they can't get enough of it!¹⁴

My father is my DM and my adventuring group is comprised entirely of my little sisters. So it's very geared towards making them (and me!) feel empowered to make our own decisions and make our own path.¹⁵

D&D is a good activity for a diverse audience – it can appeal to the wide age range and identities in a family. Board games or video games are often aimed at a particular age and skill range, making them inappropriate for a big family to play together. Scrabble was always a mess when my family tried to play it because of our varied language skills – it just never seemed fair (same for Monopoly actually). The nature of D&D allows it to be scaled for different ages and modified, as mentioned in the responses.

Family Memories

D&D as a family activity then creates family memories of playing the game – or watching parents and/or older sibling's play. There were survey responses where players detailed growing up watching their family played and waiting to be old enough to join in.

I was very little (4 or 5), and my parents used to go over to a friends house for game night, and they were playing D&D. I remember all the funny voices they used, and seeing the battle maps and miniatures on the table, and being told it was just like my pretend play, but for grown-ups. I would also 'help' my dad paint miniatures and make dungeon tiles out of foam blocks when he got off work. When I was a bit older (middle school) My mom bought a 3.5 starter kit for my sisters and I, while she played the dungeon master, and those games made me take the game to my college friends¹⁶

Fun, no hardware, long family tradition. Some of my earliest memories are hiding under the table whilst the adults played d&d when I was a small child. [...]¹⁷

Not a lot. I got into the game when I was around 10 years old. My parents played often and as kids we were dragged around to people's houses so they could play. As we got more interested we were allowed to play. It just went from there. Now we play with family and several friends.¹⁸

¹⁴ 13852

¹⁵ 7565

¹⁶ 22761

¹⁷ 6083

¹⁸ 30485

Chapter 3: Nostalgia

My parents and their friends always had so much fun. My dad let me be npcs since the age of 6. I remember once trying to creep out my mum by crawling under the table and pretending to be a draugr in a forest. LOL¹⁹

Watching my Mum & Step Dad playing the game late at night when i was very young. From like the age of about 8 i was allowed to stay up late and watch them play so long as i stayed quiet and i found it fascinating.²⁰

I used to sit in the garage with my dad and his friends watching them play when I was 3 or 4 and I wanted to play so badly. I got told I couldn't start until I could read the players handbook on my own and by age 7 I was playing in their group²¹

It feeds a nostalgic or fond positive bond with the game, assuming those memories were positive of course. I did not find there to be any trend of responses about negative family experiences – which does not mean they do not occur but that perhaps they are less likely to be shared, or those who had a negative experience playing with their family did not continue to play and therefore might not have done this survey.

In the first D&D campaign we played my dad had us fight a dragon but since I was in love with Dragonlance and therefore dragons, I got upset and turned to my dad, sobbing, and choked out that "daddy I don't want to kill the dragon." So the dragon had a change of heart and joined the party. I'm not sure if that will be relevant to your survey but I feel you should know about this.²²

For these players, and many others, D&D is part of their family's history. It is a shared activity that was passed to the younger family members over time.

Generations of Players

The continuance of D&D was a strong theme in survey responses about how players began with D&D. The game has been around for almost fifty years and as such has a following within multiple generations. In popular culture there is a movement towards 'passing the torch' to the next generation of players where parents or relatives look forward to introducing children to media like Pokémon and The Legend of Zelda. Sharing nostalgia-laden popular culture with younger people is a way to share pleasure and ensure the franchise's legacy. I

¹⁹ 22083

²⁰ 36217

²¹ 18488

²² 18491

look forward to when my niece and nephew are old enough to watch Harry Potter and I get to enjoy it with them.

I went home for Christmas this year. My two teenage nephews came up to me and said, "Mom said you know a lot about Dungeons and Dragons. One of our friends is going to run a game for us once we get some dice. We have a bunch of questions." That might have been one of the best presents I've ever received. We sat down and went through all kinds of stuff. When I got home, I ordered them some dice, dice bags, and the Starter Set as a late Christmas present. Just doing my part to pass it on.²³

At a party where our friend's kids in their early 20s were playing. One of the moms suggested that we should learn what this is all about and we started an inter-generational game. Best decision we have made in a long time. We are getting to know each other's kids and have a better relationship with our own. My son gets to be one of the experts and help us. I am so grateful we started playing because of the closeness it is bringing.²⁴

I am a second-generation gamer, having grown up in a household that always played D&D. My own children are also roleplayers, having played in both my game and their grandmother's when she was alive. I believe that having that gaming bond kept my family close, and I hope it will continue to do so once everyone has recovered enough from my mother's death for us to resume gaming together.²⁵

[...] In our family, we have second generation players that are carrying on with the table-top tradition and will probably be seeing the third generation soon.²⁶

There is a joy in seeing people enjoy a game, television show, or any piece of popular culture that you love. It can create a special bond between sharer and recipient.

Hearing Other People's Stories

In the survey responses was a strong theme of players having begun playing after enjoying the stories that they had heard about the game.

My father, who told us stories of the games he used to play with his brother and friends. I was particularly enraptured by his illusionist character, which ended up being game-breaking when he learned to make illusions of dragons.²⁷

²³ 1131

²⁴ 7034

²⁵ 37243

²⁶ 22437

²⁷ 33220

I had friends from childhood that I reconnected with who were all in the same party and played weekly, and they had such great stories from playing²⁸

I made a good friend a few years ago who LOVES Dnd. Her group are her best friends, they do everything together, and she talks about it all the time. She loved it so much, and we like a lot of the same things, so it made me really curious about it [...] ²⁹

My brother had cool stories about his adventures. It sounded like a lot of fun. I was never allowed to play with him, because my older brother was -not- going to share his favorite hobby with his kid sister.³⁰

These stories serve as a form of casual marketing for the game – the best bits are highlighted in these tales, and it draws new players in. There is a link between these stories and the community history of D&D, as the less personal version of hearing a sibling or friend's stories of playing is hearing the legends of other players' exploits. Stories about playing D&D are a powerful force in shaping perceptions of the game.

Friends encouraged them to play or introduced them

Friends can serve as excellent spokespeople for D&D, and were commonly mentioned as the reason that players picked up D&D.

I was interested in podcasts about the game, and when I mentioned it to a friend they admitted to also being interested. As we spread it around the friend group it turned out all of us low-key wanted to try it out, so we made a campaign and gave it a go.³¹

Peer pressure from my friend group³²

Honestly I'm not sure. I didnt want to play even as all my friends got into it, and then one day I came over for a movie night and I was outvoted into doing a one-shot. So i guess i was forced. Lol³³

One of my friends brought it up to our group and we just decided to start playing³⁴

All my friends were doing it. It was either go play or hang out by myself.³⁵

²⁸ 41231

²⁹ 21283

³⁰ 21173

³¹ 34068

³² 29532

³³ 26128

³⁴ 31869

³⁵ 44055

I saw my friends play and it looked interested, they saw my interest and asked me to join.³⁶

It might be because the friends were the source of D&D exposure and that is where their interest grew from, or the friends might have pressured the person to join in. I admit that I have been guilty of pressuring a friend to join in with D&D when they were the only one who did not want to play so that they would not be left out. Possibly not the best way to get someone to start playing D&D, but as mentioned in the responses it can be effective. Friends can provide a safe space to start experimenting with D&D for players who are interested but too nervous to play in public spaces and/or with strangers.

Along with mentions of friends in general, responses often mentioned beginning to play to spend time for a specific person.

I was indulging my eventual in laws. I ended up addicted and married into it.³⁷

My sister had already been playing for a while before she suggested I play in her next campaign. It seemed like a good way to bond over collaboration and a good story.³⁸

I had a group of friends who had all moved to different cities but we wanted to still spend time together. One of them had played D&D before and offered to DM for us vitually. We've been playing every other week for about 2.5 years.³⁹

I can't really remember. My group of friends all decided we wanted to try together, and someone we had met at college was experianced enough to be our DM. It probably helped that a lot of us had minor crushes on DM, he was very cute and fun to be with... lol⁴⁰

I didn't want to play it at first. My husband had started playing it again with his childhood friends. They were playing at our house, and after a few months of listening to them & how much fun they were having, I decided to give it a try.⁴¹

³⁶ 32925

³⁷ 24586

³⁸ 43351

³⁹ 6676

⁴⁰ 36000

⁴¹ 42195

Chapter 3: Nostalgia

I loved fantasy & make believe... no serious video games were out yet (but when Legend of Zelda came out in 1986... wow!) and it captured my attention. I also might have had a slight crush on the boy who asked if I wanted to play.⁴²

[...] It also helped that i had a crush on my mates older sister and she was playing. so naturally i was going to give it a go :p⁴³

I had a crush on one of the other players and wanted to join to spend more time with them.⁴⁴

I have a completely uncool answer to this, since I didn't know any better, and was pretty young, but I had an immense crush on the DM's sister who played in the game, and wanted to spend more time with her. After about a month of sessions though, that paled in comparison to the joy we all got from the actual game.⁴⁵

A girl I was seeing at the time was very into it and sort of conned me into starting Critical Role with her and I got really caught up into this whole Nerd Fantasy Random Chance thing - the game is inherently chaotic by depending on dice rolls, and I love that the story belongs to each person at the table. It was only a matter of time before someone got me into it I think.⁴⁶

I did it originally because of a guy I liked who invited me, but it was until I played on my own that I realized I liked the storytelling and the creative outlet it was.⁴⁷

According to the survey results, crushes and infatuation can be a powerful motivator for starting to play D&D.

Wanted to play to make friends

As D&D is a social game, there was a theme in responses of players using it to meet/make new friends. When I was in the game store for Adventurer's League, I often met people who had recently moved to town and had come along to meet people.

I was living abroad and I wasn't doing well mentally - I was beginning to isolate myself from my friends - and a friend of mine messaged me out of the blue to ask if I wanted to play. I decided to say yes because I knew that I needed to get out of my apartment and connect with other people⁴⁸.

⁴² 23129

⁴³ 4630

⁴⁴ 33574

⁴⁵ 27586

⁴⁶ 12453

⁴⁷ 41106

⁴⁸ 5178

I was trying to make friends in college⁴⁹

I had a dream to become an orc. Haha no. I was just looking to make some friends haha.⁵⁰

I was invited in 1999 during my freshman year of college. I was trying to make friends. I still game with those guys.⁵¹

I moved across half the country when I left home to go to uni, I didn't know many people at the time, my housemates asked me if I wanted to join in a game, so I thought I'd give it a go. I am pretty creative and

I really liked fantasy novels, so I guess I got into it because I loved the story telling aspect of it.⁵²

I met numerous people through my university's roleplaying game club; it can be an effective way to meet many people all at once. However, experiences playing in public are not always straightforward and positive as is discussed later in this thesis.

Wanted to be like a cool relative or role model

Bearing in mind the nerdy reputation of D&D and the stereotypes around the nerdy players, I was surprised that a theme in the responses was wanting to play to be cool.

I wanted to be like my brother. His books and miniatures were SO COOL.⁵³

My sister was cool and I wanted to be just like her. I also was super into fantasy narratives - dragons, unicorns, castles. It became a natural extension of my own writing and storytelling.

All the cool kids. This means kids 3-5 years older than me were doing it. And it wasn't just D&D, but like all sorts of games from the late 80s and early 90s.⁵⁴

I adored my uncle, he was my favorite person, and I wanted to spend time with him and his friends because they were SO COOL. :)⁵⁵

This links back with the family aspects of D&D – players want to bond with a “cool” family member and spend time with them whilst playing. It is kind of sweet. I remember when we were young, my brother wanted to copy whatever I did (and that seems typical of younger siblings).

⁴⁹ 14002

⁵⁰ 26495

⁵¹ 7158

⁵² 44741

⁵³ 37373

⁵⁴ 16689

⁵⁵ 6499

A group needed an additional player, or the person did not want to be left out

This is possibly a less nostalgia-linked reason for starting to play D&D but still socially based and a common reason to start playing so it needs to be discussed. I remember often dragging people into playing because they were there, and we wanted an extra person to round out the party. Those friends often went on to play numerous sessions or long-term.

A friend asked me to play his nephews game his nephew was trying to DM for the first time and he has made a oneshot and he needed players. I did it more for his nephew more than wanting to play myself but I enjoyed it and have since then joined another campaign because I did have a lot of fun⁵⁶

Friends kept talking about wanting to start a group and needed more players on their team so asked if I was interested⁵⁷

I friend needed a spell caster for a 3E game and I was asked (told) to play.⁵⁸

I initially just played because my brother needed another player in his game but I found that I really enjoyed it.⁵⁹

My brother and dad were getting into it and needed another player⁶⁰

One of my friends desperately wanted to play and we needed an extra person in the group so I was invited to join⁶¹

A set number of people are not required to play D&D, and Wizards of the Coast have even produced rules to ease one-on-one play. However, in my experience every player has a view on the best number of people for a group. It might be for in-game party composition reasons (so that you have enough damage dealing, healing, plus a mix of ranged and melee) or it might be for chemistry reasons. I like playing with a group of five players plus the DM, I just find that the best groups I have played with have been six people. Too few people and there's not enough banter plus there can be issues where one person dominates the story. I find that with five people you get a good balance, and some social issues get smoothed out (plus there is no risk of a split party vote, there must be a majority).

⁵⁶ 12450

⁵⁷ 8078

⁵⁸ 40190

⁵⁹ 41660

⁶⁰ 41458

⁶¹ 26502

What do you enjoy playing about D&D?

One of the major themes present in the responses to the question “What do you enjoy about playing D&D” was the friendship and social benefits. A regularly scheduled D&D session offers the opportunity to catch up with friends that is more resistant to outside disruption, such as conflicting plans. Having a routine catch up with sessions helps ensure consistent contact with friends and eases the maintenance of friendships. With the arrival of online platforms, it also helps friendships over long distances. For example, after moving away the use of Roll20, Discord, and other technologies means that D&D games can continue easily.

Going on adventures with my friends. The memories and stories it creates, it sticks with you. I have very fond memories of D&D with my friends.⁶²

For me, D&D allows me to hang out with a group of friends I don't get to see very often. It's also a real working time machine to go back to my high school days. Nearly every weekend, before the big MMOs came out, I was playing D&D with all my friends. I miss it.⁶³

The reliability of D&D sessions can help facilitate deeper bonds with other players – it might be the same six people fortnightly for a couple of years. There were groups described in the survey responses that had been playing together for many decades.

[..] I'm lucky to have a steady group that has been gaming for over 30 years steadily. [..].⁶⁴

[...] I still play with friends I knew when I was 12 and lived in my hometown, I still play with people I met in college despite moving 5 hours away. [...]⁶⁵

Been gaming for close to 40 years now, all 5 editions of the game. I'm lucky to have a steady group that has been gaming for over 30 years steadily. The owners of the home where we play are also gamers, and they are in their mid 60's. I love them.⁶⁶

DND is one of my favorite past times and it has kept me connected to so many friends despite growing older. I still play with friends I knew when I was 12 and lived in my hometown, I still play with people I

⁶² 40798

⁶³ 41529

⁶⁴ 42989

⁶⁵ 10180

⁶⁶ 42989

met in college despite moving 5 hours away. And I have met new people in the new city that I wouldn't have met otherwise. DND in correct environment brings and keeps people together⁶⁷

My last group played weekly (sometimes meeting up more) for about a year before work schedules disrupted the plans. There is a difference here if players are engaged in “pick-up groups” (AKA PUGs) as with Adventurer’s League – where the group might differ for each session, but the pool of players might be semi-stable.

Totemic Texts

Proctor (2017) describes “totemic nostalgia” which is based around the concept of a “totemic object”. A totemic object is a “primary text that opens up a mnemonic conduit to an idealised history” and becomes a “deified (and reified) icon of childhood, a nostalgic conduit” (Proctor, 2017, pp. 1112, 1117). Fans might have strong affective relationship with texts that then become totemic objects for them that help them remember nostalgia-inducing periods of time in their life. For example, the idealised history might relate to an individual’s childhood and the totemic object reminds them of these times.

For me it's a nostalgia blast -- it was such a massive part of my childhood and even my 20s that I love being able to revisit that.⁶⁸

[...] Creating memories you'll carry for life - my husband still reminisces about playing D&D with his uncles when he was a young kid and how amazing it was to draw out the dungeons and fight monsters.⁶⁹

Lizardi (2014, p. 42) describes “playlist pasts” which is where personal pasts are constructed through the texts that individuals loved. This is the creation of an array of references that facilitate an understanding of our personal histories. (Lizardi, 2014, p. 42). The texts become a framework or prompts for recollection.

D&D might serve as a totemic text for those who began playing when they were younger. It is a tool or door for them to access those memories and the associated feelings. Consumption of a good can serve as a sharing experience – passing along a nostalgic memory

⁶⁷ 10180

⁶⁸ 28123

⁶⁹ 16958

from one person to someone who did not experience it themselves. For example, Coca-Cola has been released in the old-style glass bottles, and Stern (1992, p. 17) found that consumers who drank the originals wanted to share that experience inter-generationally. This desire to share emerged in the survey responses.

I went home for Christmas this year. My two teenage nephews came up to me and said, "Mom said you know a lot about Dungeons and Dragons. One of our friends is going to run a game for us once we get some dice. We have a bunch of questions." That might have been one of the best presents I've ever received. We sat down and went through all kinds of stuff. When I got home, I ordered them some dice, dice bags, and the Starter Set as a late Christmas present. Just doing my part to pass it on.⁷⁰

[...] We taught all of my daughter's friends as they grew up. My husband says that he has done his part to train the next generation of female gamers! The girls are now all in their mid to late 20s and all 8 of them still play⁷¹

"[...] I love it and have even taught my children to play modified kid versions of the game. They have been playing since they were 3 and I can see that it will be a lifelong passion for them and am so proud of that fact."⁷²

After playing the Zanzar Tem game, my whole family moved on to playing AD&D 2e as a family activity. I was 12 years old.⁷³

Many respondents mentioned their parents' D&D campaigns becoming their bedtime stories.

I sat in listening to the games my mom was running, and often ended up on the floor of my room listening through the vent after I had to go to bed. I know I was exposed to my parents' games before then, but that's my first clear memory of the game.⁷⁴

Grew up to my parents playing for years. It was my bedtime story⁷⁵

[...] Dad would tell me stories if playing it and "Hero's Quest" and it always made me want to play since the age of 5. He also told me how people (in the original editions) would take acid, think they really were dragons and jump off buildings trying to fly and splat themselves.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ 1131

⁷¹ 11253

⁷² 4723

⁷³ 25544

⁷⁴ 37871

⁷⁵ 18536

⁷⁶ 15666

Players also wrote about growing up with the game and the feeling it was a natural progression for them to have begun playing. D&D for these players did not require a moment of introduction or motivation. Just as *Monopoly* or *Scrabble* are ubiquitous in Western households, D&D became the normal game or activity for some households to engage in for entertainment.

I'm not sure. When I was a child my father would play d&d, he would even run little campaigns for us kids, so it has always been around me.⁷⁷

I've been blessed in that I'm a third generation TTRPG player in my family. My grandpa grew up playing AD&D with his cousins, he then taught my uncle who played with my dad, who then exposed me to RPGs and TTRPGs when I was a kid. My family views it like a club where I get together and play something akin to video games, but with a group of people.⁷⁸

Some of my earliest memories are hiding under the table whilst the adults played d&d when I was a small child.⁷⁹

There were themes of D&D being passed from generation to generation, but also intergenerational play.

I am a second-generation gamer, having grown up in a household that always played D&D. My own children are also roleplayers, having played in both my game and their grandmother's when she was alive. I believe that having that gaming bond kept my family close, and I hope it will continue to do so once everyone has recovered enough from my mother's death for us to resume gaming together.⁸⁰

[...] The parents I know who play dnd often play with their families so the kids are learning to play young. We've brought in family members and friends who are interested, and introduce them to the wonders of TTRPG in a comfortable environment⁸¹.

[...] In our family, we have second generation players that are carrying on with the table-top tradition and will probably be seeing the third generation soon.⁸²

⁷⁷ 4

⁷⁸ 15390

⁷⁹ 6083

⁸⁰ 37243

⁸¹ 25903

⁸² 22437

I was surprised by these replies – and their large quantity. *Scrabble* and *Monopoly* were the most intense games that my parents taught me to play despite the fact they had played the *Vampire* RPG in the 1980s. Perhaps led by my own experiences, I imagined there would be more responses where young people described introducing their parents to D&D. I ran a game once for my family and family friends – frankly it was chaos because nobody could keep the rules straight in their heads. However, years later I did successfully teach my Mum to be a D&D DM for students in the lunch program she started at the school where she worked. My prior assumptions around young adults or teens introducing their family and peers to D&D were challenged by the survey responses.

There were also responses that described knowing about the game but having to wait until they were old enough to be allowed to join in with their parents' game or have one run by a parent for them.

I was very little (4 or 5), and my parents used to go over to a friends house for game night, and they were playing D&D. I remember all the funny voices they used, and seeing the battle maps and miniatures on the table, and being told it was just like my pretend play, but for grown-ups. I would also 'help' my dad paint miniatures and make dungeon tiles out of foam blocks when he got off work. When I was a bit older (middle school) My mom bought a 3.5 starter kit for my sisters and I, while she played the dungeon master, and those games made me take the game to my college friends⁸³

[...] I got into the game when I was around 10 years old. My parents played often and as kids we were dragged around to people's houses so they could play. As we got more interested we were allowed to play. It just went from there. Now we play with family and several friends.⁸⁴

The experience of being taught to play D&D by older family members sounds like a rite of passage for these players. For those who had to wait and watch before being allowed to join in, they transition from child and observer to an active participant, player, and equal at the table. These are potentially very emotive memories for a relationship with D&D to grow out of and for D&D serve as a conduit for reliving.

⁸³ 22761

⁸⁴ 30485

Nostalgic *physical* totems

Totemic nostalgia as defined by Proctor (2017) focuses on imbuing texts with meaning, additionally I propose that objects could take on similar roles and significance. Nostalgic totems and/or souvenirs consist of material and mental attributes. They have a tangible, physical, form that is created and can be interacted with. They also have an intangible dimension that consists of the memories, feelings, and emotions that are tied to the object. D&D blends the physical with the imaginary as part of gameplay. Players rely on physical objects such as dice and character sheets to dictate outcomes. Decisions are made and play out in the “theatre of the mind” but might simultaneously be reflected on a physical board, terrain table, or drawing with miniatures.

I propose that nostalgic totems exist at the intersection of memory, object, and history. Nostalgia is an interaction between memory and history. History and objects interact to create museum displays. An element of memory is missing from museums because the person viewing the collection does not typically have memories of the events being shown (though there are obviously occasions where this is not true). Nostalgic totems (and souvenirs) are objects that are imbued with history, memories, and some level of emotion which manifests in the form of nostalgia. In the case of D&D, these physical objects are the rulebooks, character sheets, dice, miniatures, terrain pieces, notebooks, and accessories that facilitate and shape play. Dice have become a symbol of tabletop gaming – the polyhedral dice sets are an iconic and distinctive element. The twenty-sided dice (d20) is integral to gameplay, as the outcomes of all player actions are decided by the roll of a d20.

Nostalgic or totemic objects have many similarities with souvenirs because of their role in memory practices. Souvenirs are brought home from travel, journeys, and pilgrimages to extend the memory of the events and allow the consumer to “possess, control, and confine the ephemeral experience of the pilgrimage at home” (Cross, 2017, p. 105). Nostalgia “associated with possessions” can serve as a touchstone or totem for accessing nostalgic memories that are important to self-concept and identity (Stern, 1992, p. 18). These objects vary from a carefully curated selection of miniatures on a desk, the event-related clothing merchandise hanging in a wardrobe, to the character figures displayed in a lounge room. They represent the totality of an experience “by substituting it with a fragment” but are able to

bring the whole memory back to life (Haldrup, 2017, p. 57). Souvenirs can be linked not just to a place, but a time of life and a state of being (Cross, 2017, p. 103). They relate to a lived experience beyond the everyday but can also undergo transformations as they are integrated into life through their changing roles (Haldrup, 2017, p. 56).

Any object can become a souvenir providing they have been imbued with “meaning and consequences” and are metonymic of an event, experience, or location (Swanson & Timothy, 2012, p. 490). Ordinary objects purchased during travel can become souvenirs, for example when an item is left at home and has to be replaced specifically for the trip (Swanson & Timothy, 2012, p. 490). It is the personal relationship that is formed with a souvenir that gives it authenticity and makes it distinct from a meaningless trinket (Swanson & Timothy, 2012, p. 491). Objects serve as markers to show others who we are but also as reminders to ourselves of our self-concepts because they are personal storehouses of meaning (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988, pp. 531, 532). Items that were once novelty or junk become “treasured nostalgia” through their association with a fad, craze, or “a cluster of events and relationships” (Cross, 2017, p. 101). A nostalgic totem or souvenir’s “generic-ness” does not negatively impact its ability to be imbued with social meaning and to “hold place-based associations” (Peters, 2011, p. 253). Peters (2011, p. 253) found that research participants treasured even seemingly “banal” souvenirs. For example, a t-shirt from a convention might initially remind its owner of that specific convention and the events there. Over time, the memories attached might blur and undergo an abstraction where it reminds the wearer of a personal moment when they were confident, met lots of people, or saw a special person. Repeated wearing of the same t-shirt to other conventions might then make the t-shirt an object of souvenir for many different events and times. The t-shirt is then a totemic object that can elicit nostalgia not just for the event it was initially purchased to remember but subsequent notable wearing. Nostalgic totem possessions might seem to be clutter or junk to everyone other than owner (or other members of the fandom) because they cannot access the layered meanings associated with the item(s).

Objects that have been imbued with memory can impact emotions, “moods, sentiments, and imaginations (Haldrup, 2017, p. 57). S. Peterson (2015, p. 150) suggests that replica objects from popular franchises (official merchandise or homemade) can go beyond just serving as a reminder of an enjoyed series. They might enable a performance and be

talismans – “telos” meaning end” and “telein” being to perform a rite in Late Greek (S. Peterson, 2015, p. 133). They “allow their users to enact or embody attributes” that they might not consider part of their typical ability or personality and therefore hold a psychological significance for the user (S. Peterson, 2015, p. 133). Through the use of a souvenir, the owner is able to frame their memories and emotions in a manner that they control (Haldrup, 2017, p. 58). The souvenir becomes a type of symbolic frame that affects how the experiences is remembered. The object becomes an actor in the remembering process as it influences the process by “actively interrupting and intervening” (Haldrup, 2017, p. 59). Objects also can make the remembering come about in a manner in which the owner or beholder is not entirely in control of (Haldrup, 2017, p. 59).

The public meaning of an object can be overwritten or replaced by the personal meaning in which it becomes meshed (Morgan & Pritchard, 2005, p. 34). A tea towel might publicly be an object for drying dishes, but personally it is a tool for remembering the lost loved-one who gifted it or a trip shared with an important person. Peters (2011, p. 253) found that souvenirs that were related to “close social relationships” were held as having the greatest importance for their owners. For D&D players, a miniature might remind them of a friend’s character, or they might treasure the dice set that a parent gave them for their first session. The miniature or dice might then remind the owner not only of a positive D&D experience but of a special person.

[...] My Dad used to play about 35 years ago, he gave me his old books and dice when I started.⁸⁵

I love the community which exists around this game and others like it - I visited an opening of a gaming cafe with my daughter who is 3 where I bought her a set of dice she liked, the strangers in the queue were so excited at seeing this⁸⁶

My dad played when I was very little (like less then 5) and I have all his books from 1e and 2e. [...] ⁸⁷

Shiny dice make click clack sound. My father started playing in the late 70. I was born in the late eighties. I grew up around the books, manuals, miniatures, all of it. When he had people over to play(family friends and aunts and uncles) he would let me roll the dice for the monster attacks. [...] ⁸⁸.

⁸⁵ 34216

⁸⁶ 42904

⁸⁷ 17331

⁸⁸ 22761

Souvenirs date back thousands of years to when “Egyptians, Romans, and other explorer-travellers brought mementos home from their journeys abroad” (Swanson & Timothy, 2012, p. 489). The modern souvenir tradition is often linked to the relics collected by Christian pilgrims on their visits to sacred sites (Swanson & Timothy, 2012, p. 489). The collection of sacred objects can be integral to a pilgrimage and the worship that is part of it. For example, the traditional collection of water from Lourdes for family members or friends who cannot make the trip themselves. Some elements of this consumption behaviour can be seen in the collection of convention-exclusive objects. For example, *Gen Con* creates a set of dice every year for the convention. People who attend the convention often purchase these to share with friends back home as a memento. What is being shared? The recipient has no memories of being at the convention to be evoked by using the dice. Instead, the dice are linked to the person and the idea of making the pilgrimage to a massive event in gaming.

Souvenirs facilitate a symbolic movement between the “mundane, ordinary and profane bounds of home, and the extraordinary ‘sacred’ places and ‘other’ times associated with their travels” (Swanson & Timothy, 2012, p. 492). Nostalgic totems can enable a similar movement between the mundanity of life and an “other time.” The time is not necessarily travel, but a moment in time that the individual wants to revisit.

I guess, deep down, I really miss playing with toys like I did when I was a kid. I found Dnd and it allowed me recapture the fun of worldbuildingn rulemakeing and cooperative storytelling just like I used to with my toys.⁸⁹

It's fun and it's like the pretend games that me and my sister used to play as kids except it also has rules and regulations so my adult brain doesn't whine that we're being childish. Also it's nice to pretend like we could go on an adventure and not be stuck in hometown america with dead end jobs for the rest of our lives.⁹⁰

It is a great game and I love these kinds of games. It just took me back to my childhood when we would play cowboys and Indians, pirates, building forts and protecting them. [...]⁹¹

It has been a wonderful experience to relive AD&D (1E) as an adult with my own children⁹²

⁸⁹ 12366

⁹⁰ 40932

⁹¹ 14564

⁹² 40745

Escapism is a significant aspect of playing D&D. Players can immerse themselves in another world where they are someone else. Interacting with a totem that evokes nostalgia for events in-game or a character's personality can induce an escapist nostalgia. In my experience, it is common for players to launch into recounting exciting adventures that they and their characters experienced when complimented on the character's well-painted miniature. That is obviously a more public sharing of memories, but it happens on a private scale too.

Marcoux (2016) conducted research into souvenirs that people have kept or collected of the events of September 11th 2001. An ambiguous relationship can exist with memory objects that can bring memories back against the owner's will (Marcoux, 2016, p. 962). Marcoux (2016, p. 962) describes interviewees "knew that it was possible to lose control of remembering". It was a common practice for people to have discarded memory objects that they "associated with the tragic events that they did not want to remember" (Marcoux, 2016, p. 961). Memory objects that cannot be controlled must be removed or hidden to avoid negative experiences. Marcoux (2016, p. 951) challenged the idea that "human beings do not keep, treasure, or collect objects associated with persons, places, and events that they do not want to remember". Instead, it is far more complicated, and humans might keep objects that remind them of moments they would rather forget. This could be due to a sense of obligation to remember because it would be somehow wrong to forget what had happened. One of Marcoux's (2016, p. 957) participants described feeling that it "would be wrong to forget the tragedy" (September 11th) and as such kept photographs of the towers from before the attacks that she otherwise would have discarded, despite being uncomfortable with the idea of keeping souvenirs of the events.

Those interviewed by Marcoux (2016, p. 962) displayed a reluctance to throw away souvenirs, because they had a sense of "responsibility toward the past" and a "duty to be memory keepers". Objects might seldom be taken out of storage, but they are purposefully and intentionally kept. Marcoux (2016, p. 958) asks "How does keeping – "deliberately" not throwing away – memory objects that one never looks at constitute a memory practice?". For many, there is a comfort that comes from having a personal hoard of memory objects or totemic objects that can be pursued, pulled out, used, and then put neatly back away again. On a sad day, it is possible to rummage through a box of old toys or souvenirs and clutch them tight whilst mulling over the memories they evoke. Nostalgic reminiscing can take on a

bittersweetness as the memories evoke happiness for the fact the events or time happened – but a deep sadness that they cannot ever happen again in the same way. It can be confronting to remember that you will never be that person again because time has changed the context. If the memories involve a person who is no longer around due to death or other reasons, then that can be challenging emotionally. These totems or objects must be managed carefully because they can bring joy or sadness depending on how they are used. This means that for some objects, displaying them is not a viable option because the owner might not want to be bombarded with these feelings whenever they see them. The best option then becomes to tuck the objects away because to discard them does not feel like an option, but nor does display.

Marcoux (2016, p. 960) describes the practice of constructing “forgetful memories” where souvenirs are used to highlight only certain features of history whilst “downplaying, excluding, and suppressing difficult memories”. Souvenirs can also be used to provide “an image frozen in time”; for a positive moment this might allow for revisiting, but for a negative event it might focus on “the way it was before” (Marcoux, 2016, p. 959). They can reflect a yearning for the past and to a time where events and memories take on a nostalgic glow. For those who have faced negativity and exclusion when approaching D&D, souvenirs of times when they felt included might take on significance. These objects can be weaponised against feelings of rejection because they are proof of times that were positive, and the owner/user was accepted. There is the potential to then downplay or squash the memories of unpleasant events and highlight the good times. It is as though the owner is landscaping their memories – trimming back or weeding plants that are unwelcome or too prominent whilst watering the positive. I think this can be necessary for a continued relationship with D&D. If the memories of exclusion and abuse are too strong then the player might not be able to keep engaging with the game for emotional reasons, even if they intellectually want to persist. This could be particularly true for how the D&D community chooses to collectively remember women’s past experiences with the game and players. Whilst D&D is now putting forward messages of inclusivity, it has not always been that way.

Nostalgia & The Old School Renaissance

Dungeons & Dragon's popularity has fluctuated over its history, and it is currently experiencing a massive surge. This may not be the first revival of D&D, with one person's survey response suggesting there was a revival in the 90's and this is in fact the third period of popularity. The perception that D&D is in a resurgence was common with survey participants:

[...] Towards the 21st century, the game was beginning to die out but was suddenly revived through various streaming sites [...]⁹³

Just that it was popular in the 80's and has had a revival recently, especially within the queer community and as a result of pop culture⁹⁴

Tannock (1995, p. 454) proposed key tropes central to nostalgic rhetoric: "the notion of a Golden Age and a subsequent Fall, the story of the Homecoming, and the pastoral". For many, D&D's Golden age would be the TSR-era, when Gygax was still heavily involved.

I've been playing since the original boxed set was distributed. In my experience, the best of D&D was the 1970's Advanced Dungeons and Dragons three book set⁹⁵.

D&D is far from the game it was back in '79. And I mean that in a bad way.⁹⁶

Then the "fall" would be when TSR hit financial trouble, Williams took over, and it was sold to Wizards of the Coast. The third edition of D&D (the first created under the helm of WOTC) was not well received and would be part of this "fall". The story of the Homecoming might be fifth edition, which has been D&D's peak in popularity. Fifth edition is more closely aligned with D&D's original gameplay values (fun over rules) than the rule heavy third edition and the video game style approach taken with fourth edition.

The re-emergence of D&D was typically mentioned in conjunction with pop culture and streaming (*Critical Role* particularly). *Critical Role's* involvement is viewed as important for many players – with one saying:

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⁹⁵ 39739

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The moment it's [sic] current presence in the cultural consciousness began was when Felicia Day gave Critical Role a platform as part of her company Geek and Sundry, and the world got to know the genius that is Matthew Mercer.⁹⁷

Part of these undulations in popularity are a natural process, as cultural objects cascade “from popular culture to unpopular culture, and from unpopular culture to popular culture” (Brabazon & Redhead, 2013). However, we are also facing a new wave of remaking/rebooting practices – of adaptation (Proctor, 2014, p. 19).

Geeky, but I sense it has turned a corner and it becoming cool. I've thought about why this may be. Is it "retro cool" in the same way that music on vinyl is making a comeback?⁹⁸

In 2020, it's a mixture of many who see it as a retro cool thing (aided by the celebrity players, references in pop culture, etc), and a good few who still view it as a hobby for basement-dwelling neckbeard types.⁹⁹

It's become super popular because of Stranger Things. I think it's had a huge resurgence in the last few years due to the whole “80s throwback” cultural trend of the 2010s. I don't think people look at it as a super nerdy thing anymore.¹⁰⁰

These days, there's a more positive, almost nostalgic feel about D&D. Older non-players tend to view D&D as a cultural throwback to the 80s and 90s. Younger non-players are curious about D&D and its players, perhaps having seen it shown in Stranger Things or having it pop up on mainstream tv talk shows (Colbert) and other places.¹⁰¹

Popular culture is fixated on its history and past, rich with nostalgia and “retromania” (Garda, 2013, p. 1). Modern culture is “composed of sequels, reruns, remakes, revivals, reissues, ... recreations, re-enactments, adaptations, anniversaries, memorabilia, oldies radio, and nostalgia record collections” (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 32). Lizardi (2014, p. 52) proposes this is because the entertainment industry generally “believes shows that trigger or reify a nostalgic view of the past are a safe bet for programming”. Remake/reboot culture is evident D&D's Old-School Renaissance.

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Proctor (2017) uses the example of the 2016 Ghostbusters remake, which elicited a strong negative response from ‘fans’ who complained the reboot was ruining their childhood. These complaints are common in fandoms when there is a reboot, remake, or retroactive changes to the subject of the fandom (Proctor, 2017, p. 1117). For these fans, Ghostbusters had become a “discursive foundation in the architecture of self-narrative” (Proctor, 2017, p. 1117). The narrative of their childhood is inextricably linked to Ghostbusters and a threat to the text, is a potential threat to their self-identity and memories (Proctor, 2017, p. 1117). There is the perception that to protect themselves, they must prevent any alteration to the totemic item. The fan’s childhood is “safe and secure in real times” but there is a symbolic threat to the “memories associated with such an important and fundamental aspect of growing up” (Proctor, 2017, p. 1118). Whilst the relationship with a totemic object is typically formed in childhood, this is not always the case, and it can be linked with other momentous time periods in life. The massively multiplayer online roleplaying game World of Warcraft (WoW) has undergone significant changes, and the biggest came with the expansion pack called Cataclysm. Pre-Cataclysm WoW is referred to as WoW Classic, and the release of official servers on which to play the classic version of the game was met with mixed emotions (Toft-Nielsen, 2019). Whilst players were excited to return to the version of the game they remembered fondly, there was also an element of trepidation. For players interviewed by Toft-Nielsen (2019, p. 12), poor execution of WoW Classic “could possibly threaten the sanctity of the totemic object and thereby the memories associated with it. This would then impact the players self-narrative built upon fan-status of WoW and the memories of playing.

5e is better than 4e, but 4e was terrible. I'm glad 3/3.5 existed, as it brought people back to D&D. But, in my humble opinion, "real D&D" is either original "basic" D&D (B/X, BECMI, Rules Cyclopedia, etc) or AD&D (I don't like it as much, but it at least had the same spirit as Basic D&D deep down).¹⁰²

[...] I know it was at its best in 2nd edition, and has sharply gone downhill since the Wizards of the Coast buyout of TSR. It's not really their fault, they're trying to keep a dying industry alive by re-inventing it but it just doesn't feel like old school D&D anymore. Without Critical Role, The Guild, and Stranger Things, I wonder if it would still exist.¹⁰³

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“Old-School Renaissance” (OSR) is a D&D subculture that supports a return to classic D&D (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 442). It began in the mid-2000’s when a section of the community began to play AD&D-style (Advanced D&D, an older edition) rules and modules rather than the third or 3.5 editions of D&D that were available (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 442). Gygax himself stated that “There is no relationship between 3E and original D&D, or OAD&D for that matter. Different games, style, and spirit” (Gygax, 2002). He encouraged people to play each game to grasp all the differences because it was too complicated to explain adequately (Gygax, 2002). The third edition of D&D was a different enough game that it did not meet the needs or desires of many existing players. The Old-School Renaissance movement spawned blogs, forums, fanzines, and even publishers dedicated to producing this version of D&D products. The Old-School Reference and Index Compilation (OSRIC) was developed by a group of gamers to produce a version of AD&D into print and to be used for new modules (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 445). The OSRIC is a retroclone, “a simulacrum” restating the original rules with close compatibility – it is not identical, but has been slightly altered (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 445). Lowenthal (2015, p. 114) wrote that “Being ancient makes things precious by proximity to beginnings”. This is possibly the case for the OSR materials because although they are not “genuine” and are instead recreations of the original materials, they do have a sort of proximal relationship to the origins of D&D. They are the closest that modern players will come to the D&D gameplay experience that the first players had, and are a taste of the ancient beginnings of D&D. Just like medieval re-enactments, these OSR players are re-enacting the original games of D&D.

Expedition Retreat Press produces the Advanced Adventures series of modules that are inspired by late 1970s to early 1980s D&D aesthetics and philosophy (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 442). OSR/AD&D is lighter on rules and relies more on the skill of the player than fourth edition (which was the current edition when OSR began to gain traction) or even fifth edition (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 462). Fourth edition’s emphasis on rules-heavy character creation leads to min-maxing of characters (manipulation of character statistics for advantages) and slows down gameplay (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 462). The nostalgia-driven OSR products stand in challenge to modern editions of D&D and the values of the culture around it (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 466). When designing fifth edition, Jeremy Crawford wanted the game to feel like the same game as back in the 70’s and 80’s (Gilsdorf,

2019). This is a stark contrast to fourth edition which was so stuffed with rules that “it might better resemble a video game” (Jahromi, 2017). This was an approach that Gyga predicted in 2007, when he wrote ““It seems likely to me that the WotC designers will do their utmost to make an appealing game for those that love playing online, one that is passable to those that enjoy actual RPGing” (Gygax, 2007). (Fourth edition was announced in mid-2007 and released in 2008) WOTC are undoubtedly aware of the OSR, and the change in approach for fifth edition might have been an attempt to tap into the nostalgic sentiment.

Advanced Adventures draws heavily on the aesthetic of early AD&D, using a specific style of artwork for their covers to signal the link between their creations and the classics. The art-style used by TSR in their adventure modules has been “fetishized” by the D&D subculture down to the “minute details” (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 446).

I have long contended that the less "professional" an edition's artwork is, the more fun it will be to play.¹⁰⁴

There was a belief that the “campier the cover art, or the worse the predicament of the adventurers portrayed in the cover scene, the better the adventure.” (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 446). Adventurers were often “thin-armed and weak-kneed” compared to the confident muscular heroes of modern D&D which reflects a common opinion that D&D has become more about character-skills than shrewd player-ability (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, pp. 450, 452). There are values and meanings imbued in the old-school D&D aesthetic. This aesthetic “retroscape” is used to sell modern products by evoking the feeling of nostalgia for an idealised version of AD&D (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 446). De Groot (2006, p. 391) wrote that in the last decade history “has become a leisure activity as never before”. It is consumed through popular culture, historical novels, television drama, and the internet (De Groot, 2006, p. 391). OSR D&D is an example of leisure activity and history colliding for the purpose of consuming the past.

Gillespie and Crouse (2012, p. 465) explain the appeal of retrogaming as being linked to the fact D&D is an important first for many gamers. It is often the first experience of tabletop roleplaying games, and for the gamers of the 1970's it meant being part of an evolving exciting movement. They write “much of the nostalgia for old-school D&D is the

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desire to reexperience the liminality of that first play experience” (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 465). It can be a “profound” experience the first time you enter a dungeon, or “sneak past an orc guard” or have to roll your first death saving roll to keep your character alive (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 465). Although D&D can remain an exciting experience full of new experiences to share, there is nothing quite like those first times and a desire to see the game like a naive wide-eyed new player can be alluring. Retrogaming or nostalgic content can help tap into those early experiences and assist the reminiscing. Nostalgia can be a temporal bridge between the past and present, linking them and collapsing the distinctions between them (Proctor, 2017, p. 114).

I enjoy the game very much. I game with the same core group of people I started with 40 years ago. We still play 2nd edition AD&D.¹⁰⁵

By playing the same game with the same people for 40 years, the gaming table becomes a bubble that insulates the players from time. When they sit down together to play, it almost transcends the now as it is a reflection and amalgamation of 40 years of sessions. Rather than moving to new games or editions, the players attempt to restore moments to keep them alive. There is some “artistic license” taken when individuals “sculpt” their nostalgic memories (Zhou et al., 2012, p. 46). This means that elements might be overlooked whilst others are overemphasised to create an ideal version of the memory. For example, players might overlook the sexist rules in 1st edition and the exclusionary atmosphere, instead focusing on the fun they had with friends. As such, remake culture “serves to recreate, pacify, and distract, thereby reaffirming dominant ideologies and a hegemony of the past that seeks to encourage an engagement with the past that is uncritical and defined by surface-level differences between texts.” (Lizardi, 2014, p. 42). There can be a “collective, social or cultural memory” that serves to legitimise, change, and spread memories “within particular sociocultural environments” (Pickering & Keightley, 2006, p. 922). The cultural memories of early D&D might become only stories of good-natured fun between friends, silencing the voices of those who might have been unwelcome at tables or excluded because they do not fit within the ideal narrative.

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Many of the gamers who first played D&D in the mid-1970s and 1980s, now desire to return to the game (if they stopped playing). This is motivated by a desire to share their experiences with their children, friends, and family (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 464).

My children play and had a chance to join our 30 year old campaign last summer. They are 23 and 25 years old. I felt like a kid again and great bonding with my adult children.¹⁰⁶

As an older player, most of the players in my experience are either new to the game, or coming back to it. But I remember that it was something that people were doing for fun when they were kids. So it's for nostalgic purposes. Then there's a couple of us who have never left the game. We're the ones who are taking our kids to Gen Con.¹⁰⁷

[...] I've noticed a lot of old skoolers like myself who go, 40 yo and up, who are possibly being nostalgic and reliving parts of their youth. [...]¹⁰⁸

The mystique of it. Then later the nostalgia, when I picked it back up.¹⁰⁹

Escapism from an unhappy childhood. When I came back to it, it wasn't escapism but nostalgia and wanting a shared face-to-face experience.¹¹⁰

Old-school D&D modules like Advanced Adventures help these gamers by providing a product closer to the nostalgia-imbued editions they would have played whilst being more accessible. Modern D&D is often positioned as being “unsatisfying” and/or “overly-complex” for old-school gamers and is too heavily influenced by the “hero-play of massively multiplayer online role-playing games” (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 462).

I feel like the current edition of D&D is popular because of the internet, pod and video casts, the ease of play, and celebrity endorsements. I do feel that the game is quite overpowered, and that every character can do everything. This might be because of video game culture. The older editions were MUCH deadlier, and I like it that way, so I have made up several “house rules” to add a bit of grit to my current game.¹¹¹

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The original game from 1974 is completely different from the modern 5e version. It started to drift in the 1990's. It is now vertically unrecognisable to the intent of the original so I expect the answers you get from players of OD&D, B/X, BECMI, and 1e. Will be very different than from those that have only played 2e to 5e. It is sad that the original concept has been lost.¹¹²

The rules-light OSRIC (Old School Reference and Index Compilation) is a recreation of first edition or Advanced D&D) "emphasizes the cleverness of the player over the abilities and skills of the character" (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 462).

Heavily influenced by reviewing of OSR books on "The Questing Beast" youtube channel. Ben Milton would point out the things that OSR books excel at that books for modern, 5th edition D&D largely ignored: challenge, risk, environments full of things to interact with, puzzle solving, and problems that aren't going to be solved by just looking at your character sheet and rolling a die. Adventures where your own wits as a player are more important than whatever skills, feats, or "character build" you've made. I can't go back to playing the way that post 3rd edition D&D emphasizes now.¹¹³

It is a different approach to the game and the "broader the perceived gap between the past and contemporary editions of the game, the greater the nostalgic yearning for products like the Advanced Adventures." (Gillespie & Crouse, 2012, p. 462).

The enduring popularity of the older D&D modules is partially attributable to the amount of play and re-play they received. Until WOTC took over D&D, the number of adventures being published were relatively small and then the ability for players to get their hands on the games was limited (David, 2019). Pre-internet distribution and during TSR's control of D&D, the number of physical copies being produced was limited. For those who lived outside of the US or whose local game store did not stock the products, then there might only be few modules that were accessible. Between 1978 and 1982, TSR were only publishing 7 adventure modules a year and these could all be completed in about a day's worth of play (David, 2019). Fans tended to replay the same set of adventures repeatedly. The early D&D modules were also very innovative, and they introduced many of the concepts that modern D&D modules rely on. For example, they were the first dungeon-crawls, strongholds, and deathtraps (*Tomb of Horrors* is an iconic module). They introduced settings like the

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“Underdark” (David, 2019). When D&D fans were asked to rate adventures, it was found that 20 of the top 30 modules/adventures came from 1985 or earlier (David, 2019).

The popularity of Old-School Renaissance D&D lies in ideas of nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia serves to restore moments of the past to keep them alive whilst reflective nostalgia leaves the subject in the past whilst longing for some aspect of it (Garda, 2013, p. 2). The old-school D&D titles are examples of restorative nostalgia because they refurbish or remake the subject of nostalgia for current consumption and enjoyment. Attempts to resurrect an object to give an accurate and faithful experience of its initial consumption are inherently flawed (Garda, 2013, p. 3). It can be hugely difficult to define what the original experience or object was or should be because there is an element of opinion and subjectivity. Personal nostalgia describes a longing for a past that the individual has actually lived or experienced, whilst vicarious nostalgia is not been personally experienced (Merchant & Rose, 2013, p. 2621). Remakes can give the illusion of a shared past through the shared consumption of a nostalgic product or text (Lizardi, 2014, p. 49). They allow newer players to feel as though they are part of a period in D&D’s history they were not around for. Players can vicariously tap into that sense of community and history to bolster their sense of belonging. To do so necessitates a level of fantasy, because direct experience cannot be leveraged as a source of knowledge (Merchant & Rose, 2013, p. 2621). A past beyond our own experience can be “as nostalgically comforting as times actually experienced” and we end up having memories that we do not actually possess (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 39). There is a process where moments in history “arch beyond the individual” and become part of a collective or community memory (Brabazon, 1999, p. 2). OSR allows the individual to tap into moments that once were private or personal but have become larger and more general community experiences.

Wizards of the Coast released *Art & Arcana: A Visual History* which included a history of D&D told through iconic imagery. The special edition includes a reproduction “pamphlet-sized, unpublished original version of the game’s most infamous adventure module and deathtrap *Tomb of Horrors*” (WOTC, 2018). The official Amazon listing for *Art and Arcana* includes reviews from famous nerds and D&D fans who gush about how much they loved the collection of artworks. The first review is from Matt Mercer who writes “Whether you got to experience the birth of *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* and want to relive that origin spark, or are new to the community and would love to adventure through the visual chronicle of its past,

present, and future... I cannot recommend this book enough" (Amazon, 2018). In a similar vein, Ernie Cline's review says, "The images contained in this book will instantly transport you back to your childhood, and conjure up memories of long forgotten adventures shared with old friends around the gaming table" (Amazon, 2018). Reading the reviews, themes emerge of revisiting past experiences and gaining access to a part of D&D's long history that otherwise would be inaccessible. Through the purchasing of this product, there is the sense that the reader can be a part of history or use the book to evoke nostalgic reminiscing (even if they were not actually there).

Consumers of nostalgic media are not encouraged to compare the past to the present in a critical way, examining what is different, but instead embrace golden glow of the past. Consumers might "bask in the glory of the past in the hope that some of it will magically rub off" (Stern, 1992, p. 15). There can be a "flattened distinction between the past and present" in nostalgic media (Lizardi, 2014, p. 42). Subjects, texts, and brands from the past are presented as being "persistently relevant" and they may cause a yearning for a return to the past (Lizardi, 2014, p. 42). There is an element of escape "from the here and now" into a time that is perceived to be in some way superior or less stressful (Stern, 1992, p. 13). The exoticness of the past is supposed to stand in contrast with our humdrum or unhappy present day (Lowenthal, 2015, p. 4). This is a "dopey nostalgia for a non-existent past" (Potter, 2010, p. 270). In considering our tendency towards looking back, Simon (2011, p. xiv) questions if it is a result of a stagnation culturally or if it is stopping our movement forward. It could be a vicious cycle – by looking to the past we stop moving forward which means look back for excitement, but this stops progress and the creation of new dynamic movement.

Old-School Renaissance D&D players can be thought of as engaging in a form of historical re-enactment.

I know a lot as my group goes back to 1980. We have been called a living history snapshot of a true old school game.¹¹⁴

They have chosen a period and are trying to perform as those who were present for the chosen events – in this case early D&D games and gamers. Just as medieval re-enactments are altered by modern sensibilities, so are the OSR resources. Re-enactments are limited by

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discrepancies between the ideologies and experiences of the target identity and the real identity. For example, De Groot (2006, p. 395) describes a British organisation whose members re-enact as Nazi German soldiers. They are not allowed to ever perform the Nazi salute and the organisation distances themselves politically from right-wing and racist politics (De Groot, 2006, p. 395). The re-enactor lacks the motivation of Nazism and therefore fails to facilitate an understanding of the past, but rather “enables an othering, a distancing of the past” (De Groot, 2006, p. 395). There is an acknowledgement then that we can understand facts of the past (to a degree), but not the true motivations of those involved. Just as the OSR players might re-enact early D&D games through their use of the rules, they cannot truly empathise with the players who experience those games. Any perceived authenticity is an illusion because it is impossible to achieve. The OSR players approach the game with a level of preconceived notions and desires born from knowledge of that era of the game and what has come since. Nostalgic desires have driven their decision to play OSR rather than the later editions whereas the original players of the first edition had no other options to select from. The early adopters of D&D had a level of innocence about the game that is impossible to recreate and simulate.

What are we nostalgic for?

Nostalgia is not just straight recollection or precise translation of the past into the future because it is loaded with emotion and the inaccuracies introduced through the processes of recollection. In a comparable manner to the creation of multiplicity of histories through purpose-driven retellings, nostalgic reminiscences serve to reshape the past and our relationships with it. Nostalgia preserves select aspects of the past whilst less popular or undesirable elements are left to get buried.

When I think about my early days of playing D&D, I do so with a wistful fondness and that strangely pervasive yearning for a simpler time. It was the first two years of university and I had moved in with people I barely knew but who became family. My first group was made up of the people I lived with and then we added people who would come hang out so much that they basically lived with us in the share house too. We played frequently – almost every opportunity – and D&D discussions dominated the house. The housemate who became our DM became obsessed and read everything he could access. Our sessions would start

whenever we could drag the DM out of bed (often 5 minutes before we agreed the session would start), we would then play through lunch and dinner. Macca's runs or pizza orders were common. There is a warm fuzziness around the idea of my group of close friends sitting around and playing together for 6 to 8 hours at a time.

D&D dominated my social life at that time, and I spent several hours a week playing up at the university with groups from the tabletop roleplaying club (that my friends started). I met different people and did not say no to any invitation to play. I remember it as being busy but fun – laughing, inside jokes, and crazy adventures. When I tell people about when I started playing D&D, I paint an enviable picture. It is how I default to thinking about those days. But if I am honest, there is a reason that time ended, and those groups fell apart. There was an abundance of rules arguments. I was part of the problem because I vacillated between rules lawyer and a more relaxed stance whenever it suited me. (Not that I was the only one) We were all immature, resulting in bitterness whenever events went awry. I was often the only woman in the groups I played with, but I did not realise how lonely that made me. There was pressure to 'be one of the boys', make crude jokes, and not be a buzzkill when I wasn't happy. And those perfect 8-hour sessions? The novelty wore off. We started to disconnect and not pay polite attention when it was not our turns. I was guilty of using my phone to scroll endlessly through Tumblr whilst sitting at the table. But that is not what I tend to recall. I enjoyed this time of my life, however when I engage critically with those memories, it is more complex. It was not all roleplaying and roses.

On a greater scale, nostalgia can contribute to the marginalisation from history of less dominant or popular groups. The positive aspects of memories are accentuated whilst the negatives might slip from view because they do not fit in nostalgic framings. This is particularly important for vicarious nostalgia where individuals are engaging with a community level history that is presented potentially by unreliable narratives or accessed through second-hand accounts with dubious reliability or agendas. Typically, the consumption of nostalgia laden products for D&D is vicarious, because most players were not present in the beginning of D&D or even the first two decades. They are relying on a reconstructed fiction of D&D's past to be nostalgic for in their consumption of products or experiences that claim historical authenticity or access to that time somehow.

I thought it was important to include some survey responses that challenge the portrayal of the “good ol’ days” of D&D that are pushed through popular culture portrayals and products like the OSR. (These responses are about playing D&D in public)

I grew up in an era when D&D was a bad thing (boy has that ever changed)` and am still not out of that mindset. I would always play in a private residence` and do not tell a lot of people about playing¹¹⁵

Back in the 80s and 90s I used to hid the fact that I played. Now I am much more open about it. I have played dnd in pubs and shops inn resent years. I feel more comfortable with it now.¹¹⁶

I love it. It is empowering after a few decades early on in which my friends and I were mocked by stupid people.¹¹⁷

Very uncomfortable. I come from the generation where D&D was associated with Satanism` drug abuse` and murder. Monsters and Mazes with Tom Hanks came out at the peak of my roleplaying life.¹¹⁸

Honestly` it makes me nervous. I started playing in the 80s when RPG was frowned upon/deviant. I gave it up in college to try to change my identity` but started back up in grad school. Anyway` it feels weird being "out" playing.¹¹⁹

[...] Back in the 80s and 90s? You could expect mockery, at best, if you were 'outed' as a D & D player. Shunning, hazing, and even physical assault/torture (within limits permitted by adult authority figures like coaches) were not unrealistic things to fear ("Let those boys toughen him up a bit"). In other words: if you liked D & D, you kept your mouth shut about it.¹²⁰

I know that in the 80s it was demonised by the church. My dad was forced to burn his DnD books a couple times when he was young.¹²¹

I was told at a young age, when expressing interest in playing d&d that it wasn't for girls. That I would never 'get it', and go play with some dolls¹²²

¹¹⁵ 21998

¹¹⁶ 22855

¹¹⁷ 38137

¹¹⁸ 35292

¹¹⁹ 11244

¹²⁰ 37065

¹²¹ 30640

¹²² 2242

In the 80s when I started, and now at some conventions I feel like I have had to prove I am worthy. Girls weren't welcome at first, and unfortunately women are treated as a sort of half-oddity/half-sex toy at some cons. We're expected to be unfamiliar with the rules and need help; and to flirt with the boys. Not happening.¹²³

Not by the groups (see above), but when I was younger in the 80s when I started you couldn't be a girl and admit you liked AD&D (advanced Dungeons & Dragons was it's title for 2nd edition in the 80s) or anime or video games. If you did you got bullied. So I just stuck with my friends who understood me and we're into it too. No one at school knew about my hobbies.¹²⁴

For women or other marginalised groups, their experiences of exclusion are often ignored in nostalgic histories because they are too do not fit with the rose tinted feelgood narrative. The desire for an idealised past to escape to creates a risk of losing the difficult and uncomfortable aspects. There is a need to challenge the fanciful nostalgia-laden versions of history and products that serve to erase the struggles that marginalised groups are still experiencing.

Conclusion

The survey findings reinforced the relevance of nostalgia as it became evident that players were most frequently introduced to D&D by friends or family members. From the very introduction to D&D there is an element of emotional connection through association of the game with someone personally important. In the long history of Dungeons & Dragons, the game's popularity has waxed and waned with its position eventually shifting from marginal to popular culture. An undeniable part of D&D's current popularity is linked to our cultural obsession with the past and reflecting on a rose-tinted simpler time. D&D is easily linked to "simpler" times because it requires no technology or devices to be played and so seems to be linked to a perceived increase authenticity of play. This trend is reflected in the increasing popularity of board games as a mainstream pastime. D&D has an established and traceable history that can be traversed and easily accessed which serves to satiate a desire to feel connected to the past. Whilst the game has undergone changes, it has remained consistent in its core mechanics, lore, and gameplay experience. This comprehensible and recognisable

¹²³ 15056

¹²⁴ 20043

pathway through time can be a reassuring stabilising force that can be wielded as a coping mechanism against the rapid changes of modernity.

Through the nostalgic relationship that players often have for D&D, I propose that the game has become a totemic object. D&D and the objects used to play the game such as dice or handbooks become imbued with a level of meaning that goes beyond their original purpose. Like souvenirs, the totemic object can be used to facilitate nostalgic recollections and remembering. Dice become more than just a tool for playing the game, and when their owner looks at them, they might remember the character that they played using or the game sessions for which they were purchased. For example, I treasure my first set of D&D dice beyond their aesthetic or practical value because they prompt me to remember how excited I was to purchase them ready for my first game. The game itself is a nostalgic totem or text because of its link to meaning and memories. Survey results have shown that when players are asked about D&D there is an emotion to their response. Players are prone to nostalgic musings about past games and the relationships that they formed around the gaming table. D&D becomes a pathway to facilitating positive immersion in the past. This has consequences for the acknowledgement of negative experiences intentionally or incidentally obscured by the foregrounding of positive ones. The emotional link that players have with D&D can form the foundation of their fandom membership and underpin their activities.

Chapter 4 – Fans & Fandom

Introduction to Fandom

Fandom describes an alignment of individuals who have a shared appreciation for a television show, book series, or movie franchise, or other cultural artefact. As established in the previous chapter, this emotional connection to the text can be extraordinarily strong and woven through a player's life. Together fandom builds from the original text to create an elaborate collection of new texts, potentially even referencing each other. Fandom uses a passion as a foundation for a whole new series of creations. With the internet, this collaborative effort becomes an international one that unites people that otherwise would not interact. That is not to say that fandom is a harmonious and peaceful endeavour – there's conflict, shipping wars, and toxic behaviour. The core fandom activities undertaken by D&D fans that were mentioned in survey responses are covered in this chapter. This includes touching on the theory of textual poaching by Jenkins and expanding on it to apply to the complex creation behaviours of D&D fans. How D&D fans and the fandom describe, apply, and maintain their fan identity is then discussed. The benefits and desirability of fandom membership for D&D players is established.

Fandom is a complex idea that's core is a passion for a piece of media. How this interest manifests and the consequences for fans (and broader consumers) is in an important concept to explore as fan behaviour becomes increasingly mainstream. The *Marvel Cinematic Universe* is an interesting example of niche fan behaviours that would have previously drawn derision, becoming acceptable. Wearing clothing with superhero references or arguing about which superhero would win in a fight against another are hardly the reserve of geeks and nerds. The movies are hugely popular, the merchandise is everywhere, and such conversations are commonplace with brunch or a drink with friends. Fandom and fandom activities are no longer reserved for the nerds or geeks and are spreading out into mainstream consumer behaviours.

Fan and fandom activities are a way for players to bring the game into their life beyond the gaming table.

[...] We talk about the game outside of sessions, roleplay our characters just hanging out in our discord server, and make playlists/fanworks of our characters. We drool over neat class abilities and magic items though. I think this is the "fandom" approach to D&D, and while we get very excited about class

mechanics and powerful abilities, it is very different from the "munchkin" type who are mostly focused on killing things and accumulating wealth¹

[...] In fact, most of my experience and involvement in D&D doesn't come from gameplay at all but in talking to other players and reading articles online, coming up with characters and researching campaign ideas, or shopping for merch and minis and getting involved in the world outside of D&D as much as in [...]²

My early gaming experiences with D&D were punctuated with long sessions of research online into how to play, new character builds, and ideas for adventures. I scrolled through D&D stories on Tumblr and shared memes with my friends. At the time, these behaviours just felt like part of playing D&D rather than peripheral fan activity. The D&D fandom has grown since then with the proliferation of D&D paratexts like *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* as these texts have their own fandoms that overlap with D&D's fandom.

Dungeons & Dragons Fandom Activities

Textual Poaching and Participatory Culture

Henry Jenkins coined the phrase and concept of 'Textual poaching' to describe the actions that fans taken when they read/consume texts: interpreting, adapting, and appropriating them. This is often to make the text more "responsive to their needs" (H. Jenkins, 2006, p. 40). Fans "poach" meaning from texts, and this meaning provides foundations for their future encounters with the text (H. Jenkins, 2012, p. 46). What is produced from "poaching" activities is kept by fans, shared, and sometimes even sold (H. Jenkins, 2012, p. 46). Examples of work produced from textual poaching include fanfiction, video clips (such as deploying clips from the shows to tell a slightly different story or remove a disliked character), and fanart. These works use existing materials to respond to the canon and produce something new. With D&D, players (and fans) often take pieces of D&D lore or adventures and then produce their own campaigns or stories. They might use the materials in the books to write their own campaigns or use nothing more than the rules and character

¹ 36301

² 4870

creation. I want to explore textual poaching and the idea of sampling from a text (D&D rulebooks, lore, podcasts, comic books, and other such media) to produce something new.

Participatory culture relates to the idea that consumers are no longer passive spectators of media, but rather media producers and consumers interact (H. Jenkins & Deuze, 2008, p. 4). Consumers can take on the role of producer – this is seen with textual poaching, but also with fans who make D&D podcasts. They are no longer purely consuming D&D as a product but creating new material for/with the game that others may consume. These interactions of consumer/producer are massively complicated, and the boundaries are often very blurred. It is also important to remember that not all participants have equal power. Corporate media carries more power than an individual consumer, or men might be seen to have more authority in over the material they are producing for.

Fan art

D&D players often create or commission portraits of their characters as the only alternative is using pre-made generic imagery that might not suit exactly. Art is a way of sharing how a player imagines their character, settings, or other aspects of D&D with others without relying on description and interpretation. Fan art can serve as an introduction to D&D and then become a part of the game experience. There were responses that mentioned beginning to play D&D after they had seen artwork created for or about the game. The allure of creating their own character as others had done can be a drawcard for players.

I am a creative person, being with people who have their own characters with their own backstories, quirks, etc, made me want to play with them to figure them out and get super invested in their character. As well as at some point illustrate those characters to bring them to life. (Since I started playing dnd, all ive ever been drawing is just dnd related things)³

PEER PRESSURE lol. And I enjoy drawing and creating characters, so I thought it could be fun. [...]⁴

I kept seeing art of people's characters online and became enamored with the idea of the character building involved.⁵

³ 41804

⁴ 28346

⁵ 27291

There was a theme that players wanted to get involved with the creative process that D&D offered and a pre-existing love for art was the gateway.

Seeing artwork of D&D's paratexts can lead individuals to seek out the source material and then ultimately begin playing D&D.

I remember seeing wonderful artwork all inspired by Dungeon and Dragons groups. From there I watched a Critical Role stream and I wanted to play. [...]⁶

Seeing the fandom base around Critical Role. The art was amazing, but I had no idea where the characters came from. Checked the first campaign of it and it was really good.⁷

I saw fanart of The Adventure Zone on social media and thought it looked interesting enough to give it a listen, then my interest in dnd spiked.⁸

Before I knew what *Critical Role* was, I had seen artwork of the characters on Tumblr that fans had drawn. Eventually I had seen so many of the same characters that I got curious and did a little research. I was already a D&D player, but for those who see the art and then are led to a paratext it can be a comfortable progression of familiarity. Fan-created art is an advertisement for the text it is inspired by, and by extension the game itself.

The creation of art can become part of how fans play D&D and rather than simply an additional external activity it becomes integral to a player's enjoyment. In this art, players choose to immortalise their exploits in a manner reminiscent of tapestries or Greek pottery. I have played at tables where one player was scribbling away whilst we played, creating simple doodles of locations, NPCs, and monsters.

[...] It lets me exercise all kinds of fun muscles writing/storytelling, acting/improv, and kind of tangentially, visual art and song. (We've made a LOT of art for the campaign. I've done oil portraits of important scenes! [...]⁹

⁶ 111677

⁷ 33581

⁸ 32866

⁹ 39725

[...] I really like visualizing stories, so playing a character leads to me wanting to create, like drawing my character, creating a comic book of my adventures, or just wanting to make a map for my little mini to play on.¹⁰

The key moments of the game are preserved in art so that they can be shared with others but also remembered by the players. Artwork takes the game from one format into another – from oral storytelling to visual medium. A desire to create art-worthy moments can influence how players approach the game.

As people made fanart about certain moments of the campaign it made me want to commit and give memorability (either humor or pathos) to events happening during the campaigns i was playing in¹¹

This is a meta-approach to the game where players have one foot in the game and one foot outside the game, considering how their play will be received.

Game-inspired art creation is not limited to players, non-players can also join to watch the game and create artwork.

[...] a friends wife will often come in to sketch the campaign. [...]¹²

This is like viewers of popular game streams creating fan art, but on a smaller and more personal scale. As a practice it is demonstrative of an alternative way to enjoy D&D that is not dependent on playing.

To me, D&D is all about world building and character development. And art. My group spends as much time thinking up plans, making fan-fics, painting miniatures, plotting schemes outside of sessions, and drawing pictures as we do actually playing. The other woman in the group keeps up-to-date full-colour drawings of important characters. [...]¹³

The creation of art is a way to engage with D&D as a hobby when play is not possible – for example, between sessions or when a group is unavailable. The creative process combines D&D with other activities and serves to create new texts based on games.

Gameplay can be enhanced through the artwork created by fans and players, especially for homebrew campaigns. When running pre-made modules, the DM can share the

¹⁰ 16494

¹¹ 17761

¹² 20905

¹³ 8939

images in the sourcebooks with players, but these are the responsibility of the DM to provide when they create their own stories.

I do a lot of illustrations for my game handouts, [...]¹⁴

I enjoy running games and worldbuilding. I create and illustrate my games from scratch (I'm a professional illustrator) and create custom miniatures for each game and character. I love bringing worlds to life and creating artworks and keepsakes my players can treasure.¹⁵

The creation of this artwork can be part of the appeal for players because they get to use their creativity.

I got to draw some characters and I'd always loved fantasy as a genre. Plus I live designing buildings/mazes, and dice, and graph paper. [...]¹⁶

It transported me to other places through my imagination. Also, I loved mapping and making maps... #gridpaper4life¹⁷

I have always enjoyed creating maps and settings for players, even though my artistic ability is almost non-existent. Fan art can overcome the gaps that exists in the official artwork for the game to 'fix' issues of inclusivity.

I don't think official artwork is as inclusive as fan art is. There are lots of fan art that embraces the real world's diversity in the different races of D&D, that I don't find in the official artwork. My group and I often find it hard to include NPCs of color, of any race, in our campaigns without spending lots of time looking for it. Most humans, dwarves, elves, the common races, are white with Caucasian features. I know that the differences are all DESCRIBED in the players handbook, but the artwork and visuals aren't as well showcased by official trademark.¹⁸

Whilst this should not be the responsibility of players, it is a stop-gap solution whilst WOTC increase the range of identities presented in their texts. Fans use art to create their own representation and play materials.

¹⁴ 32084

¹⁵ 20131

¹⁶ 21538

¹⁷ 26709

¹⁸ 19162

There are myriad crafts that can be combined with D&D to create for or from the game. Terrain is one such way and it relates back to D&D's origins as a wargame.

A lot of our campaigns boards are built by me as I design and build DnD board and WARHAMMER 40k Terrain. [...]¹⁹

This game consumes every second of my free time and I love it. I am constantly prepping, painting, building, crafting, designing, organizing, watching, researching, reading for this hobby. It is the game above all other games. I have a dedicated room for playing Dnd. I have built a custom table to play on and construct all of my own terrain. [...]²⁰

Gygax himself had a massive sand table in his basement that attracted local miniature wargames players. Modern wargaming such as Warhammer 40K is often based on tables with elaborate scenes that include buildings, trees, and environmental hazards. They are vaguely reminiscent of miniature trainsets, where great attention to detail is used to build a small world. Unlike Warhammer, D&D does not typically involve terrain and is more commonly played “in the theatre of the mind”. Maps with a grid overlay are commonly used for battles to help relative positioning of miniatures, but they are not necessary. I have often played games where we used no map at all and only relied on our memories (or random objects placed vaguely on a table). There are D&D players who create terrain and set pieces so they can enhance their game, but also to bring in their other creative hobbies.

[...] I've always liked arts and crafts and thought the terrain and props were super cool, and I wanted to make stuff like that. [...]²¹

[...] As the DM, I also really enjoy the crafting side of making terrain and designing maps and dungeons.²²

[....] I enjoy crafting, so making and painting the minis and creating the maps are fun for me [...]²³

Terrain building and map making are peripheral activities that are an important part of why players enjoy D&D.

¹⁹ 695

²⁰ 11080

²¹ 22521

²² 35049

²³ 966

[....] I love having the opportunity to do creative things like make jewelry and write poems and songs for my characters and then sing them. [...]²⁴

[...] Collecting dice. I also knit/crochet, so I like making dice bags/d&d related things for myself and friends.²⁵

[...] at my house I have a whole floor to ceiling wall of my front room that I painted with my world map which we do miss whenever we have to play at someone else's house for whatever reason.²⁶

Im currently engineering a new die design²⁷

[...] he was tell me about the creator they were going to be battling that session. So, me, having created monsters before, recreated the monsters using an oil based clay for his session that night. [...]²⁸

My friend making a model dragon for her campaign²⁹

Textile crafts, murals, dice, sculpting and 3D printing are other crafts that were mentioned in responses. I personally learned to 3D print so that I could have more miniatures for my game, then I had to learn to paint them. I have also sewn dice bags, crocheted a mimic treasure chest dice storer, and meddled with resin to make my own dice. The responses indicate that D&D fans tend to extend their activity beyond just the play sessions and into other areas of their life. D&D becomes inspiration (or an excuse) to exercise creativity that might otherwise struggle to be justifiable.

Miniatures

Miniatures are complicated as a hobby, because whilst they are something that are often purchased, they can also be created, and typically require painting as they come unfinished³⁰. As 3D printing has become increasingly affordable and accessible for hobbyists, there has been a rise in 3D modelling custom miniatures then printing using FDM and SLA

²⁴ 24343

²⁵ 35256

²⁶ 35231

²⁷ 43156

²⁸ 18757

²⁹ 39140

³⁰ They are often a plain grey, some come pre-primed ready for painting, and there may be a need to glue the parts of the miniature together.

printing methods. This section focuses on how fans interact with miniatures externally to play rather than how they are used as part of the game or roleplay processes.

Miniatures can be an alluring aspect of the game for players, prompting them to begin their D&D hobby.

The idea of having magic powers, and the miniatures - I was a kid and they looked like really fancy toys! [...] ³¹

Seeing the setups in Dragon Magazine with the dwarven forge dungeon tiles and the miniatures. The miniatures were always what drew me to wanting to play DND. ³²

One guy from a group of friends who I play video games with and have known a long time is into collecting and painting models, so he was involved in the scene but didnt play. He suggested it and sp we tried it and still play that same campaign now. ³³

Honestly, I just wanted to play with the minis. [...] ³⁴

The figurines. I was a model builder and painter. I found some Lizard Men at a hobby shop to paint. I read that they were for D&D on the packaging, and I have been hooked ever since. ³⁵

These responses (and others) reminded me of how children play with dolls houses or the way my brother and I would spend hours setting up elaborate Playmobil battle scenes. The creation of a diorama is fundamental to play activities for children and adults – they are just styled differently. Compare the wooden trainsets given to children with the detailed and technical trainsets of adults. D&D can serve as an outlet for a desire to play with miniatures in a manner that might not be socially acceptable otherwise.

The desire to play with the miniatures can lead players into wanting to also begin to roleplay. I thought this was an interesting subversion of the order that might be expected – with miniatures creating demand for D&D rather than simply vice versa.

[...] Also, I got into painting miniatures as a hobby and wanted an excuse to keep painting. ³⁶

³¹ 29324

³² 2294

³³ 12958

³⁴ 29648

³⁵ 15164

³⁶ 11748

[...]...I also collect, print, and paint miniatures, so it is nice to find uses for them.³⁷

There was a trend in responses where players had miniatures as a hobby and then began playing so that they could justify continued acquisition. Painting was described an important part of this aspect of D&D.

My dad used to let me paint figurines with him. He would buy me the fancy pewter figures that needed to be glued together. He would stop by the game store on his lunch break and buy the paints. At home we would sit together and paint at the kitchen table. I was never going to play because my mom wouldn't allow it. Then I kept the figures in my bedroom.³⁸

My uncle painted miniatures and I used to beg him to let me watch. When I found out he used them in the weekly game at his law firm it became a goal to read up on the info so he'd let me join them. (He didn't, but he did one-shots for me and did family game nights with D&D so I could learn at home)³⁹

There was a theme in the responses of painting miniatures before being allowed to play due to age. For these players, the miniature hobby aspect of D&D was a prelude to their roleplay – it shows an alternative way to interact with D&D. Not all those who engage in the peripheral activities follow through to become players.

There are issues with inclusivity when it comes to the miniatures offered for D&D in hobby or gaming stores. The stereotypical busty-babe in tight form-fitting armour is pervasive and this can be incredibly off-putting.

[...] there are the miniatures themselves which tend to be hot/ridiculous/idealized/sexualized if they're of women [...]⁴⁰

The selection of miniatures often helps or hurts female inclusion as does any of the graphics used for illustrations. Much of the D&D materials have females running around in armor that has been more sexualized than functional.⁴¹

I play mostly privately, and I'm normally the DM so I do what I can to make other women feel comfortable (don't include themes of sexism/rape that might feel too real, include plenty of prominent

³⁷ 17114

³⁸ 23139

³⁹ 36179

⁴⁰ 25129

⁴¹ 20798

female characters as NPCs, shut down weird romance angles, have tons of female minatures who look cool over sexy). A game I play in uses the X card system which I also really like.⁴²

The minatures can contribute to feelings of exclusion for women who want to play D&D. The overtly sexualised nature of women adventurers might contribute to inappropriate roleplay or the inclusion of more sexualised content. I personally do not want my characters sexualised and would prefer for them to have cool spiked armour rather than a mountainous breastplate.

[...] we all ordered custom character minis mostly because we weren't interested in skimpily clad women heroes!⁴³

It was interesting to read the ways players worked around the limited selection of minatures. Custom minatures were mentioned, but this can be an expensive solution and not necessarily accessible.

Ha - As a woman, the first issue I had was that the figurines all had woman with BIG boobs (for 15yr old boys!) So .. I filed them down and painted a top on my ranger [...]⁴⁴

Modifying existing models can be a more affordable or approachable solution, and the idea of filing down plastic breasts is a simple fix. However, it should not be necessary. When I worked in a gaming store, I often helped customers brainstorm how to make a pre-made model work for their character idea. Often race and class combinations only came in male or female rather than having a model for each – though it was often hard to tell the difference beyond the fact that female models had chest lumps. Using toys or minatures designed for other games was a commonly mentioned solution (and one I have personally frequently witnessed).

I use Lego for DnD. It's more fun that way. Players customise minis to look how they look, and it has a childlike charm.⁴⁵

⁴² 20460

⁴³ 1168

⁴⁴ 602

⁴⁵ 3706

I play in a game café, so it is open to everyone and all ages. I also use lego for the figures and share with new players, is a good ice breaker, is cheap, accessible, and has less offputting female chars than some of the metal figures.⁴⁶

Lego was a popular workaround mentioned in the responses because there are so many customisation options, and the minifigs do not tend to have breasts. It is also easy to build terrain from Lego, and then the miniatures are compatible. I feel these creative workarounds speak to the ingenuity of fans when it comes to finding representation within their hobby, but also to cobbling together texts or materials. Just as campaign ideas might borrow from myriad fiction sources, the physical aspects of the game are sourced widely from other hobbies.

Fanfiction

Fanlore defines fanfiction as “a work of fiction written by fans for other fans, taking a source text or a famous person as a point of departure” (Fanlore, n.d.)⁴⁷. Fanfiction takes diverse forms in the D&D fandom, as the game can serve as inspiration for new fanfiction creations or the storylines in homebrew⁴⁸ campaigns could be considered acts of fanfiction. I have included survey responses to give examples of how fanfiction and D&D campaigns can overlap.

I have listened to a few episodes of Film Reroll, where they create short campaigns based on a film (eg: Raiders of the Lost Ark) and see how the film would play out based on dice rolls. [...] ⁴⁹

[...] being able to extrapolate on fictional settings in ways the original media they'd been presented in hadn't yet done or didn't do much of.⁵⁰

[...] also Ive played as a student of Hogwarts. [...] ⁵¹

⁴⁶ 2251

⁴⁷ I chose to use this definition as the basis for my approach because Fanlore is a wiki associated with *Archive of Our Own* and the journal *Transformative Works and Cultures*. These are non-profit organisations established by fans and focused on serving the fan community.

⁴⁸ Homebrew is any game or content that is not created by an official publisher. It is the work of players who create the material they want or need for their own specific games, groups, and/or communities.

⁴⁹ 32060

⁵⁰ 22376

⁵¹ 44690

[...] I made a Disney themed one shot for them. I've done this with at least ten people who have never played before - get them to try by making a one shot with things they already really like.⁵²

Working on a Power Ranger based Campaign really got me more into D&D than anything.⁵³

It allows me to take an active role in the fantasy worlds of the books, movie and TV shows I've always loved.⁵⁴

[...] Harry Potter and the Natural 20, a crossover fanfiction in which a character (Milo) who runs on D&D rules is brought into the world of Harry Potter. Milo is an unabashed "munchkin", and his meta-gaming, rule-abusing, and optimization-based way of doing things are always funny and contrast well with the "more-realistic" world of Harry Potter.⁵⁵

I cannot recall ever playing in a campaign that was explicitly based off a work of fiction, but I have often played in games where storylines ended up being like those in television shows or movies that were currently popular. I also knew someone who wrote their own system for playing in a Pokémon setting for D&D, which was an ambitious undertaking. Fanfiction is a way for fans to explore what they would do with a story, the directions they want to take it in, and experiment with an established setting. By bringing these texts to D&D, this exploration can occur collaboratively with a group and together fans can play with the text they enjoy (or hate or feel indifferently about I guess). If I were offered the chance to play in a *Lord of the Rings* or *Harry Potter* D&D game (or even a silly *Twilight* one) I would jump at the chance. It just sounds fun to take the characters and settings I know and twist them into an unrecognisable mess of a game.

Campaigns can be a springboard for the creation of fanfiction as players write-up their games to share with others.

When I started watching Critical Role, I often found myself making original characters that I thought would fit well into the setting or plot. (I still do this a year later.)⁵⁶

⁵² 6411

⁵³ 9964

⁵⁴ 44798

⁵⁵ 32220

⁵⁶ 33466

[...] My characters hold a special place in my heart and therefore if I put time into them I don't like for them to be forgotten. So I wrote a novel titled Imp and the Darkserpent so they would have a world to thrive in.⁵⁷

When I found out people were writing books of their own (legally!) about their campaigns and just how much it permeated the media I was enjoying at the time. [...] ⁵⁸

There have been rumours that published fantasy novels exist that are a write up and polishing of the author's D&D campaigns.

Fandom membership as an identifier

Being a member of fandoms was a strong theme in how D&D players perceive other players. Players could fit into almost any social category and be "normal", but it was assumed that players would be invested in other fandoms too.

I don't think there is a typical D&D player, but I would say nerdy, almost every D&D player I know falls into multiple fandoms. [...] ⁵⁹

There is no typical D&D player. Each person at the table are different, and the only common factor is generally the other players have other fandoms or identify as a nerd in other ways. Perhaps they are Renaissance reenactors, or they cosplay, or they do other gaming related activities... the connection or common element is they are all nerdy in some way.⁶⁰

Pretty smart, creative, relatively introverted but likes having friends with a common interest, usually into other fandoms. All ages, all races, all religions, all genders etc.⁶¹

Having a tendency towards fan/fandom behaviour becomes a defining characteristic for D&D players. These fandoms could be anything, but science-fiction and fantasy texts were most often mentioned.

⁵⁷ 27798

⁵⁸ 36108

⁵⁹ 20309

⁶⁰ 18915

⁶¹ 21353

We're all grown ups with regular jobs, some of us married. We like to play board games and video games that allow us to enter another world. We like Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, Disney, and other "fandoms" that make us happy.⁶²

Most people are nerdy in some way, but quite diverse. Often people from different fandoms such as Anime, Video Games and Magic.⁶³

Members of multiple fandoms, usually like fantasy and SF, Star Trek, Harry Potter etc. Passionate and generous people ♥⁶⁴

These fandoms – *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*, and *Lord of the Rings* – are the archetypical and stereotypical nerd fandoms. The inclusion of Disney does make it broader and more mainstream. There was a theme in responses that fandom has become a ubiquitous part of our culture – an idea I strongly agree with.

Nerds. But I'm a proud nerd. And there are nerds of games, music, books, cars, etc ad nauseam.⁶⁵

[...] Of course we get just as bored listening to guys prattle on about sports as they do about our characters so I guess it's just if you are a sports nerd, a car nerd or a fantasy nerd.⁶⁶

I see a lot of similarities between DnD and any other fandoms (including sports) - we are all geeks of our nature. Each fandom allows people to talk about the love for it and allows them to be free of the mask they have to wear in society and just be the 'special' person they are⁶⁷

The most oft-mentioned mainstream accepted fandom was that of sports. There are established similarities between 'nerdy' fandom and sports fans in academic work. I think the comparison is made by players because of the perceived legitimacy around being a sport fan.

A normal person whose fandom is something other than sports.⁶⁸

⁶² 14770

⁶³ 5475

⁶⁴ 43991

⁶⁵ 14911

⁶⁶ 39701

⁶⁷ 4674

⁶⁸ 18057

Many non-roleplayers probably think of us as nerds, but nerds of everything exists, just as I can think of football fans as nerds. [...] ⁶⁹

I think in the last few years there's been a huge turnaround. Its not longer seen as a freak niche hobby, its more a cultural standby. People need to be "inducted", but its like sports fandom now: not for everyone, but not for weirdos, either. ⁷⁰

Even nerdy fandom is becoming more acceptable as science-fiction, fantasy, and superheroes infiltrate pop culture.

I think people really don't care too much anymore. Everyone is a nerd for something and nerdy stuff has become more widely accepted. More people watch classically nerdy things like Star Wars, Game of Thrones and superhero movies than ever before. ⁷¹

These days it's probably just another fandom or hobby, like cosplayers or Naruto fans or... League of Legends players. ⁷²

It's changing. Used to be a negative perception, and now perceived as any other major fandom. ⁷³

Whilst there is lingering stigma about being 'too invested' in fandom, fan behaviours are increasingly normalised.

Fan Identity

Groups frequently form around a common ground of "spreading the one true belief and in their fierce fighting of anybody who opposes them" (Christensen & Jensen, 2018, p. 37). Examples of this include political and religious groups but also social groups like fandoms which take shape through shared enjoyment of a text. The idea of a core truth (or knowledge base) that needs protecting in fandom can be topics such as interpretations of canon, fanon discrepancies, controversial content, application of rules, and who the best character is. Alternatively, the shared belief to be spread might be the superiority of the TV show, book, game, or any text over others in a category.

⁶⁹ 38951

⁷⁰ 33119

⁷¹ 27246

⁷² 38461

⁷³ 8834

Bourdaa and Lozano Delmar (2016, p. 3) outline five reasons fans give for identifying as such: devotion to the text, experience of it going beyond just reception, the urgency they feel towards consumption of (new) content, collecting memorabilia, and pre-existing fan-status for other texts that might exist in shared setting or universe. The “compulsive and repetitive consumption of their favourite TV show” was stressed as a critical factor in their study results on identifying as fans (Bourdaa & Lozano Delmar, 2016, p. 5). Fan identity is centred around love or dedication to a text that goes beyond simple viewing and this idea is used to juxtapose fans and non-fans or mainstream viewers. Alternative or non-mainstream retailers encourage fan consumers “to develop a feeling of alterity” between the fan-self and the non-fan-self (Booth, 2018, p. 1). Being a fan is more than just consuming a programme or text but also seeking out information and other fans for community. Bourdaa and Lozano Delmar (2016, p. 6) found that “discussion and interaction” are a common aspect of fandom which reinforces “the importance of the communal aspects of fan practices; of the social community and the sense of belonging to a fandom”. Being a member of fandom becomes an integral aspect of being a fan, and being a fan is essential for fandom membership thus a cycle of investment is created.

Fans are not only positioned against mainstream/non-fans but also the idea of the anti-fan. Anti-fans are more than just those who hate the text, but can be seen as “groups of fans fighting for discursive dominance and struggling to reach consensus about how a given text should be interpreted” (Christensen & Jensen, 2018, p. 44). The behaviours are not necessarily opposite of fans as the anti- prefix might suggest but it is the emotion or intent with which they connect with the text that is different. Anti-fans engage with a text by finding “elements within the text that they react against and oppose” (Harman & Jones, 2013, p. 955). They might engage in many of the same behaviours as fans, and it is not useful to think of them as different ends of a spectrum or binary (Harman & Jones, 2013, p. 955). *Fifty Shades of Grey* has been met with applause and criticism producing a complex balance of power between fans and anti-fans. A significant theme amongst anti-fans is criticism of the portrayal of BDSM in the series (Harman & Jones, 2013, p. 958). These fans (referred to as Sporkers in the community), position themselves in an “elevated position” through a “distinction within fan culture based on cultural capital that they possess, and which the authors and fans of the fiction they spork do not” (Harman & Jones, 2013, p. 958). Their social capital is produced

through their supposedly superior knowledge of BDSM and the BDSM community compared to fans. Anti-fans are not new and since the beginning of fandom and/or organised fans there has been “fandom wank, policing, and antifans” (Christensen & Jensen, 2018, p. 13).

To understand the need for fan communities and geek culture it is possible to look at the behaviours of other culturally marginalised individuals as historically fandom has been perceived negatively. Stigmatized individuals develop stigma-management strategies, and this includes bonding with others who are stigmatized to create “camaraderie and solidarity” (Yodovich, 2016, p. 293). In terms of fandom, early D&D players who faced social ridicule and backlash in mainstream society are examples of individuals who sought out other stigmatised individuals with whom to create safe spaces to engage with their hobby. It seems natural to find other people with whom a connection is shared, especially in an activity like D&D where a group is a core requirement of play.

No, not at all. I've always felt that at D&D you could let your inner weird out and still be accepted as long as you are not hurting anyone IRL. It is a safe space with people you can trust.⁷⁴

Not all individuals want to be associated with their similarly stigmatised peers and some seek to distance themselves (Yodovich, 2016, p. 293). Boundary work is one way that fans might try to achieve this distancing or repositioning. Yodovich (2016, p. 290) describes three styles of boundary work conducted by fans: between fans and nonfans, between normal and obsessive fans, and between fandom and appreciation. The creation of dichotomies is used so differences can be drawn between the two groups and overlaid with the idea of good and bad. Yodovich (2016, p. 296) found that fans shift the stigma back on to nonfans who an interviewee described as having “banal and unfulfilling lives” compared to the “rich” lives of fans. Not only were fans described to interact with texts more meaningfully, but they were also “special for being part of a unique, bounded community” (Yodovich, 2016, p. 297). Here, being a fan is portrayed as useful because of all the benefits accrued which non-fans supposedly miss. It is therefore better to be a fan and live a richer life with the negativity is shifted back away and onto the nonfans. Another way to shift negativity away is through the contrast between good fans and bad fans where the bad fans of those that take their fandom too far and become obsessive. There is a stigma that women fans are “loud, obsessive”,

⁷⁴ 7087

hysterical, and “focus their attention on the appearances or private lives of the object of their fandom instead of the content” (Yodovich, 2016, p. 299). In contrast, more masculine displays of fandom are rooted in displays of knowledge, sophisticated curation of the collection, and a more quiet or introverted style of fandom. By holding out examples of more obsessive fans, there is the creation of a normative alternative through dichotomisation. Instead of breaking down stigma and stereotypes to broaden or challenge acceptable behaviour, fans can use them to criticise others and destigmatise themselves as an individual. Ingroup status influences evaluations of ingroup variability to protect individual identity. When threatened with low ingroup status, individuals might choose to emphasise ingroup variability to avoid being “being tarred with the same brush” (Brown, 2000, p. 751). Yodovich (2016, p. 301) describes a subsidence of fandom that matures into appreciation. The interviewed informants positioned fandom as more “superficial and hormonal” than the “mature, reasonable, and more critical” appreciation (Yodovich, 2016, p. 302). In appreciation, there is a shedding of the childishness of fans and a movement towards adult critical consumption (Yodovich, 2016, p. 302). Through these techniques of delineating good and bad fans, there are the developmental foundations for the appropriate fan identity that underlies gatekeeping and boundaries.

Social identity theory has found that “outgroup members are seen as more similar to each other than ingroup members” (Brown, 2000, p. 750). Those who identify strongly with a group might choose to see the ingroup as being more homogenous which serves to align them with positive identity tracts (Brown, 2000, p. 751). Group homogeneity and its acceptance or rejection can be a tool for positive identity maintenance on an individual and group level. Those “who have been primed with fears of rejection” or with a strong need to belong are likely to assume that their opinions or behaviours are prototypical for the group they identify with (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013, p. 455). It is possible to occupy a marginal or non-prototypical position within a group and still identify with that social category.

As with the label ‘geek’, the idea of what constitutes a ‘gamer’ is fraught with struggle and conflict. There is a gendered aspect to it and Shaw (2012, p. 34) found that male interviewees were more comfortable and likely to identify as a gamer than female, transgender, or genderqueer interviewees.

Yes. In fact, before my very first game I was treated to a speech by a male player (I identified as female at the time) about how there are no female gamers. Women who Game were apparently just there to fuck the “real” gamers. [...] ⁷⁵

The correlation between gender and use of the label was stronger than that of race, sexuality, age, or the platform used to play (Shaw, 2012, p. 34). The term casual gamer is even used as an insult in the battle over identity (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 74).

Complicating Group Membership

An alternative to homogenised groups is the idea of a networked group which is a set of relationships that are interdependent but allow group members to occupy specific individualised roles (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013, p. 456). In this case, feelings of belonging are less based on perceptions of homogeneity but upon relationships among and between group members (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013, p. 456). Easterbrook and Vignoles (2013, p. 456) warn against the idea that “any particular group can be unequivocally categorised as a network or social category”. The size of the group might impact its categorisation as social interaction between all members is virtually impossible in large groups. Conversely, for groups that are relatively small, exclusive, and perhaps spread across limited spaces (virtual or physical) connections between members are more likely (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013, p. 456). Easterbrook and Vignoles (2013, p. 460) found that intergroup similarity predicted feelings of belonging for groups that their participants listed as social categories but not for social networks. For both social categories and social networks, they found that important conditions for belonging were frequent interactions in the formation of intimate bonds with other group members (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013, p. 460)

It can be difficult for researchers to capture the breadth, multiplicity, and interconnectedness of social group membership when investigating social identity. Social identity is often measured through a single group membership or social identity at a time rather than holistically. Bentley et al. (2020) created a tool (oSIM) for participants to map out their group memberships and rate their importance and positivity across “positivity, representativeness, support, and compatibility”. This allowed for the identification of four “oSIM constructs” associated with greater wellbeing: “number of positive groups, number of

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representative groups, number of supportive groups, and number of compatible links between groups” (Bentley et al., 2020, p. 226). oSIM also allows for observing the relationship between groups and potentially tracking over time. Conflicts between group identities (or harmonies) can be detected or explored in a manner impossible when looking at people one facet at a time. I have often felt conflict between my identifying with my group membership of being a woman (whatever that means to me at the time) and being a nerd. Being feminine or displaying femininity has often felt at odds with the way I felt expected to behave and fit in as a nerd. The representativeness of the individual for the group is interesting in terms of gatekeeping because keeping groups homogenous or consistent with a desired stereotype might protect representativeness for certain individuals. For example, for the stereotypical white nerd man there is a threat to their feeling they represent nerds if the stereotypical nerd shifts from being a white nerdy man to including other races, genders, and ways of expressing nerdiness.

Bacon-Smith (1992, p. 22) suggests a layered approach to fandoms where sub-interest groups form through more specific fandom definitions. The example given by Bacon-Smith (1992, p. 22) is that of the *Star Trek* fandom as a broader fandom, whilst there can be a suborganisation of fandom around the *Star Trek* fanfiction of a specific author. This “designates three filtering layers of participation”: that of fanfiction, *Star Trek*, and the works of the fanfiction author specifically (Bacon-Smith, 1992, p. 22). Different fandom identities, and different layers of specificity, are salient at different times – brought forward by specific contexts. How a fan decides to communicate their fandom might also vary according to circumstance. I broadly identify as a science-fiction fan, but when around other fans I elaborate on my fandom identity to specify that I am a fan of space-settings and particularly stories that take place on generational-spaceships or ark ships. For non-fans that could be meaningless, but for other fans it indicates a more specific positioning within the fandom. These identities and sub-fandoms are in flux, changing as the fan’s interests change.

Displays of fandom

Fans often show their fandoms through their appearance such as t-shirts, keyrings, badges on backpacks, and other items. Objects serve as markers to signal identity but also as reminders of self-concepts because they are personal storehouses of meaning (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988, pp. 531, 532). If life is a stage show, then objects are the props that display

meaning about our identities for the audience (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988, p. 531). Consider the ‘stripping process’ where institutions remove an individual’s clothing and possessions to sever their ties to their normal life and establish the control over the individual (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1988, p. 532). Possessions tell others something about the individual, and these messages are often controlled through carefully choosing outfits, accessories, and consumption. When meeting new people or attending big events, outfit choice can be a big decision – critical for a successful day. Significant time is often spent agonising over which shirt to wear, hairstyle to choose, or whether the costume is actually ‘good enough’. These are key parts of how self-presentation and thus the meanings being communicated. In fandom spaces one of the important messages people are trying to share is what fandom(s) they are part of and their level of dedication. These clothing choices could constitute a costume when fans are trying to exaggerate or accentuate their fan status to a level beyond reality. Huizinga (1944, p. 13) wrote that the ‘differentness’ of play is most obvious in the act of dressing up, where the individual plays as “another being. He is another being”. For Huizinga (1944), playing in costume mixes and entwines “the terrors of childhood, open-hearted gaiety, mystic fantasy and sacred awe”.

In my experience working in a gaming environment, popular culture t-shirts were ubiquitous. Customers complimented each other when they had a particularly funny reference or were novel. When describing the typical D&D fan, responses often mentioned this trend towards fandom-related clothing as an identifying feature.

Creative, funny, owns a vast array of dice and sloganed black t-shirts.⁷⁶

[...] I can meet a stranger in public just for wearing a D&D shirt and talk to them about their character or campaign without learning their real name. I think nerds gravitate toward it and we can be socially awkward or outsiders. [...]⁷⁷

Just a normal looking person, usually carrying a backpack and wearing a funny/geeky shirt.⁷⁸

[...] They tend to wear their fandoms on their shirts, and are not usually interested in high fashion. [...]⁷⁹

⁷⁶ 27957

⁷⁷ 3253

⁷⁸ 9227

⁷⁹ 21865

Mostly happy. I delight in playing and am a proud enthusiast with D&D branded clothes` badges etc. [...]⁸⁰

These shirts or clothing are also mentioned as a way for nerds to find each other. The fandom reference can be a conversation-starter or even just serve as a nod of solidarity. When I go somewhere that I do not know anyone, I feel more comfortable around people who have a shirt that I understand. It is like a moment of “ah, this is a person like me”, even if we really do not have anything in common except a shared fandom.

I focused here on bodily displays of fandom that were mentioned in survey responses, but I want to acknowledge the vast range of object-based fan displays. Collecting objects such as miniatures, books, comics, dice, and accessories has become an enormous part of the D&D fandom. This consumption can be conspicuous and show other people how dedicated to D&D that the collector is.

Conclusion

Dungeons & Dragons is more than a roleplaying game system, a set of rules that facilitate play, or a series of hefty books – **because** of fans and fandom. Players’ love of the game produce and necessitate peripheral activities that enrich their experiences of D&D. The D&D fandom is a community of people brought together by the game and working together (not always collaboratively, harmoniously, and idyllically) to create more content. Fandom and the fan activities described in this chapter are how players weave threads of D&D into their life beyond the gaming table. Fans/fandoms produce artwork, miniatures, fanfiction, and various creative products based around their D&D experiences. Often, they share these on the internet or in their local communities for other people to consume and enjoy.

Fandom is powerful because it connects fans to a broader network and fosters a sense of belonging. Fandom membership and participation were strong themes in how the survey participants identified or described other D&D players. This was not solely membership in D&D’s fandom, but a tendency towards fandom membership for other loved texts. Fandom has become a typical or accepted way for all sorts of fans to behave – not just nerds into sci-fi and fantasy but sports fans, car nuts, and gym junkies. It has become increasingly acceptable

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and mainstream to be a nerdy fan of texts such as the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*, *Game of Thrones*, and *Star Wars* where it once would have made individuals social rejects.

Identifying as a fan and participating in fandom is therefore an integral part of the D&D experience for most players. The peripheral activities draw players in and increase dedication to the text. There are individual differences in how fan identity is parsed, understood, and performed because fandom is not homogenous. To appreciate D&D, the community, popularity, appeal, and growth, it is vital to understand D&D's fandom. Exclusion from this community shapes marginalised groups' experiences with D&D. Paratexts are intricately linked to fandom activities, and are another major way that fans interact with D&D and the broader fan community.

Chapter 5 – Paratexts and their influence

Introduction

Fans create paratexts – textual objects that surround their chosen text to expand upon it. These fan creations might take on ‘official’ status, for example *Critical Role* which began as a group of D&D fans playing the game together then grew into a popular stream that has crossover promotions with WOTC. Paratexts can present alternative ways for fans to interact with a text and thus broaden the contact fans have with it. Art, fanfiction, cosplay, articles and videos discussing lore, rules, character builds, new releases, and strategy are all forms of paratexts commonly created for D&D by fans. These paratextual creations float around the ‘core’ text affecting how readers/fans consume or receive the text. Fans consume paratexts to form a unique mosaic-like perspective that influences and shapes their interpretation and ‘reading’ of the text. Paratexts are crucial to the understanding of how textual systems become social (semiotic) systems.

This chapter focuses on how the paratexts that fans consume or interact with impact the expectations held about D&D and the play activities undertaken. Paratexts can have an influence on players at every stage of their engagement with D&D. They are a prompt for beginning to play – for example, seeing the game on a television show and deciding D&D is worth trying. Paratexts can then shape player expectations through the messages that are presented about what D&D involves, how other players behave or appear, and the potential limitations of the game. As streams of D&D play have become popular, they have impacted how players approach the game due to a need to simultaneously play and perform. As a source of inspiration, paratexts can be powerful influencers over game content, style, and other aspects of the game. This includes rules and the idea of “orthogaming” which is discussed to show the potential consequences of narrowing ideas around acceptable play.

Paratexts and Framing

Paratexts are the objects that surround a text, they “prolong” and “present” it and are a critical part of its consumption offering instructions for how a reader might approach the text (Genette, 1991, p. 262). They are not “simply add-ons”, they “create texts, they manage them, and they fill them with many of the meanings that we associate with them” (Gray, 2010, p. 6). Paratexts are part of the creation of a text, how it is constituted beyond the film,

program, or book (J. Gray, 2010, p. 6). A ‘text’ is larger than object. Through intertextuality, paratexts form a web of interlocking and overlapping meaning. Each new text read becomes part of a “conversation with previously viewed texts”, a dialogue back and forward through time to form meaning (J. Gray, 2010). This might occur across platforms or medium, for example books and television shows about the same series. Jenkins (2006a) refers to this as convergence – the flow of a text across a multiplicity of media platforms. The intertextuality of paratexts serves as a sort of frame through which readers approach connected texts. Bacon-Smith (1992) describes a similar phenomenon in fan fiction that she refers to as ‘the story tree’. This is where “shared content extends to shared structure” – stories, poems, artwork are all connected through plot, characters, and setting but do not need to form a linear narrative (Bacon-Smith, 1992, p. 63). A “root story” offers up a scenario or characters and then other fans/creators/writers “branch out” from that story to complete “dropped subplots”, offer different perspectives, or even offer an alternative ending (Bacon-Smith, 1992, p. 63). D&D’s settings have been used in multiple media and texts – creating an intertextual product and enabling players to learn more about a setting if they consume these various products. For example, *Tomb of Annihilation* is an adventure module for 5th Edition, but there are also Adventurer’s League modules, an expansion for the *Neverwinter* MMORPG, and a board game that all build on the storyline.

Paratexts can be divided into two main categories: peritexts and epitexts. Peritexts are positioned closely to or are internal to the text, for example titles, a preface, or an image embedded in the text (Genette, 1991, pp. 263-264). Genette (1991, p. 262) ask the question “How would we read Joyce’s *Ulysses* if it were not called *Ulysses*?”. Epitexts are external to the text, for example interviews in the media or references to the text by the author in a private journal entry (Genette, 1991, p. 264). These epitexts play an important role in helping consumers select texts, and Gray (2010, p. 26) suggests that “we often know many texts only at the paratextual level”. As consumers, we are exposed to more paratexts than actual texts themselves, and thus our knowledge is often based not on the text.

I use theories of paratexts to explore how the players approach Dungeons and Dragons and how they may be influenced by exposure to paratexts such as podcasts, inclusion of the show on television or in movies, novels and comic books, and fan-produced images and texts. Gray (2010, p. 17) describes paratexts as “the greeters, gatekeepers, and cheerleaders

for and of the media, filters through which we must pass on the way to “the text itself””. For D&D, paratexts prime players to play the game in certain ways, encouraging behaviours and marginalising others. Before a player touches a set of dice or makes their first character, they have preconceived notions of what D&D is, who plays, and how. These paratexts then continue to exert influence during gameplay, as they continue to moderate how players interact with the narrative. Rulebooks, for example, lay out the structure and mechanics of a game *before* play starts. They are referred back to throughout the game, with rules constantly impacting how players act within the narrative and giving meaning to actions. Jara (2013, p. 43) describes this as an “interpretive loop” between the narrative and the game’s frames, where they continually provide meaning for each other. The example given is the stats on a character sheet as these stats guide what a player can do, but as the player creates their character’s personality it often provides justification for those stats (Jara, 2013, p. 44). In D&D, when a character has a high charisma stat (often chosen strategically to suit a specific class), the player tends to roleplay a charismatic character. The justification for having chosen a high charisma stat then becomes the character’s charismatic nature. The character is charismatic because of their stat, but they have the stat because they are charismatic. It is a loop where the character sheet frames how the character and narrative are approached, and this then influences how stats are further interpreted and potentially altered as levels are gained.

As Miller (2018, p. 208) writes “it has become nearly impossible to separate the politics of a text from the various actors and paratexts that inform those politics”. Miller (2018) was discussing the relationship between actors and their television show characters, but I feel the same applies to D&D celebrities. There are now celebrities famous for playing D&D through their podcasts, videos, etc. and their relationship with the fan community, text, and their own product is complicated. These issues could have an impact on how women expect or are expected to play or participate in D&D and the surrounding community.

Consalvo (2017) explores the idea that what might have originally been considered paratexts can become core texts. These paratext-turned-texts would then have their own web of paratexts. Games treated as the core text, might become the “supporting player” to another central text (Consalvo, 2017, p. 182). Consalvo (2017, p. 182) encourages games studies scholars to consider the “relatedness, interconnectedness, and contingent nature” of texts rather than reducing them down to canon or central texts. One example that Consalvo

uses is that of Twitch streamers where the streamer themselves and the content they are producing using games are the drawcard rather than the game being used. This is the situation for *Critical Role*, as the group's personalities are what retains viewers rather than a love of D&D. I vehemently believe that if the Critical Role group changed to a different gaming system their fans would remain loyal and it would have a minimal impact on their viewership. This is because it is the storytelling that matters more than the rules being used. Critical Role is a paratext but for Critical Role is D&D a paratext? This relatedness of texts is an issue for the complex constellation of texts and media that surrounds D&D.

Fictional worlds are oriented around the narrative and the characters within. The orientation of the text affects what objects are shown and what is left absent. Parts of fictional worlds are left undeveloped or assumed because it does not fit into how the reader is moved through the narrative. Fan fiction is often used as a tool for filling out the fictional world for readers, to answer the questions that are left hanging by the canon lore. Similarly, to the objects within a text, paratexts are like objects in a field that audiences choose to move towards or away from to build their own fictional worlds and experiences. Readers form different relationships and orientations with texts. How closely a reader holds a text and the information within affects the impact it has on the fictional world they create. Readers may cast information aside if it does not fit their desired image for their world. For D&D this can mean that different games, even playing the same pre-written modules, have varied gaps or extra knowledge due to players' background assumptions. Paratexts shape our reception of a text.

Framing is a concept that offers value when considering the relationship between text and context. Frames are the mental structures that shape and bind how individuals understand and respond to events or ideas. These aspects of framing theories apply in relation to paratexts, because paratexts shape understanding and reception of a text. Dungeons and Dragons' paratexts affect how players approach the game and their beliefs about it.

Framing can also entail a set of roles that are taken on by actors and these define the expected and/or appropriate conduct for those individuals holding the roles (Goffman, 1983). For example, the frame might be playing Dungeons and Dragons and the role might be DM or player; these have different expected behaviours attached to them. Play is legitimised for

adults only within certain frames because “to *be* adult is to *not be* in need of play anymore” (Deterding, 2018, p. 264). Activities can be reframed so they become appropriate for a situation. For example play can be legitimised for “*particular persons in particular roles in particular situations*” (Deterding, 2018, p. 264). Adults can play when it is done as part of their professional and social responsibilities, or as leisurely recreation. They can temporarily free themselves of their everyday life and “express and explore alterate identities and practices not fitting their official roles” (Deterding, 2018, p. 264). There are limitations on this reframing of play, as the behaviours are still regulated socially but just differently – everything has an appropriate time and a place. This play must remain less important than other work and social responsibilities, and only be done when other obligations have been completed. Social subcultures can also serve to reframe appropriate activities, for example some of the play activities around D&D (like dressing up or wearing a cloak to play) are more acceptable in the D&D community than they would be in mainstream society. This area of framing is important because D&D as a frame makes select behaviours acceptable. For example, yelling “I’ll cut his head off” might be okay when sitting at the dining table playing D&D, but not generally when sitting at the same table eating dinner. What behaviours become permissible could shed light on an aspect of the appeal of D&D for players, but also how players might justify negative behaviours such as sexual harassment and sexism that they would not engage in outside the D&D gameplay setting.

D&D’s Paratexts

There are an incredible number of paratexts that surround *Dungeons & Dragons*, far too many to try to list, let alone investigate in depth in a doctoral thesis. I have created a list of WOTC-related paratexts and have not included fan or unofficial paratexts. The listed paratexts are the paratexts that are most relevant to the current edition of D&D and to contemporary players. One notable older paratext that I must mention is the D&D animated series which ran from 1983 to 1985. The cartoon was mentioned in the survey results and the imagery from it has been resurrected for modern products. Many of the paratexts mentioned here have long histories with D&D, for example the fiction series have all been ongoing since TSR owned D&D.

WOTC distributed/produced paratexts currently available or for the current edition

- Crossover sets with Magic the Gathering
 - Various D&D inspired cards e.g., a Bag of Holding
 - Dungeons & Dragons: Adventures in the Forgotten Realms
 - Secret Lair Drop Series: Stranger Things (there are D&D references within the Stranger Things references)
 - Commander Legends: Battle for Baldur's Gate
 - Secret Lair: Saturday Morning D&D (artwork is inspired by the 80's cartoon series)
- Campaign setting crossovers with other creators
 - With *Critical Role*
 - *Explorers Guide to Wildemount*
 - *Call of the Netherdeep*
 - With *Penny Arcade*
 - *Acquisitions Incorporated*
- Unearthed Arcana (official, free to download, playtest documents)
- Content on *Dungeon Masters Guild* (DM's Guild) website
 - This website is a digital storefront where third party publishers can sell content based on the open access version of D&D 5th Edition (the 5th Edition System Reference Document). Whilst the content itself is not created by WOTC, the storefront is hosted in partnership with WOTC, and they do put their official content on there.
- Magic settings in D&D
 - Guildmasters' Guide to Ravnica
 - Mythic Odysseys of Theros
 - Unearthed Arcana: Mages of Strixhaven
 - Strixhaven: A Curriculum of Chaos
- D&D Board games
 - Three-Dragon Ante – this is based on gambling games from D&D lore
 - Dragonfire
 - Betrayal at Baldur's Gate – D&D themed version of Betrayal at House on the Hill (a classic game)

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- Dungeon Mayhem
- D&D: Tomb of Annihilation Board Game – game is based in D&D's Tomb of Annihilation setting
- D&D Attack Wing – uses the same system as Star Wars: X-Wing
- Official information books
 - Young Adventurer's Guide series – they outline the basics of the game with illustrations and simple language.
 - Heroes' Feast – official cookbook (there have been other cookbooks in the past)
- Cutie Marks & Dragons – crossover product with My Little Pony
- Merchandise – like t-shirts, bags, badges
- Dice Sets – WOTC have recently begun to release dice sets that match hardcover adventures. The dice colours match the theme of the module, also included are high quality maps, and reference cards useful for the module.
- Map sets – these can be for specific settings/modules, or generic useful maps
- Themed starter sets
 - Stranger Things Starter Set – has an adventure based off the one that was run in the show by the characters
 - Rick and Morty – based off the cartoon, artwork is in the cartoon's style and the characters feature throughout.
- Web content
 - Actual play (a selection of recent examples)
 - Roll20 Presents: Rime of the Frostmaiden (there are Roll20¹ Presents series that are sponsored by WOTC to promote specific modules)
 - Force Grey – airs on the official D&D Twitch channel. The player list is purely celebrities: Matthew Mercer, Dylan Sprouse, Marisha Ray, Deborah Ann Woll, Utkarsh Ambudkar, Brian Posehn, Joe Manganiello.
 - Die, Camera, Action – airs on the official D&D Twitch channel and the DM is Chris Perkins (Story Designer for D&D)
 - Talk shows (a selection, not a comprehensive list. These are the three with the most episodes and the most recently aired)

¹ Roll20 is an online platform for playing D&D

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- D&D News (2017-2020)
 - Dragon Talk (2017-present)
 - Dragon+ Live (2017-2020)
- Dragon+ Magazine (this is a digital magazine that has taken over from Dragon)
- Comic Books – There have been D&D comic books dating back to the 1980s, these are some examples that have been published in the last 10 years
 - *Legends of Baldur's Gate* (IDW, 2014)
 - *Shadows of the Vampire* (IDW, 2016)
 - *Rick and Morty vs. Dungeons & Dragons* (IDW, 2018)
 - *Stranger Things and Dungeons & Dragons* (IDW, 2020)
 - *At the Spine of the World* (IDW, 2020)
- Web comics
 - *Knights of the Dinner Table*
 - *Dork Tower*
 - *The Order of the Stick*
- Fiction books – There are four main settings that are official D&D content and then writers create stories within these. These settings are also used in other paratexts, such as adventure modules and video games.
 - Dragonlance
 - Ravenloft
 - Forgotten Realms
 - Eberron
- Movies
 - *Dungeons & Dragons* (2000)
 - *Scourge of Worlds: A Dungeons & Dragons Adventure* (2003)
 - *Dungeons and Dragons: Wrath of the Dragon God* (2005)
 - *Dragonlance: Dragons of Autumn Twilight* (2008)
 - *Dungeons & Dragons 3: The Book of Vile Darkness* (2012)

WOTC-endorsed or supported but not published/distributed by WOTC

- Premium versions of modules – not distributed by WOTC but supported by them. These versions by *Beadle & Grimm's* are expensive – the 'Platinum Edition of The Wild Beyond

the *Witchlight*’ was \$720 AUD (as of 1st February 2022). It has the rulebook broken down into booklets, miniatures, maps, an exclusive DM screen with official art, encounter cards to assist DMs with showing players what they are facing, physical artifacts that relate to the in-game quest pieces plus other merchandise. There is also “bonus encounter content to extend and expand your adventure” so it goes beyond just being a flashier re-packaged version of the same module (Beadle & Grimm’s Pandemonium Warehouse, 2022).

- Video games – There have been video games published that use D&D settings or materials. I have chosen to highlight select major games series that were mentioned in survey results and/or are contemporary.
 - *Neverwinter Nights* series
 - *Baldur’s Gate* series
 - *Icewind Dale* series
 - *Dungeons & Dragons Online* (this was an MMO version of D&D)
 - *Dungeons & Dragons: Dark Alliance* (2021)

This was just a small attempt to present the currently relevant paratexts produced or endorsed by D&D’s publishers. For players who began with earlier editions, there would be other influences – for example, older versions of *Dragon* magazine and the relevant edition’s rulebooks, sourcebooks, and modules. The paratexts created by fans are innumerable and beyond cataloguing. As discussed in the previous chapter there is an incredible amount of fan art, fan fiction, fan published game materials, and a wide variety of podcasts, streams, and web shows being produced. All these fan-created paratexts can also influence players expectations and approach to D&D.

Introduction through Paratexts

How paratexts influence perceptions of D&D as a game

Before discussing how paratexts influenced playstyle and expectations of playing D&D, it is important to acknowledge that paratexts also affect how the game itself is seen as a text. Through exposure to paratexts, the audience gains an understanding of D&D that then impacts their decision to play – even if it is not their first introduction to the game. The survey results suggested that podcasts were sought out after players were introduced to D&D by a friend or family member – but that does not mean their entire opinion of D&D would be based

off that person's description. Understanding and opinions of D&D are developed over time, and the paratexts that a player is exposed to would contribute to this.

A theme in survey responses was that the image of D&D in certain paratexts might be negative and off-putting. They become a hurdle to overcome and challenge so that someone might want to play D&D.

When I've talked to my family about my interest in D&D their main frame of reference is the characters in The Big Bang Theory. So, I think most people perceive D&D players to look like those characters in real life. Male nerds with questionable personal hygiene who can't get girlfriends? :(²

I will say I used to look down on D&D in high school and that really closed me off to the idea of it until college. Big bang Theory gave me such a negative impression, I'm glad I ended up trying it out. It's such a major aspect of my life now, I can't imagine who I'd be without it³

Basing this from a point of view of my friends BEFORE they played DND, they think it is very... Nerdy. I find most television does a poor example at showing how DND isn't just played by acne ridden, socially inept teenagers. Like, the Riverdale episode about... "Goblins and Gargoyles?" I've never watched the show, but they thought because of it it was like either a) a nerdy gathering or b) a cultist ritual, [...]⁴

I don't think there's the perception there once was, for sure. I think people are starting to see that it's just another way to get together and hang with friends. Plus, the Big Bang Theory is off the air now, which can really only help things.⁵

Some people have told me it sounds interesting, but they don't want to play. Others have outright ridiculed the game and its players because of bad media representation (big bang theory, the idea that it's grown men playing in the basement, nerds dressed in costumes making funny/weird voices, etc.).⁶

The nerdy, parents-basement-dwelling, mountain-dew-drinking loner archetype is still the go-to stereotype, popularised by portrayals like The Big Bang Theory.⁷

The see them as geeks. People who live in basements, painting miniatures and watch Big Bang Theory. When in reality we live like normal people and BBT is a terrible show.⁸

² 23695

³ 41746

⁴ 24172

⁵ 11842

⁶ 34551

⁷ 7010

⁸ 19148

The depiction of D&D in *Big Bang Theory* specifically has mixed reviews. Whilst there were participants who mentioned it as harmful, this was not consistent across the responses. There were also responses that defended the show. Those who see *Big Bang Theory* as a positive source of information about D&D are in the minority, but it is important to acknowledge their existence.

Beyond redemption until the TV show The big bang theory, which I think normalized and humanized nerds. I think this helped the perception of people who play d&d⁹

[...] Though some people are actually keen to learn a bit about it, due to shows like The Big Bang Theory and Stranger Things popularizing "nerd culture".¹⁰

In contrast to *Big Bang Theory*, the show *Stranger Things* was regarded more positively. There was even a *Stranger Things* Starter Set released for the 5th Edition of D&D. The difference here might be the handling of the characters' nerdiness. In *Big Bang Theory* the fact the characters are massive nerds is treated as a joke, a negative trait, and their hobbies are a punchline. The children who play D&D in *Stranger Things* are the heroes of the story, treated as complex characters with nerdiness as a trait rather than caricatures focused on one-dimensional nerd tropes.

Due to Stranger Things, there is a level of curiosity that there wasn't before. Instead of just being assumed as boring and nerdy, people actually ask me what it is, how it works, why is it fun. When I liken it to Fantasy Football, it makes it more relatable.¹¹

Before it was scene as very nerdy and weird, but I think thanks to things like Stranger Things people have more of an idea what it's like and it isn't as "nerdy" anymore.¹²

Extra nerdy, "neck beard", candles and LARPing, but the perception is changing because of shows like Stranger Things and online resources like Critical Role¹³

I believe its continued success is due to mainstream exposure and branding; if the Stranger Things kids were playing Earthdawn, Numenara, or Delta Green I think the game would continue to struggle as the

⁹ 14180

¹⁰ 13524

¹¹ 22178

¹² 26097

¹³ 44417

market is widening for other systems. The demographic is more diverse and because of it they expect more choice, representation, and relevance that D&D does not provide.¹⁴

[...] My Mum seems to link it to Gryphons & Gargoyles from Riverdale and was genuinely concerned until she watched Stranger Things and saw that it was much different. Most people I meet are pretty chill and interested in it.¹⁵

The 'accuracy' of D&D's depiction seems to vary depending on the media involved. For example, participants tended to mention TV shows as being misleading whereas podcasts/streams of actual play were more reliable sources. The complications of treating a podcast or stream as 'real' is discussed later in the chapter.

I believe it's changing, but because people don't REALLY know what D&D is, they rely on media like tv shows that portray it sometimes incorrectly. It makes people confused about the game and sometimes there is still the "Wow what a nerd" reaction.¹⁶

My family only knows it's a "nerdy thing they see on Big Bang Theory," which doesn't actually show a lot of playing.¹⁷

A lot of people think its like a video game. A lot of people think that it is more LARP than TTRPG. While these people still exist, they are falling to the wayside with the numerous forms of media out that show the game in its true form. It has never been more popular than it is today. Between Critical Role, Matt Colville, Stranger Things, the ridiculous amount of media available that shows what DnD truly is, is mindboggling.¹⁸

I feel like the game is often perceived as weird and complicated, and the players are sometimes seen as geeky or socially inept. Surprisingly, I think Stranger Things' depiction of D&D has helped ease some of the stigma associated with the game and its players.¹⁹

I think that is changing significantly. Most of the time when I talk to people about D&D right now, they realize that they just don't know anything about it... they are aware of it, as it shows up in little

¹⁴ 38466

¹⁵ 584

¹⁶ 1043

¹⁷ 22425

¹⁸ 32297

¹⁹ 4868

snapshots on TV shows (iZombie, stranger things, etc), but they don't really understand what it would be like to play. [...] ²⁰

I think today people don't care as much about what other people do in their spare time. We used to be misunderstood, and were treated unfairly in media in the 80s and 90s (Revenge of the Nerds, Sixteen Candles, Can't Hardly Wait, etc.). ²¹

I think the Big Bang Theory has done a wonderful job of trashing people's opinions. However shows like Critical Role and Stranger Things have made it more popular. In general, more people want to try it and it's not as stigmatized as it was when I was in school. ²²

There were also respondents that described how paratexts had positively influenced their perceptions and led them to try the game.

Before shows like Stranger Things spiked interest in the topic, I feel like it was regarded as the nerdiest of nerd interests - even I, a lifelong gamer and fan of sci-fi and fantasy genres, raised my nose at it. But with nerd culture presented positively in TV, film, and podcast form, I feel like public perception of the game is moving towards acceptance and even intrigue. ²³

It's becoming more popular across media apps, such as Tik Tok. So I think people are seeing it in a more positive light. ²⁴

Part of this was changing perceptions around how the game could be played – and this is discussed in greater detail later – but I wanted to touch on the perception of D&D as hack-and-slash and math-heavy versus a tool for roleplaying. Podcasts and streams are influential in shifting perceptions of D&D from a wargame heavy on mechanics and rules to being full of roleplay and storytelling. This is not how D&D *should* be played but changing ideas about how it *could* be played.

My DM at the time was... uninspiring. Critical Role showed me how cool D&D could actually be - I'd never had a roleplay-heavy group, or a particularly descriptive one. ²⁵

²⁰ 16589

²¹ 8481

²² 22423

²³ 32345

²⁴ 33382

²⁵ 12961

1) Harmontown showed me that DnD can be as much improv comedy as it is a game. They never took the game too seriously, it was all about just creating fun and funny moments together. It also showed me your character's premise can be as simple and silly as "a goblin who loves cigarettes and riddles" and it can work. 2) The Adventure Zone showed me that DnD can have a heavy, emotional core to it.²⁶

It was a much more narrative experience than other representations of d&d I had seen in movies (which leaned towards the war gaming roots of the game). It influenced how I came to the table, as someone who wanted to tell a combined story rather than beat a big monster.²⁷

Fantasy High by Dimension 20 has made role-playing an important part of my experience, instead of just viewing it as a game with stats, it's a method of storytelling that still has stats²⁸

My first experience playing dnd wasn't great. Some of the characters treated my character badly because they assumed sexism had to exist in that universe. We played an older version (2e) and there were rules baked right into it that said women had a lower intelligence cap. Listening to The Adventure Zone changed my perception of what dnd could be like. The players were 4 cis white men, but they really strived for diversity in the pcs and npcs they created²⁹

These statements are illustrative of experiences where players might not have returned to D&D, or started playing, if they had not had exposure to a paratext that altered their perceptions.

Paratexts establishing expectations

I undertook a thematic analysis of "Q24: If you answered yes, please describe how it influenced your playstyle or expectations about playing". Initially I was unsure how to present the themes that emerged, because I felt the sorting might influence how they are received. I would be imposing a category of meaning on the themes, but it is necessary. The results could be sorted and re-sorted endlessly but I have chosen the categories I felt most useful. I have kept the wording of the themes as they appeared in my initial thematic analysis because I felt altering them would risk diluting or changing the meaning.

²⁶ 22538

²⁷ 20794

²⁸ 42374

²⁹ 7576

Expectations/ideas about how D&D works as a game

- Work out what kind of game they want to play or to dm
- Improve understanding of the game
- Thought game would go smoother/faster but aware of editing and consequences of that on gameplay flow
- Awareness and reduction of metagaming

Paratexts can allow players to gain a low-effort experience of assorted styles of game which is then useful as a method for players to decide what kind of game they want to play. For example, rather than having to go through the trial and error of experimenting, players can see a stream of a high-roleplaying low-combat game and decide if it is for them. They also serve as a reference point for communicating this because players can say “I want to roleplay like *Critical Role*” or “I want more combat than they have in *Critical Role*.” Overall, it can help players feel like they have a stronger understanding of what playing D&D entails. Simply reading the rulebooks without having seen the game in action can be intimidating, and it can also be difficult to explain to inexperienced players. In the survey results, it was a widespread practice to recommend that players view a stream the DM likes to help with inexperienced players or to establish the desired tone of the game. The problem with this approach is that streams are often edited to remove clunky moments and keep them entertaining. The impact of editing on game perceptions is further discussed later in this chapter. Another theme in the survey responses was that paratexts were helpful for increasing awareness of metagaming and then curbing the behaviour. Metagaming can be a difficult concept to explain and a tricky behaviour to stop in players. It can be hard understanding where the line of ‘player knowledge’ and ‘character knowledge’ is and how to intentionally ignore what an individual might know for roleplaying’s sake.

Related to rules

- Learnt the rules and able understand the mechanics better
- Comforting to see experienced players also making mistakes with rules
- Confidence/desire to be more relaxed with rules

One aspect of helping players to learn about how D&D works as a game is when paratexts clarify the rules. Paratexts are often a way to see rules as applied, how mechanics can interact, and when to bend the rules for the good of the game. Seeing experienced players on streams make errors with the rules assisted in players feel less pressure during their own games.

Open/exposed to new/different potential

- Ideas & inspiration
- More creative in what willing to try -- applies to DMS and players
- Led to trying new experiences, such as traps or puzzles
- Voices -- desire to do them, more comfortable, pressure to do so
- Helped get ideas to build worlds and games
- Opened eyes to the game's potential beyond what they had realised
- Greater flexibility for non-combat or atypical uses of spells/magic
- Awareness of and desire for homebrew rather than premade modules
- Exposure to distinctive character builds and classes that might not have seen otherwise
- Out of the box thinking

As mentioned before, paratexts help players understand what D&D can be and this occurs partially through exposure to variety. Paratexts remain entertaining significantly through novelty: innovative approaches to the game, updated content, and new character builds. They cannot simply recycle the same methods for approaching situations every time or the paratext would become formulaic.

Understanding the role of a DM

- Expectation that the DM will be very well prepped for the session
- Want to be a dm like the ones off the podcasts
- Confidence and/or desire to try being DM
- Try to DM like Matt Mercer (or a specific named DM)

The expectation that the DM will be well prepared for the D&D session is reinforced through paratexts. DMs for streams typically have pre-prepared maps, a well-structured

session, rich back story, and there does not tend to be awkward sessions that end way earlier than expected due to running out of material. I have not found my DMs to be this well-prepared, even if they are running from a pre-made module. There are always pauses to look up details and rules, maps are drawn as we play unless they have been printed out, and sometimes we ran out of content and played board games instead. This does not work for a streamed game that is supposed to be entertaining for an outside audience. Editing removes some of these gaps and create the perception of a smooth game. Some of the bigger celebrity DMs can also afford to invest significant amounts of their time to doing all the preparation. For example, running the *Critical Role* is a job for Matt Mercer so he is financially rewarded for the time spent preparing. The typical non-professional DM must balance game preparation with other life responsibilities. Seeing DMs in action on these streams did make some players want to try taking on the role and increase their confidence. This is possibly because the paratexts demystify the processes involved and make it feel approachable.

Regarding story

- Wanting a deeper/longer/richer/bigger story
- Expectations around bigger story and less combat focus
- Expect to be invested in a good story
- Led to an appreciation of collaborative storytelling in D&D - understand how to build a story

Part of the appeal of paratexts is the story being told using the game – it must be entertaining for an audience, or nobody would watch. Where there is a cast, they must come together to build the story in a harmonious way because endless conflict and arguing about minutia would get boring. Survey results reported that the high quality of story and minimised combat of paratexts was something players wanted to emulate.

Expectations about tone of game

- Created/fostered desire for humour or light-hearted games
- Expected more silliness than they might have otherwise

The tone of streamed games tends to be more humorous rather than deeply serious, possibly because it is easier to execute. Players expect to get the same banter, silly jokes, and humour at their own table.

Perceptions about other players

- Example of a "good" player or DM to emulate - etiquette - podcasts as yardstick/benchmark

Paratexts can reveal what a good group, player, and/or DM looks like, how they behave, and what they do not do. Table etiquette can be hard to establish but streams typically show how a group works together well. If players were constantly interrupting each other then it would not be as entertaining. Paratexts have potential for positively shaping the community through this demonstration of ideal behaviours. If podcasts are being held as an example of best practice, then when they model inclusivity that might be copied by the community.

Regarding roleplaying

- Desire for more roleplay and/or character development
- More comfortable with roleplaying
- Wanted to roleplay more
- Grown to love roleplaying
- Expect roleplaying from other players
- Embrace the idea of "yes and"
- Roleplaying more challenging than expected
- Improve roleplaying

A strong theme in the survey responses was the impact that paratexts had on how players perceived and approached roleplaying. When I first began playing D&D, my group had no idea how to roleplay or what it would look like. There was little in-character dialogue, no voices, and we did not act out what happened. Our stories were very linear compared to the "yes and" approach that DM's often take in paratexts. Roleplaying is a large part of what makes many of the streams entertaining – for example, the voice acting in *Critical Role*. Players'

expectations regarding roleplaying are influenced by paratexts because they show an ideal version of entertaining gameplay. There can then be a desire to emulate this, roleplay like the professionals, and this changes the way they might have previously approached the game. This also translates to altered expectations regarding how other players will approach roleplaying.

Different streams have different influences

- Learn different approaches and strategies from different podcasts e.g., TAZ is fun, flexible with rules, silly; CR is more high fantasy, heavy roleplay, more rule focused
- Exposure to distinctive styles of gameplay -- especially if only played with one group before, diff podcasts = diff styles
- TAZ seems to have led people to be casual with rules and more focused on fun

Paratexts can influence expectations in diverse ways. In the survey responses, the theme was that *The Adventure Zone* takes a fun, sillier, and more flexible approach with the rules. In contrast, *Critical Role* is more rule-focused, with heavier dramatic roleplay, and falls into the high fantasy genre. These two examples teach viewers distinct approaches to D&D and show how differently D&D can be approached. This exposure to assorted styles of gameplay was an advantage that was frequently mentioned.

Aspirations

- Disappointment when game does not live up to podcasts
- Podcasts as setting a gold standard
- Desire similar group dynamics - friends, banter
- Try to have a more descriptive style

These expectations can create an ‘ideal’ game, an optimal approach to D&D that players desire. Paratexts and streams can set a “gold standard” for D&D gameplay that players hold themselves up to – an example that players really did not have before streaming became commonplace. Watching the dynamic between the players in games like *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* can be aspirational. I have never been at a table so harmonious, and I

understand the appeal. I further discuss these issues of an “ideal game” in section 5 of this chapter under orthogaming.

Paratexts prompting play

In section 2 of this chapter, the focus moves from how paratexts introduce players to the game to how they prompt play. This is done primarily through looking at the responses to question 21: “What made you first want to play D&D?”. Previous research has found paratexts to be a major introduction to D&D (Sidhu & Carter, 2020). I found that paratexts were more commonly a secondary source of information for players, a source sought out after a more personal introduction to the game.

Re-sparked interest

Paratexts can serve as a reintroduction to D&D, bringing players back to the game after time away. This can be because a podcast challenges negative experiences by displaying the enjoyable elements absent from a player’s previous experience. This then encourages the player to try again with the cause of the issues potentially removed or reduced. For example, they might be able to identify that the reason they did not have fun is because the group’s playstyle did not suit their preferences, or that the way a group/group member behaved is abnormal and does not have to be tolerated.

listening to the adventure zone rekindled my interest in the hobby after a few bad experiences. i had wanted to play for a while but wasn't sure i could run a game, but then i realized it could be a lot more chill than i was imagining³⁰

I had an incredibly bad experience with an emotionally abusive and controlling DM in college. I didn't play for years after that, even when invited to join. I started listening to The Adventure Zone and realized that maybe, instead of being an emotionally exhausting gauntlet of humiliation, D&D could actually be fun. It helped separate my feelings about the game from my extremely negative feelings about the only DM I'd ever played with up to that point.³¹

³⁰ 7658

³¹ 35532

It made me want to give it a second try after a disappointing high school experience. The Adventure Zone made me realize that you could have fun without sacrificing story, and Critical Role helped me feel comfortable with being dramatic as I pleased without feeling like I was being "too much".³²

Alternatively, players might have drifted away from playing D&D over time and exposure to a podcast can rekindle the desire or show the differences for a new edition.

It influenced literally everything. I reacquainted myself with D&D by listening to all female/non-binary cast 5e real play podcasts: Venture Maidens and D20 Dames specifically. Not only did it teach me a lot of what I know about 5e, it inspired me to try DMing—something I was convinced I would never do less than a year ago.³³

3 year hiatus from playing, watched a stream, immediately felt a need to play again³⁴
it gave me a more mature view of D&D and how to adventure. I hadn't played in almost 20 years, and it made me want to start again. it also showed me more what a good DM could do. compared to our self-taught approach from my youth.³⁵

It rekindled my desire to play. It allowed me to see that my social awkwardness was not something to be derided as these beloved people were doing the same thing as I've always done and not getting shut down. It has also made me up my game back to my teenaged years, and try to do more creativity. It has also allowed me to share this hobby and all of its positive aspects with my children³⁶

The last response mentioned a reduction in perceived social stigma around playing D&D that helped the player return to D&D. The age diversity featured in podcasts and other such paratexts might be influential in welcoming more players to continue playing beyond childhood. Whilst *Stranger Things* features a group of young teenagers playing D&D, the famous *Critical Role* and *The Adventure Zone* groups are closer to middle-aged. These older players help challenge the perception that games and play are pastimes reserved for children. This change is also visible in the resurgence of board games as a hobby and the plethora of mature-themed games with complex mechanics. It is important to not only recognise that podcasts and paratexts are bringing players to D&D, but to understand *who* is influenced.

³² 30345

³³ 37684

³⁴ 19275

³⁵ 12781

³⁶ 1072

Friend introduced them to a D&D podcast

As previously mentioned in the quantitative survey results, friends and family are the first introduction to D&D whilst podcasts are a follow-up avenue. Many of the respondents mentioned that their friend (or someone they know) recommended a podcast which then led to them playing D&D.

A friend of mine recommended I listen to The Adventure Zone. While I had seen a lot of fanart online (Tumblr), I never tried listening to it. That got me hooked. Personally I love creating a character and solving in game puzzles.³⁷

An acquaintance tweeted about Critical Role, and I didn't know what it was so I googled it, watched a few episodes, and got hooked.³⁸

I accidentally reblogged a fan art of a character in a podcast my friend was listening to. He told me about it and after hearing the passion he used to speak about it, I binged the whole 69 episode series.³⁹

Podcast made it seem more interesting or approachable or taught them about the game

Podcasts/paratexts can challenge preconceived notions about D&D and encourage viewers to at least *try* D&D.

I am rather new to dnd, but I think the resurgence of podcasts has really impacted how dnd is perceived by the public. Its showing people in an accessible way how fun it is and that stupid portrayals of it, like in the terrible show big band theory, are not accurate. [...].⁴⁰

Honestly the McElroy's is why my friend group was interested in trying. They're easygoing friendly play style, managing high stakes without having to resort to assault or transphobia made it seem doable and welcoming. In a similar vein so has Critical Role and the influence of Matt Mercer, the women at his table are welcomed and celebrated by the rest of the cast regardless of what is said about them online and seeing the level of respect for his players and their respect for his story is pretty inspiring.⁴¹

³⁷ 40278

³⁸ 13220

³⁹ 7869

⁴⁰ 42609

⁴¹ 31827

It made the whole game seem less serious to me, and more accessible, as beneath the story and the action it was quite clearly a group of friends /@ family that were having fun together and telling a story.⁴²

Everyone I watched had so much fun that it pushed me to overcome being shy and giving up because it was hard to find a group.⁴³

Seeing the streamers and online players enjoying D&D and playing in a manner that is positive, accessible, and desirable encourages would-be players to find a game. The varying effect of paratexts in this manner is discussed later in the section on how paratexts influence play. It was important to mention that paratexts influence desire to play, not just focus on the impact on gameplay.

Paratexts as a pathway to inclusion

Paratexts can show how D&D groups and games can be inclusive through their cast, stories, and fans.

I think it's coming into the mainstream more and more, cause people love Critical Role and the amount of D&D podcasts are reaching critical mass. I think it used to be considered this thing just for (male, white) nerds but more and more folks feel empowered to DM and that's going to make more and more people feel comfortable to play.⁴⁴

I think this perception has changed a lot since the growing popularity of Critical Role. I was frequently the only woman in D&D groups in high school, but now that is rarely the case. We are still seen as nerds, of course, but I think even being a nerd is a lot more acceptable now.⁴⁵

Critical role really changed me from a rule lawyer/tactician to a storyteller and role player. It also introduced the idea that dnd could be more inclusive than white male nerds⁴⁶

For these players, *Critical Role's* bringing the game to a mainstream audience has helped encourage diverse players to feel comfortable at the table. D&D as an interest for many

⁴² 29901

⁴³ 41598

⁴⁴ 31566

⁴⁵ 21902

⁴⁶ 25130

demographics rather than solely for white male nerds can translate to increased acceptance at the D&D table.

I learned there's room for women and lgbtq people now, if you find the right group. That the rules aren't as complicated as I thought, that there are 101 different ways to play D&D, that the game is what you decide to make it.⁴⁷

Well I wouldn't have a playstyle at all because I wouldn't be playing [...] My expectations were certainly changed from expecting D&D to be a wall of toxic exclusion to being a bit more optimistic. Seeing other women and certainly women of colour playing D&D was definitely a big part in bringing me to the table. [...]⁴⁸

Paratexts can show their audience alternative ways of approaching the game that challenge preconceived assumptions. In these quotes it becomes apparent that the podcasts typically show diverse groups, that the rules are approachable, and the potential that D&D has. Podcasts and paratexts could be powerful tools for resisting gatekeeping and reducing exclusionary behaviour in the community.

D&D as a progression from roleplaying computer games (RPG)

D&D has influenced a selection of the biggest computer RPG franchises, such as *Divinity*, *The Elder Scrolls*, *Dark Souls*, *Dragon Age*, and *World of Warcraft*. It is often credited with: popularising the idea of adventuring parties and meeting in taverns; the core fantasy races of elves, dwarves, and halflings; the concept of choosing a race and class, the mechanics of critical hits, character design, and side quests; and furthering the aesthetic of fantasy as the Middle Ages in Western Europe (Kogod, 2020). These ideas might not have begun with D&D, but they are credited to D&D often enough to legitimise the popular history of D&D being a recognised originator.

I enjoyed Skyrim, and it's always seemed like a ton of fun!⁴⁹

I love roleplaying games like Dragon Age, Elder Scrolls: Skyrim, etc. So when it was described to me it sounded like a lot of fun, and when someone offered to DM for me and other friends I jumped on it.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ 7108

⁴⁸ 24524

⁴⁹ 30755

⁵⁰ 36245

I grew up loving JRPGs and text-based roleplaying online, MUDs, etc. I'd say my love of creative writing and characters made me interested in D&D⁵¹

Going beyond being inspired by D&D, some games actually use the rules to power their mechanics system – for example *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic* (Kogod, 2020).

I enjoy RPG videogames such as *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect*, so I was told that those games were based off the mechanics of D&D.⁵²

Playing *Baldur's Gate* (video game from the late 90s which was set in the forgotten realms and used advanced D&D rules).⁵³

There are even popular games set in the D&D universe: *Baldur's Gate*, *Neverwinter Nights*, and *Icewind Dale*. (Gil, 2019). These familiarise players with D&D's extensive lore.

My dad played *Baldur's Gate* when I was a kid, and I used to pull up a stool next to his chair in his office and watch him play before bed, which was probably what initially sparked the interest, [...].⁵⁴

Baldur's Gate (1998)⁵⁵

*Baldur's Gate II: Shadows of Amn*⁵⁶

Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance II on Playstation 2. I played through the video game and loved the play concept and the story and got interested in finding more things like it. I played a lot of video games that were similar, and eventually found friends interested in playing *Pathfinder* (cause D&D at the time sounded difficult to us).⁵⁷

I've been playing *Neverwinter* on the PS4. The gaming community I belong to on discord is very active, and one of my *neverwinter* buddies set up a discord channel with a bot (Avrae) to help roll to play d&d. He then asked who wanted to join and I thought I'd give it a try. I basically had to have it handed to me by a group of people I already gamed with in order to want to play.⁵⁸

⁵¹ 21444

⁵² 29214

⁵³ 21916

⁵⁴ 36270

⁵⁵ 44469

⁵⁶ 43190

⁵⁷ 10754

⁵⁸ 30340

The pervasiveness of D&D's aesthetic and sensibilities might lead players to feel more comfortable with trying D&D. There were responses that explained how it seemed natural to move from a D&D-inspired game to playing D&D.

D&D as a chance to play in a fantasy setting players already loved

The desire to play in existing fictional settings was catered for in early D&D modules. For example, *Conan Unchained!* and *Conan Against Darkness* were modules designed as movie tie-for *Conan the Destroyer* (1984). The modules' covers feature Arnold Schwarzenegger as Conan the Barbarian and allow players to play as Conan, Juma, Valeria, and Nestor from the Conan stories (though players may unadvisedly use their own characters). D&D has continued to cross over into other works of fiction throughout its history – from *Red Sonja Unconquered* (1986), *Oriental Adventures* (2001) (a *Legend of the Five Rings* tie-in), *Guildmaster's Guide to Ravnica* (2018) (*Magic the Gathering* setting), and the *Stranger Things* themed starter set (2019). There are also the specific shared universes mentioned in the next section (e.g., *The Legend of Drizzt* and *Dragonlance*). *Lord of The Rings* initially influenced D&D – there was even a lawsuit that required Gygax and Arneson to change the names of elements that potentially infringed on copyright. It is an archetypical fantasy setting in Western fiction – many players mentioned approaching D&D with a desire to play their *Lord of the Rings* fantasies.

For me Dungeons & Dragons was always about acting out the fantasy of being in tolkien's Middle-earth.

That was my only draw. To the game⁵⁹

A friend convinced me to play and i thought it would be like lord of the rings. I was like 14 i just wanted to be Aragorn.⁶⁰

The idea that I could male my own character and story. I could be Gimle in Lord of the Rings, or Jack Sparrow, or Harry Potter. Or better yet, I could make a character to adventure in those worlds with them.⁶¹

⁵⁹ 32363

⁶⁰ 32548

⁶¹ 16479

The idea that I could take on the role of Aragon, Gandalf, or Bilbo, and go on an adventure appealed greatly to me.⁶²

I imagined it would be like being a character in a Tolkien novel. I had recently purchased & finished "The Hobbit" & "LOTR".⁶³

My brother and sister in law pitched it this way: "you like Lord of the Rings, right? Well, DnD lets you play as Aragorn or Gimli or any other character you want. Or you can make a completely new character."⁶⁴

We were reading The Lord of the Rings and my dad wrote a campaign for us as hobbits exploring the Shire.⁶⁵

Are you kidding me??? I was 10 years old and had just seen Star Wars and the animated The Hobbit and as a war gamer at the time, this was our new direction to go and fulfill the gaming adventure desires inspired from those movie experiences.⁶⁶

As soon as I found out that I could create a character what was essentially Hermione Granger in her Cat appearance (from Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets), I was immediately hooked! Since then, I was informed I could turn into a variety of animals if I was a druid... That is the day I found my ultimate class and race!⁶⁷

D&D's variety of settings and content facilitate player's desires to live out fantasy adventures in a manner acceptable for adults.

Reading the books set in the D&D universe/lore

I was not familiar with the D&D-settings before playing for the first time, but two my fellow players had read the *Legend of Drizzt* books. They had different mental imagery of the settings and a greater understanding of the game's lore. Additionally, they tended to have a similar mental image of aspects whilst the rest of us were relying on various other references (which led to some confusion when we were imagining scenes vastly differently). For fans of

⁶² 29038

⁶³ 17287

⁶⁴ 29835

⁶⁵ 30355

⁶⁶ 4008

⁶⁷ 17680

the *Dragonlance* (over 190 books have used the setting) and R.A. Salvatore's *The Legend of Drizzt* (37 books), D&D is an opportunity to play in that fictional world.

A friend recommended R.A. Salvatore's "The Legend of Drizzt" series for me to read. I was hooked by the first book and there was no going back. My boyfriend at the time started reading them, too, and a small group of our friends at that point decided we wanted to check out what D&D was all about.⁶⁸

I was obsessed with the Dragonlance novels as a preteen and learned that it came out of a D&D campaign build that they were doing. I needed to understand the game in order to understand the books and world that I loved. That's what made me want to play it. [...].⁶⁹

The books! I had read a lot of the books—even have a horse named Drizzt—and it was a natural next step to playing the game.⁷⁰

Reading the Dragonlance books, loving them and learning they were based off this game⁷¹

I read the book series The Legend of Drizzt Do'Urden by R. A. Salvatore, and I talked to my dad about what it was like to actually play⁷²

a guy i was good friends with invited me, i loved the D&D novels by Weis and Hackman, so i had a try⁷³

I loved the Dragon Lance books. This gave me a way to be closer to those characters and have my own adventures in their world.⁷⁴

I have always been a psychotic Tolkien fan and my uncle gave me the Drizzt books when I was young, so seeing my sister play, I wanted to as well.⁷⁵

I like fantasy settings and races and read a lot of Dragonlance and Forgotten Realms books when I was young⁷⁶

I had read books in the Forgotten Realm setting and I knew friends in highschool who played⁷⁷

⁶⁸ 43515

⁶⁹ 2013

⁷⁰ 29243

⁷¹ 10493

⁷² 26835

⁷³ 40794

⁷⁴ 28290

⁷⁵ 27176

⁷⁶ 13876

⁷⁷ 4202

Before I played D&D, I read many of the books in the Dragonlance collection. When I discovered that the plot for the Chronicles trilogy was based on a game of D&D played by the authors, I was amazed and enthralled.⁷⁸

I always wondered about it, but I can definitely credit the Dragonlance book series for pushing me into actually looking for a group.⁷⁹

There is a sense in the responses that it was a logical step into D&D from the tie-in fiction and the massive quantity of books means that most fantasy readers will stumble upon one at a bookstore or library eventually. They could be powerful entry-routes for new D&D players if revitalised by WOTC for a fresh audience.

“Choose Your Own Adventure” books

I was surprised by the number of survey responses that mentioned “Choose Your Own Adventure”-style (CYOA) books as a significant part of their route into D&D. As a child I was obsessed with the few adventure game books that I found – particularly *Star Wars: The Lost Jedi Adventure Game Book: Jedi Dawn and The Bounty Hunter* by Paul Cockburn (1995). I had never considered the relationship between this style of book and roleplaying games but as I read the survey responses it became increasingly apparent.

choose your own adventure books based on conan the barbarian and my dad and uncle talking about their old campaigns.⁸⁰

I loved Fighting Fantasy game books (based on D&D and had all the Dragon Warriors books that I wrote campaigns for and tried to play with my brother who wasn't interested). [...].⁸¹

I read the books and thought it sounded fun. I was introduced to it because of my like for Choose Your Own Adventure books.⁸²

I enjoyed the Ian Livingstone and other choose your own adventure books.⁸³

I read a lot of my dad's Fighting Fantasy books and they are a gateway drug.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ 22907

⁷⁹ 42284

⁸⁰ 2197

⁸¹ 2354

⁸² 15587

⁸³ 2251

⁸⁴ 25642

Fighting Fantasy Books, D&D seemed like the natural evolution, the next step of the same thing, only better.⁸⁵

CYOA books give readers the chance to shape their experience of the book, to take control and decide the pathway of the character. The *Star Wars* book I adored even had character sheets, customisable character attributes, combat, dice mechanics, and equipment.

Fighting Fantasy books were too restrictive in what my character could be and do. I really wanted to experience Middle Earth.⁸⁶

I had played the Fighting Fantasy book, *Warlock of Firetop Mountain* a year earlier and DnD was mentioned as something better - and it was.⁸⁷

I love fantasy literature. I was a fan of "You are the hero" books by Jackson & Livingstone, D&D was the next step in the evolution.⁸⁸

I don't know, i liked the idea. I'm a good reader, and some when i was a teenager there was this Choose Your Own Adventure, or Secret Path Books that i loved, and one of them, had this "life points" stuff that was pretty amazing. So, when i find this Dragonlance box in a local library was something natural.⁸⁹

I used to love "choose your own adventure" books as a kid, and I love high fantasy, so when John told me D&D was essentially a choose your own adventure fantasy game, I was already hooked.⁹⁰

I loved choose your own adventure games or video games with heavy dialogue/choice elements and I heard that DnD was the key to understanding them. Podcasts really helped me understand how the game worked and was my first real play exposure⁹¹

Though the choices are more limited than when playing D&D with a flexible DM, it is comparable to a paired-back one-on-one roleplaying experience as the player/reader is encouraged to take control. CYOA books are an active reading experience with decision-making as a core concept and the ability to shape/influence the narrative, like D&D.

⁸⁵ 3055

⁸⁶ 14164

⁸⁷ 42793

⁸⁸ 36175

⁸⁹ 16564

⁹⁰ 30191

⁹¹ 39410

Webcomics

It was even more surprising to me to see webcomics mentioned as a significant paratext for encouraging readers to become D&D players. Personally, I credit *Darths & Droids* (The Comic Irregulars, 2011) and *DM of the Ring* (Shamus Young, 2006) for fuelling my initial desire to play. These two webcomics use screen captures from *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings* respectively and then overlay new dialogue as though it is a D&D game. I recall reading *DM of the Ring* whilst on the trip to America where I purchased my first starter set. The webcomic made the game seem so fun that I decided I needed to try playing.

I'm very into fantasy, and had played BG1&2 over and over for about a decade. Then a friend and I read the webcomic Darths & Droids and decided YES we needed this is our lives! And we still play in a campaign together.⁹²

Reading Darths and Droids.⁹³

The Order of the Stick (OOTS) was also mentioned frequently, which began online in 2003 and continues today. OOTS was featured in *Dragon* magazine from December 2005 to the last issue in 2007. There have also been hardcopy books produced that collate the webcomic pages into their story arcs.

--You might also want to include something about webcomics. My first deep exposure to D&D (not the casual references in a tv show or movie) came from The Order of the Stick. I read it even though I only had a vague idea of the mechanics it was based on. I was also quite a fan of Darths and Droids, but I lost track mid-episode two[...]7472

In addition to playing D&D where possible, I also used to enjoy reading the D&D themed comic Order of the Stick, which cemented for me that D&D is inherently a good-natured, not very serious, joking kind of game.⁹⁴

I think it was my love of The Order of the Stick, and then also Darths and Droids - both made the adventuring seem really fun.⁹⁵

⁹² 12263

⁹³ 20714

⁹⁴ 199

⁹⁵ 17621

The Order of the Stick made it seem like a really interesting game system where interesting stories could be told⁹⁶

I started reading the Order of the Stick webcomic, after which I started looking up D&D proper on Wikipedia, and some time afterwards, I started talking about it with my brother, who had been given our cousin's old 3.5 books, and I ended up joining a short lived campaign he ran⁹⁷.

I read The Order of the Stick and thought D&D sounded really neat!⁹⁸

I began digging into the SRD after reading The Order of the Stick. I gradually became more and more interested of how the game was actually played.⁹⁹

Honestly Order of the Stick?¹⁰⁰

The Order of the Stick uses 3.5 Edition rules, and the storylines rely heavily on tropes and stereotypical behaviours.

Memes

Another “surprising, but probably should not have been” frequent mention in the survey responses was the influence of memes. Memes are typically images with a small amount of text that convey meaning through the layered associations with specific imagery. D&D memes vary from mocking players and the DM (often self-deprecatingly), acknowledging tropes, and relating events in popular media to D&D mechanics (e.g., when a television character fails at a significant moment it is comparable to rolling a critical miss in D&D). They are easily shared on social media due to their format typically being a single image, the meaning is often accessible to non-players, and they provide a humorous insight into playing D&D.

These days, it's more popular than ever. Rather than learning by word of mouth, people now lead with memes about bards trying to seduce inanimate objects and references to Critical Role[...]¹⁰¹

⁹⁶ 29812

⁹⁷ 10634

⁹⁸ 5320

⁹⁹ 41207

¹⁰⁰ 18540

¹⁰¹ 39315

Dad explained it to me then told me I wasn't allowed to play with him. I forgot about it for a couple of years until I started going on tumblr and reddit to look at memes. I quickly spiraled into loving the idea of it and joined my school's club when it started¹⁰²

I don't remember. I kinda remember it getting brought up more and more on Facebook in memes friends and I shared, then those friends talked and got together and just played. It was very fluid¹⁰³

Seeing posts and memes about it.¹⁰⁴

consuming large amounts of memes about it posted by other players on imgur.com, made me really want to try and then was invited by my sister in law to play and it felt like a safe environment to try for the first time.¹⁰⁵

The memes were funny, so it sparked my interest.¹⁰⁶

I saw memes about nat 1s and nat 20s and class/alignment stereotypes and after looking it up to understand the jokes, I thought it seemed like fun. A roommate then proposed starting a super-watered down campaign for our fellow newbie roommates and it was a lot of fun.¹⁰⁷

Frankly? Memes. More mainstream exposure.¹⁰⁸

I gained a strong enough desire to play that I actually got a starter set after researching about it online and seeing a lot of D&D memes on tumblr.com¹⁰⁹

I saw some memes about on Tumblr and thought it would be fun to try.¹¹⁰

I saw the memes haha¹¹¹

Survey responses described memes as a source of frequent exposure to D&D that then resulted in the viewer doing more research into the game or having their interest piqued. They often highlight the funniest tropes of D&D play and therefore contribute to the perception that D&D is something fun, silly, and approachable. Memes are like billboard

¹⁰² 42529

¹⁰³ 20855

¹⁰⁴ 5066

¹⁰⁵ 967

¹⁰⁶ 30880

¹⁰⁷ 32066

¹⁰⁸ 14360

¹⁰⁹ 36793

¹¹⁰ 12969

¹¹¹ 14332

advertisements for iconic D&D moments – they entice players in with the promise of an enjoyable time and similar hilarity.

The Play *She Kills Monsters* by Qui Nguyen (2011)

She Kills Monsters by Qui Nguyen is a comical play based around D&D. The summary by Nguyen (2012) describes Agnes' journey to understand her sister through Tilly's D&D notebook after Tilly's death in a car crash. It includes themes of sexuality, grief, bullying, strong female characters, and comedy (Vincentelli, 2020).

The best representation of my dnd experience is the play, "she kills monsters". It's about an older sister who finds the dnd campaign notes of her younger sister who recently died in a car accident. The older sister proceeds to play the campaign and learn a lot about her sister, including that she was queer. It's a really beautiful play that I think speaks to the experience of a lot of queer people and the way we find safety and community in our campaigns.¹¹²

I watched the play by Qui Nguyen, which was all about acceptance and learning to understand and empathize with people. I also always had a huge imagination and thought d&d was a good way to exercise it!¹¹³

Between 2013 and 2021, it was performed in 797 American productions – particularly popular for school and college groups (Vincentelli, 2020). A version for younger performers and audiences has even been created that tweaks the content to be more school-setting appropriate, and due to the pandemic there is even a script for a performance entirely through Zoom and other streaming platforms (Vincentelli, 2020).

A group of my theatre friends performed a play about D&D (she kills monsters) and it sparked both my interest and theirs in the game.¹¹⁴

I got cast as the lead in *She Kills Monsters* and at the same time, my best friends were telling me more about it and I went to visit them and watched a session of theirs. I was immediately into it.¹¹⁵

¹¹² 43347

¹¹³ 41450

¹¹⁴ 1026

¹¹⁵ 3266

Hearing about it from friends and media, the final push to play was when my high school put on a production of *She Kills Monsters*.¹¹⁶

She Kills Monsters was a really cool show, and I had some friends who played, and it piqued my interest, so I asked them if I could join¹¹⁷

I performed in a show about DND at the University playhouse at Texas A&M Commerce¹¹⁸

I Stage Managed the play "*She Kills Monsters*"¹¹⁹

Hearing my friends talk about playing it, and being a part of a production of *She Kills Monsters* at my college.¹²⁰

Years after working on *She Kills Monsters*, I was preparing to write a play that would incorporate rpg elements (I had played more narrative RPGs like *Fiasco*) but had never played D&D. I was also listening to *The Adventure Zone* at the time and it all came together.¹²¹

My lack of awareness of the play is due to its popularity primarily in America, but it is clearly a significant driver of interest in D&D. D&D as an outlet for acting is discussed further in the chapter on roleplaying.

Paratexts as a route to D&D establish players' expectations of the game, other players, and activities around gameplay. This initial introduction has consequences for how players play D&D. The creation of these paratexts is often a performance that is recorded and shared. The next section discusses how the act of performing D&D play impacts the gameplay and therefore the expectations and perceptions of players.

Play as Performance

For the context of existing research, streams of D&D gameplay can be considered form of Let's Play video, despite the genre typically consisting of video games. Gameplay is still presented for an audience in these videos – there just tends to be a larger cast involved. Let's Play videos are not just a straight transcription of content, but rather they "alter the meaning

¹¹⁶ 43391

¹¹⁷ 16388

¹¹⁸ 26671

¹¹⁹ 23543

¹²⁰ 36328

¹²¹ 6980

of the games they appropriate” (Burwell & Miller, 2016, p. 113). Play is transformed into a performance for an audience and therefore changes the player’s approach. Now there must be decisions made about “tone, language and narrative” plus the creation of a persona. There are additional layers added to the game through this performance for the purpose of entertainment. Commentary on how the game works or how rules should be applied is one such layering that is common. Meaning is also produced through the emotions of the players, how they approach gameplay, and any discussions they may have about or around the game (Burwell & Miller, 2016, p. 113). There is also a layer of interactions between the players that goes beyond the gameplay – and it is this layer that makes the streams so enjoyable for many. Through the audience watching players play and the performance of the player meaning is produced that is absent from when D&D is played by a group in isolation. When players then discuss the events of a stream/podcast on internet forums, the comment section, or even on the live chat an additional meaning-making process occurs (Burwell & Miller, 2016, p. 116). Viewers can reflect on interpretations, discuss ambiguous events, and provide commentary on the game which takes the beyond the role of simple consumers and into producers of another text.

The value and impact of streamed gameplay are well-known by Wizards of the Coast. Nathan Stewart (the VP for the Dungeons & Dragons franchise at Wizards of the Coast) stated that “over half of the new people who started playing fifth edition got into D&D through watching people play online” (Borba, 2020). My research suggests that the role of family/friends is a more popular source of introduction, but podcasts are a crucial follow-on source. Wizards of the Coast are aware of the strong link between online gaming streams and a desire to play D&D. In a video on the IGN website that explores D&D’s popularity, several key WOTC staff are interviewed about the impact on streaming. Chris Cocks (Wizards of the Coast President) stated that the company has realised that platforms like YouTube and Twitch are important (Borba, 2020). Chris Perkins (Principal Story Designer for D&D) suggests that streams demystify the game’s rules so that it is more approachable (Borba, 2020). Jeremy Crawford (Lead Rules Designer) discusses how streams also present non-stereotypical players with “people of all types” playing D&D (Borba, 2020).

Inspired to stream

In the responses there were frequent mentions of the desire to start a podcast or stream after watching others. There are new podcasts and streams starting all the time – there has been an explosion in their prevalence. DeVille (2017) describes how podcasts have become “an increasingly popular outlet for aspiring performers who don’t have a clear path into traditional media”. Matt Mercer describes podcasts as distinct from other media because they “empower the audience to go off the next day and create it themselves” (DeVile, 2017).

As someone wanting to start up a dnd podcast eventually, listening has helped me shape my campaigns into something that would make pleasing audio to listen to¹²²

Honestly the only thing it influenced was the urge for me to start a dnd podcast.¹²³

I've watched livestreams to do research in current trends streaming for my own livestream. I've added some interesting elements into my stream that I've seen. I've also taken cues from things I've been missing in our streams and added those elements.¹²⁴

Further research into the needs that are met by starting a podcast would be valuable for understanding the increase in amateur D&D podcasting. D&D podcasts might be like community theatre, where a love of performing can be met for those who enjoy acting but could not/did not pursue it as a career.

The impact of editing

As part of the production process, streams typically have a degree of editing before they are shared with the audience. This is not the case for live streams as they occur, but there may be tweaking before the final video gets posted. Responses gave examples of how podcasts edit their gameplay sessions for the stream:

Podcasts are usually cut and edited so there's not as much umming and ahing and sessions can get or seem a lot more drudgery in real life. Players are far less verbose when describing their actions, and often don't engage in the role play dialogue much.¹²⁵

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Everything on the podcast seems to run much smoother and faster. In reality because there's no such thing as editing, there's a lot of awkward pauses and discussions that go nowhere¹²⁶

I didn't expect all the pauses while we think or look up rules!¹²⁷

I guess you watch some podcasts and streams like critical role and its just the wow factor everything runs smoothly theres no awkward silience or tripping over words theres jokes and noone ever seems bored or upset. its the dream to be able to run or be able to play in a game like that but for the most part its not realistic and even as you wish for it I feel everyone knows that¹²⁸

The consequence of podcasts editing their gameplay is an impact on the expectations that players bring into the game. Expectations are something that are discussed heavily in the next section, but in touching on editing it is important to include this discussion.

The editing of the podcast, and the professional actors/voiceover artists involved set expectations high for the amount of in-character dialogue and role playing that would go on. In reality, its a bunch of folks sitting around a table, drinking, talking in normal voices, debating options, and metagaming the hell out of our characters, while we think up the funniest, most creative ways to solve problems.¹²⁹

I think at first I expected the role playing to be a lot more seamless than it is in real life because edited podcasts put up by audio professionals tend to sound more polished than irl sessions with people who aren't professional actors or comedians.¹³⁰

I sometimes catch myself thinking our games will go more like the games in the streams and podcasts, even though I know they won't for a myriad of reasons (like the players being professional actors, or the podcasts being edited & played for a full-audio medium). [...]¹³¹

I listened to podcasts of people playing DnD once I moved away for uni and didn't have a steady group. At first I was like, 'wow, the story is really cool, it's almost like theatre, but this isn't really what it's like to play, it's more clunky than this in real life.' But the longer I went not playing, the less I remembered that.

So then when it came to me jumping into playing in with a new group (of strangers), I was like, 'wow, the story isn't as tight,' 'why does it feel like these characters don't mesh,' 'why am I bored.' Because it

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wasn't working like it does on professional shows, I was wondering why I wasn't having as much fun as they were... so stupid.¹³²

Made me want to think outside the box more. Also gave me false expectations about how much crosstalk there would be (they edit it out but when I play online it's a problem)¹³³

The smoothness created by editing out stumbling, mistakes, and pauses creates an expectation of how a game will progress. In my experience, there are often lengthy delays as players look up rules, argue about how a mechanic works, or pause for a food delivery. The side conversations, drawn-out discussions on how to proceed, and good-natured ribbing of other players are my favourite parts of D&D – and those are often edited out or limited in podcasts and streams.

Play on a stream

Playing on a stream can change the approach that the players take to D&D to make it entertaining for an audience. This phenomenon was mentioned in responses, and the consequences are interesting to consider if players are learning purely from these paratexts.

expectations: People who stream D&D do it for viewers, therefore they are more entertaining/better at improv and roleplay. With a group of friends it is nothing like that, its more unorganised/silly¹³⁴

[...] I also don't believe streams are dnd games - they are making an entertainment for an EXTERNAL audience. A good gaming group is making entertainment for themselves.¹³⁵

[...] I also realized that stream games are a lot different than my home game. Stream games are about entertainment and my home game is more beer and pretzels style.¹³⁶

I produce a live podcast. We modify our game playing to make content that would be more enjoyable to listeners - less rolling & math and more roleplaying/storytelling and acting.¹³⁷

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¹³³ 22980

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D&D podcasts/streams tend to focus a lot more on story and being entertaining for people watching. I think this maybe caused me to focus much more on character and story, as well as to have a few more unrealistic expectations at first?¹³⁸

These quotes recognise that the presence of an external audience changes the focus of a streamed game – from enjoyment for players to entertainment for an audience. The target or goal of the game changes and this can alter how the game functions.

Podcasts and streams have to play fast and loose so that their narrative isn't bogged down by rules talk. By listening (not watching) podcasts and streams, I've learned several tricks for keeping my narration quick, engaging my players, and keeping the plot moving.¹³⁹

I play on a twitch stream on Sundays and I KNOW that I absolutely, positively cannot, under any circumstances be 100% my self. I need to entertain the audience that that sometimes means doing the opposite of what I would do in real life. It could be that I do something absolutely evil, just to build up tension or drama, or it could be that I KNOW there is a trap somewhere but I step on it anyway to give the audience something funny to laugh at. Its a lot like wrestling. I have to make it look real when it isn't. [...].¹⁴⁰

I've actually decided to leave my D&D group after our current adventure wraps up. Our DM is very serious about it, creating 10-20 part adventures and recording everything for his podcast. Even though I enjoy D&D I'm finding this level of commitment really exhausting. I'd like to switch to hosting games nights at my house so I can play games with different people that don't require so much time.¹⁴¹

I learned a lot of how 5th Edition worked through listening to The Adventure Zone, which was helpful. However, I do feel that it may have skewed my expectations toward players enjoying a 'railroad-y' style of DMing, whereas I now know that that style was selected specifically because the podcast was meant to be entertaining to listeners. Players generally prefer to have more autonomy in their games, a lesson I learned over time spent actually playing.¹⁴²

People who stream often have more experience, money, and also have the ability to edit what is put out into the world. Additionally, since the group is "performing" on camera, they're much more attentive and

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professional. These are the expectations when going into a new campaign or group, and often are not met unless a conversation is had¹⁴³

To create an engaging experience for audiences, the plot of streamed games might need to be modified compared to an un-stream game. A trope-filled hack-and-slack dungeon can be fun to play through, but it would be boring to watch because there is little story – and it is predictable. The storyline in podcasts is often more elaborate to draw an audience in and remain interesting. One response mentioned that their stream’s DM tended to create 10- to 20-part adventures which would be unusual for a home game. Survey results show that the typical group plays once a week (31.2% of responses) or a few times a month (26.2% of responses)¹⁴⁴. For a weekly group, a ten-part adventure would take two-and-a-half months whilst a twenty-part adventure would take five months (if they manage to play every week without disruption for that period). Considering a group that plays only twice a month, those timelines are doubled which means a single adventure story arc could take an entire year. That is a long time to keep a group on a single track and objective without them losing interest or getting distracted. It becomes too many sessions to trek through before narrative payoff and the rewards are reached.

If you're watching a stream that is already part of a company like I was (Both High Rollers and Critical Role) those people are professional entertainers and are probably already friends. This means they start playing and everything works together instantly and the whole session is fairly well put together and relatively efficient, all fitting in 3-4 hours. This is not how it is when you begin playing. [...] ¹⁴⁵

Frequency of sessions are not just a consideration, but the length of them. I do not think I would describe any group I have ever enjoyed playing with as “efficient” but that is how responses described streams. The design and focus of streams mean that players are often “railroaded” or guided through an entertaining but straightforward storyline. There is often no room for random side-quests, tangential discussion, and drawn-out failed interrogations of NPC (or they are edited out).

I answered no, and I'm still going to answer here. :-D live video streams have completely skewed what makes role-playing games fun. Instead of friends getting together and gaming and telling a story,

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¹⁴⁴ See Appendix 1 for results table

¹⁴⁵ 34463

there's also the addition of "playing for the fourth wall". It's changed how people play and what they think they need to do. I've seen this playing with younger folk at local game stores. It's depressing.¹⁴⁶

I feel D&D is quite different from when I started playing. Not just the way the rules work but it's popularity and partial acceptance into mainstream culture. Podcasts etc have brought in a different style of play into the game, one more of the theatrical with people playing quirky characters more. It's neither good nor bad but absolutely different than how it used to be where such characters were rare.¹⁴⁷

In connection with question no. 23, most streamed games I've seen are embarrassing. The presence of a camera seems to make some people act like asses (this includes friends I've seen in streamed games). I suppose observing the event alters the event.¹⁴⁸

The ideas of "playing for the fourth wall" and that "observing the event alters the event" resonated with how I consider streams of D&D to change gameplay. There is the addition of an extra presence – the audience, fourth wall, observers, recording device or however the viewer is represented – that fundamentally alters the experience. D&D is twisted from a shared mode of production to one of production for external consumption's sake.

Production Value

Streams are intrinsically an entertainment product and are created with watchability/consumption in mind. This means that set dressing is important for visually based paratexts and sound-quality is important for streams that rely solely on audio.

Critical Role is basically the high production value version of D&D, and it absolutely influenced how I (and many other people I'm sure) play D&D. [...]¹⁴⁹

The amount of production put into Critical Role set my standards way too high. They have a lot of money going into it, but I wish I could have that level of quality sets and role play.¹⁵⁰

D&D combat can be a drawn-out process even with the streamlining that occurs and remembering where each character is relative to each enemy gets difficult. Miniatures and terrain can be a valuable tool for setting the scene and helping the audience keep track of

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what is happening. It adds to the quality of the stream beyond staring at the players' faces and dice rolls. Sound effects and atmospheric music are also often employed to increase immersion. This is something I have experienced a DM trying to use, and not doing it well. Editing in sounds later or having a production assistant add sound effects whilst running a game is vastly different from trying to balance running the game and choose the right song for the right moment. Too slow and it breaks immersion rather than improving it.

I think it made me want to roleplay more in my games because i thought that looked really fun. i've met players who wanted the same "production value" (props, maps, figurines) from the show in their games but i think that's pretty unrealistic. However the fun that they have when roleplaying with one another is something that i think is easier to replicate and incredibly fun to do right.¹⁵¹

The expectation for intriguing visuals and sounds in an in-person game has increased due to the standards set in streams. Whilst miniatures have been part of the game since the beginning, the market has come a long way in merchandising D&D-specific miniatures. The legend goes that Gygax based early monsters off cheap plastic toys he found, but now the exact model for each monster is typically available and from assorted brands. My longest running D&D group used to use old *Star Wars* miniatures for all our games because our DM had a random box of them. They were simply a tool for tracking space and relative position. I have seen elaborate village sets complete with villagers, massive sailing boats, and an incredible number of different dragons that vary in colour, size, and pose. Streams often treat their gaming table like a stage, and that means that set dressing is important.

Paratexts influencing play

Introduction

In this section, I discuss the impact of paratexts on the actual play activities involved with D&D. This includes how paratexts inspire the content of D&D games, alter expectations, and approach, and raise player's perceived play/quality performance. Both quantitative and qualitative data from the surveys is used to support the themes in this section.

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Survey Results – Quantitative

To understand the relationship that players have with watching streams and podcasts I asked three questions that I will discuss the results of here. An overwhelming majority of players reported to have watched a stream of people playing D&D or have listened to a podcast – 78.8% said they had, compared to 20.9% who had not. This only covers if they have ever watched podcasts or streams and does not touch on frequency. I personally have dabbled in watching *Critical Role* but did not find it enjoyable, so I have only listened to few episodes casually. For this survey, my behaviour is indistinguishable from someone who watches avidly and can reference the events of each episode confidently. It would be interesting to break down podcast and stream consumption further in additional research to better understand their appeal and influences.

Q22 Have you watched a stream of people playing D&D or listened to a podcast?	Percent
Yes	78.8
No	20.9
Missing	0.4
Total	100

Respondents were then asked if they felt that watching a stream/podcast had influences their playstyle or expectations about playing. The results were not meaningfully different between “yes” and “no”. This suggests that the impact might be highly individual, with some using what they watched to change or decide how they play D&D and others performing what they believe to be their own style. The impact might also be more subtle – affecting play in a way they do not realise or cannot pinpoint. When players watch their first stream might also be impactful here. This led me to breaking the results down by length of time respondents had been playing.

Q23 Do you feel that watching a stream or listening to a podcast influenced your playstyle or expectations about playing?	Percent
Skipped	2.1
Yes	48.8
No	48

Selected Both	1.2
Total	100

Do you feel that watching a stream or listening to a podcast influenced your playstyle or expectations about playing?		Skipped	Yes	No	Selected Both
Length of time playing D&D	Less than a month	4.80%	44.90%	49.00%	1.30%
	One month to six months	3.40%	52.70%	42.70%	1.20%
	Six months to a year	3.10%	58.90%	37.00%	1.10%
	A year to two years	1.90%	62.20%	34.80%	1.20%
	Two to five years	1.50%	62.60%	34.50%	1.40%
	More than five years, but less than a decade	1.50%	50.70%	46.20%	1.60%
	More than a decade	2.20%	30.30%	66.60%	0.80%

Differences between groups did emerge as the time playing D&D increased. For those who had been playing for less than a month and then up to six months the percentages were still quite similar between the “yes” and “no” responses. Players who had been playing for ‘six months to a year’ reported that podcasts had influenced them more than those had been playing for less time. The influence was greater again for those who had been playing for ‘a year to two years’ and then for ‘two to five years’ but then drops back down to similar percentages for ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in the group who had been playing between five and ten years. I expected that the groups who had been playing the shortest lengths of time to have been influenced the most because they would be beginning to play with the largest selection of podcasts and streams available to them. *Critical Role* began in 2015 and *The Adventure Zone* in 2014 whilst the fifth edition of D&D was released in 2014. This means that three critical factors in D&D’s resurgence occurred about 5 years ago from the time of this survey. Paratexts and streams were a more critical introductory point before D&D was as mainstream as it has become. Now, with greater saturation of players there is the increased chance that players are introduced to D&D by their friends rather than stumbling upon it on online.

Gender		Other (please specify)	Woman	Man	Non-binary	Would rather not say
Do you feel that watching a stream or listening to a podcast influenced your playstyle or expectations about playing?	Skipped	2.20%	2.90%	1.40%	2.60%	3.10%
	Yes	53.80%	48.90%	46.90%	60.80%	49.10%
	No	42.50%	47.20%	50.60%	34.70%	44.80%
	Selected	1.60%	1.00%	1.10%	1.90%	3.10%
	Both					

I also broke the results down by gender to see if there were any differences, but the groups were closely divided between “yes” and “no”. The only group where there was a discernible difference between the responses was for the group who identified as non-binary but due to the small number of responses for this group, individual differences make a larger impact. I wondered if women would report being more influenced by podcasts and streams because of a perceived lower self-confidence for the group. There might be a strategy to gain confidence by emulating what is done by players or DM’s who have massive cultural legitimacy.

To understand how players might be influenced by streams and/or podcasts, they were asked to provide a description of the impact. Looking at the prevalence of certain words or concepts did not feel like it was providing the desired insights. I read responses to see what ideas were recurring and what themes emerged.

Survey results – Qualitative

The ways that players described paratexts influencing their play fell into five main themes: change in approach, source of inspiration, positively, negatively, improved their play, and impacted confidence. I evaluated the responses on the tone that they seemed to convey rather than my opinion on whether it was a positive, negative, or improvement. It was important to me that my own preferences about game style did not influence my reception of responses in a manner that would take them away from the original intent. However, this is not error-proof, and I am sure that other readers might feel responses belong in a different category. That is why I have avoided paraphrasing quotes – to allow for alternative

interpretations. The potential for difference in opinion and interpretation illustrates the enormity of individual preferences and approaches as factor in D&D.

Change in approach

There were some ways that players described their play changing that did not seem presented inherently positive, negative, or an improvement. These responses were more matter of fact in how they presented their experiences, so I have included these under a more neutral heading so they can be included in the discussion.

One theme that emerged was the acknowledgment that different podcasts direct players towards different playstyles. This can result in a clash or incompatibility at a table as players' have mismatching playstyles.

Everyone at my table had listened to Critical Role, and I hadn't. So their playstyle was very different to mine, where I listened to podcasts such as I Speak Giant, and Tabletop Champions, such have much less focus on being serious, and much more on being a group of friends having fun. I was playing like them, while everyone else played like CR. It took me jumping on the CR bandwagon to settle into the playstyle at my table.¹⁵²

I binged critical role HARD and my games ended up more narrative and expansive than I could handle. Then I binged dice camera action and my games became a lot more loose and fun. The content we consume effects our storytelling.¹⁵³

Griffin McElroy taught me that you need to keep your players engaged and you need to have fun; otherwise nobody is going to enjoy it. I also picked up a very linear style of storytelling from him! Players have freedom, yes, but they're on a path from point a to point b, and how they get there is up to them. Matt Mercer taught me that if you take your world and your characters seriously, then you become more drawn into the overall experience. I've always tried to find a balance between these two styles of D&D.¹⁵⁴

I feel the funny nature of TAZ made me more inclined to joking around while playing (helped by the groups I've been in being less serious and more focused on humor a lot of the time).¹⁵⁵

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A comparison was often made between the more serious style of *Critical Role* compared to podcasts such as *The Adventure Zone*, or *Dice Camera Action* which are primarily humorous. It can cause conflict at a table if some players are trying to engage in deep, serious roleplaying whilst others are being disruptive with puns, jokes, and ridiculous decisions. Setting table expectations for a game is important irrespective of podcasts, but they are an important influence to be considered.

Podcasts can be a source of inspiration for how to approach playing D&D differently to initially considered (further discussed in the section on improvements).

It made me put more effort into roleplay ad a character, but it has most influenced how I act as a GM. I use music for mood, try to be as vivid in describing things as possible, and I even do different voices for NPCs. It also encouraged me to do the setting and story completely from scratch for a unique experience for my veteran players.¹⁵⁶

It influenced my play style by seeing how others play their characters. For example, my experience in a video game is to walk into the tavern and find the most important looking person and get the information or quest I need from them. That was a dull way to play D&D so seeing how more experienced players treat different settings and scenarios helped me to build more of a personality for my character in game as opposed to just the character traits I'd put on paper.¹⁵⁷

I found DMing much more intimidating in terms of prep, until I listened to Adventure Zone and realised you can just make it all up on the fly if needed. That helped me relax a bit.¹⁵⁸

It exposed me to different types of playstyles. Matt Mercer runs his extremely different from the McElroys. So I think it helped me to sort of pick what I liked that their each did and incorporate it into my own style that I enjoy.¹⁵⁹

It influenced me as a DM to try out different styles of narration or puzzle setup that I otherwise probably wouldn't have thought of.¹⁶⁰

It made players easier to find and it is a good teaching tool. Some of the techniques and strategies other DMs use I can now adapt for my group and our play style. It also opened up more permission to

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focus on character development, plot, and puzzles as opposed to constantly having to be in hack and slash style combat.¹⁶¹

The Adventure Zone helped me imagine a different flow of the game, more episodic than my group was used to.¹⁶²

It loosened me up, I used to have a stick up my ass about 'historical accuracy' or whatever but now a shopkeeper is rude to me and I'm like 'one star on fantasy yelp for you'. Thanks McElroys.¹⁶³

I try to incorporate the improvisational "yes, and" attitude into my playstyle. Also I always ask a player, "What does it look like when you kill him?" when they land the final blow on an enemy.¹⁶⁴

As a player, it's made me take careful notes. Making sure I don't miss any important information because unlike a stream or podcast, I can't go back. As a dm, it definitely makes me think more about every word I say, if it's entertaining or does it add to the story, I'm always mindful about what goes into the game¹⁶⁵

I started listening to The Adventure Zone which has had several unique battles so far where the players have defeated bosses in very creative ways (using their environment instead of straight combat) so I'm always looking for sneaky ways to end a fight now¹⁶⁶

The ideas in these responses were echoed repeatedly in the survey results – podcasts show alternate approaches which players and DMs then selectively adopt. The depth and complexity of story is an aspect of the game particularly affected. After watching podcasts, many DMs explained that they try to include more puzzles, more emotional moments, deeper character development, and a game that is more tailored to their unique group of players. When I first began playing D&D, combat was the solution for every problem but over time it became more common to see puzzles and diplomacy employed. Podcasts would be tedious if every situation resulted in combat, but diplomacy is an excellent opportunity to highlight roleplaying ability and create a performance-based scene. Podcasts have the potential to broaden the horizons of players and expose them to more approaches to D&D than if the individual is restricted to what they see in their own groups and local community.

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Podcasts as a source of inspiration

I draw a distinction here between ‘inspiration’, ‘borrowing’, and ‘imitation’ when discussing how players interact with podcasts as a source of inspiration. These are fuzzy boundaries but are based on the manner in which the player describes emulating what they have seen or heard. Inspiration is using the podcast/ideas as a stimulus for developing someone’s own ideas, borrowing is about taking elements directly from podcasts but integrating or weaving them together with original ideas, whereas imitation is about purely copying the source material without tweaking or customising. These three procedures are present in numerous fandom practices – from fanart and fanfiction to cosplay – and they were mentioned in responses on how paratexts influence D&D play.

I usually take note of things I want to bring into the way I play the game, like how to inject levity into a game, or how to encourage RP between players.¹⁶⁷

Matt Mercer has really set the bar for me and I find I have adopted some of his rules and even mannerisms when I DM. I also have drawn inspiration and education from Satine Phoenix, Matt colville, and the crew at DnDnD pod.¹⁶⁸

I mainly DM so I pull a lot of phrases from other DMs. I specifically look for when they get stuck and how they make rulings.¹⁶⁹

Haha I mercerfied! And in Holland we have a saying Beter goed gejat als slecht verzonnen. It translates to better to steal a great idea than to make something up that was terrible. So if you get inspired take it and make it your own by customize it for your players¹⁷⁰

It helped me realize how creative and inventive you could get with these games, before I watched these streams, any game I ran was a very boring and stereotypical dungeon crawl with little plot. Afterwards things became a lot more roleplay and character oriented, which was ultimately far more enjoyable.¹⁷¹

These responses mention taking ideas from podcast DMs and bringing their ideas into their game. The last quote specifically mentions customising the ideas specifically for players.

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‘Borrowing’ elements:

Copying rules from podcasts and paratexts is a significant practice, and I will discuss it later in the chapter, but this focuses more on the ideas that players and DMs borrow from these sources.

Just my playstyle and DM style. Maybe I like the way something was done or rolled or created. I don't see any problem with appropriating what I like. Frankly, it saves me a lot of time and/or effort.¹⁷²

I shamelessly steal stuff from Matt Mercer and Chris Perkins constantly. Hopefully this has lead me to running better sessions¹⁷³

I enjoy listening to other DM/GM styles, to cherry pick their efforts to add to my own tool kit for running and playing in games. [...].¹⁷⁴

As mentioned in the responses, this can be done to save time, improve sessions, and increase the tricks in a DMs “tool kit”. Players study podcasts and often use them as a resource that can be drawn on to grow their game.

I steal so many tricks and subsystems and narration techniques from streams and podcasts. I steal worldbuilding ideas, and mechanics, and just everything. I also have a pretty cinematic playstyle and GMing style that some podcasts/streams have really helped me develop¹⁷⁵

As a dm I steal things from CR and TAZ all the time and I try to create compelling enough stories that would match up to them.¹⁷⁶

I love borrowing mechanics from other people's games and incorporating them into my own.¹⁷⁷

I frequently want to steal Alexander J. Newell's set pieces and inflict them on my own players.¹⁷⁸

I beg, borrow, and steal ideas from podcasts and tweak them to fit our group when I am acting as DM.¹⁷⁹

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[...] I'll see something Mercer or another GM will do(Usually a mechanic) and go wow thats cool, I will borrow that. For example I like Mercer's wilderness searching rules from the two most recent Critical Role episodes. I'm already planning on using that. Not sure if it exists in a core rule book or not but it struck a chord with me.¹⁸⁰

These 'resources' can be stylistic techniques for running the game for example how to tell a story and create a world or based around the mechanical side of the game. Dungeon Masters often have their own house-rules, mechanics, and custom traps that are developed through experience and practice. The developing of house rules is discussed further in the section on orthogaming, and the copying of these mechanics contribute to the overall flavour of the game.

Inspiration for characters can be borrowed from popular podcasts, because it can be overwhelming to create a character from scratch because players need a backstory, personality, and to understand mechanically how D&D works.

A lot of my characters are loosely based off of characters from Critical Roll, I have a goblin rogue with a similar aesthetic to Nott, although their personality is different, I have a Yuan-Ti bard with a similar voice and silly streak to Jester, a tiefling barbarian with a similar chill personality to Molly, a turtle druid similar to Caduceus, and an aasimar ranger who's similarly stand-offish and anti-authority to Beau[...]¹⁸¹

I've noticed how players will try to replicate characters or styles of play from a podcast liking that character and wantint to take on a certsin role. I prefer people use their imagination and to think outside the box. Not copy or imitate someone elses work.¹⁸²

Character concept is incredibly important and there is a fine line to walk between 'borrowing' a concept and copying it entirely. The two responses demonstrate the difference in approach as the first discusses loosely basing characters off *Critical Role's* ensemble, whilst the second criticises the replication of characters. The level of 'acceptable' replication and inspiration varies with each table and group's preferences.

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Imitating style:

Moving beyond borrowing from paratexts, players can imitate what they see without altering it for their own preferences (perhaps because it already suits them, it is not necessarily negative to copy).

I absolutely try to imitate Matthew Mercer because I think the way they play on Critical Role looks the most fun. [...]¹⁸³

I ask players 'how do you want to do this' when they get the killing blow in a boss fight. It would never have occurred to me to do anything like that if I hadn't seen Matt Mercer do it on critical role.¹⁸⁴

my DM style is very similar to griffin mcelroy's, waving rules for fun. also If my players dont watch specific dnd media, I will use ideas that those DMs incorporate¹⁸⁵

I noticed our DM picking up some ideas and tricks, and it helped me to flesh out my character and how I play her. Specific example: instead of saying "I cast [spell name]" (I still yell 'eldritch blaaaaast' though, because that's just FUN), I try to describe the movements and actions needed to cast (re: Liam O'Briens' way of playing Caleb)¹⁸⁶

The pure emulation and copying of paratexts has consequences for reducing the variation between gaming tables. If all tables/groups copy the same main paratexts (e.g., *Critical Role*, *The Adventure Zone*) then this results in a reduction in approaches to the game. In my experience, moving between DMs and groups has been challenging (but fun) because I had to adapt to their style and expectations. I have intentionally played with separate groups concurrently to meet different needs and desires, for example a high-roleplaying group and a sillier group. However, if all groups begin trying to mimic the same few sources, then this diversity disappears, and a dominant approach emerges.

Positive

Paratexts can have a positive influence on players' expectations, encouraging them to search out the game that suits their needs. Through showing players different approaches to the game and modelling ideal table behaviour, players can get an idea of what works at a

¹⁸³ 42356

¹⁸⁴ 34153

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¹⁸⁶ 41774

table and what does not. This includes how to treat other players with courtesy and good game-table etiquette.

Raising expectations

Paratexts influence on player expectations has been a major focus of this chapter, and this is where expectations and play interact. There is an oft cited idea that possibilities must be seen before they can be aspirational for most people. Whilst I do not entirely agree that examples or role models are vital, they do seem to play a role in facilitating change or ideas of what is possible. These responses are examples of how expectations change play in a positive way for players.

I think it taught me to expect a respectful environment. Basically, to play with people I know and avoid groups that give me a bad feeling. I should expect to be treated fairly and not be uncomfortable.¹⁸⁷

My notion of D&D was a bit incomplete and stuck in old guard ideas of adversarial player/DM dynamics. After watching critical role, I realized that it was a DMs job to create a challenging world for the PCs that engaged their characters motivations, rather than a series of challenges that don't really speak to them. And on the same token, the players had a responsibility to be cooperative and engage themselves with the game world, as well as their characters[...]¹⁸⁸

taught me some table etiquette and rules as a newb¹⁸⁹

I prefer a more "realistic" adventure, but everyone online seemed to talk about "seducing all the bad guys" as a way to solve every problem. Streams like Critical Role showed me that this doesn't have to be the way that you play the game, and it helped me realise that I didn't have to tolerate that kind of playstyle if I wasn't comfortable with it.¹⁹⁰

Through paratexts challenging players' conceptions of what is acceptable during play, these individuals changed the way they played D&D. Paratexts can show players what they do and do not want from their play experience – for example, the player who described realising they did not have to tolerate heavy themes of seduction if it made them uncomfortable. It can be empowering to see examples of desirable play because it can aid players in articulating what they want D&D to be for them. Without these examples, players might be able to point out

¹⁸⁷ 31537

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¹⁹⁰ 33642

what they do not like but not conceive of an alternative and thus feel trapped in a singular paradigm for the game.

Altering Approach

In an analogous manner, paratexts alter how D&D is played by presenting alternative styles to attempt or riff-off.

Definitely made it more approachable and fun! The manuals by themselves can be kinda scary or intimidating, so it was nice to see that sometimes the 'by the book' rules can be eschewed for the fun factor, and that some people really do focus more on story than endless "murderhobo" combat and looting cycles.¹⁹¹

My early D&D experiences were heavily “murderhobo” – which is basically where players are focused on killing and/or looting what they encounter without regard for a greater storyline. This would not be entertaining in a long-term podcast because it is incredibly repetitive and heavily mechanically focused. Two of the major themes that emerged in my qualitative analysis of question 6 “What do you enjoy playing about D&D” were the ability to tell/build stories and the collaborative storytelling involved.

at first, i didn't get super invested in my characters and i didn't really pay attention, but when i saw critical role for the first time, i realized, "hey! DMs like it when you are reactive to their twists, and complex characters are a lot of fun!" ever since then, i've been the player who makes super intricate backstories and gasps loud at twists, even if i saw them coming.¹⁹²

Critical role taught me there was more to the game than hack & slash. If it hadn't been for watching it, I would have quit after my first game, where there was little to no roleplaying.¹⁹³

Paratexts such as *Critical Role* that focus heavily on storytelling might change the perception that D&D is solely “hack and slash” and thus facilitate other modes of play. *The Wild Beyond the Witchlight* is a D&D adventure released in September 2021. All the encounters in this campaign are designed to have a non-combat option so that players can choose to roleplay their way to solutions rather than fighting (Wizards of the Coast, 2021). This change in

¹⁹¹ 41294

¹⁹² 41613

¹⁹³ 23576

approach to include non-combat as an approach reflects the changes in how D&D is being played.

Confidence

The most exalted positive impact of podcasts was an improvement in confidence for players and particularly DMs. (The inverse of this is discussed in the section on ‘The Matt Mercer Effect’). Respondents described how consuming a paratext had a positive influence on their confidence to not only begin playing, but how they played. Part of this was the feeling that streams had dispelled the mystery around what is involved with D&D, and thus made it more approachable.

It was intimidating, as I started being the DM. I watched a lot of Chris Perkins stuff, notably acq inc and the robot chicken one shot (with dm commentary) to take some of the mystery out of it and give me confidence to run my first game¹⁹⁴

It gave me a lot more confidence to just.. relax! Sort of chill out because it's okay to laugh and not be serious and extra into it all the time. You're supposed to have fun!¹⁹⁵

Before I played an actual game, I wanted to do some research so I wouldn't walk in completely clueless. So it helped me be less nervous my first time playing but I also learned that every DM is different so my playstyle changes to reflect how the DM calls the shots.¹⁹⁶

I feel more confident as a DM because I've listened to other DMs handle similar problems. I'm learning through their experience. I'm also getting a wide variety of play styles, seeing what other players/DMs/GMs prioritize.¹⁹⁷

It gave me some confidence having an idea about how games are usually conducted, and how the mechanics of the game happen.¹⁹⁸

I feel like if i didn't experience people actually playing it a lot on a podcast i would have been a little more nervous about jumping right in while i still hadn't memorized all the rules, but since i had some familiarity with how the gameplay worked it made things a little easier for me.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁴ 6022

¹⁹⁵ 24483

¹⁹⁶ 25999

¹⁹⁷ 33164

¹⁹⁸ 12420

¹⁹⁹ 41360

It SEVERELY lowered the daunting learning curve. I came into the game with a slightly flawed but general understanding of how the game worked and how I would be building my character [...]²⁰⁰

After watching popular streams, I've gained a little more confidence as a DM going by the seat of my pants and not panicking so much if things go off script or not as I had initially planned.²⁰¹

This was true not only for the mechanics and “how” of the game, but for the roleplaying aspects.

Seeing how... into it other people get makes you a little bit braver. Made me braver. Knowing I wasn't the only one who wanted to BE my character while I'm at the table.²⁰²

It helped me be more confident getting into character and showing the distinction between in game and out of game "me" which is super helpful.²⁰³

It influenced my playstyle by helping me be more comfortable with role playing and 'being' my character in game. Sometimes it's hard for people to give in and open up in that way. [...]²⁰⁴

It gives me confidence to use funny voices or try more ridiculous actions.²⁰⁵

By seeing other people openly roleplay, it increases comfort with roleplaying because it removes the mystery of ‘how’ to roleplay and shows what is acceptable. Players watch streamers who are famous for their quality roleplaying, and it contributes to increasing the social acceptability of committing to roleplay.

There was a distinction drawn in many responses of *The Adventure Zone* changing perceptions about D&D regarding how strict the rules are and the level of humour appropriate. On *Critical Role* the group began streaming after having already played together for a while, but *The Adventure Zone* featured fresh players.

[...] I do think that starting out listening to The Adventure Zone, where everyone was a new player and no one knew any of the rules (including the DM) definitely helped me feel less anxious when I started DMing.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁰ 41282

²⁰¹ 28441

²⁰² 30233

²⁰³ 25573

²⁰⁴ 26064

²⁰⁵ 7800

²⁰⁶ 41331

The Adventure Zone podcast made D&D seem fun, lighthearted, and WAY more accessible than I had initially believed! It helped me gain loose familiarity with the rules and mechanics so I had the confidence to build my own character and join a game.²⁰⁷

I'm more confident with what I do because, having listened to podcasts, I'm more aware of the range of things it's possible to do, rather than feeling lost with it. Also I think I lean more towards finding the humour in a situation because of listening to podcasts like The Adventure Zone and Dungeons and Daddies etc.²⁰⁸

Before I listened to the adventure zone I didn't think I could be a DM. My friends had all been very knowledgeable and played a long time, and I never felt that clever with all the details and rules. Hearing the more relaxed play style on TAZ made me realize I could do more.²⁰⁹

Seeing other inexperienced players muddle through the game can help players feel comfortable starting to play without first achieving an encyclopaedic knowledge of the rules. The humour-forward approach of TAZ also influenced players tendency towards silly situations and light-hearted scenarios, rather than the more serious drama of *Critical Role* (CR has humour woven through). This can be considered as positive because through exposure to gameplay that varies in tone and rule-competency, players reported feeling more confident in negotiating an approach to D&D that suited their group and thus increased enjoyment.

Improving Play

Another positive way that players reported streams influenced their game is in the improvements they were able to implement. This ties in with the idea of using streams as a source of inspiration, but it is in a more general way.

After seeing other people play, I basically get tips on how to 'improve' my gameplay (roleplay like this, ask questions like this, don't forget perception stuff ...)²¹⁰

I don't listen/watch, but my husband (our DM) does. Watching/listening to Matt Mercer or Critical Role does change the way he runs the game. He's much better at telling a story, world-building, and role playing his NPCs now than he was prior to listening to them.²¹¹

²⁰⁷ 34480

²⁰⁸ 32897

²⁰⁹ 24513

²¹⁰ 38599

²¹¹ 1978

I love listening to and watching other groups play because it gives me ideas on how I can improve- I can use things that I liked, and keep things I didn't like in mind. It's a great perspective.²¹²

I am grateful that live stream gaming is now a thing. When i started DMing in the late 90s, all the DMs had to go on for how to be a good DM was trial and error. There were no books or blogs. And there are a bunch of bad DMs out there. By the 20teens I was reading everything i could on DM theory so i could be better. Now i can watch the best and brightest DM and learn by watching, learn by reading, and hopefully do better.²¹³

We stepped up the level for which we played and learned how to employ a greater level of strategy e.g. using a gameplay board to position players and use flanking strategies, and using visual representations to monitor Initiative. It also made us more creative in how we attacked/created out of the ordinary solutions to playing e.g. purposefully wounding opponent (such as attacking their calf muscles to fell them) instead of "I swing my short sword"²¹⁴

It made me aspire to do better - be more creative, give more to my games as a player and a DM, really try to immerse myself. As a player I try to take more notes, role play more in character and absorb the world we're in. As a DM I try to be more prepared in my research and writing and to go with what felt right in the story not just right in the rules as written.²¹⁵

Honestly - listening to other DMs, like Matt Mercer, Griffin McElroy, and Johnny Chiodini helped me figure out techniques for running campaigns that were fun, allowed my players to shine, and helped keep the table safe for everyone.²¹⁶

I have often taken ideas from one group to solve problems with other groups, or to prevent problems emerging. One example is having the initiative order visible for all players (rather than just the DM) so that turns can be planned rather than players continually being surprised it was their turn and then delaying the game whilst they decided how to proceed. This seems to have become a staple practice at D&D tables I have played at in the last few years, but when I first began playing it was only the DM that ever saw the initiative order.

²¹² 20961

²¹³ 26204

²¹⁴ 4342

²¹⁵ 26260

²¹⁶ 44539

It was basically “how other DMs work and what you can add to your game to make it more engaging” cause before I was reading forums and scouting the internet for those but now I can easily access it²¹⁷

My first group had two players who would spend hours between games scouring the internet for stories about what other DMs were doing, reading rules explanations, and learning the fine art of min/maxing their characters. Players always have sought out information on how to improve, that behaviour is present the early content of *Dragon Magazine*. The first edition had advice on how to improve games with the addition of wilderness spaces, handling skill checks (before they were outlined in the rules), and the implications of language for the game (for example, can unicorns understand horses?²¹⁸).

It has helped me as a DM to be more comfortable with being able to improvise encounters and such when playing D&D. It helped me learn more inventive ways to play than what just reading the D&D handbooks can teach. I feel like this is developed more over time when playing, but watching was definitely influential in the way that I organised encounters, prepared and played.²¹⁹

Matt Mercer taught me how to make NPC and world interaction interesting and VOICES. Can't say I'm even half as good as him, but if I even achieve the dollar store budget version of matt mercer I'd die happy.²²⁰

I don't think streams & podcasts influence my playstyle as a player very much, but I do think CR improved my DMing (and voice acting!)²²¹

I think it has taught me a lot about what's important in a role playing game. Specifically, I can cite James D'Amato (of One Shot / Campaign) and Gannon Reedy (of NeoScum) as being significantly influential. I've learned that it's important to identify what players enjoy, and lean into it. It's important to have fun, more than worry about the details. It's okay to go off script, and it's fine not to know rules. Just tell a good story with compelling stakes.²²²

Streams give players the opportunity to take solutions from a large quantity and wider variety of tables than they would be able to access otherwise. This means that they can tweak their games for the better and increase enjoyment. The idea of improvement is not inherently

²¹⁷ 7215

²¹⁸ The answer given by Lee Gold was basically that they kind of can – like dialects, with a common Equine tongue that is 70% understandable and spoken by horses, and 50% understandable by Unicorns.

²¹⁹ 8077

²²⁰ 1095

²²¹ 38667

²²² 27053

negative, it is when players feel pressured to play a specific way or to continually ‘do better’ that it becomes an issue.

The idea of table and etiquette is one that appeared repeatedly in the survey. I found this a surprising takeaway from entertainment-focus streams.

I learned how to have good table etiquette, respecting players in and out of game whilst both at and away from the table. [...] ²²³

There is an art to being a good player vs a selfish players. Most of the podcasts have good players looking to create a good story and discover what happens rather than control the outcome. I try to emulate that. ²²⁴

I've unlearned some bad habits, I'm way more conscious now of not talking over people. ²²⁵

It made me think about what kind of player I didn't want to be. I wanted to always know what I was gonna do when my turn in combat came up, so people should not have to wait for me to look at my sheet or my spells for 10 minutes ²²⁶

I learned so much! How to be a more considerate player, how to roleplay and let out my acting skills, how to be a good DM, that crafts the game with love for the players, that the game is a gift for everyone to enjoy. It's made me a better friend for sure. ²²⁷

The groups of streams must be entertainingly cohesive and pleasurable to watch interact – if they were nasty to each other for 90 minutes it would not be popular.

Negative Impacts on Play

There were many negative side effects of watching streams that responses mentioned, and these overlap with other sections – particularly the “Matt Mercer Effect” and the concept of orthogaming. These are some other themes that were present in the results. One common idea was the idea of needing/wanting to play to a certain standard and then feeling bad when unable to do so (or feeling unable).

²²³ 5453

²²⁴ 15576

²²⁵ 30782

²²⁶ 5984

²²⁷ 36229

The Adventure Zone was created by professional comedians who are able to think and roleplay on the fly so when I started playing I thought I'd be able to do that too. I was not.²²⁸

It made me more self conscious about not being good at it. I've enjoyed it less since watching Critical Roll²²⁹

For me it's very hard to not want to emulate people I watch. I have, uh, issues. So as a DM I feel like I'm not living up to Matthew Mercer, Chris Perkins, or Griffin McElroy - that's also my imposter syndrome being a rude ass bitch.²³⁰

I hate watching those fake streams - they are usually performance art, not authentic at all. I always feel badly for the new players coming in who think that's normal.²³¹

I had less patience with myself as a beginner because I wanted to just jump right into being a borderline professional²³²

I hate watching it but my boyfriend and his friends are now always disappointed and angry with each other because they aren't as good as critical role.²³³

I think people are definitely more insecure since they started watching pro voice actors playing sponsored DnD. We used to play shitfaced drunk in our uni dorm kitchen, nobody was minmaxing and didn't get told off if we didn't memorize the PHB. Don't get me wrong, I have learned a lot from them, but its a commercial product and some people fail to see that.²³⁴

When I first played, my group and I had no idea what we were doing. We just did whatever worked, had fun, and played the game as we understood it. Our conflicts came from disagreements about how rules were supposed to work (and people not paying attention), not whether we were living up to a stream-worthy standard. There is a balance between the helpful improvements that can come from learning from streams/paratexts and the pressure to “do better.”

²²⁸ 41955

²²⁹ 5237

²³⁰ 40830

²³¹ 9208

²³² 26045

²³³ 6568

²³⁴ 29898

I expected my DM to throw a lot into preparation. The first campaign I played was a slight let down.

When I ran my own I felt as though I had to live up to unreachable standards to keep my players interested. I invest a lot of time and money to raise the immersiveness.²³⁵

The podcasts I've encountered are heavily narrative-focused and could even be called deterministic. As a result I've realized I assume the DM (usually me) will take on a disproportionate amount of work to keep the story going vs expecting players to make the game their own. To be honest, it's kind of exhausting.²³⁶

I've been inspired to create larger campaigns with story lines that actually connect instead of little adventures that have nothing to do with each other. And while it's been a great source of inspiration, it also kind of set the bar higher for myself as far as crafting npcs and workshopping adventures and making sure everything makes sense to the point when it's gotten a little overwhelming and I've had to cancel last minute because I'm worried my own game won't be as great as xyz's game.²³⁷

Expected the maps, minis etc to be essential but they're really not. Made it seem harder than it is.²³⁸

This tension between aspiration and emulation might be felt particularly by a group's DM. Streams typically involve homebrew campaigns²³⁹ because they are an original story that the viewer would not already know. If the group were to play an official campaign, the viewer might have played it themselves or read the book which can remove entertainment value. This creates the perception that experienced or skilled DMs only run their own custom material. Doing so is a massive undertaking – especially for casual players who are not paid to write the setting, adventure, and create all the encounters. I have had excellent DMs end their games prematurely because they could not manage session preparation and writing alongside their other commitments. I personally have only run pre-made official D&D content because I find the encounters so challenging to balance (however, I have created elaborate homebrew games for other systems). D&D needs DMs. The games cannot be run without them. There is a shortage of willing DMs for the number of players. Streams might be

²³⁵ 37417

²³⁶ 38590

²³⁷ 10861

²³⁸ 8291

²³⁹ These refer to campaigns or materials designed by the group or other non-official sources rather than the official WOTC/TSR published adventures or settings.

contributing to this scarcity because of the off-putting stress created by players applying the professional standards of streams to their casual games.

Roleplay and Voices

Critical Role's cast are professional voice actors, and they bring their skills to their character's voices. Part of the appeal of *Critical Role* is the theatricality, the immersion of listening to character dialogue as though it was from their own mouth, and it makes for engaging listening. Character voices have become a common part of streams, regardless of the players' voice acting experience, and this has influenced home games.

I especially notice this in my fellow gamers. The biggest for sure is the idea of doing character voices as a player. SOME DMs would do NPC voices but it was extremely rare in my circles to see this at all. Even the idea that you would always be speaking in character as your character is relatively new. "My fighter threatens the guard!" vs something a bit more descriptive and first-person. [...]²⁴⁰

Putting on character voices was not something that occurred to my group when we first began but now, I encounter it frequently. When I was working at the games store, I would often overhear (or shamelessly eavesdrop on) games where players were putting on voices for their characters. Streams normalise the practice of voice acting whilst roleplaying and make it a more comfortable practice than it was previously.

[...] Also, I no longer feel silly or awkward when I do accents or funny voices. Knowing that so many other players do that has given me the credibility of normalcy.²⁴¹

It made me more confident in attempting to take on the roles of my characters, even using voices and accents. It made me more descriptive in my engagements, "A glowing, crackling light rises from my hands" instead of "I cast eldritch blast."²⁴²

It is hard, as a DM, not to compare yourself to professionals. I never used to voice my PCs before watching *Critical Role*. I was always awkward and mechanical where now I have become grandiose and colourful in my language and roleplay.²⁴³

²⁴⁰ 43985

²⁴¹ 42988

²⁴² 30627

²⁴³ 13208

As with many of the practices that are common on streams, it has become an expectation that there will be character voices.

I expect people to be good at voices and personalities²⁴⁴

I definitely base my playing on the critical role style i.e. I didn't realise accents weren't fairly common²⁴⁵

More expectation of character voices being used, lol. [...]²⁴⁶

I expect the DM to be a good storyteller and be able to do cool voices²⁴⁷

I expected better DM voices²⁴⁸

I expected more roleplaying and everyone making voices and getting deep into their characters comfortably. Most people are scared or dont know how to do that.²⁴⁹

Due to streams, it might seem that character voices are a ubiquitous part of playing D&D. If that is something desired by the players, then there would be disappointment when sitting down with a casual D&D group.

The roleplay aspect. I have had to curb the idea now everyone can do character voices, or wants to, and the DM/GM won't act out every scene. I am fine with not having fancy minis and game boards but the roleplaying means so much to me and can be a bummer if it's lacking.²⁵⁰

Critical Role for example has given me unrealistic expectations for voicing my own character and the voices I expect to hear from other PCs. [...]²⁵¹

I would find it incredibly off-putting if my group expected me to do voices – as the DM or as a player. Whilst I have occasionally put on daft voices for NPC's, it was by choice and there was no pressure for any quality. The stress of being (or feeling as though) required to perform to play might stop people playing.

I've absorbed pieces from different streams/podcasts into my playstyle just by listening to them frequently. My expectations from shows like Critical Role were a bit too high (I was afraid of not being

²⁴⁴ 39258

²⁴⁵ 23216

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²⁴⁷ 59

²⁴⁸ 17213

²⁴⁹ 19688

²⁵⁰ 40939

²⁵¹ 27294

able to do proper voices or make intricate battle maps), but other podcasts put these expectations at a more fun, relaxing level.²⁵²

As with most of the influences on D&D that were mentioned in responses, the trend of voice acting is not inherently positive or negative. It is the pressure to play in a particular manner that causes a negative outcome for players and D&D overall.

Orthogaming and Prescriptive Play

Orthogaming is a result of the culmination of all the impacts that paratexts have on D&D – how they shape expectations, approaches, and contribute to homogenization. Carter, Gibbs, and Harrop (2012) propose the terms “orthogame” to describe the “right and correct” game as defined by (Carter et al., 2012, p. 14). There is no wrong way to play D&D if everyone is having an enjoyable time, but D&D streams proffer a right way – intentionally or not. It is easy to be swept up in the idea that D&D as played on *Critical Role* or other popular streams is how D&D should be played and any deviation should be avoided or reined in. If a style is successful, entertaining, popular, and widely praised then it is inevitably going to seem more “correct” than the styles that are not featured in streams.

Learning Rules through Paratexts

I was surprised by the number of respondents that claimed they had used streams to learn the rules rather than relying on the rulebooks.

I don't learn well from reading the player handbook. So much of the rules, lore, and strategies I've learned have been from streams [...]²⁵³

[...] I actually didn't read the player's handbook until I had already been playing for several months, I knew enough about the rules from watching streams/podcasts to get by without reading any material [...]²⁵⁴

Respondents described gaining confidence from learning the rules this way because it increased the scope of their knowledge and demonstrated how the rules function in action.

²⁵² 39223

²⁵³ 11721

²⁵⁴ 43040

I learned the rules really well by watching over 800 hours of Critical Role, so now I am much more particular and aware of moves in combat, spell usage, and other things like that. I am also more comfortable with role playing.²⁵⁵

A number of elements of the game seemed somewhat strange to me and I couldn't connect to the until I saw others play them²⁵⁶

It made the PHB more accessible by lowering the comprehension required. Seeing applications of the material impacted my understanding of game mechanics in a big way.²⁵⁷

I am highly dyslexic so I couldn't read the rules or book materials. So I had to learn the rules from watching others play. And watching more entertainers play the game meant my play style is more RP (Role-Playing) Heavy and more focused on Story and character development.²⁵⁸

I didn't buy the official books right away, because I'm too broke. So instead, I learned the rules from Inglorious Bards, Acquisitions Incorporated, and Dice, Camera, Action. [...]²⁵⁹

I feel that it made me more confident in my play. I get into my RP more deeply. It has also given me more knowledge into the game. The last time we played one of our team went down, I threw my 300gp diamond to the cleric who then asked how I knew that it had to be 300gp without looking it up. I just know the rules better now from listing to hundred possibly thousands of hours from different streams.²⁶⁰

Streams have the potential to increase the accessibility of D&D for those who find the density of the rulebook to be a barrier to entry. Watching streams is also being used as a substitute for being able to learn whilst playing.

Watching streams has been very useful for gaining more knowledge. Sometimes it can be hard to play and without playing you cannot learn so being able to watch others play can help you expand your knowledge further and faster.²⁶¹

I was fortunate enough to have a group of inexperienced players to learn alongside, but this is not necessarily possible (or desirable) for everyone. There are players who prefer to feel as though they have a solid understanding of the game before beginning.

²⁵⁵ 33270

²⁵⁶ 22219

²⁵⁷ 31715

²⁵⁸ 31186

²⁵⁹ 815

²⁶⁰ 4039

²⁶¹ 41623

Streams do not always use the official rules, instead they often have their own house rules that suit their style, players, or preferences.

A lot of people get rules wrong, because streams and podcasts try to streamline the experience or have house rules.²⁶²

Whilst modifications can help make the game more fun by addressing issues with the rules, it can also lead to confusion as players do not necessarily realise when they are using a homebrew rule.

I honestly learned all of the rules from Critical Role and often don't realize when something isn't actually a mechanic or thing in the game but is something specifically CritRole does.²⁶³

Watching Critical Role has really helped me to remember the rules so much better, though sometimes I get them mixed up with Mercer's home brew rules. [...]²⁶⁴

There is nothing inherently wrong with players adopting the rules they like from streams, but there are issues when they do not realise that they are doing so. For example, I played with someone who began playing after binge-watching *Critical Role* and he often argued about how rules worked relying on his knowledge from the stream versus our book-based understanding. Arguments could be intense when the ruling affected a significant variable, as it was difficult to change his perspective even using the rulebook.

I expected the DM to be a little looser in terms of the rules (for example in the Adventure Zone, spell slots are... shall we say not heavily tracked in terms of if they've been used up or not). It also made me feel like I could do literally ANYTHING when in reality our DM kind of needed to know our general plan as he could only prep so much in between sessions.²⁶⁵

It made me expect ingenuity, and I began to really dislike the people who aren't willing to stretch the rules.²⁶⁶

²⁶² 34655

²⁶³ 19498

²⁶⁴ 6931

²⁶⁵ 40867

²⁶⁶ 35328

This loose approach to the rules is not popular at every table and is not necessarily compatible with all groups. There can be issues when switching between tables and groups thus diminishing enjoyment or creating conflict.

Since the first dnd podcast I listened to (The Adventure Zone) played a bit...freestyle with some of the rules I developed somewhat of a rules-bendy creative style of play. Thankfully my dm is the same way so our table ends up being able to do some really wacky stuff that would never fly at other groups.²⁶⁷

When players try to pull off crazy feats by bending the rules, it can result in fun for the table, but if the group prefers to play closer to the rules-as-written then it can be irritating or even labelled cheating.

In addition to altering rules, streams often ignore or gloss over the game mechanics that they do not want to include.

Griffin just cuts out rules he doesn't like, so I do the same thing.²⁶⁸

I have a lot less "actual play" stuff in my games (eg. strict rules, rations, travel distance) because the podcast I listened to doesn't have it.²⁶⁹

Due to the fast and loose style of The Adventure Zone podcast, I have found that my groups tend to be more focused on having fun than being troubled over rules. We are not hard sticklers, even if we are all aware of them. An example of this would be that carry weight is often neglected to be tallied and many of the people I play with are fans of homebrew and creativity. [...]²⁷⁰

I didn't actually read the rules before playing, just assumed I'd learned enough from what I'd watched, so I was surprised to have to learn so many rules! [...]²⁷¹

The games I have played rarely used the "strict rules" that bring survival and resource management into the game unless it was a plot point, for example being stuck in a desert. The rules are included for a reason and can really influence how the game is designed or approached. When streams cherry-pick the rules they include, they begin to create their own

²⁶⁷ 37917

²⁶⁸ 34372

²⁶⁹ 41391

²⁷⁰ 33051

²⁷¹ 6037

edition of D&D and that becomes the dominant ruleset if streams are how players are learning the rules.

Streams are potentially encouraging players to develop their own pick-a-mix approach to the rules where they feel comfortable curating the experience they want from D&D.

I am the dm and when I write I focus more on a complex story then the actual rules of the game. I'm more willing to bend and shape them to fit what I want then I would have been before I listened to the podcast.²⁷²

Back then, everyone was a rules-lawyer. We didn't know any different. But I always wanted something more immersive. I hooked up with a group some years ago that were getting close to what I'd been looking for in the game all along, but it was still a lot of "No, you can't do that" and rules-first style of play. I started to think O was the weird one who just wanted to play "Let's Pretend!!!" and tell fun stories. When I saw AZ, then Critical Role, I found my butterfly people. They were playing what I was wanting the game to be for 35 years. It was revelatory, and my games now are worlds more enjoyable.²⁷³

Because of the McElroys' style of focusing on the storytelling, my group barely uses the hard rules and mostly goes for the story and character development.²⁷⁴

Seeing groups successfully play with tweaked rules and enjoying themselves, has led to groups doing the same.

It definitely helped me learn what is interesting vs boring and when to make the most of the Rule of Cool. My DMing style is heavily calvinball, I don't get married to rulebooks because I know how amazing a time players can have if you mostly let them go nuts while still finding ways to challenge and hinder them.²⁷⁵

The streams serve as an example for how to shed boring rules and emphasise what is enjoyable. Over the time I have been playing D&D it has become more common to have house-rules that are established to suit the group. For example, in the game I currently play the DM has fixed the healing potential of potions to their maximum rather than forcing us to roll the outcome. This means the potions are more powerful and dependable, reducing the party's likelihood of dying and making the game more fun for our group. Ultimately, D&D is

²⁷² 33502

²⁷³ 1445

²⁷⁴ 33713

²⁷⁵ 14327

about having fun, not about a die-hard adherence to the rules if that makes the group miserable.

The perceived authority that *Critical Role* holds regarding D&D and roleplaying should be acknowledged. They have their own popular series of videos called *Handbook Helper* where they discuss rules such as levelling up, ability checks, and the basics of spell casting. Mercer had a show on *Geek & Sundry* that was based around DM tips and is often called upon for his expert advice. The show also has an established relationship with Wizards of the Coast – they playtest *Unearthed Arcana* materials and Sam Reigel made a *D&D Beyond* app advertisement. Their celebrity-status is tied up in their knowledge of D&D and/or skill as a player (not all the cast members are experts on the rules and nor do they claim to be). *Critical Role* can be a teaching tool for DM's who want to ensure their inexperienced players know how the game functions.

Well my DM requested that his new players who had never played before watch a little bit of Critical role to make sure we had a minimum of knowledge about how the game is played... So it basically thought me how to play entirely [...]²⁷⁶

For my first 5e game, our DM assigned Critical Role as "homework" to explain her DM style. It was a breath of fresh air after my previous experience in 4e with a stats-driven DM.²⁷⁷

I was told by my DM to watch some critical role videos to get more familiar with the game before our first game. [...]²⁷⁸

Responses also frequently mentioned a tendency to fall-back on Mercer's opinion over that of the individual/group.

If there's a rule discrepancy my first thought is how would Matthew Mercer resolve or rule on this. This has also led me to try to have more rp or adventure heavy games (as opposed to combat). I also pretty much use the same rules/ homebrew rules as Matt²⁷⁹

When playing, there are always "in critical role, they ____" discussions about how rules are applied [...]²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ 20858

²⁷⁷ 7990

²⁷⁸ 20858

²⁷⁹ 41277

²⁸⁰ 14582

The level of support that *Critical Role* have within the D&D community and from the game's official publishers establishes the show as a credible source of information. Their actions have gravitas because of the recognition they have achieved compared to other podcasts/streams.

The Adventure Zone takes a casual approach to the rules, and this was something typically mentioned positively. TAZ helped players relax when it comes to the rules and find D&D to be more approachable.

It definitely influenced me to not give a fuck about spell components or rules. It was very freeing and I'm glad I got into D&D through the Adventure Zone and not like, Crit Role. I unironically think TAZ is a HUGE factor in the revitalization of D&D.²⁸¹

listening to TAZ helped me loosen up about rules vs rule of cool. some of my co players in the past were very rules oriented, and hearing people just go off the rails and have fun helped me, particularly as a dm, relax and allow things for the sake of fun rather than meticulous rules lawyering. not throwing the rulebook out the window, obviously, as the restrictions of rules do indeed breed creativity²⁸²

However, responses also mentioned a shock when playing after having only watched *The Adventure Zone*.

I fell in love with D&D through The Adventure Zone, but they play fast and loose with the rules. Once I began playing myself, I found that there were many more rules and mechanics than previously thought. It was quite a culture shock. Listening to Critical Role helped me figure out how to *properly* play D&D with the rules as written, and made me a much more informed player. [...]²⁸³

I went in not totally understanding the rules because they said themselves on TAZ that sometimes they bend rules to make for good podcasting. [...]²⁸⁴

Where TAZ is a player's only introduction to the rules of D&D it can be a shock when beginning to play because there are so many more rules.

Modern D&D players have access to other people's interpretations of the rules. Not sure how a rule should be applied? Google it. Check Reddit. Go on *Sage Advice*. Copy someone else. *Sage Advice* has existed in various forms since the early days of D&D, and it used to be a

²⁸¹ 34542

²⁸² 41470

²⁸³ 32345

²⁸⁴ 35409

column in *Dragon* Magazine. Seeking out advice is not new; it is the ready availability of this information that has changed.

Before my own group of friends played, I had only played once for fun and understood very little about the rules and how to play. When I started with my friends, we had only what we could google and a players handbook. It was hard for us to understand, confusing and overwhelming. After finding *Critical Role*, we all watched so much that we started to understand how the game was actually played and picked up on the rules along the way.²⁸⁵

Rule Lawyers²⁸⁶ can check their DM's rulings whilst sitting at the table rather than needing to do so between sessions. Whilst this collaboration has the potential to be incredibly helpful for solving rules disputes, it is worth considering what is lost in the process.

I think players can lose their own creativity by seeing how others play. They could see how something works and apply it to a future game where they normally would have done something different.²⁸⁷

The big issue with my original interest in dnd being entirely influenced by TAZ was that was also everyone elses influence in the group so we were all trying to go for these signature zingers or quick quips that interrupted eachother and very magical items and this and that that eventually broke both the campaign and dm²⁸⁸

It takes creativity and negotiation to solve rules issues when playing D&D – and it can be fun to argue out how a rule should be applied or the quantity of water can possibly fit in a *Portable Hole*.

The “Matt Mercer Effect”?

Who is Matt Mercer? (And what is *Critical Role*?)

Matt Mercer is the Dungeon Master for the popular web series *Critical Role* which began streaming in March 2015.

²⁸⁵ 19526

²⁸⁶ A term used to describe players who enforce the rules as written to an obnoxious degree, often at the expense of fun.

²⁸⁷ 14002

²⁸⁸ 31744

Matt Mercer is a legendary DM -- a beautiful balance of description, unique characters, compelling story, and exciting combat²⁸⁹

The series features a group of professional voice actors who play D&D together (and had been doing so for two years before they recorded any episodes). The group is known as *Vox Machina* and includes Ashley Johnson, Marisha Ray, Taliesin Jaffe, Travis Willingham, Sam Riegel, Laura Bailey, and Liam O'Brien.

Critical Role was first live streamed for *Geek & Sundry* but is now self-produced and uses Twitch and YouTube as its primary platforms. The episodes run for 3 to 6 hours on a weekly basis with occasional breaks and spin-off single shows. The first campaign went for 115 episodes and took 373 hours of gameplay (Critical Role, 2019). *Critical Role* has more than 7.5 million hours watched on Twitch, with 7.89 million views and 12,791 average viewers (TwitchTracker, 2020). These numbers are only for their Twitch channel and does not consider their views on *Geek & Sundry* or YouTube.

Their success has resulted in merchandising, a published book of the setting for the first campaign, a comic series, a line of miniatures, and a huge fan base. *Critical Role* successfully fundraised for an animated series, and their Kickstarter raised more than \$1 million in its first hour and finished with more than \$11 million in funding. This broke records and made it the most successful television or film project in the history of Kickstarter. *Critical Role* clearly has a dedicated and enthusiastic fan-base who want more stories from the group (note: the nickname for fans is "Critters").

The "Matt Mercer Effect" (MME) is a term that has been appearing in podcasts, YouTube videos, and articles about Dungeons and Dragons with increasing frequency since around late-2018. I was expecting to see it mentioned in the responses on the influence of paratexts, but I was surprised to see how commonly players used the term. The origin (or at least the moment it gained more attention) seems to be a Reddit post entitled "How do I beat the Matt Mercer effect²⁹⁰" where u/Mister-builder asks for advice from the "DM Academy" sub-Reddit. Their issue centres around their group of first-time players and their love of *Critical Role*. Mister-builder states that a third of their group had watched more than 30 hours

²⁸⁹ 40425

²⁹⁰ https://www.reddit.com/r/DMAcademy/comments/a999sd/how_do_i_beat_the_matt_mercer_effect/ acc 2/9

of *Critical Role* before ever playing and it has influenced their expectations around the game and how it should be run. The group shares *Geek and Sundry* (the website *Critical Role* used to be hosted through) videos on “how to play RPGs better”. As the DM, Mister-builder does not have an issue with how they play on the show but feels that the players have “unrealistic expectations” about the game. Mister-builder summarises the issue with “TL; DR *Critical Role* has become the prototype for how my players think D&D works. How do I push my own way of doing things without letting them down?”.

The Reddit thread gained enough attention for a reply from Matt Mercer himself who said: “Seeing stuff like this kinda breaks my heart”. Mercer then took the time to provide advice that reinforced the idea that every game is different and should be run as such. Mercer suggested that players should discuss their expectations early on to make sure they are on the same page and help them find the “table’s special style of storytelling”. He also included a reminder that the group for *Critical Role* are professional actors and that he has been DMing for more than 20 years.

I see this in newer gamers (who aren't yet quite RolePlayers), and the "Matt Mercer Effect" is real, though it actually is disappointing to him (or so I hear). I DO like the Animated Spellbook on Youtube.²⁹¹

The comments on the Reddit thread follow in a similar vein, with commenters offering their own experiences with players who are focused on a *Critical Role* playstyle. The thread’s comments make it clear that it is not a problem unique to the poster’s playgroup. With the rise of celebrity-DM’s and the increasing popularity and proliferation of D&D podcasts, shows, and streams, the consequences warrant consideration.

“The Matt Mercer Effect” defined

As mentioned in the explanation of the MME’s origin, the issue centres around player expectations being elevated beyond what their DM can achieve after they watched *Critical Role*.

²⁹¹ 31559

Heavily affected by the "Matt Mercer" effect, where the world needs to be entirely expansive, and a totally open sandbox adventure.²⁹²

For a time it certainly caused the "Mercer Effect" as it's been dubbed. Where you feel like the DM has to have some giant elaborate campaign story they tell with all these wacky and cool voices they do.

When in actuality you don't need any of that, even Gygax himself said it isn't needed to play at all either. You play however you wanna play it.²⁹³

Definitely helped in understanding basic rules. At first there was a bit of the "Mercer Effect" where folks expect their DM to be "as good" or have the same style as people like Matt Mercer. However, it's common sense to realize that every DM is different, and there is just as much fun to be had even if you're not running a game with famous voice actors.²⁹⁴

At first it raised my expectations a lot. People call it the "Matt Mercer Effect". Where I wanted everyone going voices and being serious. Then as my comfortability and skill improved, my expectations for everyone else settled down a lot more.²⁹⁵

This puts pressure on the DM because regardless of their own experience, they feel held to the ambitious standards of Matt Mercer.

It's the "Matthew Mercer Effect", the idea that a good DM has to be exactly like Matthew Mercer in order to be a good DM. I have learned that this is not necessarily true, but still I strive to provide the experience that Matthew Mercer provides to his players because his style captivate sounds his audiences in a game where the world actually feels real and the players (and their enjoyment) genuinely matter.²⁹⁶

The Mercer effect! That's when you watch critical role and want to be a better Dm or better players, or as players want your dm to be more like Mercer, or as a dm want your players to be more like the cast.²⁹⁷

You're probably already aware of the "Mercer Effect". But in case you aren't: Matt Mercer of Critical Role is one of the driving forces in revitalizing public interest in DnD which is great but the side effect is that new DMs are given an impossible standard to live up to because everybody expects their friend

²⁹² 2640

²⁹³ 5087

²⁹⁴ 43518

²⁹⁵ 18987

²⁹⁶ 4182

²⁹⁷ 20098

who only has a few hours to prepare and no experience to provide the same immersion and fluency as a professional DM. I often find myself disappointed in my performance as a DM because I cannot live up to a professional standard.²⁹⁸

Attempting to improve player and DM skills after watching a podcast is not necessarily negative, and as discussed previously there are players who are happy to do so. However, for players such as the one above, it can lead to feeling disappointed when this cannot be achieved. These consequences are what this section focuses on.

What does this mean for D&D?

One of the biggest impacts that *Critical Role* and other similar streams and podcasts are having on Dungeons & Dragons is the education of players about the game. The discussions I have read online of the Matt Mercer Effect are peppered with acknowledgements that even if the effect is a real and negative thing, *Critical Role* should be positively recognised for helping bring new enthusiastic players to the table. Even the anti-Mercer comments often took the time to mention that they had noticed an influx of new players that cited *Critical Role* as what sparked their interest. D&D's Communications Director Greg Tito told *Geek & Sundry* that research is showing that streaming is now the number one way that people find out about D&D – more so than from friends and family. (This thesis' research disagrees, and found the opposite to be true, however streaming is undeniably influential) *Critical Role's* group are attractive, successful, charming people who are far from the lingering stereotypes of D&D players as basement-dwelling weirdos.

I think all players now are aware or heard of the Matt Mercer effect. And much the same as the photo shop can change the image of a person this effect has been used to change the image of D&D²⁹⁹

I dont think i know. Back before the matt Mercer effect d&d was taboo, a fringe activity that you talked about with ur friend in code. No though its the "cool thing" to do and i dont like it.³⁰⁰

I'm grateful for the work that Matthew Mercer and others did with making DnD popular, but I'm afraid it also gave people the wrong expecations about games, players and DMs. Me and other DMs and

²⁹⁸ 14481

²⁹⁹ 9252

³⁰⁰ 40702

players directly paid the consequences of the "Mercer Effect". I wish there was space for this conversation without being necessarily labeled as "haters".³⁰¹

This is a double-edged sword because it has the potential to encourage a greater diversity of people to play and feel welcome, but it could also marginalise those who do not fit the stereotypes.

Critical Role only represents one type of D&D experience and one approach to the game, and it can be the only exposure players have – or their very first, and first impressions are key. It is an alluring insight into what D&D has the potential to be. The players are a cohesive group of friends who are deeply invested in the game, are very funny, and are willing to commit to roleplaying their characters. There are no awkward breaks because someone is checking their phone and missed a whole chunk of dialogue, there are no heated arguments about the best course of action, and Matt Mercer delivers an engaging, exciting story that is well-planned and expertly moderated. One of the most common complaints seems to be that players cannot produce a game of *Critical Role* quality, and that leads to disappointment for players and DM's.

I try not to expect Mercer-level DMing but I can't say the disappointment from not encountering it hasn't reared its ugly head. I *have* been disappointed by a lack of the level of communication between player and DM that *Critical Role* has influenced me to come to expect.³⁰²

I answered no but I'm the youngest of the old guard. Anyone my age group is effected by DND streams and they frankly make my life a nightmare. Mathew Mercer is God tier. His party is voice actors. It's an impossible bar to clear. I have to reprogram my players before we start and they expect be to serve up gold with no input themselves. Drives me nuts.³⁰³

[...] I haven't had this affect me, but when new players come into Adventurer's League games with the scripted adventures - if the DM doesn't expand upon what's on the page, they can feel a bit "where's the magic?" and we have to remind new people that not everyone runs games the same way.³⁰⁴

When a player walks into their first session expecting a session like *Critical Role* and other D&D streams, then they are guaranteed to be dissatisfied. That is not to say that home games

³⁰¹ 6675

³⁰² 15843

³⁰³ 35191

³⁰⁴ 16079

cannot be of a high quality, but it takes time and effort to build group rapport and the level of DM experience that Matt Mercer and other professional streamers have. One concern would be that those who try out D&D after watching *Critical Role* or other professional streams might be disillusioned or dissuaded after their first session (or campaign) if it does not hit the same highs and standard as what they have seen previously. This might result in them quitting before really trying D&D because it is not what they expected. The burden here also lies with the individual to explore D&D and experiment with diverse groups, playstyles, and characters before they quit. Whilst more people might be trying D&D because of *Critical Role* (and other streams), they are doing so in a limited way or a manner that sets them up for a level of disappointment.

Another Reddit thread responding to the original “Matt Mercer Effect” thread, said that the ‘Real’ Matt Mercer Effect should actually be considered the inspiration he provides for people to put in extra effort to “improve their roleplaying” (Holovoid, 2019). u/Holovoid claims that: “Inspired by Matt [...] I work my ass off to present an awesome fantasy world for my players to romp about in. I spend probably 10 hours a week fleshing out the world, the lore and history, the NPCs, the story that the players are building, etc.”. This idea was also espoused in my survey responses.

[...] So I use the show's high production value as a high standard to work towards when DMing. But I do not expect anything of my players. They are not professional actors. The "mercerc effect" is only prevalent because most nerds have horrible communication skills and cannot set expectations in the start of a campaign.³⁰⁵

It made it harder for me to dm because so often people would expect Mercer-style games. And while I think he's very very skilled, he's also not me and my friends aren't voice actors. It's set a bar that day to day folks aren't gonna meet³⁰⁶

I felt pressured as a DM to live up to the expectations set by Matthew Mercer. I took a few of his homebrew rules and used them myself, and tried to use flowery descriptions like his in combat.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁵ 25893

³⁰⁶ 39426

³⁰⁷ 17703

The Mercer Effect makes me more critical of my story writing. I also have more varied ideas on mechanics and arcs now and I'm more willing to explore new stuff³⁰⁸

The Matt Mercer effect is pretty common with new players, and often viewed as negative, but as a DM it actually made my writing and storytelling a lot better.³⁰⁹

A desire to improve and create better games is a strong motivation and is potentially positive for the quality of D&D games that are out there. Where the MME has DMs reflecting on their storytelling, it is not inherently harmful. "Better" games lead to better experiences, happier players, and the growth of the hobby. However, should DM's/players feel like they need to put so much work into a hobby? Is this pressure for 'quality' and endless improvement a good thing?

As the DM, I feel anxious about trying to reach Matt Mercer's level of DMing. I know that no one actually expects me to have everything put together at his level, but I want my players to have the best experience possible.³¹⁰

Matt Mercer's DMing has hugely influenced my DMing. To a point that I did feel discouraged from DMing because his is SO GOOD and I'm of course pretty new. But watching him DM and watching players on Critical Role play has really made me realize what you can DO with D&D, what kinds of imagination you can have. [...]³¹¹

I am usually the DM of my group, and watching Matt Mercer has made me heighten my standards for my own skills (to the point of being too nervous at times), but has also given me many helpful tools for my own games.³¹²

I got the "Mercer syndrome" after listening to Critical Role. I felt my skills are not enough to even GM again. But that was my depression speaking, and I've managed to overcome it since. But it does seem to be both a bit discouraging, and motivating at the same time. It pushed me to both work more with the players and weave their expectations and stories into the game more strongly.³¹³

There should not be so much pressure applied to DMs that they no longer feel comfortable or confident to run their game. D&D is at its core, still just a game for 99.9% of players.

³⁰⁸ 6950

³⁰⁹ 68

³¹⁰ 10771

³¹¹ 3324

³¹² 33672

³¹³ 896

Culturally there is a pressure to turn hobbies into ‘side-hustles’ or businesses and whilst there’s not necessarily monetisation in this example, it is a case of a hobby turning into work.

The "Mercer Effect" is a common thing now. People expect professionally forged and crafted games from their DMs. It is often the streamers fulltime jobs, as they monetize their stream, to create their worlds and their sessions while your bi-weekly GM has a fulltime job and cant spend 8 hours a day forging their worlds. It has influenced how the game is run for sure.³¹⁴

It is a massive commitment to spend 10 hours a week planning a game plus then several hours playing – and this can be a barrier to entry. If this is the standard required, then D&D quickly would become inaccessible for the time-poor or unwilling. Everyone should feel comfortable trying to play D&D without worrying about being able to meet professional standards.

The Matt Mercer Effect is a contributing factor to the issue discussed in the next section – orthogaming. *Critical Role’s* viewers often hold it as the gold standard of play, and a style to be emulated. Complaints about this narrowing of acceptable gameplay were common in the responses.

Same as the others I'd expect. When I'm dming and my players go "well matt mercer does it this way...." and when I'm playing and I pull the same stunt³¹⁵

Every DM thinks they have to be Matt Mercer. That's not sustainable. As I've learnt more about the game, I've been able to pick and choose parts of streams and podcasts I like to incorporate into my game to achieve the effect I want. There's more to learn about D&D than the rules. I think at first I thought "this is the best way to play" until I discovered my own style and preferences.³¹⁶

It's made me aware that some people really put podcast down as the "correct way" to play. Mercer is an excellent DM but his playstyle is not "The One" as some like to proclaim. That being said, I still learned a thing or two from listening to him and other GM's.³¹⁷

So, I don't watch anyone else's games, but my players do, and I swear I had to spend two months deprogramming them from expecting everything to be exactly like Critical Role. I eventually had to just straight up say to stop bringing it up because that's that game, this is this game, can we actually focus

³¹⁴ 20830

³¹⁵ 33235

³¹⁶ 41131

³¹⁷ 30609

on this one now. I've never had that happen before streaming/podcasting campaigns became a thing, but now it's really frequently kind of an issue.³¹⁸

I came to the hobby long enough ago that streams weren't a thing, and my playing and GMing styles were mostly developed before streaming was a thing. However I've noticed that with the popularity of *Critical Role* etc it seems like newer players all have a very specific set of ideas about the game that seem to derive from that- whereas it used to be that you learnt D&D from whoever happened to be in your area, now most new players seem to learn from Matt Mercer. There's nothing wrong with that, Matt's a cool guy, but it does mean that a multiplicity of D&D traditions are being replaced with one single tradition, one that I would argue D&D 5e isn't necessarily built for.³¹⁹

I think streams/podcasts are a blessing and a curse for this generation of gamer. On the one hand, D&D is a game where you can only truly "learn by doing" or by watching others play. The rules are just guidelines and opportunities for inspiration. On the other, there is no right way to play D&D and I constantly hear about DM's who feel pressure to live up to Matt Mercer's ability or to run their game in certain ways. PC's and DM's of my generation had to learn through experiment which was harder, but ultimately results in a variety of playstyles rather than over-reliance on potentially unrealistic expectations.³²⁰

In the early days of D&D the community was disparate because of geography and technology, and as a result different cities developed their own interpretations of the rules. Zines and *Dragon Magazine* provided players with consistency for rule interpretation, because it was difficult to play in cities other than the one the player had learned in. Currently, D&D players have access to a myriad of technology-based resources for seeing gameplay and rule interpretations – and *Critical Role* is a major one. The MME is not only about a DM-style, but the entire approach that *Critical Role* take to D&D led by Matt Mercer. The response that described “a multiplicity of D&D traditions” as being replaced by a singular approach summed up this phenomenon well. Due to the MME and *Critical Role* one style of play is becoming dominant through the idea of orthogaming.

³¹⁸ 5180

³¹⁹ 26202

³²⁰ 23024

Homogenisation

It is imperative to further touch on the idea of people trying D&D in a ‘limited’ way. *Critical Role* and every other stream or podcast each have their own specific way of playing Dungeons and Dragons. There may be common threads or styles – potentially due to a need to make the game work for an audience rather than just the players. I feel that due to the dynamic between DM and players plus between the players, every group is different and produces a different ‘flavour’ of game. This has been my own experience as I have moved from group to group and had to make significant adjustments to my own approach as a player or DM. There is even a noticeable difference when a single player is missing from a group – for example, if there is one player who tends to be the ‘face³²¹’ of the group their absence can send the party into a spin as someone tries to feel that slot for a session. Personally, I enjoy roleplaying and can happily spend time interacting with NPC’s and other players, but I still need for there to be a combat or intense high-stakes dice rolling each session to keep me engaged. The idea of lengthy roleplaying can be an absolute nightmare, and they prefer a combat-heavy session that involves complicated manipulation of the rules. If players restrict themselves to playing D&D the *Critical Role* way, then lose the chance to find their own style and preferences.

In D&D’s history this pressure to play in a specific manner did not exist or was incredibly limited, because players did not know what happened at each other’s tables.

[...] I started playing in the 80s and back then you had no easy way of knowing if you were ‘doing it right’.³²²

Whilst there were obviously discussions between DM’s and players about how others approached the game, it was not to the same scale as it is now. It is valuable to ask what is being lost when a certain version becomes the mainstream. If all groups play like *Critical Role*, then we have lost myriad playstyles that all have value and we also risk alienating different types of players. The hypervisibility of D&D through streams has led to a visible mainstream approach.

³²¹ The face of a group is the one who typically takes on responsibility for interactions with non-player characters (NPC’s)

³²² 11055

Conclusion

This chapter covered the myriad ways that paratexts influence players, their perceptions of D&D, and even how they play the game. For inexperienced players, their first paratexts can show them how to approach D&D and what to expect. Watching or consuming these texts serves as a form of research before playing; educating potential players on what their experience could be. The expectations formed through paratext consumption can be positive for players because they establish standards for players to hold their experience against. In these circumstances the paratext helps players recognise unacceptable events. However, these expectations can also be unrealistic and impossible for players to achieve thus leading to disappointment. New Dungeons Masters can feel pressured to execute their role at a level they cannot for their first attempts. This also impacts experienced DM's who are trying to achieve Matt Mercer levels of performance. Part of these expectations are skewed by the fact paratexts are typically a performance by the players rather than an unedited game session. The changes required to make a performance watchable and enjoyable impact the expectations of viewers. It can change the focus of the game from being fun for the players to working as a viewable experience for an audience (that might not exist). Paratexts influence and impact every aspect of playing D&D and it is causing a homogenisation of gameplay. The popularity of certain approaches to D&D, for example in *Critical Role* or *The Adventure Zone*, results in their dominance over concepts of desirable gameplay styles. Players seek to emulate what they see in podcasts, because it works for those groups and it is community approved. Gameplay approaches that do not fit these ideals are then marginalised and the variety of games diminishes. When thinking about the marginalisation of players, it is important to acknowledge that this extends to player-styles. In the early days of D&D, the focus was heavily wargaming, combat, and the completion of challenging dungeons. Deep roleplaying and voices would have been less welcome at the table. Now the opposite is true. This change can be associated with the rise of paratexts that have shifted ideas of how D&D should be played. The role of paratexts in this example can be used as a basis for considering how paratexts might be used to change ideas of who plays D&D. Paratexts therefore become a powerful tool in increasing D&D's inclusivity and overcoming sexist gatekeeping.

Apoapsis

The apsis is the farthest point from the planetary body (of knowledge) that this thesis began orbiting. Central to this thesis – from its beginning - was the planetary body constituted by popular culture's notions of D&D's fandom and the stereotypical players. The gravity holding these ideas together was fuelled by dated work on fandom and the historical exclusion of women from fandom studies. Women's erasure from D&D's history and the popular misinformation or perceptions of how the game came to be contributed to the popular culture perspective of the identity of D&D's fandom. Nostalgia fuels comfortable rose-tinted perspectives on D&D's history and is supported by the emotional relationship that players can form with the game.

This voyage of discovery began with the mission objective of amplifying women's voices in experiences of D&D's fandom – from there the focus has broadened to explore the background of fandom. This thesis has investigated how women are erased or minimised in D&D's legends, myths, and historical narrative. Nostalgia and the emotive misremembering of history then reinforce this deletion whilst advancing a softer history for even marginalised groups to lust after. D&D's fandom is how D&D's community collectively perform their love of the game. The allure of D&D does not just lie in the game and the table but the peripheral activities that are engaged in. D&D is more than a game system, it is a source of inspiration for fan creation and identity. It was necessary to establish this foundation first because the richness of survey data gave an insight absent from existing academic research into D&D's fandom.

At this point, the fandom and community of D&D has been described and exposed. The potential of fandom has been addressed and highlighted whilst the experiences of women have floated around, interrupting where possible. This was D&D's fandom as described by the community from rather than through the lens of external researchers. It challenged the ideas of fandom that were presented in the works of Jenkins, Hills, and Bacon-Smith because it is less utopian. There is internal conflict in fandom that is often absent from how fandom is presented in research. The relationship between the legal 'owners' of a text

and the fans who feel they own the text is often riddled with conflict and the exploitation of fan creations.

Paratexts influence not only how players view D&D, but how they engage in the play activities involved. These constellations of texts are unique to each player – as each fan consumes different texts, in different orders, from different perspectives, and hold on to different pieces of information. The individual lenses through which players view D&D are vitally important to appreciate in modern popular culture where the multiplicity of media platforms and internet-enabled access to other fans has changed the way fans consume texts. Paratexts are an opportunity to influence how players approach D&D – to increase inclusivity in the face of gatekeeping.

This thesis is a foundational step towards the formation of a new understanding of D&D's fan, fandom, and the play activities of the game. Rather than moving back towards a positioning of periapsis to the celestial body that is the old notions of D&D's fandom, this thesis shifts out of the existing orbit in search of a new planet. Escape velocity is fuelled by women's experiences, the power of their voices, and the desire for change in D&D's fandom.

Chapter 6 – Boundaries and Gatekeeping in Fandom

Introduction

Existing scholarship on fandom, especially in relation to older texts, tends to portray fandom as a space of innocent or benevolent creativity, harmonious co-productivity for the sake of creating, and a welcoming environment. Guerrero Pico, Establés, and Ventura (2018, p. 315) suggest that toxic fan practices and the struggle for control of a text between fans and producers “shatter the idyllic theorisation of a communal fandom” that was promoted in early fandom scholarship. Whilst I am sure there are still pockets of fandom that exist in this golden haze, the reality for mainstream fandom is vastly different for women (or identities other than straight white men). There are intersecting and overlapping identities that effect who might feel comfortable or be allowed to claim the label geek or fan. Gatekeeping and the creation of boundaries within/around communities are techniques for protecting a group or identity. The idea of cultural gatekeeping in video gaming and nerd culture more broadly is already established in academic literature, but there has been a gap when it comes to D&D or tabletop gaming communities. In this chapter, I discuss the idea of access and inclusion in D&D’s fandom with a particular focus on the gatekeeping and boundaries that affect women.

Positioning and Boundaries

As the mainstream latches on to “one form of geek” to embrace, there is the tendency or risk to “excluding further or even negating the existence of whoever does not fit that new model” (Busse, 2015, p. 111). To understand their position within a group, people tend to form binary categories for group members. This allows for a ‘norm’ and ‘other’ category which streamlines the mental processes involved with social positioning and feelings of belonging. These binaries were cited in survey responses. I have included testimony from my respondents to illustrate this trend, then created a simple graphic with a selection of key binaries. This is followed with a discussion of two key binaries involved in gatekeeping – core/marginal, and authentic/inauthentic.

Old players vs new players:

[...] I have also noticed a trend in those who began in fifth edition where they seem utterly dismayed at the idea of character death. To us older players, that was a natural element of the game, and we even

found it laughable, attempting to at least go out in spectacular fashion. It does create a bit of a divide between old players and newcomers.¹

[...] right on into today's meta that slams oldskool players, dark age number munchkins, and posers from Reddit who saw it on Big Bang Theory, Stranger Things, etc. and want to get in on some sweet sub-culture commodification.²

A bimodal distribution: new players brought in by things like Critical Role and old-school players who've been around since before it started.³

I find gamer culture interesting in that it seems like it is made up of some old school, slightly sexist gamers, and some new school, very inclusive and open minded gamers. I find it odd that these quite different groups can coexist in one community. At a con, it can be difficult to know which flavour of gaming table you'll get⁴

Old vs young

Because of my age; yes. I was introduced to a group of younger players (by that I mean in their Twenties) who had great difficulty in playing with me as they could not get past looking at me and not the character I was playing; it in itself was a learning curve as I now know to look for gaming groups of diverse ages.⁵

Being in my late 30's it is a little hard to join a group of younger players. I have tried to join random games before and felt like an outcast, ignored, etc.⁶

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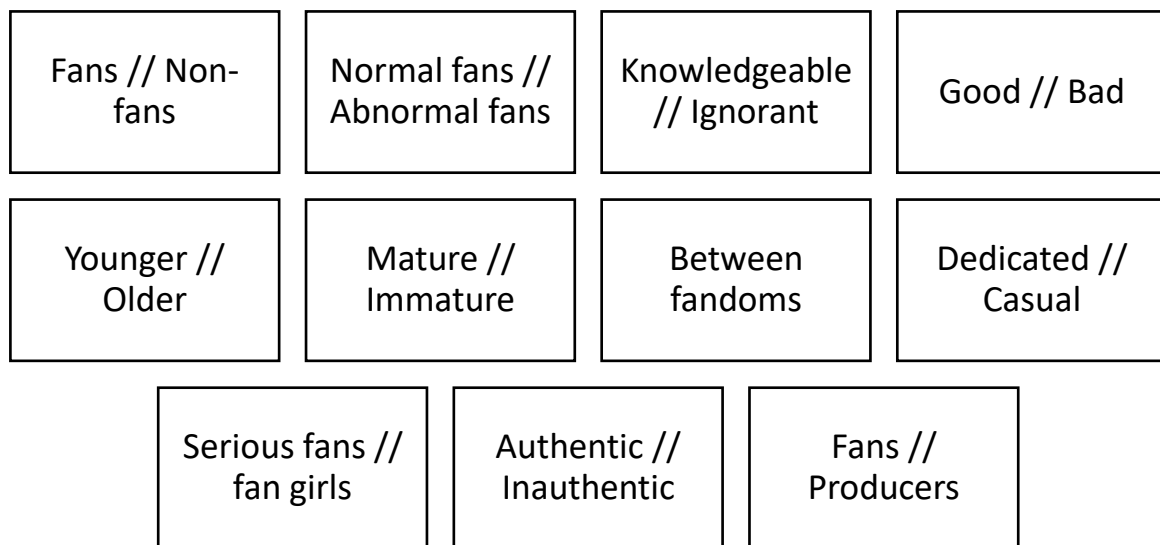
² 5633

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⁴ 8805

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Core//Marginal

There is often a dichotomy of core players and marginal or peripheral players. Fron, Fullerton, Ford Morie, and Pearce (2007) discuss the idea of “hegemony of play”, the power structures of play that are exclusionary and alienate minority players. They describe the power elite of the game industry as a “predominately white, and secondarily Asian, male-dominated corporate and creative elite” (Fron et al., 2007, p. 1). Similarly, Busse (2015, p. 114) describes a geek hierarchy of “positive (white, male, straight, intellectual, apolitical) and negative (person of colour, female, queer, embodied, political)”. This was reflected in the survey responses, where many players acknowledged their white male identity was the geek default.

No, as a white male with a tech background, I'm kind of the expected default.⁷

No, but I'm a white dude, so my inclusion doesn't trigger misogynist/racist assholes.⁸

Nope, but as a white, straight middle Class bloke I have alot of privilege backing me up⁹

⁷ 22926

⁸ 6589

⁹ 5390

Nope. As a male, white, urban, nerdy, intellectual kid who was super into sci fi and fantasy and role playing, I was in the privileged position of never having to wonder whether the game was "made for people like me". [...]"¹⁰

No. but I'm a white male... the core demographic."¹¹

The privileged group have control over what technologies are used, what games are made, and which players and playstyles will be designed for and/or supported (Fron et al., 2007, p. 1). This serves to alienate the perceived minority – who are in fact the numerical majority – and bolster the so-called “hardcore gamer” audience (Fron et al., 2007, p. 1). “Hardcore” gamers are treated as the target demographic by the gaming industry, and are characterised “by an adolescent male sensibility that transcends physical age and embraces highly stylised graphic violence, male fantasies of power and domination, hyper-sexualised, [and] objectified depictions of women” (Fron et al., 2007). This target audience of men are treated as being more important than women and other non-stereotypical players (Cote, 2017, p. 150; Scott, 2019, p. 4). The idea that the game is designed primarily for white, nerdy, men is used as a foundation for territorial claims in D&D’s community.

I think that as enjoyable as D&D can be for anyone, there’s an element of inaccessibility for some (women, LGBT folks, people of color, etc) due to how closely associated it has become with the stereotypically white cishet male image of the “nerd”¹²

Most of the non-players I speak to are interested in trying to play but the complexity of the rules and trying to find a group to play with are high barriers to entry. I think that players are still considered pretty nerdy, but with the tech revolution and Stranger Things, nerdy is a lot cooler than it used to be.¹³

Most people I've talked to about it have either been interested in trying it or thought it was a cool idea, but a lot of marginalized people feel like they can't get into it because they wouldn't know where to find an accepting group- the perception is that it's still largely nerdy white guys¹⁴

Positioning goes beyond group membership and can be considered in terms of core and marginal positions. Ellemers and Jetten (2012, p. 4) suggest that in social identity theory

¹⁰ 32637

¹¹ 7403

¹² 35465

¹³ 38740

¹⁴ 31713

prototypical group members have been treated as the active members whilst those with a marginal position are passive onlookers. Typically, research that has focused on marginals has conceptualised them as “core members in waiting” rather than as possessing a stable or even desired position (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 4). Much of social identity theory research has focused on the strategies the marginal group members might use to achieve or ensure a more central position within the group but this rests on the assumption that marginal group members always desire inclusion or are uncomfortable with their marginality. Ellemers and Jetten (2012, p. 3) challenge the idea that marginal positioning is only a transitory stage towards centrality and instead propose that it can be a desired end-state. They suggest that times the group might be seeking to include individuals and achieve homogeneity whilst the individual resists, or vice versa (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 3). There is a history of the media industries devaluing female audiences (Scott, 2019, p. 22). This has a flow-through effect on the infrastructure of the gaming industry and the paratexts around gaming (Fron et al., 2007). It also influences how women’s participation in gaming is discussed – the industry is “heavily invested in the stereotypical assumption of their target audience being almost exclusively young men” so they have no desire or motivation to consider the issue (Bergstrom, 2018, p. 8). These power structures and systems serve to create and perpetuate values and norms around gaming whilst subordinating those that do not fit (Fron et al., 2007, p. 2). Those who do not fit the normative ideologies of D&D players are ‘othered’ and alienated. Ahmed described strangers as not being a failure of recognition, but rather being recognised as “*not belonging*, as being out of place” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 21). They are not the unencountered, but someone familiar in their unfamiliarity.

I have some stories about pretty typical male condescension in nerdy environments. It can come out pretty harshly in crunch-heavy environments like earlier editions of DnD or Magic: The Gathering. It's a constant reminder that I don't QUITE belong, but usually people will get over themselves if I show them

I don't need my hand held often enough. I shouldn't have to, but..¹⁵.

These recognitions position strangers as being different degrees of strange – some are “*stranger than other others*” (Ahmed, 2000, p. 25). There becomes a mechanism or hierarchy where some people are valued over others linked to their strangeness or stranger-status

¹⁵ 2913

(Ahmed, 2000, p. 30). Communities are “established, enforced and legitimated” through recognising strangers and the danger they pose (Ahmed, 2000, p. 37).

Marginalised group members might “find themselves in a similar distance from the core position but for very different reasons” (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 7). This then results in different approaches towards becoming a core member. For example, whilst some might reject the potential of becoming a core member, others might work towards core member status. Groups need their marginal members just as much as they need core members – marginality or deviance is not necessarily a negative quality. There are ways to deviate that can benefit the group, for example through being exceptional, being whistle-blowers when groups violate important external norms, or offering new qualities or information that stimulates innovation (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 6). A member might find themselves marginalised due to exceptionally high or low levels of knowledge. High knowledge might be perceived as positive, unachievable by the prototypical core member and therefore valued. Those with low levels of knowledge are disparaged for their perceived ignorance. Marginality and prototypicality (core membership) are not dichotomous polar opposites but rather a complex galaxy of varied positions (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 7). Fans “create internal hierarchies”, and these might vary from fandom to fandom in positioning of activities. For Busse (2013, p. 79) the creation of a hierarchy is indicative of a need and/or desire within fan communities to “prove to oneself that there are more intense geeks out there”. Certain fan activities are legitimised and privileged over others in these hierarchies. There can also be movement within groups where members advance (or lower) hierarchically – Armenta et al. (2017, p. 418) give the example of a woman rising in position within a male-dominated organisation. For D&D, to advance through the social hierarchy an individual might get a reputation for excellent DM skills or being knowledgeable about the rules.

Social comparison theory (as started with Festinger, 1954) is where individuals consider information in relation to other people and the self (Gerber, Wheeler, & Suls, 2018, p. 177). This can be done as ‘upward’ or ‘downward’ comparisons, and these have different potential outcomes. Upwards social comparison is where an individual compares themselves to someone better off or more skilled. This can result in an elevation of self-worth where similarities are identified (Gerber et al., 2018, p. 178). It is also common for there to be a decrease in self-esteem or self-evaluation after upward social comparison (Gerber et al.,

2018, p. 194) Downward social comparison can be an attempt to restore self-esteem by boosting the evaluation of the self, through comparison to someone less successful (Gerber et al., 2018, p. 178). More immediate or local information tends to be “more highly weighted” for comparisons than information from or about distant sources (Gerber et al., 2018, p. 179). This is where paratexts may be less impactful than the norms of the local community.

The position someone holds within a group can affect their behaviours both towards ingroups and outgroups. Those who inhabit a marginal position tend to exert influence less easily, be more disengaged from the group, and less likely to defend the group against the acts when compared to core members (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 4). There is inconsistency in what has been found about marginal members comparatively weak loyalty to the group, their increased tendency to deviate from group norms, decreased motivation to act for the benefit of the group, and a decreased likelihood to show “ingroup bias in the face of threats to the distinctiveness of the group” (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 4). There has been research that complicates these assumptions and demonstrates occasions when marginal members might demonstrate “as much loyalty to the group as core members, if not more” (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 4). Boundaries between groups are often permeable – especially for social groups, but there are times where it is impossible or incredibly challenging to change group membership (Armenta et al., 2017, p. 418). For example, changing sporting teams might lead to a change in social groups but changing group membership that is based off gender or race is difficult or impossible (Armenta et al., 2017, p. 418). It also might not be desirable to change group membership – if the player does not want to stop playing D&D and leave the fandom, they might feel stuck in the group. Social identity theory (SIT) posits that permeability is a factor in determining people’s attitudes towards not only their own group, but towards members of other groups (outgroup members), and towards intergroup inequality (Armenta et al., 2017, p. 419). Where group boundaries are impermeable, members identify more with their own group (Armenta et al., 2017, p. 419). In permeable groups, high status members “are more likely to derogate the low status group” as a technique for maintaining the status quo and keeping their high status (Armenta et al., 2017, p. 419). D&D’s fandom is a permeable social group because players can start (and stop) playing without barriers (social exclusion aside). Once marginalised, gamers must struggle harder against dominant participants for access to status, opportunities, and capital (Gray et al., 2017, p. 4). Fron et al. (2007) found

anecdotally that the stereotypes around being a “gamer” might stop people from playing games entirely. The sub-culture is “exclusionary and alienating to many people who play games, but who do not want to be associated with the characteristics [...] associated with “hardcore gamers”” (Fron et al., 2007). The label “gamer” is part of these hegemonic power structures, as a failure or reluctance to identify with it stops certain people from participating.

Ellemers and Jetten (2012, p. 8) highlight two dimensions for determining different conditions for marginality: 1) “the extent to which the group’s goal [...] is for the individual to become more central in the group [...] or rejects or cuts off opportunities for further inclusion

Figure 1: Marginality as Resulting from Group and Individual Negotiation About Inclusion (the MARGINI model)

This image has been removed due to copyright restriction. Available online from DOI: 10.1177/1088868312453086

to those at the edge of the group, and 2) “the extent to which those currently at the edge seek inclusion in the group”. Those in a marginal position might sometimes communicate a desire for inclusion and other times may seek to distinguish themselves from the group prototype. Ellemers

and Jetten (2012) uses group inclusion goals and individual inclusion goals combined with movement towards a core position to create the MARGINI (Marginality as Resulting from Group and Individual Negotiation About Inclusion). The “socialising marginal” are marginalised individuals who strive for greater inclusion in the group where the group allows and facilitates transition from marginal to core (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 8).

*As a young teen yes, I often felt uncomfortable playing in overtly sexist spaces. I’m ashamed to say I tended to deal with it by trying to lean into toxic masculinity and become ‘one of the guys’.*¹⁶

The “independent marginal” is where both parties’ “inclusion goals converge in the sense that the group and individual perceived that there are more benefits associated with remaining marginal than they are moving away from the marginal position” (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 9). This provides a level of stability for both the individual who is remaining marginal and for the group – independent marginals to be unconcerned about their position within the group and that prototypicality. In contrast the “rejected marginal” of those who seek inclusion but are

¹⁶ 29291

not “willingly included by the group, or even actively rejected” (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 10). This position includes black sheep, those whom there are concerns about “the extent to which the individual meets key criteria for group membership”, and also the scapegoating and bullying of those seen as directly responsible for the failure of the group to meet goals or be successful (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 10). The act or process of rejecting these marginal members can serve to unify group members and reinforce their social bonds (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 10). This is a less stable position as it is dependent on whether marginals persist in seeking inclusion whether the group continues to reject them. Continued rejection can lead to displays of aggression and hostility towards the core group by the rejected individual. The “admired marginal” is a marginal who has a loyal inclusion goal and the group aims to include them (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 12). These marginals “do not adapt their behaviour to communicate in group inclusion or to fit in, but take the freedom to display their unique abilities and to pursue their personal visions and ideals” (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 12). In this situation the marginal individual might have power to exploit the group because they know that the group wants them more than they want to be part of the group (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 12). They also benefit potentially through feeling admired or valued whilst getting their need for belonging met (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 12). The group benefits from these marginals as they can be a source of inspiration, expose the group to different experiences, and serve as an exceptional example of the group (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 12). This can be a tenuous position as is reliant on the marginal remaining favourably considered by the group, the group member not breaking free to join a different group, all the individual losing the distinctiveness and being reabsorbed into a more prototypical member (Ellemers & Jetten, 2012, p. 12).

Authentic // Inauthentic

Authentic is a contrastive term that must stand in opposition to something (Potter, 2010, p. 6). Authenticity is a zero-sum game because for something to be authentic renders something else as fake – status cannot be gained without someone else losing (Potter, 2010, p. 119). For there to be real geeks there must be fake ones. The quest for authenticity borders on a new religion in modern society, we demand the real and natural as a backlash against the shallowness and isolation of everyday life (Potter, 2010, p. 4). Authenticity is arguably an

illusion – a simulacrum that has no bearing on reality but is self-referential and ultimately fake (Potter, 2010, pp. 112-113). D&D has an authenticity issue according to many survey results.

I feel that the new edition and all the popularity from podcasts the game has achieved a lot but also sold out for the same reasons. The community is ridden with folk who have no concept of what actual d&d really is, the epic fantasy storytelling of heroes and villains, good and evil, moral, social, political consequences to actions and working your brains imaginations, organization, sociability and improvisation skills. People nowadays join dnd having never been a fan of the fantasy setting, never having read or watched or likes any fantastical piece. Nowadays it's all weird races with purple hair, a sexuality or gender thing, a squeaky anime voice and general disarray and dissonance with the original concept and lore. I am saddened by the fact that the community is changing so much so fast leaving the original game and concept further back as it moves forward to commercial, politically correct, consumer product.¹⁷

I think the current popularity of the game has made the words "geek" and "nerd" a positive label that many people claim for themselves, whether true geeks and nerds can relate to them or not is often a big disconnect. Cool and handsome celebrities who adopt those labels is a little like cultural appropriation to the people that have been labelled that their entire life in a negative way and were not seen as cool or handsome. But the stigma tied to those labels and the people they represent have dissipated a great deal allowing them to breathe a little and come out of the shadows, hopefully for good. They are good and descent people just trying to get by in the world working, paying bills and having fun with friends.¹⁸

Booth (2018, p. 2) describes that “being part of fandom is about finding authentic ways to express membership in that fan community”. Authenticity and expressing personal commitment to the fandom is often how fans “set themselves as different from the mainstream” (Booth, 2018, p. 2). Taste and marginality are central to these representations and to subcultural capital in fandom (Booth, 2018, p. 2). These concepts are constructed in opposition to the mainstream – authenticity is constructed to be dichotomous to mainstream.

The ideology of authenticity is a strong thread in discussions of geek or nerd identity. The labels ‘geek’ and ‘nerd’ have a long history that are associated “with mockery and outsider status”, but we are seeing them become insider labels for a growing sub-culture

¹⁷ 20252

¹⁸ 14096

(Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 5). Geek subculture is facing a crisis of identity – once victimised outsiders, the identity now carries a certain level of cultural power and influence (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 12). This power and influence are being used by geeks who were once bullied or mistreated for their interests to stand above others in the community. Unfortunately, the geek subculture or identity has been often strongly aligned with ideas of “toxic straight white masculinity” (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 5). This emphasis on masculinity and hypermasculinity has been exaggerated and reflected back as mainstream culture has represented geeks in a more visible and consumable form (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 13).

[...] I would have liked to start in high school, but one of the guys in my friend-group that played D&D together was constantly talking shit about my not actually liking the things I liked (punk music, scifi/fantasy, etc) and only said I did for attention. (I was living as a woman at the time)¹⁹

Definitely. Back in high school, I wanted to join our DnD club, but it consisted of a bunch of rude guys who didn't want a "fake gamer girl" to infiltrate the group. So I didn't get to play until a few years later, when my ex introduced me to it properly.²⁰

I am cisgender female, and often people think I'm not a serious player. "If you really play do you know X?" Like I have had to be bff with Guygax to prove my value as a player. [...]²¹

Yes. I get flack for being a woman. There's a lot of gatekeeping, i.e. "if you're a real player, then tell me x." And I get a lot of "well a bunch of chicks joined with critical roll, I bet you're one of those." [...]²²

Authentic people reject “popular tastes, thoughts, opinions, styles, and morals” (Potter, 2010, p. 75). With the increasing mainstream visibility and consumption of franchises, characters, and genres that have long been the mainstay of geeks, there is a struggle over being nerdy *enough*. There are geeks who demand that those who wish to use the label have suffered *enough* or must jump through elaborate tests of knowledge to be a true member of the community (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, pp. 5-6, 12).

[...] Being a woman almost always becomes "a thing", in that some of the other players assume you are only there because you are looking for a boyfriend, or feel the need to grill you on your "credentials" to make sure you've played the game before the recent boom in mainstream popularity from shows like

¹⁹ 35852

²⁰ 35362

²¹ 7493

²² 10832

Critical Role becoming popular. The end result is not so much feeling unwelcome, as it was feeling "othered", as well as being under constant scrutiny for any and all decisions I made both in and out of game. [...] ²³

Not personally, but I have generally avoided public space dnd with strangers because I fear having to interact with men gatekeeping DND the same way I've interacted with men gatekeeping comics, star wars, etc ²⁴

I did when playing with a group that my partner organized. There were men in the group that did not respect my calls as a DM and often would ask me to prove My rolls and "quiz me" or outright challenge me on the mechanics I was using. I felt more like I was defending a thesis than running a campaign. ²⁵

I experienced some "nerd gatekeeping" when I first tried to play D&D with my high school's club. The DM (who was also a teacher) interrogated me about unrelated media such as LotR, Doctor Who, etc. before he would let me play. [...] ²⁶

It is not enough to enjoy the *Marvel Cinematic Universe*; the fan might have to prove that they have extensive knowledge of the comics to be respected (and treated kindly) by other geeks. Website *The Armory* has Geek and Nerd "Purity Test" checklists that can be used to determine how 'pure' a nerd or geek someone is (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, pp. 6-7). These tests have about 100 questions each and rely on stereotypes such as geeks having poor relationship skills, questionable personal hygiene, and good knowledge of technology (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, pp. 6-7). These are outdated and often highly negative stereotypes that exclude anyone who fails to fit them.

Pre-internet, it was difficult for fans to achieve expertise – it was an investment "in time, effort, and sometimes money to tape episodes, buy series guides, photocopy fanzines, and attend conventions" (Hadas & Shifman, 2013, p. 277). Knowledge served as a form of cultural currency that was hard to gain. Through the internet it is now possible for fans to reach (and share) information with greater ease and with fewer resources. This shifts portions of the achievement and prestige away from extensive fan-knowledge because it is not as hard

²³ 40784

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²⁵ 7893

²⁶ 43838

to achieve. Fan credibility is instead often generated through “time commitment and investment” because it shows a “permanence of affect” (Busse, 2013, p. 84)

Not from my fellow players, but I've often seen people on the internet saying, that the current "boom" on DnD is just a trend and it's suddenly cool, and if you haven't been playing since the '90s in your basement and haven't been ridiculed/bullied for it at least once, you can't call yourself a "true DnD player"... which again is just gatekeeping.²⁷

Guerrero Pico et al. (2018, p. 312) describes toxic fan practices as “fannish discourses and actions that constitute harassment and *ad hominem* attacks on media producers or that promote racism, sexism, homophobia, and other reactionary currents by exploiting fan discontent”. These go beyond demonstrations of ‘fan antagonism’ or ‘anti-fan activism’ and develop into something more negative and serious (Guerrero Pico et al., 2018, p. 314). These styles of fandom can be conceptualised as a spectrum from fan-tagonism/fan antagonism leading to anti-fandom and then to toxicity (Guerrero Pico et al., 2018, p. 316). The “reasoned debates and campaigning” of fan-tagnoists and anti-fans can ‘co-exist’ with the toxic fan practices of defamatory messages and harassment (Guerrero Pico et al., 2018, p. 319). To legitimise their position, activist fans might deploy the stereotype of the toxic and “emotionally stunted fangirl” (Guerrero Pico et al., 2018, p. 324). These ‘fan girls’ are held responsible for damaging the reputation of fans and their activism. A distinction is drawn between the extreme fans who are toxic and the supposed majority of reasonable fans. This acts to legitimise certain fan behaviours at the expense of others.

‘Fanwank’ can be defined as “a strongly derogatory term: basically meaning fiction that only fans could understand and derive pleasure from, obtuse to outsiders and thus of little if any value” (Hadas & Shifman, 2013, p. 280). This judgement of value that relies on outsider approval seems flawed for fan studies. Fan creations and fandom activities can often only have value to those who understand or appreciate the focus text. I have seen it applied to other fan content or activity that requires a high-degree of obscure fan-knowledge or investment to understand or appreciate. It is almost smug in its obtuseness – because to comprehend or even recognise it means the audience is a deeply invested or ‘legitimate’ insider. For Doctor Who, an example of Fanwank is “continuity references, old monsters, and

²⁷ 33759

overcomplicated explanations of trivial plot details” that might result in texts that a general audience would “find at best boring, at worst impossible to watch” (Hadas & Shifman, 2013, p. 281). Fanwank can also be “self-indulgent”, where the content is aimed at pleasing the writer or a niche audience whilst eschewing a mass audience (Hadas & Shifman, 2013, p. 287). This style of fan-produced content is common in fan fiction where writers might unapologetically write self-insert stories or fulfill head-canons that the series will not touch but bring the author joy or pleasure. This style of fan fiction is not always negatively received.

Gatekeeping

For D&D players, it is desirable to be part of the broader community. Thematic analysis of the survey responses found that group membership, friendship, and social interaction were key enjoyable aspects of D&D. In responses to question 6: “What do you enjoy about playing D&D?” the following social themes emerged: being with friends; bonding with friends and family; community; friends; new friends; catching up with friends; guided social time; camaraderie; found family; being about to maintain friendships over distance; socialising; sharing food and dinner.

Creativity, inspiration for writing, hanging with friends, stress relief, and knowing that no matter how geeky or strange I am there are a group of people who get me.²⁸

The collaborative story telling and the ability to check your anxieties at the door. We're all nerds here. We're going to do nerdy things. And no one is going to judge anyone else.²⁹

The community surrounding it, not only with the people that you play games with, but everyone else as well, even if you don't all have the exact same experiences, they're shared enough that everyone just understands each other³⁰

The contact with like minded people that want to have fun in a safe environment.³¹

There is a value placed on being included in the D&D community and being able to interact socially with others whilst playing.

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²⁹ 21837

³⁰ 25345

³¹ 38312

Social group membership contributes to identity and self-esteem, but it is “fragile and thus requires continual maintenance” (Dechesne, Janssen, & van Knippenberg, 2000, p. 923). When there is potential damage to the group or the group membership identity then there is a need to react. Defending the group and belonging is typically the preferred technique over distancing the self from the group (Dechesne et al., 2000, p. 924). Part of this can be negativity towards or attacking the source of the negativity (Dechesne et al., 2000, p. 924). For example, attacking those who criticise the lack of inclusivity in D&D or the past racist content rather than considering the merit of what they have to say. These people instinctually jump to the defence of D&D as a text they have built their identity and self-esteem off rather than conceding that it might be flawed.

The geek subculture sees itself as community under siege from outside influences and the influx of new interest for areas that have traditionally been relegated to obscure geekiness. Geek identity has become a battlefield – the label geek treated as something to be defended from external and internal forces (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 11). There are those nostalgic for a more exclusive version of fan identity, but those are the individuals who used to hold all the power in the community – straight, white, men. There is the choice whether to embrace this new popularity and welcome the new fans, or to lock down and “defend the terrain from those less dedicated, who have never suffered from their geekdom” (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 11).

Another piece of nerd culture that has been appropriated by "normal" people and is now "cool"³²

Decades ago D&D was for geeks and nerds, social outcasts, and 'virgins'. Now it's for EVERYONE and it's considered cool.³³

I worry that gatekeeping the game is becoming more and more prevalent. Especially in the face of Critical Role's recent Kickstarter success and the rise of popularity for D&D because of its visibility, a lot of long-time and old school players feel like the bullying they endured for playing the game when it was unpopular is being invalidated. As if the "jocks" that want to play the game now should be punished and refused entry because of how their "type" treated long-time fans in the past. Or even that people being introduced to D&D by popular streams aren't real fans because they came in at an easy time.³⁴

³² 27731

³³ 14557

³⁴ 12361

There was a theme in survey responses that who was welcome to play D&D was changing, no longer just nerds, but all sorts of people – and there was a pushback against this. There was also a theme of strong rejection for perceived ‘social justice’ considerations invading the D&D community.

i dislike recent changes in the community where social justice has crept in. D&D recently redefined elves as being gender fluid to appease a minority - i don't care for it. there's no reason to do so and change decades of established folklore To do so. social justice is tearing apart our hobbies and enjoyment when we're forced to engage in changes to rules and/or background material just for the sake Of change. as a result, i tend to play less at conventions and in public lest i say something that is taken out of context and triggers someone's sensibilities.³⁵

I just wanna play my goddamn game; I don't want gender mixed trans, bullshit, fucking stupid ideas. It's a fucking story game. You play a role in the story, have fun, if that's what you wanna do, fine, but just don't make it anything more than it needs to be - Christ.³⁶

Gatekeeping is an important aspect of protecting a hobby from "people" who wish to subvert it and change it to fit there window of social/political norms.³⁷

I don't enjoy gatekeeping; I would say no one does. However it is important to recognize when people are involving themselves in a hobby for reasons other than playing the game. It is not about excluding people for arbitrary characteristics. It is about preserving the things that make your hobby good. Believe me we want more people to play, but we will kindly thank you to leave your baggage at the door, political or otherwise. [...] ³⁸

These responses demonstrate the resistance to change members of the D&D community can feel. A sub-section do not want cultural change that promotes diversity and inclusivity because it offends them personally or somehow reduces their enjoyment of the game. Busse (2013, p. 75) suggests that border policing in fandom is based in “a clear sense of protecting one’s own sense of fan community and ascribing positive values to it while trying to exclude others”. In this sense, fans who resist the change might feel they are trying to protect the community’s existing values against ‘social justice warriors’. Goals and values held by a majority in a group can come to characterise the group and function as standards that are

³⁵ 23967

³⁶ 17898

³⁷ 11268

³⁸ 6644

used to judge individuals on whether they are proper group members (Ellemers, Pagliaro, & Barreto, 2013, p. 161). Groups might come to be understood or distinguished through the values behaviours or goals that the group is seen to hold (Ellemers et al., 2013, p. 163). Behaving morally or in line with group values can be incredibly important and people typically are motivated to behave in ways that help them appear as moral in the eyes of others (Ellemers et al., 2013, p. 168). Ellemers et al. (2013, p. 172) describe studies that found that positive evaluations of morality can contribute more significantly to establishing a positive social identity the competence or sociability. By following group moral norms, group members can contribute to a positive reputation or status within a group more effectively or quickly thereby proving their competence or social skills. The identity of a group as being moral is a positive influence on group member pride but also the desire of people to join or be part of the group (Ellemers et al., 2013, p. 186). A sense of immersion with a group and a feeling of being “depersonalised and interchangeable exemplars of a homogenised group” can contribute to a feeling of belonging (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013, p. 455). Being perceived as being more prototypical can lead group members to be more liked which then can contribute to strong feelings of belonging (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2013, p. 455). If morals and acceptable behaviour within the D&D community change, exclusionary group members would no longer be behaving consistently with the group’s overall morals thus damaging their group membership.

Gender & Gatekeeping?

The label “fake geek” girl is an example of the pervasive hunt for those who do not ‘belong’ as real geeks. It was pushed by Tara Tiger Brown, a Forbes writer, who called for credential checking to “separate the geeks from the muck” and the influx of “pretentious females” using the geek label (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 102). The ‘Fake geek girls’ label is applied to women who demonstrate any sexuality, are thought to care at all about their physical appearance, act in a feminine manner, or in fact exist at all (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 104).

I showed up in my sorority shirt right after bid day to burn off some steam and play a pickup game that had been advertised to occur at the local game store. I carefully picked the blandest, least spicy character i have so as not to offend any strangers sensibilities of what dnd should and should not be (what do you mean, you dont like tiefling bards who play the kazoo) I was immediately shut out, talked

over, and only given the barest sense of inclusion. I'd rather they'd refused me outright, because at least then I would have just gone home instead of being strung along, passive and miserable in a game which should have been fun because two of the men playing scoffed at my appearance and made several pointed remarks throughout the game about fake gamer girls and damn fake sorority bitches.³⁹ When I tried to find in-person games I played one-off games with a few groups locally just to see how it went. But I like makeup and keep my hair very long and styled, sparkly acrylic nails and all that. Many of the men wouldn't take me seriously or spent a long time staring at me rather than playing. I found out that the guys had been talking crudely behind my back from one of the girls and decided not to go back.⁴⁰

Women's visibility in a sub-culture assumed to be dominated by men renders them vulnerable to attacks on whether they are genuinely geeks. A *Google Images* search for "geek" will give images of white men, with a smattering of women in sexualised poses (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 47). In the popular geeky television show *The Big Bang Theory*, Amy is one of the smartest and successful characters but her character is motivated by a desire to "be one of the girls ... go out dancing and looking at boys" (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, pp. 58-59). There is too much of her "female nature showing through" for her to ever be accepted as one of the geeks (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 60). Her nerdiness is undeniable, but it is played as being in opposition to her femininity rather than as personality attributes that can co-exist.

The treatment of *Twilight* fans at the 2009 Comic-Con is an example of fan boundaries and the construction and perpetuation of the good fan/bad fan dichotomy, alongside a hierarchy of cultural value. *Twilight* fans were treated as "too obsessive, too fanatic, and too invested" (Busse, 2013, p. 73). They were rejected by outsiders to Comic-Con and to fan communities, but also by fans of other media at Comic-Con. *Twilight* fans were not "good-enough fans" to be respected by general public or by other attendees (Busse, 2013, p. 74).

As a casual, female player, I think it's important to know that D&D does not have to be life consuming hobby. For me, it has been a way to gather friends and play a create "board" game. Anyone can have an interest in D&D. Anyone can learn to play.⁴¹

³⁹ 20296

⁴⁰ 15733

⁴¹ 29

Their image as fans was treated as “embarrassing to other fans” (Busse, 2013, p. 74). Busse (2013, p. 74) proposes that gender is central to the dismissal of *Twilight* and its fans. Fan behaviours are coded as being masculine or feminine within the gender binary – with masculine behaviours being “active, intellectual, aggressive, and objective”, whilst the feminine behaviours are “passive, emotional, sensitive, and subjective” (Busse, 2013, p. 74). “Overt sexual expression” by female fans is often described as “overinvested and hysterical” whilst male desire is healthy and normal (Busse, 2013, p. 74). It is not just how female fans behave that is maligned but also their interests. Both internally to fandom and externally, fan fiction, fan vids, and cosplaying are generally less acceptable than the obsessive collecting of comic books “or speaking Klingon” (Busse, 2013, p. 75). It is no coincidence that the former activities are typically dominated by women, whilst the latter are stereotypically masculine expressions of fandom.

Dixon (2015, p. 641) found women sports fans who started being fans as children, were introduced by “influential ‘male’ figures”. They then had a sense of gratitude to those men who acted as gatekeepers that created opportunities rather than shutting them out (Dixon, 2015, p. 641). The early introductions to fandom “tended to evoke positive nostalgic memories” (Dixon, 2015, p. 641). This similar positive nostalgia is evident in how players are often introduced to D&D by friends and family, sometime even as children. In sports fandom, there is the stereotype of “puck bunnies” which is a “term that is used to generalise and trivialise the status of female fans whose alleged primary interest is in the sexual attractiveness of male athletes” (Dixon, 2015, p. 645). This is part of “sub-cultural exclusion” (Dixon, 2015, p. 645). Women D&D players must often overcome the perception that they are simply playing because their boyfriend, husband, or another man wants them to.

[...]There's an assumption, in public games, that I'm someone's partner or mum (!) rather than being there as a player myself.⁴²

In the mid-2000s the local trpg Store was rather vocal about Not allowing "Girlfriends" to join the game. They assumed every woman was just there because of their partner, regardless If they had one or not. [...] ⁴³

⁴² 23331

⁴³ 36685

To be perceived as “authentic members of a fan group” is harder work for women fans (Dixon, 2015, p. 645). For some, this process is done by trying to adopt masculine practices and try to assimilate with male fans (Dixon, 2015, p. 646). Women face stigma when they are part of “female-dominated fandom” and “when they associated with mainstream male-dominated fandom” (Yodovich, 2016, p. 292). This is a no-win position for women in fandom.

Hill (2011, p. 301) describes that in the metal music community, women are positioned as fans who worship musicians, whilst men are the musicians who are worshipped. There is the dichotomy here of consumer and producer, with the producer as an elevated status. Men are legitimised through their association with the creation of culture – it positions them to be the gatekeepers of ‘their’ creations. For D&D and nerd/geek culture, men are treated as the creators of content and community whilst women are secondary, they are purely consumers. (This is not true, but it does not need to be – it just must be treated as though it is by enough people that it gains credibility and influences attitudes). To reconcile women as producers, their creations are dismissed or treated as inferior. For example, the treatment of fan fiction by women. The dichotomy of mass culture and high art is “based upon the duality and attendant hierarchy of feminine and masculine (Hill, 2011, p. 308). This reveals alignments to the subculture and mainstream dichotomy – mass culture is mainstream whilst high art can be appreciated only by a subculture (Hill, 2011, p. 310). If the appeal of a text becomes too broad, then it risks becoming mainstream and loses its status and links to high art or being somehow special. Boundaries and gatekeeping might serve to re-establish the niche nature of a text and protect it from becoming ‘mainstream’ or ‘pop culture’. A perceived influx of new fans, particularly women, are a threat to the fandom’s masculine/high culture/not-mainstream status. When a text draws attention from women “it automatically loses both credibility and cultural value” (Yodovich, 2016, p. 291). This is partially based in the assumption that women are fans “for the wrong reasons” – generally assumed to be because of attractive celebrities (Yodovich, 2016, p. 291). Women and their motivation for fandom membership are dismissed as hollow or misguided, and this is used as justification for their exclusion.

Cisgender men are framed in pop culture as being the heroes of their geek community and women cannot take on this role because they are meant to be the damsel in distress waiting to be rescued (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 26). Those who fail to toe the line and

conform to the subculture's norms are treated as a "direct attack upon all of geek culture" (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 26). Although women are often the targets of these attacks due to their visibility, the standards are also basically impossible for men to emulate. There is the prevailing message that women, especially feminists, are out to "destroy geek culture" and that it must be defended by true geeks (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 12). However, women have long composed a large percentage of the audience for geeky media – their (our) presence is nothing new (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. v). Due to the expectation that gaming is a male space, there is a threshold at which it women's participation is seen as disproportionate to men's (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 87). Women are then seen as being interlopers in these spaces and they face harassment (Cote, 2017, p. 138). Women's presence in geekdom is "policed and delineated" whilst geek masculinity often goes uncriticised (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 11). There is a struggle for nuanced identity for geek women as they are often pigeon-holed into extremes – treated as sex objects or as feminist bitches if they resist, fake geeks or fan girls (Salter & Blodgett, 2017, p. 12). There is a pathologizing of feminine fans or those who don't fit the archetypes (Scott, 2019, p. 6). Women's participation in geek spaces/community is predefined, with their positions and access reduced due to a series of power relationships (Gray, Buyukozturk, & Hill, 2017, p. 4). This can lead to women feeling pressured to conform to gendered stereotype and not transgress these norms in order to begin reshaping perceptions (Gray et al., 2017, p. 4). Gray et al. (2017, p. 4) describe the limits on women's agency as being limited to the "same supplementary positions their character counterparts are positioned in". Attempts to critique media representations of women or the lack of diversity in the industry leads to derision and dismissal. An extreme version of this response when considering the events around 'Gamergate'. Gamergate was a campaign of harassment aimed at women in the video game industry that began in August 2014. It was not an organised movement with a cohesive set of values, but it was centred around backlash against the cultural diversification and social criticism of games. Proponents of Gamergate described it as being about ethics in gamer journalism and the integrity of gamer identity. Essentially though, it was male gamers' anxiety over losing their homogenous, white, male universe that fuelled the movement (Gray et al., 2017, p. 2). The disgusting abuse and rhetoric around Gamergate can be seen as a response to gamers being "forced to accept the inclusion of women and increased diversity in game narratives" (Gray et al., 2017, p. 2). Anita Sarkeesian's project examining tropes about women in video games angered many, as a result

her personal information was published online, her safety was threatened, and a video game was even made where players could physically attack her (Cote, 2017, p. 138). Women face real world violence for being gamers, critics, or working in the industry (Gray et al., 2017, p. 1).

These issues of harassment must be considered as part of why women might be less involved in gaming and the gaming community. Their participation is curtailed by aggression and their visibility is reduced as a method of avoiding abuse. Miranda Pakodzi, a professional gamer, quit because her coach would focus her team's web-stream camera on her body and make lewd comments (Cote, 2017, p. 138). It is disgusting that a professional would have to quit her job because of sexual harassment – but women at all levels of gaming quit for similar reasons. Toxic behaviour is seen as a “part of the online gaming experience” and a “normal occurrence” (Assunção, 2016, pp. 55, 58). Identifying as a woman on voice or text chat can result on women being harassed for “encroach[ing] on a perceived male space” (Bergstrom, 2018, p. 7). Before even playing, women are often perceived as being less competent and when they are trying a game for the first time, they face insults for their lack of knowledge (Assunção, 2016, pp. 55, 58). Some games are unenjoyable or much harder if players cannot communicate with each other, and Assunção (2016) found that women will avoid online multiplayer games because of the likely abuse. Resisting abuse through logic or aggression is unlikely to work and women are left with no choices but to suffer the abuse or leave the online space (Cote, 2017, p. 140). Online, women often face sexualised insults such as “slut, whore, and cocksucker” and threats of assault (Cote, 2017, p. 138) At in-person events women often face physical harassment and inappropriate conduct. Cote (2017, p. 138) found that women were often touched or photographed without their permission. This harassment and continual disrespect of personal boundaries drives women away from gaming communities.

One way that women's choices might be limited is in the games they feel they are able to try. There is a pull towards socially acceptable behaviours, and pressure to reproduce gender stereotypes through our actions and choices (Hayes, 2007, p. 27). For example, women are pushed towards puzzle games and their enjoyment of online or competitive games is ignored (Hayes, 2007, p. 25). The “girl games” approach by the media treats gender differences in gaming as something innate and immutable rather than as something

constructed by the hegemony of play (Hayes, 2007, p. 25). Bergstrom (2018, p. 12) found that *EVE* was not seen as being a worthwhile endeavour for women because the game was so unwelcoming, they also saw it as not being “for” them. When playing games, women also face stereotypes about the roles they will take on (Hodson & Livingstone, 2017, p. 114). In cooperative games, often the only acceptable role for women is as the party healer or a similar support role (Hodson & Livingstone, 2017, p. 114). Women’s participation is curbed at every level in gaming – in industry job roles, game choice, and how they are allowed to play.

Conclusion

When interacting with D&D’s fandom, women face barriers in the form of gatekeeping. Their inclusion and position within the community is policed by those who are threatened by change in the fandom over time. As established in previous chapters, the D&D community is a massive part of enjoying the game and so by excluding women there is the potential to drive women completely away from the game. Gatekeeping is not only a mechanism for excluding women from mainstream fandom spaces, but for ensuring women remain invisible and ignored. One way to make it seem like there are no issues with D&D’s fandom is to hide and push away anyone who might have negative feedback. Having established the mechanisms of gatekeeping, the next chapter will discuss the consequences of these behaviours for women who want to play D&D.

Chapter 7 – Consequences of Gatekeeping

Introduction

Gatekeeping exists. This thesis has offered ample evidence of the diversity of player experiences, especially from a gendered perspective. Research into other areas of nerd culture, particularly video game communities, has begun to document occurrences of gatekeeping and exclusion. However, the consequences of gatekeeping are often forgotten or not realised. Recognising the impact that exclusion has on the gatekept is vital. Gatekeeping often takes more sinister or clandestine forms - from microaggressions, to mansplaining, or even the violation of personal physical boundaries. To effectively change D&D's culture and remove gatekeeping it is necessary to recognise the myriad forms it takes and the most effective way to do this is listen to women's experiences.

This chapter brings together the desirability and benefits of fandom membership, the complex relationship between D&D's history and women, and on the theories of boundaries and gatekeeping established in the previous chapter to show the impact on women's lived experiences of D&D. Sexist gatekeeping prevents or delays when women can play *Dungeons & Dragons* for the first time, or it might deter their continued presence. There are then impacts on how women feel playing games in public, their welcomeness at the game table, and their overall encounters when playing D&D or interacting with the fandom. The focuses of this chapter include barriers to play, women's experiences playing D&D in public, and incidents of feeling unwelcome when playing. The methods used by women for managing gatekeeping and making spaces comfortable for women to play D&D are also described. The findings discussed in this chapter are based on survey responses, thematic analysis of the responses, and the voices of women rather than theory or statistics. Due to this grounding in original data, this chapter is a significant original contribution to knowledge. In terms of focus, data richness, and approach, this research is unique and ground-breaking.

Preventing Play

To understand how players first come to D&D, survey participants were asked "What made you want to start playing D&D?" (Q21). Within these responses there was a significant theme of gatekeeping preventing eager players from participating. For women, there was

often a moment that sparked a desire to play but barriers that prevented immediate follow through.

I had always wanted to play, but the sheer volume of rules, and knowledge, and honestly some of the gate keeping behavior of DND purists made me balk. It was only after I turned 30, and my best friend started running his own game, itself very queer-focused, that I realized I could totally do it too. Stranger Things helped too.¹

For many years I avoided playing it due to the stigma around being that big of a nerd, but eventually I realized I am that big of a nerd/geek and just dove in because it's fun to build the connections with your friends and get to explore different sides of your personality.²

The perception that D&D is incredibly complex and the reputation of the community for gatekeeping behaviours can keep players away. If players cannot find a welcoming group or overcome those perceptions, they might never begin playing. Responses also described being left out because they were a woman or being initially allowed to play but then uninvited.

Always wanted to but was told in high school I was “too pretty to play DnD”³

At first I wanted to play because my friends liked it. But I wasn't allowed to join since I'm a woman.⁴

Friends in high school were talking about it during a MtG game and it sounded fun. One of them invited me to join, but the dm was not happy about a girl in the game. I quit after 3 sessions.⁵

I wanted to play when I was young, as my stepfather had explained what the game was to me, but he was unwilling to play at that time. I later had some unfavourable associations due to a boyfriend who didn't want to play with me as I was a girl and a "noob". Several years after this, I had a friend who had played as a teen and wanted to play again. Critical Role was making a name for itself at this time, and I liked that there were several women playing, so I wanted to give it a try.⁶

For this last participant, it took several years for them to be able to play – from their initial interest to finding a welcoming game. The group that many women expressed finally being welcome in typically involved other women or people of another identity that felt safe.

¹ 10611

² 35519

³ 42695

⁴ 16944

⁵ 15905

⁶ 42410

I wanted to play when I first heard about it, but gatekeeping/negativity prevented me from getting involved until a bunch of my friends who all felt the same way decided to just go for it⁷

My gf when I was 18 played it, but I was too nervous when she invited me. But I wanted to play and I didn't start till I was 24 and invited to join a queer group⁸

Outside of a one-player one-shot in middle school, my first game was in college; a veteran player sent out a game offer over our Shakespeare troupe's email list, and the first four folks who responded were women (which made me feel that the game might not be socially alienating as I had expected).⁹

This suggests that an important part of overcoming the gatekeeping and unwelcoming reputation is to have visible women (or other marginalised identities) present. Other women at the table who are enjoying the game and having a positive experience encourages women to participate. It lowers the perceived risk. As such, the efforts of non-inclusive fans and gatekeepers to minimise or erase women from the fandom is an effective mechanism – it is a vicious cycle for women. Fewer women seeing women participating potentially reduces the number of women who overcome the gatekeeping to participate which then decreases the number of women that can be seen participating, and so on. I do not think that women *need* to see other women to participate, there are always those who push forward regardless and are not afraid to be the first. When I started playing D&D I was the only woman who was playing, and then for a long time after I was often the only woman regularly in attendance. However, I think it makes participating easier and more comfortable when there are other women or people you know are going to help keep you safe. I played with friends – there were people I knew would have my back if there was nastiness. I also had enough support within the gaming club that I knew I could call out inappropriateness and not face exclusion or backlash. I would not attend an Adventurer's League event full of strangers if I was the only woman. Even where I worked, I would not have wanted to sit down at a table without another woman (or someone genderqueer/gender non-conforming). The risk of something being said that I was uncomfortable with was too high, and the risk feels lower when not alone

⁷ 1699

⁸ 32843

⁹ 42659

Experiences playing in Public

For women who do play in public, the experience can be very mixed. There were positives of public play described in the survey responses by people of all gender identities. I want to begin by acknowledging the possibility for an enjoyable public D&D experience. It is important to acknowledge the spectrum of potential outcomes for D&D play, for fairness and to show what players are missing when they feel unable to participate. These survey responses refer to answers to multiple questions about feeling comfortable playing in public (q10, q11) Due to the enormity and range of responses I have included the major themes from my thematic analysis but have not provided illustrative quotes for every single one.

Positives of playing in public

The themes in the responses that expressed positivity about playing in public were:

- Love it
- Great
- Good for meeting other people
- Fine
- Fine – but with caveats about the setting needing to be welcoming or the group being familiar
- Feeling comfortable with playing in public
- Enjoyable because of the presence of an audience and the energy that brings

The positives of playing seem more lacklustre when compared to the depth and detail that was in responses about negativity. That might be just the nature of survey responses because the negative experiences might be more emotive, or it might feel more important to share those times.

The sense of the community and being around other people was one of the major positives.

I feel like it is important to have a clean` safe space to play. The game store provides a sense of security that a home game often lacks. It may be harder to open up and RP at first` but after playing there consistently it becomes easier to RP and be silly. In my experience` when a game is played at

someone's home people get a little too comfortable. Bad habits and crass comments slip out more easily` making some people uncomfortable.¹⁰

Not my favorite because it can be loud and less private` hard to focus` etc. however I appreciate those spaces because it feels safer as a woman and is more accessible to many people.¹¹

I think it's exciting` as you get to meet new people` but am still wary as you might meet someone out of r/rpghorrorstories¹²

Great! Nice to have geeks all gathered together!¹³

It's fun. The more the merrier` and I'm too old to be self concious. D&D is a very inclusive game.¹⁴

It's nice because you know everyone there is nerding out with you.¹⁵

Sharing other space with fellow D&D fans and feeling included was an aspect of public play that was frequently mentioned. I can relate to that because whilst I prefer not to play in public, I do enjoy the energy of the Adventurer's League meetups. I would linger after work to chat with other players before they started, and I enjoyed when players came in early with extra time to talk. We would trade stories, they would often tell me about their latest character idea in detail, or we would talk about new dice sets. It can be pleasurable to converse with fans about a shared passion. However, this comes with the caveat that I would not *play* in that environment, only socialise. Even then, it can be incredibly overwhelming, and I have faced some sexist gatekeeping in the past.

Mixed and Neutral Experiences

There were players who kept their responses neutral, and there were also blank responses. The blank responses imply ambivalence to me, but they cannot be interpreted in any way for certain. It could have also been because the player did not want to respond even if they had a positive or negative experience. The most common response themes that I understood as mixed was that playing in public “doesn't bother them”, and also replies that were basically “Eh” and “Don't mind”. There were also responses that did not express an

¹⁰ 6726

¹¹ 35317

¹² 36514

¹³ 13665

¹⁴ 4969

¹⁵ 24487

opinion about if it is good to play in public, but instead acknowledged another aspect that was important.

These were:

- Have never done it/Never tried it
- Food is an issue
- Game length is restricted more in public places. Over four hours does not work in this location
- Harder with disabilities
- Access to play spaces hard for people who do not live in a city
- Home is more convenient for facilities
- Alcohol consumption is easier at houses
- Fine for short games like one-shots but not ongoing campaigns

Many of these are issues of accessibility – to the facility, limitations of the facility, or inability to meet the needs of the players. When I was playing D&D on the university campus, food was often an issue because the on-campus places were closed and without a car it was hard to get to and from food mid-game (and even then, it would take a fair bit of time just to get to fast food). Sometimes we also played in places like the library where we were not allowed to eat hot food (and had to be quiet). This often meant eating dinner after the game, which was late and not ideal. When I played at other people's or my house, food was often part of the social aspect of the game. We would order shared takeout and in my later groups where we were all close friends, we took it in turns to cook for each other. This was more cost effective for us because pizza every week is expensive. Game stores and community spaces are often not ideal for longer sessions due to their opening hours or booking restrictions. They also might not be very accessible for people with disability.

I prefer playing at my friends' house. Public settings are too hard to control; for example` I have a health condition that makes me sensitive to temperature changes` and if I start feeling frozen at a game store` it's not like I can adjust the thermostat or grab a blanket. [...]¹⁶

I am hearing impaired. Conventions` game stores` and the like` all have a large amount of background noise that inhibits my ability to understand what is going on. Players are not always comfortably

¹⁶ 9867

compatible in random groups` particularly those that mix younger players with mature adults. The youngsters tend to screw around for attention rather than play the game.¹⁷

It is more complicated than just being physically accessible in terms of stairs or being able to get into the space.

Uncomfortable? I never know if I'm going to be harassed or treated fairly. I feel my perceived gender is a barrier and that I can't be open about my sexuality` gender` or religion. I'm also disabled` so locations are frequently inaccessible to me because of long drives or uncomfortable seats.¹⁸

Being accessible can be about controlling noise levels, temperature, having comfortable chairs for prolonged periods of sitting, sufficient lighting, and many other considerations. Adventurer's League sessions or shared spaces for D&D can get incredibly loud which is not suitable for many players.

Negative Experiences

There were issues of accessibility noted in a neutral way that were also mentioned in a negative tone or elaborated on to give harmful details. I noticed that the existence of an audience, which could be positive for respondents, also came up as a major downside to playing in public. It shows that players seek and enjoy different things from their D&D play experiences.

Negative themes:

- Do not like it
- Issues with visibility/ strangers seeing the game and not knowing what is going on
- Can be intimidating/make people nervous to play in public
- Dislike being watched by strangers or audience
- Players are too loud for public places
- Issues with the space being too loud to keep players engaged
- Hard with anxiety
- Awkward
- Swearing can be inappropriate in public spaces

¹⁷ 8187

¹⁸ 1657

Chapter 7 – Consequences of Gatekeeping

- Can be rude if an appropriate space is not chosen – where the game is being hosted matters – for example, a public space like a restaurant versus a dedicated space like a community centre
- Where – the location matters. Dedicated spaces are more readily accepted than libraries or cafes
- Music is a thing that people like to incorporate into their game, but it does not work in public spaces
- Public spaces can be smelly

There is still some stigma around playing D&D in general, because although it has hit more mainstream popularity in the last five years, it has a long history of negative association with nerdy stereotypes.

Due to the stigma surrounding D&D it can be embarrassing and also in all honesty some guys can be either very gatekeepery or creepy when they see girls playing.¹⁹

Playing in public is intimidating because of the potential for strangers who do not play D&D to see what is happening and criticise, and because of the other players. When playing in private with friends there is a trust that any feedback will be good natured, but strangers can be unkind or insensitive in their approach.

A little nervous` because I'm a very casual player and I don't know very much about the nitty gritty details. Nerds are mean.²⁰

I have never done so` but I imagine I would feel a bit uncomfortable. I have been playing for years now` but I am not 100% confident in my rules knowledge compared to my friends who regularly DM and optimize all their character builds. I would be afraid of looking like a 'noob' in front of other people.²¹

I'm really not a fan because there's a feeling of being judged for every decision (probably because I'm a woman tbh)²²

no thanks!! as a small` very feminine woman i'm literally always terrified someone will say something mean or harass me.²³

¹⁹ 9999

²⁰ 18874

²¹ 26483

²² 32143

²³ 32719

Fear of stranger's behaviour was a particularly strong theme for women players, who frequently expressed avoiding playing in public to avoid harassment.

I prefer to play in private. As a female player` I tend to get a lot of unwelcome attention in public gaming spaces.²⁴

It depends on the venue. Some venues can be pretty great` but some game stores and most conventions bring out the creeps and sexists.²⁵

I am cautious about public settings. As a woman in the hobby` you have to be vigilant. In maybe 1/3 the public games have played` I have run into sexist or creepy players. And...some players lack in hygiene and basic manners. I am much more comfortable playing in public setting if 1) The GM and or one of the players is another woman 2) The establishment has a good reputation 3) The GM can be trusted to deal with misbehaving plays.²⁶

As a woman` I typically don't play in public. Too many creeps.²⁷

As a conventionally attractive AFAB` I avoid game stores and public DND at all costs. I have had bad luck being bullied` with gatekeepers` and with really creepy guys.²⁸

I am hyper aware of being female` that my actions may come under scrutiny (eg not a 'real' gamer because I don't know exactly what every other player's abilities are just by knowing what class they are). I feel pressure to play really well and not make mistakes` so that I am not advancing any stereotypes about women and gaming.²⁹

[...] The game stores in my area are all notoriously unfriendly towards non male players and customers. I have to drive over an hour to reach a gaming store that's more welcoming` which is not doable for me. Just overall not any good experiences with D&D in public settings.³⁰

Absolutely not. As a female player I do not need to endure the type of harassment that I would get when playing at a public venue.³¹

²⁴ 43681

²⁵ 10578

²⁶ 32209

²⁷ 19378

²⁸ 10771

²⁹ 2159

³⁰ 10440

³¹ 21383

I wouldn't feel comfortable due to being a female of my age. Too many horror stories of exclusion and boundary pushing sexual assault scenarios.³²

This is just a tiny fraction of the responses that women gave about being unwilling to play in public. The risk of sexual harassment, bullying, and gatekeeping due to sexism are too high. This contributes to the lack of women playing in gaming stores and at conventions that is often cited by sexist gatekeepers as proof that women do not play D&D or participate in fandom. When I used to play D&D in non-home settings, I was careful about how I dressed. I tried to dress to modestly so I would be taken seriously. This sometimes meant being uncomfortably warm in summer – physical discomfort was chosen to avoid psychological discomfort. Back then I would not have said I did this because I was worried about being objectified or sexual harassment, but I can recognise it as such now. I changed the way I dressed to avoid eliciting inappropriate behaviours and comments from the men around me.

There were uncomfortable responses that were given in response to this question, and I categorised them under the heading “creepiness”. It might not be the most academic term, but it was the best way I could think of describing these reasons that women avoided playing in public.

last time i played at a convention with strangers` one of the guys was a super creep and really soured the whole experience for me. the DM shut him down pretty well` but it was still scummy.³³

I've done it once and felt a little weird about it. We were at a board game café (my suggestion)` and I felt like we were being too loud. On the other hand` for this first group I was with` I was messaged by the male DM and asked if I would like to join` and I wouldn't have been comfortable meeting him in his home` as he was a complete stranger. Especially since it turned out that the reason he invited me to join his campaign was because he saw my Facebook profile and thought I was attractive and was hoping to get to know me better through the game. There wasn't really an ideal option for me in terms of maximizing safety and comfort.³⁴

³² 13468

³³ 38079

³⁴ 41385

No` I tried in a game store once` I was made incredibly uncomfortable the entire time and could not connect with my character as many others tended to make in game sexual advances` instead of engaging with the world. [...]³⁵

[...] I am also very wary of men who I don't know yet. Eg) I always watch my drink at the AL game so I can be sure nobody tampers with it [...].³⁶

[...] I have heard too many horror stories from other female players about walking in to a public game and having their character or even themselves be harassed by the male DM/other players she just met.³⁷

[...] I'm hesitant to play with strangers` simply because a lot of them are men` and men can sometimes use role play as an opportunity to act out their aggressions on women in a way that they can't be penalized for` as they would be if they did so in real life. [...]³⁸

There are more explicitly disgusting behaviours detailed later in the chapter, but I felt it was important to acknowledge that women often feel incredibly unsafe playing in public. It is horrifying to feel that a need to watch your drink whilst playing D&D.

It is unfortunate that gaming stores, which often exist as dedicated fan spaces, often cannot (or do not) provide a safe space for women to play D&D.

As a woman` it makes me nervous. I've tried playing at gaming stores` but I've been harassed by men.³⁹

I don't play d and d at game stores and actively avoid going to events at them. Previously when I've gone people have made rape jokes which are very inappropriate!⁴⁰

I've played in game stores before` but I find it really intimidating and often times not fun. I live in an incredibly progressive and liberal city` but even then` Adventurer's League at my local game shop was a ratio of about 20 men to 1 woman. Content often felt a little more "murder hobo" and at times made me downright uncomfortable. [...]⁴¹

³⁵ 19909

³⁶ 23267

³⁷ 40358

³⁸ 20297

³⁹ 19330

⁴⁰ 5023

⁴¹ 36693

To mitigate potential issues, there was a strong theme of preferring to carefully select the other players rather than relying on the decency of strangers.

I have never done that and would honestly feel a bit of stage fright playing with strangers as I trust my group a lot and know their play styles and that they won't intentionally do anything in or out of character to hurt me.⁴²

Uncomfortable` because being paired with strangers could easily go bad` especially for women.

Playing with familiar people in a public setting would probably be fine.⁴³

I usually find that public settings fail to exclude problematic` sexist players.⁴⁴

As revealed in the survey, this has long been my approach and I would be reluctant to play with people I had never met before (unless they had been vouched for by someone I trusted). By deciding on players in advance, there is the ability to ensure the table dynamic and game content will be acceptable.

Never tried but would be anxious about joining a group of strangers without being very clear about things like content of the game in terms of sexual violence` etc.⁴⁵

Never done` hesitant due to not knowing the tone or expectation of other players (would be worried about players saying or doing things which unintentionally or intentionally making me uncomfortable)⁴⁶

I generally only go to such games with my girlfriend. Games in these settings tend not to have consistent group dynamics` which makes it hard for me to stay interested in the narrative. Also` there isnt a great system to avoid playing with people who make you uncomfortable in these settings` short of just leaving.⁴⁷

This goes beyond negotiating what module to play or any house rules, women players have an extra layer of consideration when choosing their group. They must make sure they are not going to face sexual harassment and explicit content that might make them feel uncomfortable. It makes playing in public more work than it might be worth, which is a shame.

⁴² 32268

⁴³ 36872

⁴⁴ 38126

⁴⁵ 25432

⁴⁶ 614

⁴⁷ 35169

Experiences of feeling unwelcome when playing D&D

The themes of hesitancy and reluctance expressed about playing in public that ran through women's responses to question 10 were then supported in the answers to question 12. The survey asked "Have you felt unwelcome when trying to play D&D? Please describe your experience". In the replies to this question, a percentage of the sexism, unwelcomeness, explicit sexual content, exclusion, and gross behaviour that women have experienced are exposed.

Sexism

Yes I have. I was watching Critical Role play during a stream and I was wondering why some of the people typing in the chat were telling Marisha to "shut up" whenever she was speaking. It made me feel uncomfortable as I was a new player.⁴⁸

Seeing the treatment of a prominent woman D&D player, Marisha Ray, by the audience made this woman feel uncomfortable. There were responses explaining how the women in podcasts like *Critical Role* helped inexperienced players feel confident approaching the table. However, this example it had the opposite effect. When women see how other women are treated in fandom and geek culture, it can cause apprehension and reduce desire to participate. I personally have overheard men saying things that support Gamergate or that were negative about women who game, and it made me feel uncomfortable to interact with them. Offhand comments like "oh, girls love playing druids and turning into cute animals. It's so boring and predictable" discouraged me from talking about the druid that I played.

I don't think unwelcome is quite the word but one of my groups is 1/2 men who have quite a lot of experience playing d&d (decades) while the women/nb have much less. The men typically speak more, talk over the rest of the group and give more weight to the opinions and wants of the other men. I also play in another group that is all women and it's a wildly different experience. In the mixed group it often feels like a struggle to be heard and in the all women group there's much more consideration given to the group as a whole.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ 42775

⁴⁹ 2561

Being spoken over was a common complaint – and one that has driven me to stop playing with groups in the past.

Hahah oh hell yeah, I'm a girl and I've been playing since I was 12. I have been told multiple times that I can't craft stories well as a DM, firstly. Always by males, and mostly when I've done something feminist in my campaigns. I was also once subjected to a player who always was making sexually aggressive comments and actions while we're both PCs together, and who got mad when I told him that a rape joke wasn't funny. My mostly male group did not agree and it turned into a huge fight and I stopped playing with that group. I've also straight up just been told many times that I don't know what I'm talking about, that "girls don't play as well" by a college friend, or it's been assumed I don't at game shops, and even told to my face that girls don't belong in D&D, all by men. That last one is especially galling, because he'd been playing for about 10 fewer years than I had.⁵⁰

Another theme was the assumption that if a player is a girl or woman, they cannot be as good at D&D. That assertion is tied to gatekeeping, where women must prove themselves to be more knowledgeable to be taken seriously than men would.

Mansplaining

Whilst it is difficult to track or confirm, my research reveals a relationship between men interacting with other genders and the prevalence of mansplaining. Mansplaining has become an increasingly visible example of sexism in all sorts of social settings. I was in a women's studies class once and had one of the students (who said they identified as a man, so I am not making assumptions) mansplain catcalling and why it makes women uncomfortable. He interrupted the flow of the discussion where students shared their experiences to make sure they knew *just how bad catcalling is*. Did he have a story of when he had been catcalled? No. He just assumed he knew more about it than a group of women who had been catcalled. This behaviour occurs in the D&D fandom where men feel that they need to explain the rules to the women trying to play the game – and not in that helpful, mentoring way, but a condescending manner. There is nothing wrong with players helping each other with rules and that collaboration is something I enjoy, but it often crosses boundaries into mansplaining and sexism,

⁵⁰ 7452

[...] I wanted to get involved in an RPG at a local game shop but was subjected to such mansplaining and toxic masculinity that I quit. The players kept explaining rules to me when I was fully aware of the rules. But they explained in a condescending manner like repeatedly telling me which die was which or offering to help me add my bonus points. [...]⁵¹

[...] I've even heard the occasional patronizing comment "Here, sweetheart, you look lost, want me to show you? You take this big die here, with the 20 numbers on it, and you roll it and then add the number to this number listed here..."⁵²

Yes. A lot of times at cons I get mansplained to - I've been playing for 10 years, but there's always an assumption that I'm a noob. And early on, my typical group of gamer friends had a habit of talking to girls' boyfriends about their characters rather than talking directly to the women.⁵³

We have a mansplainer/he-peater in our group that likes to talk over others and self-insert into other interactions. I feel like I have to placate him in order to remain in the group.⁵⁴

When I was working at the gaming store during the early years of this thesis, I often had men explain D&D to me or basic rules so they could tell me stories. I would try to interject to let them know that I was *very* familiar with the game or that "yep, I have played a druid before" but once they started there was often no stopping them. Even if I did manage to interrupt, it was often brushed off and the 'education' resumed. The final response used the term "he-peater", something I had not heard before. It describes perfectly one of the most annoying sexist mechanisms I have had play out during D&D – where men steal my ideas and then get the credit. There was one group where I finally snapped and pointed it out because I was so fed up with having fantastic ideas, everyone ignoring them or dismissing them, the discussion then going on... until someone repeated my idea as their own. It really made me feel like I might as well not be at the table. In my experience it has always been a gendered occurrence, with men not tending to try it on each other. Mansplaining, he-peating, and the barrage of sexist condescension drives women away from the table – especially those in public where they can be seen and interacted with. It moves women towards private groups if they can find them.

⁵¹ 43901

⁵² 2262

⁵³ 26100

⁵⁴ 37691

Exclusion

Joining a private group is not always as straightforward as asking friends to join, because they might have zero interest or availability. That means it is necessary to put feelers out to find a suitable group or players.

At the beginning of uni I met a classmate who also had a passion for critical role. I told him about how my dream was to get a group and play - the next day I found out he had created a group of only boys (some who didn't even rly care about dnd) and wouldn't let me join because they were now "too many"⁵⁵

Yes. When I first heard about D&D I was living in a small town, and I could only find two groups that played. Both groups were made up entirely of boys, and though one of the groups just said "no", the other group said "we don't want you in our group because you're a girl". This lead to me playing my first session when I was 30 instead of 15.⁵⁶

Simply finding a group of players, or someone interested does not mean the individual will be allowed to play with them. Which can be fine, because it is a social experience and private groups exist to be selective. However, being rejected solely "because you are a girl" is sexist and it sucks.

[...] One DM would bend over backwards to accommodate the work schedules of all the males in the group, but ignore the work schedules of the women. [...]⁵⁷

This last response resonated with me because it reeks of reluctant acceptance or a constructive dismissal. Women are allowed at the table, but the bare minimum is done (or maybe is not done) to make sure they feel comfortable and can continue to be present. Then when women leave, the other players do not have to face their sexism as a factor. After all, they *said* the person could play.

Whilst reading the "No" answers to question 12 I noticed an interesting contradictory tendency within the responses. Some responses would say that they never felt unwelcome, but then described experiences that to me seemed uncomfortable or unusual.

⁵⁵ 33960

⁵⁶ 3732

⁵⁷ 40261

Nope. I was at a game store once in the early '80s and was asked if I was lost. When I said I was looking for a new module they looked at me like I was an anomaly, but I didn't fit the stereotype of an acne-infested, pot-smoking, basement dwelling teen-aged boy. I was in my early 20s and female. It was quite a shock to the store people, but they got over it when I started spending money.⁵⁸

Being looked at like an 'anomaly' would not make me feel welcome, and in fact was a reason that I did return to one of my local game stores. I had asked about D&D books and then waved in their general direction whilst I was still trying to ask a question. I felt hyper-visible. I do not want to have to spend money to be reluctantly accepted.

Never unwelcomed, but I played one game where I was the only woman and it felt like I had to mom the group all the time to keep them on track and to stop them from doing 10-30 minute pee/poop/sex jokes. Most of my games are also streamed, so there is some apprehension on how chat will react to things I do, but very often was it comments that made me straight up uncomfortable.⁵⁹

This response highlights the difference between being unwelcome and being uncomfortable. This player does not describe being unwelcome to the game but outlines the emotional or social work they had to do to keep the game comfortable. If I had to constantly keep being "mom" and shutting down humour that made me uncomfortable, I think I would feel unwelcome. I thought making someone feel welcome involved making sure your behaviour did not make them feel uncomfortable. It is an interesting insight into the complexity of feeling welcome and comfortable at a D&D table as a woman.

Highly Visible Bodies

From the responses, the D&D fandom has some issues behaving around breasts. There is the stereotype of bumbling male nerds who do not know how to behave around women's bodies, the anime characters who get nosebleeds when they see attractive women, plus the general objectification of women in comic books, video games, and the media of nerd culture. These inappropriate reactions to women's body and accompanying disgusting behaviours are often present at the D&D table.

⁵⁸ 3727

⁵⁹ 38136

I have felt uncomfortable and stopped playing a game due to the aforementioned 'she breastly breasted the door open with her breasts' DM. I would describe it as uncomfortable and boring.⁶⁰

When I tried to play a man before I was out as genderqueer I had problems with the DM not being able to keep the pronouns straight because "[her] boobs are *right there*", I tried to play a genderfluid Changeling and was told it was too confusing and I was causing problems for the group somehow just by existing. I'm also disabled and sometimes I have to stretch so I don't get too stiff and being singled out in the middle of session when I'm quietly trying to stretch at the back and not disturb anyone to have the DM stop everything and comment on how my back must hurt, every single time I have to stretch. It made me feel like an unwelcome spectacle.⁶¹

Oh boy yes. I have had fellow (male) players brazenly stare at my breasts for the entirety of sessions (I'm ~5 foot, so there's a very noticeable difference between looking at my face and my breasts which are barely above the table), then get told by the (male) dm and other (male) players to suck it up and that if I hated it so much, leave. [...]⁶²

[...] I've been told I should display my chest more to reward the guys for letting me play. [...]⁶³

Just by being physically present at the table and having breasts, players are singled out and made to feel uncomfortable. The responsibility for addressing this then falls to the victims rather than the perpetrators. There was a theme of “don’t like it? Then leave” in the responses. I can understand putting up with it, I know I have played at tables or in spaces where I felt as though I needed to disguise my body to avoid harassment. If choice is to not get to play D&D or put up with some discomfort here and there, the temptation can be to just stick it out. Especially if it unlikely the treatment would be better somewhere else – sometimes it is better the devil you know. It could be worse... right?

Rape and Sexual Assault

TW/CW: This section discusses the inclusion of rape and sexual assault in D&D games. The content is not explicit and descriptive, but it still might be disturbing. Women’s experiences of sexual harassment and assault linked to D&D games are also mentioned.

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⁶² 4005

⁶³ 19094

One of the major themes in making women feel unwelcome at the D&D table was the inclusion of rape, sexual assault, and unwanted sexual content in the story. This shocked me. I know these often themes in other games that have a 'grittier' reputation⁶⁴, but D&D is marketed as a fairly PG gaming system. I feel fortunate that this is not something I have faced at the D&D table. Yet it is a grotesque behaviour. My gratitude at not experiencing it does not minimize its seriousness. Rape 'jokes' were a common reason that women offered for feeling uncomfortable at the D&D table.

I first time I tried to play there was a man in the group who kept making rape and other really inappropriate jokes, despite the fact that we'd literally just met. After 2 sessions I just stopped going.⁶⁵

A convention game, where a lot of old-guard style male D&D players were talking about rape and laughing. I didn't feel comfortable speaking up because I was isolated and much younger.⁶⁶

A few years ago I went looking for new groups since my current groups had become inactive. One particular group was run by a man in his 50's who laughed as he told stories about inflicting sexual violence on player characters, especially women. I never went back. That was a terrible red flag.⁶⁷

Extended rape jokes and sensationalised violence against women have come up multiple times in games I've played with majority cis male groups, and I wanted to ask to divert from it each time, but I was relatively new to playing and the environments I was playing in and the idea of topics people didn't want to touch on or pausing play to talk hadn't been brought up.⁶⁸

The treatment of rape as a joke or humorous element in a story is extremely alienating for women (and many people of all genders). It can be seen as a way of feeling out how other players feel about rape, sexual assault, and women for those who think that it is okay. When other players laugh or remain silent it is a form of endorsement for the story/joke-teller and their feelings about rape.

The rape of NPC's (non-player characters) was used as a plot point in some campaigns or another social avenue for interaction.

⁶⁴ In terms of tabletop RPG, the games published by *White Wolf* like *Vampire: The Masquerade*, and *Werewolf* have a reputation for 'adult' content. Nordic LARP does include R-rated content and non-consensual sexual activities.

⁶⁵ 10593

⁶⁶ 42083

⁶⁷ 15808

⁶⁸ 35666

[...] At a con, I played with a table that decided they wanted to drug and serially rape an NPC in an attempt to get information out of her. The DM had no idea how to redirect and was not confident enough to just stop game. So while they discussed the details of who got to go when, ect. *shudder* I quietly let our prisoner free, got the info we needed, and helped her escape without the others noticing. [...]⁶⁹

The use of rape as an interrogation technique on NPC women was mentioned frequently.

Yes. In a con game another Player who I did not know decided at the end of a fight that raping the unconscious female PCs & NPCs was 'what his character would do'. The GM and rest of the boys at the table were fine with this. My objection was overruled and I left the table. [...]⁷⁰

The use of character motivation as an excuse for this behaviour was common, but it seems a very strange excuse. Who chooses to play a rapist? That would make me feel uncomfortable around the player, and anyone who actively or passively supported that decision. The idea of rape as a 'normal' element in fantasy was cited as common justification for this disgusting behaviour.

Only in online forums about the game. I see a lot of men say things like "women are trying to make D&D too politically correct! Rape/Sexual assault/murder of women are something common in fantasy settings and I shouldnt have to cater to them being tRiGgErEd by it!" Which is gross and makes me feel very unsafe and wary of looking for other groups.⁷¹

I am sure there are lots of fantasy novels that use sexual violence as a plot point – but that does not make it okay.

Absolutely. I don't/won't play with men I don't know anymore. I got tired of having my female characters raped "for the sake of the plot".⁷²

D&D gives players control over your setting, and lots of people make modifications to suit their ideas (homebrew is massive) so why would anyone feel it necessary to include rape for 'accuracy'?

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⁷⁰ 17843

⁷¹ 31457

⁷² 11511

When you can make an entire universe or an thing you'd like, and people choose rape? It's truly terrifying to be in a room with them- I worry about my own real personal safety.⁷³

[...] I would say avoid clearly sexualized games. Met a man once whose gaming world worked such that if you wanted to use any magic, you had to be naked. Even moving through the world was harder if you wore clothes... That was a big turn-off and I don't think I would have gamed with him.⁷⁴

For the player who shared these experiences, it typically made them feel unsafe in the community because the opinion seemed so common.

Not since my very first experience at a small game store, the DM there was super toxic. We had been enjoying a fairly normal campaign, until we had two players leave. The DM wrote out the male's PC by just having him find a way back to his home plane. The woman's PC was abducted, and when the party mounted a rescue, walked in on her being tortured and raped to death. Then the necromancer (the DM's bff) raised the PC as a walking necrotic bomb. That was the last time I played with that group.⁷⁵

This response is an example of the toxic sexism that women can face at the table and how rape is used as a punishment. The male PC (that become an NPC) was left unscathed and free to return home, but the woman's PC/NPC was tortured and raped to death. Both players left – but only the woman's character was punished by the DM.

I have had a Dungeon Master that would regularly act out violent or sexually aggressive issues on players in the group i.e. rape, sodomy, etc. I did not play in that group that long, and actively avoided playing with that particular Dungeon Master again.⁷⁶

The sense that the DM or players were acting out their own issues through the inclusion of rape and sexual assault in games was another common theme.

I'm sure it's fine — I haven't done it myself yet because i don't trust strangers to be welcoming and not weird. I hear horror stories about people playing out weird rape fantasies and owning slaves and other weird story elements I don't want to be a part of.⁷⁷

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I cannot imagine the discomfort (and fear) that is caused when a player might have thought was okay, starts acting out rape fantasies at the D&D table. It would make me feel deeply unsafe around that person and anyone who condoned the behaviour.

Characters are the player's avatar in the game – like your personal projection into the story. Players can become overly attached to their characters; crying when they die, cosplaying as them, and creating fan art. I can speak to this attachment – I have been known to get very anxious about my character in sticky situations. There can be a real emotional investment in their success that I think would surprise non-players. So, to have your character raped or assaulted... that is disturbing in a way that is hard to describe.

[...] I have had my characters raped and/or murdered while I've been away for a session. [...] ⁷⁸

(tw for rape/incest/pedophilia!) I once joined a campaign via request of a loose acquaintance. They refused to give me details about the campaign of any kind (red flag number one) so I used a fairly indestructible sweetheart character, very young and naive. This campaign was about our characters being abducted into a closed off town to become sex slaves. Not something ANY of us were told about. ⁷⁹

A misogynistic GM made me quit a game: he ruled that my characters high charisma meant she was raped while sleeping in a bunkhouse. ⁸⁰

I once had a DM who had our party captured and as I was the only female playing a female character (there was a male playing a female character) mine ended up being the one that was picked to be trained as a sex slave. While I did say I wasn't comfortable with this scenario, I was pretty much ignored, so my character went full ninja, killed all the guards and burnt the camp to the ground, and then ran away never to be heard from again. I stopped playing with that group after that session. ⁸¹

Women described their characters being raped if they missed a session and were not there to stop the DM (or try to).

I once had a male player role stealth to sneak into my character's sleeping bag and the DM allowed it. That wasn't fun ⁸²

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Dungeon Masters were not the only perpetrators of sexual violence, there were also instances of women having their characters raped by the characters of other players. There is something incredibly disturbing about a player wanting to roleplay the rape of someone else's character. It is weirdly personal and invasive. I would not feel safe around anyone who tried to rape or sexually assault my character. There would be a sense of transference – that they were acting out desires they had for real life.

Additionally, women shared their experiences of this sexual harassment and violence going beyond the game and into real life. (Though I question how clear a distinction this truly is.)

[...] A had another DM who would give my character things for no reason in-game. Another DM who used DMing to aggressively flirt with me. Let's not forget the guy who sent me a dick pic whilst we were playing.⁸³

I have been called fake and even have a guy say sexual comments to me and grabbed my breasts.⁸⁴

[...] I have also been stalked home by someone after a session attempting to get my phone number.⁸⁵

The dm of one of my games shared a tragic event where his son committed suicide because he played d&d. Then he tried to finger me.⁸⁶

The very first group I joined, I was 18, and a 32 year old man would sit beside and too close to me. I would change seats, and he would follow. I started setting up a physical barrier with my gaming binder. A few months in to gaming he asked me out over Facebook, and I politely turned him down. He lashed out, calling me names and ungrateful, and that I wasn't even a good catch, and that any woman would gladly have him. I ignored him, but continued to play with the group (all males besides myself aged 17-35). A few weeks went by and he asked me out again over Facebook. This pattern of asking out and turning down repeated 3 more times. [...] ⁸⁷

I used too. I was "too girly" or talked down to a lot. Being a girl in the gaming industry in the 90s was awful. I've had people actively try to ruin my life for not wanting them to touch me during a game. I've

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⁸⁵ 29287

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had guys tell me the only reason I am in a game is because guys want to sleep with me- because "men are only friends with women they want to fuck"⁸⁸

Stalking and out-of-game inappropriate contact were often described by women as behaviours that made them feel uncomfortable. From reading these responses there is a sense that women are at risk when they play D&D – that there is a chance that simply because of wanting to play a game they are vulnerable to sexual predators. It seems incredibly disturbing and confronting for players to need to weigh the risk of sexual harassment against the benefits of playing D&D. The decision to remain hidden, covert, and safer contributes to the underrepresentation of women in D&D's public fandom.

Managing Gatekeeping and Exclusion

Despite the likelihood of negative experiences, women persist in their efforts to play D&D, interact with fandom, and be part of the community. I wanted to end this chapter, and this thesis, with an investigation of how women manage and moderate their interactions with/around D&D. The breadth of the survey responses has given this research an unequalled opportunity to produce knowledge around how women claim space or withstand exclusion.

I turned to video game studies to form the base theory of managing exclusion and gatekeeping. The communities have similar issues in terms of toxic sexism and share similar demographics. Cote (2017) found five main strategies that women use when playing online games, and these are used contextually and as appropriate. They are: "leaving online gaming, avoiding playing with strangers, camouflaging their gender, deploying their skill and experience, or adopting an aggressive persona" (Cote, 2017, p. 137). Emphasising skill and experience was often successful but it was difficult to acquire and maintain the required skill level to use this strategy consistently (Cote, 2017, p. 147). It is a strategy that inexperienced players do not have access to until they have played the game enough to have a high skill level so there are serious limitations there too. Being aggressive allowed participants to show they could take insults and dish them out, this sometimes earned them enough respect that the harassment became more banter or they gained allies against the harasser (Cote, 2017, p. 147). Having to participate in a toxic situation to "earn respect" would not be desirable for

⁸⁸ 16244

many women. Cote (2017) mentions two other strategies that participants mentioned but did not like to use – flirting and relying on male allies. Flirting to “win over” male players was seen as uncomfortable and was “looked down on” (Cote, 2017, p. 148). Male allies were relied on more for in-person events even though interviewees found that playing with male friends may have decreased in-game harassment (Cote, 2017, p. 148). These strategies are an exhausting and unfair burden that women face to play online games and participate in geek spaces. Bad behaviour is not something that should be managed by victims but addressed at the level of the perpetrator. By requiring women to take control “it suggests a tacit acceptance of gender norms that assume women are the gatekeepers of sexual activity, and men cannot control their own sexual urges” (Hodson & Livingstone, 2017, p. 115). I did not find that these lined up with the responses that I got in the survey. There are elements of these strategies integrated in how spaces and women help other women feel comfortable playing. Future research that focuses specifically on tabletop gaming communities that builds from the insights in this chapter would be beneficial.

Thematic Analysis Regarding Comfort Whilst Playing

This component of the doctorate research summons an analysis of Q11: Does where you play D&D do anything to make women feel more comfortable? Please describe what they do/do not do. The wording of the themes from when I initially coded the results have been preserved. These themes are followed by a discussion and survey responses that further illustrate the issues.

- Dm's asking about boundaries
- No need, women treated as equals
- Prefer to just play in private to avoid needing it
- Choosing to play games with majority not-men
- Use of X-cards or pre-established no-go lists
- Gravitating towards women DM's
- Only playing in public at first until they feel safe in an environment
- Playing with friends so there's trust
- Women seen/treated as "one of the guys"
- WHO matters more than WHERE

Chapter 7 – Consequences of Gatekeeping

- Private residence or only with friends so therefore n/a - "it's my house"
- Playing online to feel safe
- Play in own home so feel comfortable controlling who is there (Might be why women are less visible as players)
- Creation of worlds where uncomfortable material is avoided, e.g., sexism, racism, transphobia
- Playing as a group of couples stops weirdness
- Women owner or co-owner of game store - stores with woman/diverse employees mentioned as a positive
- Women majority players preferred
- Knowing the owner of the public space/store helps comfort
- Sanitary bins & clean bathrooms
- Women in leadership roles
- being online makes it unnecessary somehow to make women feel comfortable
- some men acknowledged that they could not say

As with many social issues, the burden of resisting gatekeeping seems to have fallen to the individual player rather than the community. Although, we do see collective discussion of sexism in gaming it seems that at a practical level, women are still individually changing their behaviours (hopefully this will change, and responsibility will shift from victims to the perpetrators).

No. I am consistently expected to Just Deal With It (with 'it' being anything the male players do, including being uncomfortably raunchy).⁸⁹

Dnd is probably the worst game to play as a woman if you're in a group of guys. Its really hard to be treated as equal. I'm non binary but usually female presenting, and I don't get taken seriously. I play at home now with my boyfriend as the DM, and it helps because I'm his, so to speak. The boys will take him telling them to stop more seriously than if I said to stop. [...]⁹⁰

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⁹⁰ 9957

The tendency toward collective protest is linked to the permeability of group boundaries – if there is “the perception that even a token few deprived group members could join a more privileged group” then collective action is unlikely and instead “individual forms of remedial action” are favoured (Brown, 2000, p. 750).

The games store has some inclusivity posters up on the walls and say that they'll kick people out for being offensive to any group. In my experience they haven't lived up to that ideal though.⁹¹

Within the D&D fandom, there is the ability for certain women to climb the social hierarchy and gain respect from the men fans around them.

As the only gal playing, being treated as one of the guys is appreciated.⁹²

There are prominent women that are emerging from paratexts like *Critical Role* and other streamed games. I believe that this undermines the likelihood of collective action and pushes towards individual solutions. These women are often used as examples of inclusivity and acceptance to dismiss other women's claims of exclusion.

There were responses that claimed that it was unnecessary for locations to do anything to make women more comfortable to play D&D there.

Being a woman myself, I am kinda lucky with my group. I also am not particullary hyper sensitive about " dick jokes" and so on. ⁹³

Since I'm a woman, it really doesn't apply to me, but I played with all guys and it really didn't make a difference to me because I'm not a little snowflake crybaby and could hold my own against them⁹⁴

[...] Im not super sensitive, like youd have to try real hard to offend me so i guess that helps that the 10 pervy men i play with got nothing on me. You couldnt offend or "sexually harass" me even if u tried. My " rehotirical penis" got nothing on their actual penises. Does this even answer the question.⁹⁵

That is such an offensive question to all people who identify as women. As if we are all the same, and all want or need the same thing, and as if we are super sensitive fragile flowers whom normal people

⁹¹ 13425

⁹² 42024

⁹³ 1271

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need to pander to. The question is probably well-meaning, but please examine your own sexist preconceptions, and try to view people as individuals, not as members or populations.⁹⁶

I am a woman and I have all male dnd friends. When I first joined them they were wary of making me feel uncomfortable but now, years later, anything goes and I love that I'm "one of the guys". I did have one female friend years ago who played and she was a little delicate so we all toned down our talk and watched what we said around her.⁹⁷

Evidence arose of individualizing blame on a player's sensitivity level if they had an issue – which links to the theme of "put up with it or leave" that emerged in the last section. By reducing it to individuals being oversensitive, it obscures the bigger issues of systemic sexism in D&D's fandom. It then becomes a case of people needing to be "tougher", rather than the offenders changing their behaviour.

I mean, it's my house, so I'm comfortable already. But nowhere should be pressured to make women feel comfortable. Doing that destroys everything. Stop coddling them. We can play or not but it's not about us, dearie.⁹⁸

doesn't really matter. for the most part it has to do with people. A group shouldn't bend over backward to kiss the ass of someone because they have a vagina. There shouldn't be special accommodation to make a woman feel comfortable outside of treating her the way other group members are treated.⁹⁹

Ensuring that women are not sexually harassed and feel safe playing D&D does not seem like coddling to me. It is not about women being treated as 'special' but making sure that all players are treated with respect – not just the men.

Despite the myriad issues with public spaces, they can be an important facilitator of play for women. A public space like a game store or a library is still likely to be safer than the home of a stranger.

I believe starting in public (but maybe a private game room) makes a lot of people, but especially women, feel more comfortable when playing d&d with new people. Meeting in a public place is a safety practice that women have been repeatedly encouraged to employ. Additionally, without LGS games,

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especially AL, I would not have felt comfortable and would not have started playing this game I love so much (D&D).¹⁰⁰

Not that I've seen. My first DND group was with a group of strangers who all knew the DM, and when I got there I realized I was the only woman. I ended up telling my friend about the address and that if I don't text her at a certain time then to call me. Additionally, all the DND campaigns I have played in avoided in-game sexism entirely (i.e., no specifically lewd female characters, no specific/unequal violence against women)¹⁰¹

I am a woman and I've been invited to a coworker's house to play D&D, but refused because he was much older than me and I didn't know him well. If I was man or we were meeting in public or online, I would have probably accepted.¹⁰²

If women do not feel like they are welcome to use the public spaces and join the games there, then there is the potential they will feel pressure to play in people's homes that might not be as safe. If the games that I played in through the university club had been at people's homes rather than the library, I am sure I would have gone to peoples' houses. As a young woman I felt a false sense of security because the people were friends of friends of friends, and so they could not possibly hurt me... (Which is ridiculous logic) I was so desperate to play, to meet people, to be part of the club that I would have made the risk/benefit calculation in favour of going to strangers' homes. The D&D community needs to make sure these fandom/play spaces are welcoming and safe for women so do not feel the need to take risks.

Part of making sure that the table space is safe, and welcoming, is choosing a good group of people to play with. Now, this is not always straightforward because someone might not become a problem until after play has commenced. Then uninviting them can be incredibly awkward, socially tricky to navigate, and almost impossible if you want to preserve a friendship. I have friends that I love dearly but hate playing D&D with. Getting out of those games was difficult but possible because I knew I would not face potentially dangerous backlash.

As a woman, I have to pay attention to the people I game with. I have stopped playing with people because they were misogynistic, racist, homophobic, or acted like assh*les. My current group is a

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healthy mix of women (it's a lot of married couples that game), and the GM would have a conversation if anyone were to make anyone feel uncomfortable.¹⁰³

At my home table, we carefully vet players to ensure a good fit. [...]¹⁰⁴

[...] Playing at friends houses, I pick my friends not to be misogynistic dicks.¹⁰⁵

I always play with my family and they vet the other party members pretty thoroughly on how cool they are with women and LGBT folks¹⁰⁶

People set the tone of D&D because it is such a social game. By playing with people known to be safe, there is the ability to create a safe game. This might mean choosing specifically to only play with others who have specific identities. The creation of groups specifically for queer people was a strong theme in the responses, as were all non-men groups.

All my DND friends are queer feminists and I'm talking to them safely from my living room. Can't get more comfortable than that.¹⁰⁷

All of my sessions are DM-Ed by queer people for other queer people. As a result, a lot of the internet misogynist/homophobic/transphobic tropes of the medieval-lite setting are not considered. We also do not roleplay any kind of sexual assault/partner violence in game and that is a strict rule.¹⁰⁸

Because I play with mostly women and non-binary people, and the men in the group are very respectful and supportive, it works out well for all of us. In particular, there is an effort to not stereotype or sexualize any characters/races/classes/etc. as well as allow for retaliation or combat if an NPC reacts in a problematic way (usually planned and with consent from the effected player(s)).¹⁰⁹

I am a woman and we generally play at my house. Our tables are usually 50/50 split gender wise. And when a friend specifically asked for female identifying players only, we set up a game just for her.¹¹⁰

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I feel much more comfortable playing with people I know, particularly if they are other LGBT women; the place doesn't matter as much as the people¹¹¹

This approach means that the women players are less likely to be (or are definitely not) the minority, thus shifting the typical power dynamic. The responses gave the impression that groups like this were more likely to be supportive in calling out racism, homophobia, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. D&D organisations often host explicitly inclusive events that facilitate the creation of this type of group.

The game cafe I used to play at has just started to run a D and D campaign exclusively for those who self-identifying as women or non-binary. I think it's a great idea. [...]¹¹²

I am a woman and I run for a table of half women. I have also DMed ladies night at my FLGS. There they set aside women-only nights including DMs, and had inclusivity rules. They also had dice jewelry for sale and the business was co-owner by a woman gamer who was in charge of all the D&D events.¹¹³

One of my local game stores does have ladies game nights and tries to find female DMs to make other women feel more comfortable. I'd love to see more of that at other stores and conventions. Some conventions to try to make inclusion of all people important, but I haven't seen much about women in gaming at conventions. I also feel that including women is only half the problem. I rarely see men talk to other men about the importance of including women or how to appropriately act with women around the table. I always feel that, as a woman, it is my job to tell men gamers how to treat me. It would be nice for more men to talk to each other about this. [...]¹¹⁴

'Ladies night' or women-only events are frequently inclusive of anyone who does not identify as a cis-man – but the naming can confuse this inclusivity. I have also seen games aimed specifically at the LBGTQI+ community. These dedicated events are important for women who might not know other women who want to play D&D and so cannot form their own private groups. It also gives women the chance to play casual games in public without having to be as concerned about toxic sexist behaviours. If I had access to one of these events when I first started playing, I would have gone along. I was often very lonely as one of few women who

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¹¹² 21322

¹¹³ 33227

¹¹⁴ 8203

seemed to play. Now that I do not have a regular D&D group, it is an avenue I would explore rather than going to a more general Adventurer's League event. I just do not want to risk having an unpleasant experience and an event with no men (sadly) seems less risky.

As mentioned previously, part of creating a positive gaming experience is asking those who violate the group's rules to not return.

[...] When new folks are invited to play, everyone in the group has a blanket veto on whether to invite them back, which is excellent regulation (so far no one overtly sexist, but a dude who would deliberately mess with the rest of the group's goals got bounced after one session)¹¹⁵

[...] my dm is very protective of his players, we had a new member join us, he only lasted 2 sessions, he was making comments to the other female member and myself that made us very uncomfortable and he was asked to leave immediately after we brought it to the dm's attention.¹¹⁶

[...] In the past, we've had a male member talk over, cut off, and get angry with female players for character actions. We asked him to leave the group.¹¹⁷

These responses describe times where the group has been empowered to ask undesirable players to leave. This is not always the case, as has been mentioned in other examples I have given where the women were the ones who had to remove themselves. Avoiding public play in a physical location can be avoided if players are able to engage with D&D from a private residence or online.

I play at a private residence. Used to play at a local game store but stopped when I was consistently sexualized both in game by store sponsored dms and out of game with no support or defense¹¹⁸

As a woman, I feel like a private residence is far more comfortable. I've been to gaming stores just to get supplies for games, and I felt very out of place in them; like a specimen on display. At a private residence there's a feeling of safety that just doesn't come in a gaming store.¹¹⁹

At home creates a more casual and less "gazed upon" atmosphere -- sometimes (though this has changed a LOT) local game stores can be very masculine-dominant places. [...]¹²⁰

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(I'm a girl)-It is played at my house so that I can play, and my DMs give me control over who I'm comfortable with at my house. I'm also able to limit the number of total players at one time, which helps with being heard and not talked over as much.¹²¹

I found it interesting that in the responses there were two opposite sentiments about where to play: with public as safe/private unsafe and public unsafe/private safe. This reflects the diversity of experiences that were reflected in the survey results. I think one of the major differences would be if the group is known or not – whether they are friends at a friend's house, or mostly strangers at a stranger's house.

Playing D&D online boomed during the writing of this thesis due to the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 global pandemic. However, this survey was done before the pandemic had really gone into full swing and therefore these results reflect the pre-pandemic online spaces.

As a nerdy woman myself, I do often get hit on because of my interest in gaming, so despite enjoying the idea of playing in a public setting, playing D&D over the internet makes me less worried about men trying to hit on me.¹²²

Being online makes it comfortable, because you aren't seen. But roll20 does not have any safeguards against predation¹²³

I have not played in person before, and as a single woman I went with the online route because I was worried about finding a group that was gender inclusive. I'm a bit anxious about the idea of being the only woman in a group of people that would be strangers at first, and the online aspect lessens the stress related to that.¹²⁴

When D&D is played online, it is often done so through a platform that has text and audio voice chat facilities, but typically no cameras on players unless the game is being streamed. In the responses there were players who described only using text, no microphone, and how it allowed them to further obscure their identity. As someone who has been abused online

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for having a woman's voice¹²⁵, I will not use a microphone with strangers. I would rather remain ambiguously gendered and slightly safer from sexist insults.

Since we play online, women don't have to worry about their looks. I haven't run into that problem before, but have talked to friends that have.¹²⁶

The lack of video allows the player's appearance to remain hidden which can offer another layer of protection from cruel comment.

Online is good because you can find other women or leave a group without consequences if they make you uncomfortable.¹²⁷

It is also potentially much easier to leave an online game full of strangers than it is to do so in person. There is the ability to disconnect, block, and walk away if necessary to. (This is of course more complicated if the people are pre-existing acquaintances or part of a shared community) In person players need to be able to remove themselves – safely - from a table. This might not feel possible where the tempers of those involved are unknown, in the game is in someone else's home, or the players have already been made to feel unsafe.

Communication as a solution

The biggest solution for women who are trying to ensure they feel comfortable and safe playing D&D seemed to be rooted in communication. This communication would need to take place before, during, and after the gaming session to hit the topics required. Part of selecting a specific group might involve communicating about what all the players want from the game to ensure that every is aiming for a similar outcome. Sometimes this takes place in what is referred to as a "Session Zero" or "Session 0". It is the session that occurs prior to the one where play begins – sometimes it is tacked on to the same time, but often groups get together specifically for a non-gaming session.

All of my groups are LGBT+ groups so we are very open-minded :) We all feel very comfortable. We always have a little session 0 talk, where we talk about triggers and boundaries - such as in-game sex, rape etc.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ When playing online video games, not whilst playing D&D. I have only played D&D online with friends that I had also played in person with.

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Absolutely. My dm asked pronouns for characters and players, we were allowed to specify topics we were uncomfortable with being explored (addiction, sexual assault, etc) before the campaign started in 3-tier levels of discomfort, none of the homebrew world includes misogyny or homophobia or transphobia. We have the option of calling a timeout or stop at any point if a player isn't feeling ok. It's welcoming.¹²⁹

I am a woman! A player and a DM. When I DM, I have very strict rules about what is or isn't allowed at the table based on common sense (we don't get creepy) I ask my players to fill out a survey about how they personally feel and how their characters feel about certain scenarios or if there's anything that would be a "bummer" trigger (nobody wants to feel sad about things in their real life while playing D&D - well no one I've met). As a player I'm not shy about telling other players to back the fuck off if they're getting weird, and I've both left sessions and kicked people out of sessions for being creepy, disrespectful or gross. Its a 0 tolerance policy¹³⁰

As a transgender woman and DM of my group I work to remove sexism and graphic details of sexual assault inherent in some pre-written scenarios. I also have my players fill out a consent checklist prior to the campaign to see what everyone is comfortable with experiencing and what to avoid.¹³¹

I hope so. I am a woman who runs D&D and I have a written contract and rules policy that must be agreed upon or players are not allowed in my game. It covers everything from sexualization to topics that are uncomfortable and how they are handled. It also addresses gender identity and safe space.¹³²

As described in these responses, players can be given a survey to outline any content that they would rather not have in their game. DMs frequently make these anonymous so players feel comfortable revealing what they would like to. My most recent DM gave us this opportunity when we first started playing D&D and it made me feel less anxious about starting to play (I did not know most of the people). The use of a contract or code of conduct can also be useful for assuring players that the DM is sensitive and committed to avoiding certain behaviours/content.

The use of in-game communication was also crucial for players in keeping the game feeling safe.

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Absolutely, our DM is super conscious of making it a safe haven for everyone. We openly acknowledge anytime something may be triggering or potentially problematic. [...]¹³³

As a woman I've had to explain a couple issues to my DM, who is a man, and a couple other men who play with us that some topics cross the line. That said they have been very receptive of feedback and respectful towards myself and other women and nonbinary players at the table about the issues and boundaries we bring up.¹³⁴

Feeling comfortable to raise these issues implies a level of friendship or at least comfort with the group more generally.

Anti harassment policy, x card policy, orgs available to help, discuss triggering concepts before campaigns start and avoid topics people note as problematic¹³⁵

The "X-Card" is an X drawn on a piece of paper that players can touch when they are uncomfortable with what is happening in the game. The DM then moves the game along without requiring the player to explain the reasoning to the group. Groups can also have it so that if a player hovers their hand near the card, then the DM understands they are approaching something undesirable and they can take it as a hint to move along before triggering anyone. It has become a common feature at convention D&D game tables.

The ability to debrief after a game is also important for ensuring that players can communicate any issues.

3/4 participants in my current group are female and my brother is the DM. We have a check in at the end of each game to make sure everyone's happy with the direction of play. We don't seem, at this stage and with this group of friends, to need more.¹³⁶

This check-in might occur between sessions rather than right after the game, and through messaging instead of face-to-face. Sometimes it can be awkward to say an issue in front of the group, so it is good if players are able to approach the DM at another time.

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¹³⁶ 4193

Conclusion

This chapter brought together the content and theory of the proceeding chapters to show the lived consequences for women D&D players. From the abundance of replies that mentioned these encounters, it seems unfathomable to me that there has not been more research into the toxic side of D&D's fandom. This side of D&D goes unacknowledged. Women's voices go unheard due to the gatekeeping and exclusion mechanisms that create these situations. It is a vicious cycle of exclusion that self-perpetuates.

Through understanding what makes women feel uncomfortable or unsafe in D&D's fandom, and what potentially can be done to address this issue, the future of D&D could be made more inclusive. These experiences must be taken as evidence of a problem that requires fresh solutions. The burden cannot remain on women to minimise their visibility and hide from the wider community. The conclusion will continue to consider the necessary movements towards change, improvement, and a safer fandom for every player.

Conclusion

This thesis developed from a desire to contextualise my experiences as a woman playing D&D with research into fandom. I wanted to understand personal experiences with a feminist academic lens, but this testimony and view were absent in the texts in the research field, whether exploring gaming studies or Dungeons and Dragons studies. Women's experiences in tabletop roleplaying games (and in nerd culture outside video games) was an unexplored topic. Relatable voices were absent and the issues that had impacted me were absent from often idyllic accounts of fandom. Instead of walking away feeling alienated I decided to create the research that I had been searching for. I would not wait for someone else to talk about women's experiences – to stumble upon the issues that I already knew existed. From these absences, gaps and silences, this thesis was created.

An original approach to fandom research that seeks out marginalised voices and centres them has been created for/through this thesis. The marginalised are brought to foreground and amplified. I challenged the idea of who D&D fans are and why they play D&D. I broadened the fan beyond the stereotypical nerdy man to show the presence of women. This includes the historical presence of women and their impact on how the game developed. The survey results highlight women's experiences with fandom to expose the toxicity and show that it is a systematic issue. Women as individuals should not be forced to modify their fandom and hide their existence to protect themselves. The culture of D&D's fandom needs to change. D&D is a system of potentiality and possibility that is spreading into the research of different disciplines. It is time to redefine the community and end gatekeeping.

This research has been far more successful than I could have imagined when I began three years ago. My initial concept for this thesis relied on existing texts, the D&D game itself, and then the survey results would be the cherry on top. I did not expect to be able to collect enough data to rely solely on my survey results. However, I was incredibly fortunate that the D&D community was generous in completing and sharing my surveys. The enormous level of participation allowed me to contribute a unique, novel, piece of research to the area of roleplaying game studies and popular culture studies. I have been unable to find any research on D&D with a similarly sized dataset – let alone one as rich in response detail.

My own orientation shifted through the research journey – from women as a distinct category of D&D player to the realisation that women's desires when it comes to D&D are not significantly different to men's. On numerous topics covered by the survey, I did not find

differences in the thematic analysis between responses from any of the gender identities. My preconceived 'othering' of women players as something distinct, as a different audience to cater to, and as a special kind of 'fan' clouded my approach and interpretation. It is this logic or thought processes of 'othering' that undermine approaches to ceasing toxic exclusion. Women are not a monolithic entity to be slotted into D&D's fandom – like a Lego brick slotted into a bigger building. They are already bricks of all shapes, sizes, and colours throughout the larger creation that are distinct from men only because of the exclusion they experience. Improving inclusion might not be about tailoring products for *women*, but for ending the sexism that singles them out for exclusion. That is not to say that products do not need to diversify, they do. D&D and nerd culture is typically incredibly white, Western-dominated, heteronormative, and man-centred. Fixing this is not about catering to women. Women are not the only ones who want to see badass women heroes, rescue princes in distress, and have non-binary gender representation in their stories. Changing or fixing these things undermine elements of the faulty logic that exclusionary forces rely on. It removes power from their argument, thus improving the community for everyone, not just women.

This thesis fills – and occupies - an important gap in contemporary roleplaying game research. Contemporary research has begun to suggest D&D's value in educational and therapeutic settings and with potentially vulnerable populations. This makes understanding the potential experiences that girls and women might have when they try to engage with the D&D fandom. Research that is aware of gendered considerations is vitally important but absent currently. This thesis has provided a broad variety of topics that researchers can build from and take into consideration in future research. For example, young students shown D&D in a classroom might seek out games in the wider community – e.g., attending Adventurer's League events or going online to play with strangers. Educators of minors might want to warn parents to monitor their child's play for inappropriate themes and the potential for sexually inappropriate content. It might sound extreme to suggest that D&D needs warning labels, but the reality is that many girls and women have had extremely negative experiences. Just as it is important to educate children about online predators, being careful about information they share, and cyberbullying that can occur in online game chats, it is vital to make them aware about the potential harm that can occur in communities. This thesis' findings should be used

as conversation-starter, a research prompt, and a caution about the toxic sexism still prevalent in fandom.

Findings

Chapter 1 arched beyond simply stating the methodology employed for this research to provide a thorough investigation into feminist autoethnographic research. The approach taken in this thesis is an original contribution to knowledge that could be used to study other areas of fandom. There were many challenges in this research around anonymity and ethical interactions with the community of interest that would be useful for other researchers to learn from.

Chapter 2 established the relationship pop culture has with D&D's history serves to erase or villainise the women instrumental in the game's development. Rather than recognising the long inclusion of women in D&D and the challenges those women faced, a popular history has been constructed that smooths out the narrative. This shiny new popular history is a tool used by the exclusionary D&D fans to justify sexism and gatekeeping – *D&D is a game created by men, for men, and women only recently started to play so they do not deserve equal space in D&D's fandom*. There is ongoing pushback against inclusivity. TSR (the new iteration) has support in suing WOTC for their disclaimer at the beginning of legacy products. It is not just a few angry people throwing out a lawsuit, there is a community that supports them. History is weaponised – a tool for silencing critics. Our cultural desire for a neat, wholesome, and inspirational history of D&D has created a narrative that continues to silence or shrink women who claim space in D&D's fandom.

Chapter 3 introduced nostalgia, the rose-tinted glasses through which history is viewed and understood. It is such a strong urge to romanticise the past, that even some women and minorities who would have faced exclusion in D&D's early days lust for a chance to relieve that time. D&D's fandom covet "vintage t-shirts," pursue an "authentic" D&D experience with the Old School Renaissance products and engage in re-enactments of a history that did not exist. Fans are often nostalgic for something that simply did not exist. Nostalgic recollection buries the more problematic histories, thus contributing to the erasure

of women's history with D&D¹. The nostalgia players experience is not only that vicarious, abstract, and impersonal relationship fostered through collective nostalgia, but also often a more personal link to the game. Paratexts seem to get majority credit for D&D's resurgence in most modern D&D research, but my findings contradicted this. That is not to say that paratexts do not play a significant role, but that the influence of friends, family, and nostalgia is understated. I argue that D&D players begin playing not because of D&D *the game*, but D&D *the social experience*. D&D is a way to connect with people, share experiences, and spend meaningful time together interacting. Memories are created that players reminisce about for years – and this is a powerful experience that players often want to share with those around them. D&D as a text becomes a touchstone for memories.

Chapter 4 built a profile of D&D's fandom using the survey results to provide an insight unparalleled by existing research. The chapter went beyond reporting fan activities to discuss the function of these practices and how fans felt about them. The original contributions to knowledge in this chapter is not just this fan-led fandom profiling, but the understanding created of why fandom is appealing. Popular culture is built on fans and fandoms – they are increasingly influential in product development and direction. There is a flow between WOTC and D&D fans, with the company seeking to understand the desires of the community and create products to suit. It is not a purely benevolent relationship; it makes economic sense to please fans and bolster the fandom. The stereotype persists that the core D&D player is a white, straight, man but this thesis has challenged that. However, unless the community and companies recognise that, then the audience being catered to and supported is that of the privileged white straight man. D&D's fandom, and the ability to participate within it, is one of the appealing parts of *Dungeons & Dragons*. It is this fact that makes the issue of gatekeeping and exclusion so important to understand and combat.

Chapter 5 introduced D&D's paratexts and the relationship these texts have with play. There is existing research into paratexts as a popular introduction to D&D and how streams are bringing new players to the game, for example the work of Sidhu & Carter (2020) on *Critical Role*. This thesis created original knowledge on the complexity of this relationship between watching a stream or interacting with a paratext and beginning to play. The relevant

¹ This commentary refers not simply to women. This statement extends to anyone who is not a white American man.

paratexts to D&D was expanded beyond just streams like *Critical Role* to acknowledge the importance of media representations and texts like Choose Your Own Adventure books. Streaming games or recording them for an audience has fundamentally changed how some players approach the game. Their expectations are shaped by viewing streams and their games altered by recreating what they have seen and a desire to make their own games enjoyable for potential viewers. Orthogaming is a big part of how paratexts work to change or influence D&D play, as texts such as streams and how-to videos present ideal ways to play D&D. Players attempting to emulate what they have seen in paratexts has changed the way they might have approached the game. It is an interesting paratextual climate compared to when D&D was originally released because now players can create a constellation of references. In early editions of D&D there was such a lack of knowledge around how others were interpreting rules that players often could not drop into games in other cities because it was so different. Paratexts shape players experiences of D&D, establish their expectations, and are a powerful change agent. This makes paratexts a potential tool for increasing inclusion, overcoming gatekeeping, and changing the culture of D&D's fandom.

In chapter 6, the theories behind gatekeeping, exclusion, and group member identity were shaped and discussed. Gatekeeping is a tool that is used to minimise and discourage the presence of women in D&D's fandom. Full of the historically-justified confidence that they have 'always' owned, maintained, and disseminated D&D that was established in the first two chapters, men attempt to claim the fandom and gatekeep who is allowed to play. Women are excluded, side-lined, and marginalised from the fan community that surrounds D&D.

Chapter 7 built on this theory to highlight the consequences of gatekeeping for women when they play D&D. The stories and experiences shared in this thesis illustrated the mechanisms and consequences of gatekeeping. Women are often made to feel uncomfortable and unwelcome at the D&D table – such that playing in public and/or with strangers becomes a scary prospect. Experiences of sexual harassment, being made to feel unwelcome, mansplaining, and general exclusionary tactics were provided to show the extent of the issue. In their survey responses, women shared stories of how their characters were raped and sexually assaulted in routine gameplay, and how this impacted them. The substantial number of women who had experienced feeling unwelcome and the diverse stories shared show that this is a significant issue. D&D's fandom/community/players are

making it incredibly difficult and often unpleasant for women who want to play. There are ways to “manage” gatekeeping, but the overwhelming theme of responses was that it becomes the responsibility of the gatekept. Women (and other marginalised identities) are forced to alter their approach, carefully considering how they interact with the fandom and play D&D rather than the community being held responsible as a collective for creating safe spaces.

Each of these issues, each of the chapters, has demonstrated ways that women are excluded or erased from D&D. This marginalization configured barriers for inclusion. These barriers do stop some women playing D&D. The thesis results proved that many women do not play D&D so that they can avoid feeling unwelcome, so they do not have to struggle to prove they deserve to be present at the table, so they will not be sexually harassed, and because it simply does not seem accessible. There is a considerable number of women who try to play D&D but never make it past one or two sessions because of their negative experiences. This was evident in the survey responses, as so many women described trying to play and not coming back for another try for many years or decades. Nerd culture and fandoms need to change to become inclusive spaces. The community needs to stamp out the exclusionary behaviours, sexual harassment, and general nastiness to marginalised groups. One privileged group should not be allowed to claim a text and then create a hostile environment for anyone else.

There is however another consequence for D&D's women that I have come to understand throughout this research. These mechanisms serve to hide women. They obscure or minimise the presence of women and this is then used to justify exclusion. Rhetoric like ‘Women don't want to play anyway,’ ‘This is a game made by men for men, so it makes sense there's no women characters,’ and ‘Men are (and always have been) the primary audience so their needs matter most’ run rampant in nerd culture. Statements like these underpin justification for failing to include diversity in lore and inaction when it comes to the sexist toxicity of game spaces.

History and nostalgia encourage the acceptance of a version of D&D's history that ignores the contribution and struggles and women. This history is then re-enacted. It is desirable – presented as a golden time for the game, a time that players long to have been part of. D&D's fandom then finds itself lusting after a version of D&D where women are

invisible. Even women fans engage with that nostalgic yearning – but they are inadvertently craving for a version of D&D where they are not present. The ideal of D&D becomes a group of boys playing D&D in their basement like in *Stranger Things*, or the nerd men of *Big Bang Theory*. Somehow the fandom has become complicit and active in the process of erasing women from the popular history and ideals of D&D.

The gatekeeping mechanisms of fandom reduce women's active participation with D&D. The goal of these gatekeepers is to ensure that women do not want to play D&D. This might have worked in the past, but I do not think it is as effective anymore. The proliferation of podcasts that highlight women's participation and the desirability of a diverse D&D table counter many of these arguments of exclusion. The internet and the myriad social media platforms allow for the creation of inclusive communities – spaces designed for those made unwelcome by the gatekeepers. There is a multiplicity of message. The gatekeeping in the D&D fandom is restrictive and obstructionary and should be resisted, but there are also many avenues marginalised groups can take to avoid needing to interact with the fandom at large. Women can find other women to play with. There are *Facebook* groups, *Discord* servers, and other social media spaces where women players can exist and interact without the imposition of sexist men.

I am not stating that gatekeeping is an issue that women should 'get over' because there are avenues to avoid it. I do not believe the impetus should be on women to modify their approach to avoid negativity. However, due to these alternative approaches that allow the dodging of gatekeepers, the efficacy of exclusionary tactics have dropped. Due to this we might predict an increase in the hostility and aggressiveness of gatekeepers as they escalate behaviours to salvage their effectiveness. As such, it is vital we continue to investigate and interrogate cultural gatekeeping.

The other impact that I want to highlight is the self-perpetuating cycle that is occurring for the marginalisation of women D&D fans. As women seek out dedicated spaces outside the mainstream fandom, it makes their existence harder to see and count. I mentioned in the introduction that WOTC official demographics were quite different to those of this survey in terms of non-binary gender identities. I am left wondering what the demographics of D&D players would look like if it were possible to reach everyone. The consequences of popular culture and media producers like WOTC only being able to see those able/allowed/willing to

participate in mainstream fandom is that they genuinely believe their audience is still dominated by men. These companies can conduct audience research and their decision to pander to the desire of man fans is seen as statistically justifiable. The mainstream, man-dominated, pop culture fandoms benefit from the mechanisms that push women and marginalised groups toward alternative communities. Popular culture research needs to find a way to incorporate a multiplicity of fandoms – rather than the monolithic approach that seems to dominate.

Answering the research questions

I posed four questions to set the scope and frame of the research when I began this research. I felt that in answering these questions, this thesis would provide meaningful and useful information for an academic audience but also for D&D fans and the women whose experiences are like those within this text. At every step of this thesis, I have reflected on the impact this research can have on the D&D community. This was not only from an ethical perspective in protecting my participants and fairly representing the community, but from the stance of wanting to ensure the research benefitted D&D players. In the conclusion I answer these questions – clarifying my original contribution to knowledge and offering new insight into D&D's fandom.

What forms does women's exclusion from D&D and fandom take?

Women's exclusion takes forms that vary from the subtle to the overt and from the quiet erasure to the violent rejection. Through minimising, twisting, and wilfully ignoring women's contributions to and presence in D&D's history, women's absence from modern fandom is justified. The women who have remained prominent in D&D's history, like Lorraine Williams and the nameless 'Gygax's wife,' have their tales twisted into tropes and are used as props for the stories of men. Lorraine Williams became the Big Baddy against the righteous Gygax, removing him from *his* company – just as all women seek to do to men in fandom... Williams is a cautionary tale of what happens when women participate. They will steal the thing men love right from under them and destroy it. Lee Gold was instrumental in the spread of D&D beyond Wisconsin and the development of shared rule interpretations. Gold's *Alarums and Excursions* worked to unify understanding of the rules so that players from different cities could play together – something that was impossible due to the vastly

divergent rule interpretations and resulting characters. This was crucial work pre-internet forums and the zine itself launched many RPG writers. Nostalgia is a tool deployed to change D&D's history into something more desirable. For men who want to exclude women, nostalgia allows them to reminisce over simpler times when it was just boys around the table. None of this 'social justice nonsense.' Nobody holding them accountable for their actions. Nostalgia builds a new history, obscuring the past with nicer versions of the past. There is a cultural tendency towards nostalgia due to the tumultuous and rapidly changing modernity. D&D's past represents a more stable, wholesome, technology-free time. As Laato & Rauti (2022) found, nostalgic feelings are often accompanied by comfort and bittersweet reminiscing. Nostalgia is baked into many players' relationships with D&D because they are introduced by friends and family with whom they bond around the game. There becomes an emotive string that the RPG industry plucks with vintage t-shirts and retrospective products. Nostalgia tricks those who would have suffered to lust for the past. Women, and other marginalised groups, longingly imagine playing in D&D's early days despite the fact they would not have been welcome or even introduced to the game to know it exists. Like blinkers on horses, nostalgia works at keeping individuals and communities focused on a narrow version of events – pointed where the rider wants. WOTC and the D&D fandom benefits from keeping players looking at the good ol' days of boys playing D&D in a basement, men working together to create a game, and 'simpler times' so they do not examine what is missing. Or rather, who is missing.

What purpose does women's exclusion from fandom serve for other fans?

Gatekeeping activates power and control. My survey showed that men are threatened by the presence of women and other genders in fandom. This misogyny is not only true for D&D but all areas of fandom. Women fans face derision and exclusion in every single type of fandom – music (Davies, 2001; Hill, 2016), sports (Pope & Williams, 2011; Richards, 2015), hobby (Woo, 2012), gaming (Paaßen et al., 2017; Salter & Blodgett, 2012; Scott, 2019), comic books (Kohnen, 2014; Orme, 2016; Scott, 2013). Women liking things somehow delegitimises the object or subject of attention. Like Beatlemania and the stereotypical manic screaming girl (Ehrenreich et al., 2002). This means that women must be excluded to keep the fandom respectable. The alternative is to challenge the idea that women as consumers are somehow inferior in their preferences. That would be difficult and upset some hegemonic power

structures that men benefit from. The idea of authentic fan status demands an opposite, and women fans are the scapegoat. They come to represent the inauthentic and improper way to be a fan that men can compare themselves to. Comparisons are a fundamental part of how social status is understood. It is difficult to imagine a system without someone to deride, someone to aspire to, and those who are kept irrelevant.

Some of the fear is due to the expectations that women bring with them in their approach to community and acceptable content. For some D&D fans, the inclusion of women is seen as a threat to their sexy chainmail-bikini babes on front cover, the buxom damsels in distress, and their rolls to sexually assault and rape NPC's. If women are present in fandom, these things might stop. And that would be... bad. In the survey results, it was apparent that some men saw women as a barrier to the kind of game they wanted to play and their participation as requiring a distinctive style of behaviour. D&D as boy's only night might no longer be acceptable. For those toxic fans who want their games and products full of sexist tropes, including women is a threat.

What barriers do women face when playing D&D and participating in D&D's fandom?

Women's contributions to D&D's history are ignored and their legacy minimised thus making it harder for each cohort and generation of women to break into the industry and community. Barriers are erected to keep out 'new' demographics who are not 'real fans' but trend-following fakes. Women are treated as though they are new to D&D, even though they are not. They are forced to justify their presence in a way that men are not.

Women seeking representation in their gaming manuals and adventures are often left disappointed because the women characters within are flat, sexist, tropes that serve the interests of men's characters. They are romance targets, bar wenches, damsels to rescue, and scantily clad fellow adventurers. Yes, this representation is improving. But it has a long way to go. Complaints about these barriers are neutralised or distracted through nostalgic mechanisms. The past is presented as having been a wonderful time for D&D – to try and paint it as something otherwise is an uphill struggle. The emotive relationship that players form with D&D through nostalgic associations further clouds critical discussion.

Women face discomfort, hostility, mansplaining, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and the rape of their characters when they sit at the D&D table. There are physical and

emotional ramifications for women when they try to participate in D&D's fandom. For women it can become a cost-benefit risk analysis each time they try to find a group to play with. Is the game worth the risk of being verbally assaulted? Is the game worth the risk of being made to feel small and stupid through mansplaining and being endlessly talked over? Is the game worth being stalked on your way home? These are real questions that women ask themselves just to roll dice and pretend to be a fantasy hero. Questions that men do not have to consider. Women should not have to manage danger, or even feel as though they are at risk, to participate in fandom.

What are the consequences of women's exclusion from D&D?

Some women in my survey did not play D&D because of the issues arising around their exclusion from fandom and the harmful gatekeeping mechanisms. Many women continue to play under the radar. They avoid playing in public, they carefully choose their groups, and they might never interact with the mainstream fandom spaces. Beyond the dollars they spend, they are invisible to the industry – and if they are buying from big websites or bookstores rather than local game stores their dollars are anonymous. WOTC might not know the real demographics of their player base (and this applies to other companies involved in the roleplaying game industry). This means women's ability to shape the future of D&D is reduced because they are not meaningfully counted by those in power. Women are important to fandom, but they are often invisible. As fandoms branch out into participatory politics, the voices of women need to be heard and issues of gender represented (Betz, 2022).

Limitations & Future Research

This research was limited by the parameters of the genre of doctoral education. Future work is clear and required. I aim to complete research on how gender and roleplaying interact, popular narratives of D&D's history, how D&D's fandom perceives itself versus how it believes it is perceived, and influence of paratexts such as *Critical Role*. There were so many survey responses that I was not able to include – because almost 500,000 short answer survey responses cannot fit into a single thesis. This means that, although I tried to represent as many voices as possible, there were issues I was unable to touch on. There is the potential to produce more research that implements those survey responses as a primary source of information. I feel a responsibility to leave no stone unturned and honour the contributions

of my survey participants. I am the custodian of an enormous data set, and I refuse to leave it to gather dust.

The data set could be explored from the perspective of different demographic groups to see if there are significant differences in experience. For example, I am sure it would be interesting and enlightening to compare the responses of 18-year-old women with women over the age of 50. The possibilities that can emerge from this expansive data set are extraordinary. I acknowledge my role as the curator of this information. I also acknowledge that this doctoral thesis is the first stage – the first interpretative cut – of this scholarship.

A crucial topic for future research is the experiences that transgender, non-binary, and queer participants shared. As I mentioned I in the methodology chapter, if I were to do the research again, I change the gender options at the beginning of the survey. They lacked nuance for transgender and non-binary identities and make it harder to narrow down the data set to only responses from those communities. There were survey responses that told me that the queer community has claimed D&D. I did not feel that I had the expertise or experience to be able to write about these responses and explore their contents – especially from an autoethnographic position. In the responses to the questions, I asked about gender and roleplaying, transgender or non-binary participants frequently took the time to share their opinions and experiences. Again, this was a topic I felt ill-equipped to adequately broach. A crossover with the ideas of *The Gender Tag Project* (Wylde, 2015) would be interesting as the project focuses on creating conversation about gender identity and expression. D&D can be a pathway or tool for players for explore how they play with gender and understand it. Martino et al. (2021) explored the pedagogical potential of *The Gender Tag Project* within the context of teach gender complexity. As D&D is also being investigated as an educational tool there is potential for an overlap of these three ideas to assist in meaningful engagement with gender issues in an educational setting using D&D. I would love to team-up with someone more knowledgeable about these experiences and work together to give these survey responses a voice.

Intersectionality is vitally important to feminist research – but racial identity and experience goes unexamined in this thesis. Probably due to my white privilege, I failed to ask participants about such aspects of their identity, and I regret this now. Future research into how racial prejudice affects women (and all player's) experiences of exclusion in fan/fandom

spaces is incredibly important. The most effective research is iterative. My survey revealed innovative and unusual outcomes. Future insights can build on this research.

Campaign Epilogue

D&D's popularity is booming whilst visibly diversifying. Awareness around sexism in gaming has grown due to movements like 'Gamergate.' Paratexts like *Critical Role*, *The Adventure Zone*, *Acquisitions Incorporated*, *Force Grey*, and *Maze Arcana* are making women players visible, powerful, and popular. They are also moving the game into new realms of entertainment, as watching Twitch Streams, or listening to podcasts has become an increasingly popular way to interact with D&D whilst not playing. The audiences these shows bring are undoubtedly increasing D&D's mainstream popularity. It is vital currently, as D&D spreads through pop culture, to stop and ensure that it does so without toxic sexism and gatekeeping. There is an opportunity to intervene and prevent a new generation of D&D players going through the harassment, sexism, and exclusion that women have previously (and presently) face.

When I began this research, I expected women players to differ from men – that their motivations for playing would be distinctive and how they engaged with D&D would be distinct. However, as discussed in the body of the thesis, this was not the case. There was no significant difference in why women wanted to play D&D when compared to men. Players who did not identify with binarized gendered identity confirmed this motivational impetus. The differences were evident primarily in what happened after (or when) women tried to play. The *why* of playing D&D is consistent, but the *how* of going about it is where my research results started to diverge. All genders of player want the same basic attributes from D&D – to play with friends, explore fantasy worlds, and have fun. However, when it is when women (and other marginalised genders) begin to play, they find their experience divergent from their expectations. Women must fight through barriers to entry, exclusion, and continually justify their presence. Their D&D experience is likely to involve sexual harassment, discomfort, bullying, and other forms of gatekeeping. D&D's product does not need to change to attract more women players. The community's culture needs an overhaul to stop scaring women away.

This research is part of – and contributes to – the changing the culture of D&D's fandom, improving the experiences of women and all marginalised groups, and recognizing and breaking down gatekeeping. Each piece of testimony shared in this thesis is an important voice added to the discussion. It is my hope that this thesis can have a broader impact through the approach I have modelled here. There are women in other fandoms who are experiencing gatekeeping and exclusion – and I strongly believe that by taking a similar approach to those communities as I have done here with D&D, researchers can begin to understand those encounters and bring change. This thesis is a step towards gender-focused, multidisciplinary, modern fandom studies but also towards the end of sexist gatekeeping.

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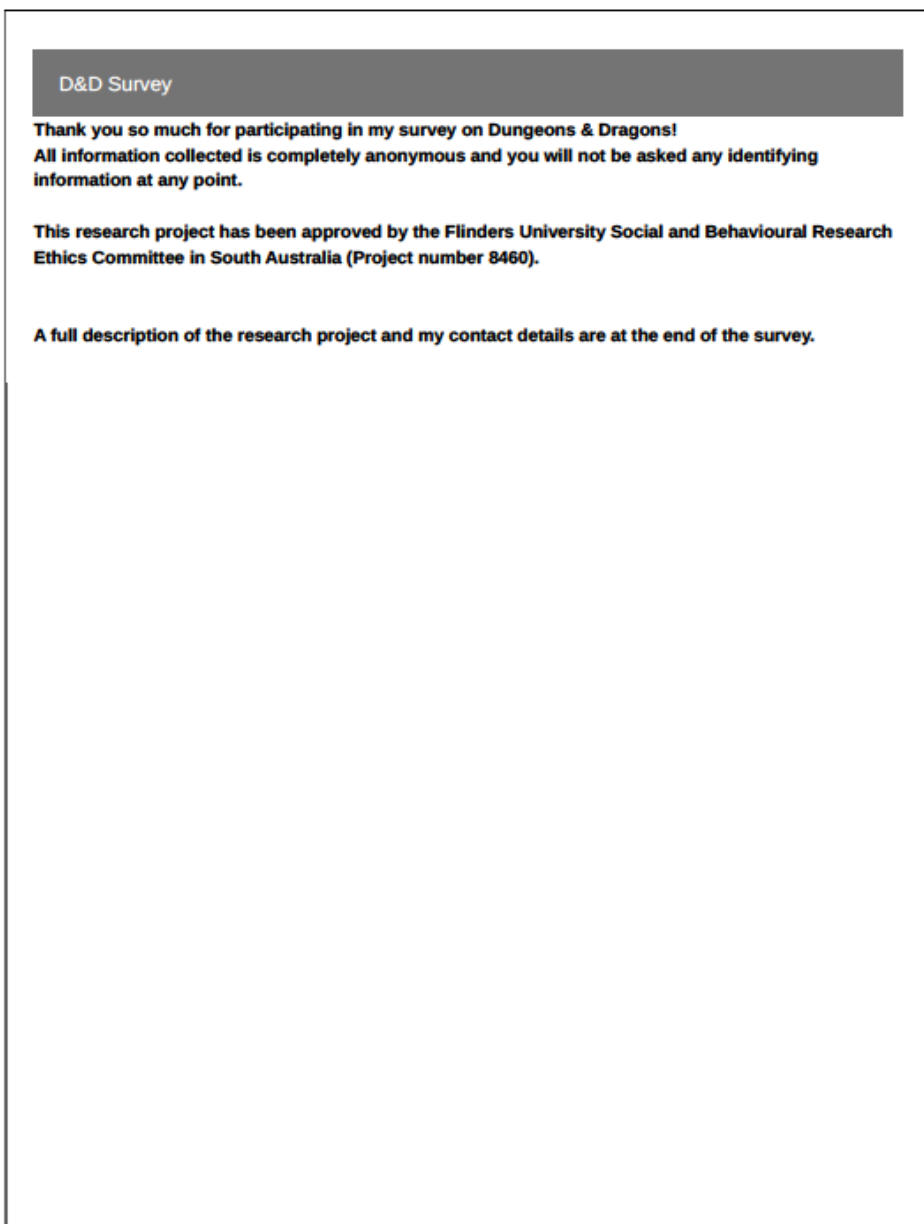
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Appendices

Files are accessible as PDF by double clicking on the images. They are also included as supplemental files for ease of access.

Player Survey

A screenshot of a survey form titled "D&D Survey". The form contains three paragraphs of text. The first paragraph is a thank you message and a statement of anonymity. The second paragraph states that the research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in South Australia (Project number 8460). The third paragraph states that a full description of the research project and contact details are at the end of the survey. The form is enclosed in a black border.

D&D Survey

Thank you so much for participating in my survey on Dungeons & Dragons!
All information collected is completely anonymous and you will not be asked any identifying information at any point.

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in South Australia (Project number 8460).

A full description of the research project and my contact details are at the end of the survey.

Non-player Survey

This survey is designed for people who either haven't ever played D&D or have briefly but did not continue to play regularly.

All information collected is completely anonymous and you will not be asked any identifying information at any point.

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in South Australia (Project number 8460).

Thank you so much for participating in my survey on Dungeons & Dragons! A full description of the research project and my contact details are at the end of the survey.

1. Age

☐ Under 18

☐ 45-54

☐ 18-24

☐ 55-64

☐ 25-34

☐ 65+

☐ 35-44

2. What is your gender identity

☐ Woman

☐ Man

☐ Non-binary

☐ Would rather not say

☐ Other (please specify)

3. How do you think non-D&D players perceive D&D and those who play it?

Character Build Survey

Welcome!

Thank you for doing my survey! A full description of my research plus my contact details are included at the end of the survey.

All information collected is completely anonymous and you will not be asked any identifying information at any point.

This research project has been approved by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee in South Australia (Project number 8460).

This survey is designed to collect details of the characters that you've built in the past.

Please give as many responses as you want!

You can leave lines of the questions blank.

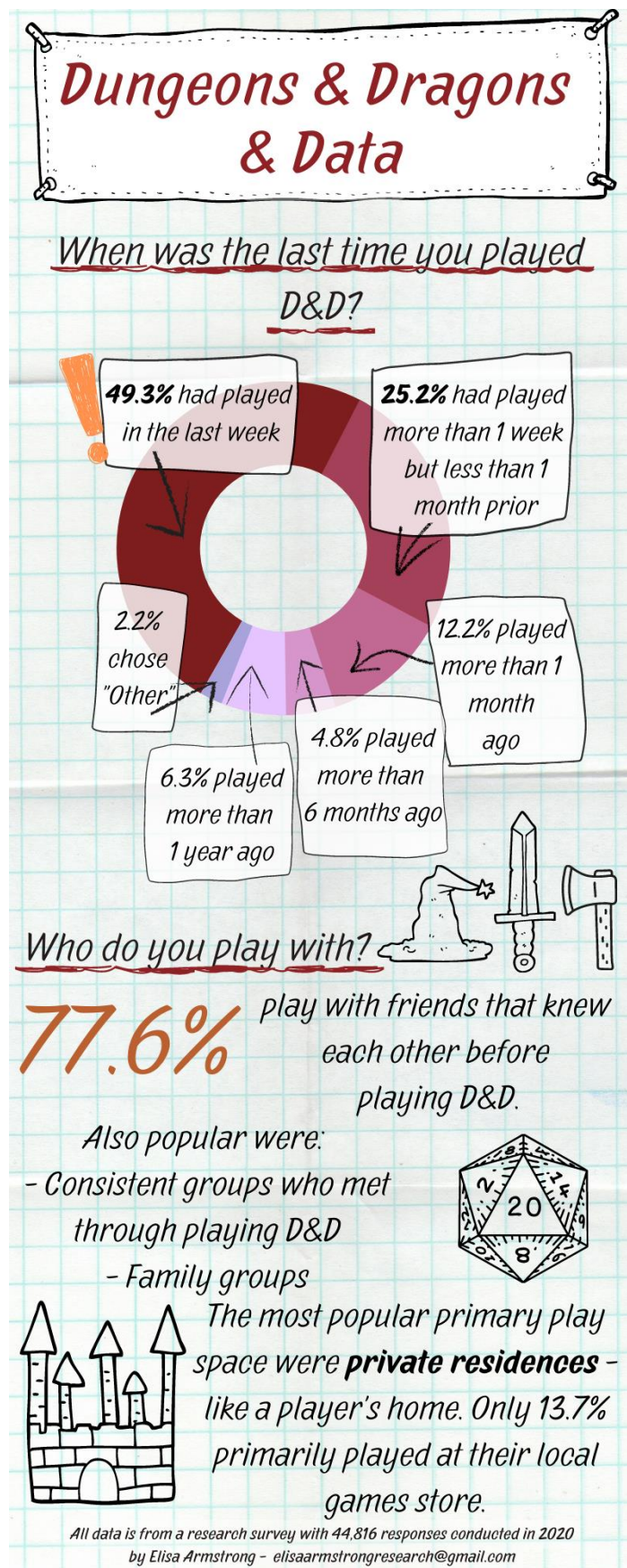
For any additional responses or if your character build doesn't match the dropdown box options, please use the textbox at the end.

1. Character builds

	Race	Class	Gender
1	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
2	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
3	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
4	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
5	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
6	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
7	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
8	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
9	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
10	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

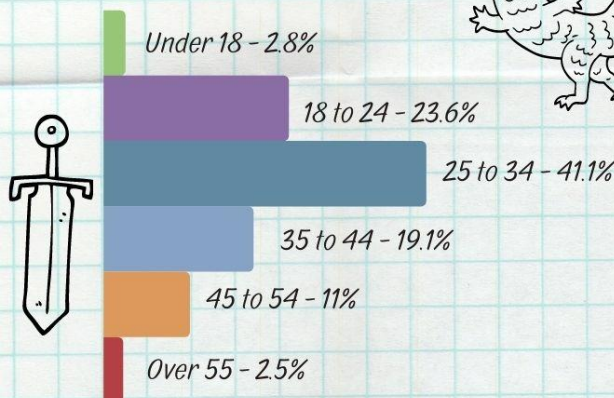
2. Additional character builds (race, class, gender). Please put each response on a new line.

Examples of research dissemination

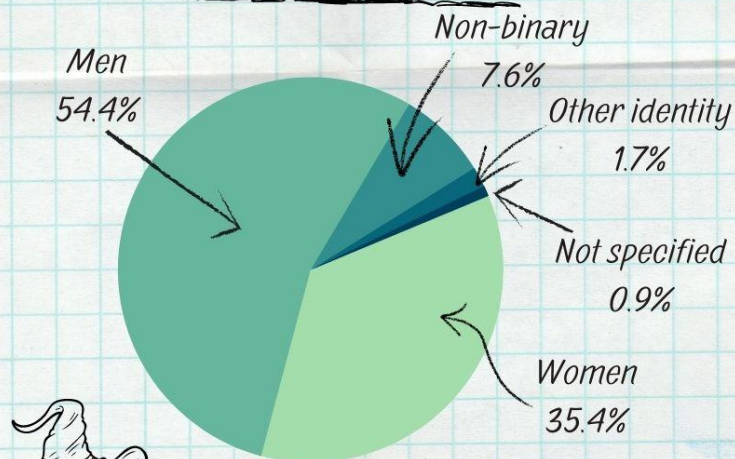


Dungeons & Dragons & Data

Age of Players



Gender Identities



Time as a D&D player

Less than a month	1.03%
1 month to 6 months	4.97%
6 months to 1 year	6.8%
1 - 2 years	16%
2 - 5 years	23.6%
More than 5 years, but less than 10 years	12.42%
More than 10 years	35.18%

All data is from a research survey with 44,816 responses conducted in 2020
by Elisa Armstrong - elisaarmstrongresearch@gmail.com