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Negotiating Masculinity in Tabletop Roleplaying Game Spaces

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science  
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Rigby Lynn Bendele  
Bachelor of Arts, Longwood University 2012

Director: Dr. Jennifer Johnson  
Associate Professor and Chair, Sociology

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
May, 2019

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## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	6
List of Abbreviations .....	7
Abstract .....	8
Introduction.....	9
Theoretic Framework.....	10
Masculinity .....	10
Homosociality.....	14
Gender Performativity .....	16
Literature Review.....	17
Nerd-As-Masculinity .....	17
Game Studies and Gamer Identity .....	19
Statement of the Problem.....	22
Purpose of the Study .....	22
Significance of the Study .....	22
Methods.....	24
Analysis.....	30
Subtheme One: <i>These spaces are filled with diverse characters... but not people.</i> .....	30
Subtheme Two: <i>You don't have to be manly to play TTRPGs, but you do have to be smart.</i> <i>Being smart is the alternative to being strong.</i> .....	34

Theme Three: <i>These spaces facilitate intimate connections, even if these connections are only between characters.</i> .....	36
Theme Four: <i>Power gaming is an undesirable but masculine practice.</i> .....	38
Discussion .....	41
Implications.....	41
Limitations and Strengths .....	42
Future Research .....	45
Conclusion .....	47
References.....	49
Vita.....	54

## List of Tables

TABLE 1: Descriptive Characteristics .....	26
TABLE 2: Tabletop RPG Engagement.....	27
TABLE 3: Themes and Subthemes.....	29

## List of Abbreviations

ESA – The Entertainment Software Association

GM – Gamemaster, also known as Dungeon Master or storyteller

TTRPG – Tabletop roleplaying game



## Abstract

### NEGOTIATING MASCULINITY IN TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING GAME SPACES

By Rigby L. Bendele, M.S.

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019

Major Director: Dr. Jennifer Johnson  
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As video games and other gaming has become a popular media form, with 60% of Americans playing games daily (Entertainment Software Association [ESA], 2018), gaming communities have increased in size and participation. While scholarly research has consistently found that women are marginalized in these communities, little research has looked at how men see these communities. Research on homosociality shows that men use communities and relationships with other men to access masculinity (Bird, 1996; Dellinger, 2004; Houston, 2012). Building on game studies and masculinity studies, this research looks at the way men in tabletop roleplaying game communities understand their involvement and the ways their involvement connects with masculinity. Tabletop gaming communities give men access to a form of masculinity they may be denied, primarily by providing access to other ways of building social capital and relationships with other men.

## Introduction

Game studies, like many fields, has repeatedly shown that women are marginalized in gaming spaces. Research into gendered experiences in gaming focuses on women's marginalization without consciously considering how men's gendered experiences affect their engagement in games (Taylor, 2018). While research in gender and game studies identifies the harm to women, there is room to look at how men benefit and how they navigate those benefits. There is also an outstanding tension within game studies about how or when to intervene, particularly in the research context (Taylor, 2018). Understanding how men understand their experiences in these spaces and what they feel are the benefits to their participation can provide insight into why they participate. Understanding how they see the connection between their involvement and their masculinity can provide insight into how these spaces influence men's relationship to masculinity. By pairing the scholarship about women's harm and this research's findings about men's benefits, a fuller picture of experiences emerges.

Masculinity and manhood is as much a gendered phenomenon as femininity and womanhood. While Men and Masculinities Studies has grown as a field, there remain distinct tensions about how to grapple with power, incorporation of feminist critique, and how individuals resist or become complacent with power (Waling, 2019). A major tension within Men and Masculinities Studies exists in how masculinities are understood as roles or types that men inhabit, without looking at how men position themselves within masculinity (Waling, 2019). Questions about agency are important, as they look at how men navigate the structures that shape gendered reproduction and looks at how men resist or change those structures. By seeing men's masculinities as roles they inhabit without looking at how they position themselves within those roles, the question of agency and men's ability to shape masculinities is

unresolvable. Hegemonic masculinity ranks some masculinities above others. The fundamental nature of hegemonic masculinity is a struggle for power and dominance. As a result, understanding the way that men engage in that struggle for power can illuminate the trap of the reproduction of patriarchal power. This project aims to look at the way men understand and position themselves as gamers or nerds. Both of these roles are “liminal” masculinities (Quail, 2011), as the acceptability of these masculinities varies. Due to this liminal status, there is a fertile possibility for research into positioning within masculinities and how individual agency influences the construction of those identities.

### Theoretic Framework

#### Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity is not an identity. It is a set of practices and patterns that constrict possible masculinities in order to establish men as dominate and women as subordinate (Connell, 2005). While hegemonic masculinity is associated with specific traits in the contemporary U.S., these specific traits are not needed to create hegemonic masculinity. It is the processes that determine how traits are defined, enforced and made the normative option that create patriarchal hegemony. This research looks at the creation and normalization of local masculinities. In doing so, the intention is to engage in an examination of hegemonic masculinity and to provide a framework that makes potential intervention into tabletop roleplaying game communities possible. As discussed later in more depth, gaming communities have a history of reproducing patriarchal, heterosexist, and white supremacist oppression. Looking at what men get from these communities helps with understanding why men are invested in these communities. This, in turn, can help with understanding the nature of policing within those communities. If men in these communities are able to access a sense of appropriate masculinity within these communities and

they feel as though they do not otherwise have access to this masculinity, future interventions would need to take that into account.

This research uses Connell's Masculinities (2005) as the basis for analysis of masculinities, as well as Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) later critiques of how hegemonic masculinity has been utilized in academic works. This research also draws on the interaction of hegemonic masculinity and homosociality, particularly with how men's relationships with other men creates normative masculinities. Connell (2005) identifies three broad categories of masculine identities that are characterized by those identities' relationship to hegemony, in addition to hegemonic identities. First, subordinate masculinities are characterized by a failure to be appropriately masculine, particularly masculinities that are seen as weak or feminine in nature. Next, complicit masculinities may not completely fit hegemonic standards but benefit from the "patriarchal dividend", or "the advantage men gain from the overall subordination of women" (Connell, 2005, p. 79; Almog and Kaplan, 2015). Finally, there are marginalized masculinities, the masculinities of marginalized groups that are unable to access hegemonic standards due to oppression. Subordinate masculinities exhibit the qualities opposite of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005, p.78), while marginalized masculinities are affected by other systems of oppression (Connell, 2005, p. 80).

In critique of Connell's work, Christensen and Jensen (2014) present several challenges to this conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity. They believe that there needs to be a clear separation between internal and external hegemonic masculinity. Internal hegemonic masculinity polices the gendered behaviors and expression of other men, while external hegemonic masculinity polices the gendered behaviors and standards of women. This clear separation, they theorize, will make it easier to understand the ways in which men are dominant over other men,

as opposed to looking solely at the ways in which men are dominant over women. Both dimensions of masculinity are fraught with power. However, these dimensions of power have separate context and require different nuanced analysis. Christensen and Jensen (2014) believe that an intersectional approach to masculinity is key in better understanding of how power functions within masculinity, particularly in understanding the connections between macro-level masculinities and micro-level identities. An intersectional approach attuned to nuance and context maintains an open question of how power may exert itself while maintaining attention to the everyday lived realities of men. In addition, separating out external and internal forms of hegemony acknowledges that experiences of gender are not symmetrical. It provides a framework that goes beyond the binary of “men and women”, including room for analysis of nonbinary people, transgender people, and gender nonconforming people. It provides a way to widen the analysis of experiences of people who are not seen as men by patriarchy based on the shared experiences of oppression due to gender. However, even a separation of internal and external hegemony has its analytic limits. People who are occasionally or conditionally accepted (or forced into being) men do not fit neatly into this separation. In particular, transgender men fall into this category of people who are conditionally accepted and whose experiences are characterized by this acceptance or lack of acceptance.

This understanding operates off Foucault’s methodology from *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* (1976), where power must be examined at its farthest capillary points, in the places where power exerts itself on people through discipline and discourse. Discursive and disciplinary power functions to create specific embodiments of gender. The power of masculinities flows through discursive power, particularly the “specific extortion of truth” (Foucault, 1990, p. 97) that limits certain embodiments and functions to positively define the scope and shape of

masculinity (Connell, 2005, p. 68). Discursive power functions by defining men and masculinity as the opposite of women and femininity (Connell, 2005) in such a way that hides masculinity's constructed nature within a false binary. Cartoonish creations of masculinity that are easily dismissed – meat-eating, gun-toting men of action films – serve as powerful role in obscuring the equally narrow ideals of masculinities that follow normative life paths. This includes the idealized heterosexual husband and head-of-household who provides a comfortable life for his wife and children. These masculinities are constructed and upheld through discourses that define limited options to fulfill the destiny of “being a man”.

Hegemonic masculinity does not mean that men live lives without discomfort or struggle. While hegemonic masculinity as a whole works to ensure men ascend above women, it creates a hierarchy of masculinities (Connell, 2005). The policing of masculinity can be a violent force, involving both physical and social violence. Bird's (1996) work on homosociality explicitly included the policing of men's emotional expression in homosocial relationships. Men who showed too much emotion, such as after the end of a romantic relationship, were categorized as wimps. Likewise, Kimmel (2004) theorizes homophobia as integral to masculinity, particularly in the ways that “being a man” is equated with a refusal to be a wimp or overly feminine. The ways that masculinity harms men is typically understood under the umbrella of toxic masculinity, or the “need to aggressively compete and dominate others” (Kupers, 2005). Toxic masculinity is this expression of overt domination. It can include the suppression of emotion, exposure to physical violence, the importance of sexual prowess and conquest, and the need for a constant exertion of power in order to maintain appropriate masculinity (Kimmel, 2004; Connell, 2005; Kupers, 2005). Kimmel (2004) argues that the fundamental power structure of masculinity is obscured from men. They are unable to see that those in power are powerful men and the

cause of their woes (Kimmel, 2004). Rather, white men place blame with any number of targets, including feminism and racial equality movements (Kimmel, 2013). Within gaming itself, GamerGate provides a prime example. GamerGate was a loosely organized community of white men that mobilizes against “social justice warriors” and those critical of gaming communities toxic masculinity (Chess & Shaw, 2015). While GamerGate is a diffuse organization with unclear and sometimes contradictory goals, it has served as an aggressive backlash to inclusion of women, people of color, and LGBT people within games.

### Homosociality

Men construct, refine and maintain their understanding of what it means to be a man by being in spaces with other men (Connell, 2005; Bird, 1996; Kimmel, 2004; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). These understandings typically are created through homosocial relationships, which are nonsexual relationships and attractions between members of the same gender. Homosocial spaces vary, but are marked by their oppression of women as social participants. Examples include Bird’s (1996) research into male-dominated bar settings, indie rock bands (Haenfler 2015) and, as illuminated in this research, gaming spaces. Examining the ways the homosociality functions reveals the ways it creates legitimate masculinities and delegitimizes other possibilities.

Social groups and spaces are homosocial when they both are physically and symbolically focused on relationships between members of the same sex (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004). Groups do not need to have the total exclusion of women and the token inclusion of women often serves to reinforce men as the center. This is done by including women who adhere to patriarchal standards and serve as the standard for inclusion, by accepting objectification or by becoming “one of the boys” (Bird, 1996; K Kimmel & Aronson, 2004). Groups and spaces also need to

serve a role in creating participant's worldviews, value systems, political leanings, or other types of opinions in such a way that men's inputs are foregrounded (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004).

However, the nature of homosocial spaces are often rendered invisible to participants, as men are often not aware when they are in spaces that center men (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004).

Homosociality is not limited to the reproduction of masculinity, but it has been applied more within Men and Masculinities Studies than with women and nonbinary people (Hammarén & Johansson, 2014). Due to the structure of patriarchal power, men are only able to receive patriarchal acceptance as men by other men (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004). The domination of women and other people who experience gender-based oppression means that they can gain power and acceptance from men (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004).

When individuals with non-normative traits of masculinity spend time in homosocial settings, traits that counter hegemonic norms are suppressed within these settings. In Bird's (1996) defining research about the connection between homosociality and hegemonic masculinity, men indicated that they suppress non-hegemonic traits, such as expressing strong emotion or showing concern for relationships. This is enforced by a competitive self-policing between men, where a "pecking order" (Bird, 1996) is established and requires men's participation in order to maintain status. This is done by making men invested in and responsible for creating a hierarchy; those who don't engage in "pecking" are subjugated and those that do are made more dominant. Resistance to the ideals of the homosocial space by individuals is difficult, as resisting leads to removal from domination.

Violations of norms do not typically lead to changes in hegemonic practices in these spaces; they instead lead to punishment or penalizing of the violator (Bird, 1996). Individual conflicts with hegemonic masculinity do not typically lead to a change or reimagining of



hegemonic masculinity. Dellinger (2004) found in his study of accountants in the porn industry that men claimed that they were unlike “the guys” who consumed pornography and denounced sexism. However, their office conversations often included overtly sexualized and sexist commentary, which was encouraged by other men working in the office. Arxer (2011) stresses that hegemonic masculinity must be seen as a hybridizing force, where challenges to hegemony are absorbed and used to continue creation of hierarchies. Homosociality, Arxer (2011) concludes, is an integral to the formation of hegemonic masculinity. However, other scholar see homosociality as more complex and ambiguous. Hammarén & Johansson (2014) see a more nuanced possibility for homosociality, including some homosocial spaces and relationships serving to challenge hegemonic masculinity.

### Gender Performativity

This research looks at the way in which these masculinities are constructed by paying particular attention to Judith Butler’s (1990) ideas about gender performativity. Gender performativity is the way by which gender is created through performative actions. (Butler 1990) Gender is created through the repetition of the decisions about how to walk, dress or talk (Butler 1990). For this research, the questions of how discursive power works to create gender has strong implication. Butler sees discursive power at work in every moment of gendered expression – and there are few moments outside of gendered expression. The difference between performance and performativity is highlighted in this project, as players both express themselves and take on the performance of characters. However, these performances are separate from the performativity of the player’s gender. The player may choose to explicitly perform a gender for the character that they are playing, and this performance may affect the way that the player’s

gender is perceived. However, the difference between player and character provides an insulating difference that may protect the player from the policing of a performance of a character.

### Literature Review

There are nerds that say that their experience of bullying places them in a similar experience of oppression to women, gay men or other oppressed groups (Cross, 2017). Nerd identities are delegitimized and subject to intense pressure from the systems of power that bring into being hegemonic masculinity and face a particular social violence associated with 'being a nerd' (Kendall, 1999). However, in order to understand how nerd-as-identity functions is to look at the way that these identities are constructed. This necessitates looking at the challenges these identities present to hegemonic masculinity. If the challenges are focused on only slightly adjusting masculinity in order to allow nerds access to hegemonic power, then these identities are complicit in hegemony. If the challenge is to destabilize the ways by which masculinity is made normative and to provide space for men to develop traits counter to hegemonic masculinity, then there is a possibility of rupture and resistance.

### Nerd-As-Masculinity

The masculinity of nerds is of interest in understanding the way that white subjugated masculinities interact with hegemonic masculine ideals. Nerd spaces provide the potential for the creation of truly alternative masculinities that reject the mandates of toxic masculinity. However, there is also the potential for these masculinities to be created in such a way that reinforces hegemonic masculinity. This research is interested in looking at tabletop roleplaying game (TTRPG) communities in order to understand the ways in which masculinity is constructed in these spaces. The games around which these communities are formed often encourage traditionally feminine-coded behavior as part of the game and do not require overtly masculine

traits to successfully play. However, gaming communities are assumed to be dominated by men (Chess & Baines, 2017).

Nerds have been portrayed many ways, occupying a spectrum of representation from socially awkward to technological wunderkind (Kendall, 2000). Kendall (2000) examined the cultural production of nerds through movies, news article and Internet materials. In doing so, Kendall (2000) found that the portrait of the nerd includes an interest in school, particular math and science, an emphasis on intelligence, and extensive knowledge of computers. Nerds are also primarily white men, though self-identification has been claimed by individuals outside of this narrow category (Kendall, 2011). However, nerds as a group have a wide range of possible social statuses, including nerds that are more accepted and nerds that are more maligned (Quail, 2011). Nerds, as a group, have a “liminal status” with regards to masculinity. Some nerds, like those focused on technology development, are more accepted. Other nerds, such as those that focus on interests like gaming and comic book collection, are more marginalized (Quail, 2011). In general, though, nerds lack of hegemonic status but still aspire toward that hegemony, particularly in their relationships with women (Kendall, 2000; Almog & Kaplan, 2015). Almog & Kaplan (2015) found that many participants in pick-up artist communities self-identified nerds who used gamification techniques to frame relationships with women. These techniques rest on the assumption that women are prizes to be earned and a desire for patriarchal power.

Nerds fall into a pathologized vision of modern manhood. They are identified as a tenuous adolescence stretched into adulthood. They also are the cultural nightmare of adults living with their parents against U.S. norms, unable to sustain normative romantic relationships, and not participating in normative employment. While these attributes have been assigned more generally to young adult men recently, the subjugated masculinity of nerds serves as an

important touchstone. It is vital to note that the image of the nerd in popular discourse is that of a man that fails to live up to racial, gender and class supremacy due to a combined personal and societal failure. Part of the way in which the nerd has been subjugated has been through a pathologization of their failed masculinity, where the failure to live an appropriately masculine life becomes a sort-of disease in need of fixing. In Julian Carter's *The Heart of Whiteness* (2002), he outlines the historical ways that failure to meet normative standards of white masculinity has been pathologized and treated in such a way to enforce white supremacist notions of masculinity. The inability of a man to be sufficiently employed or to perform sexually was a disease to be diagnosed and treated so that he could return to his destined life (Carter, 2002). It seems like there is a similar focus on nerds and the inability of modern men to sufficiently fulfill the reproductive and social destinies of domination.

#### Game Studies and Gamer Identity

Game studies is a relatively new interdisciplinary field, with a general consideration of 2001 as "Year One" by the publication of the first issue of *Games Studies*, a journal dedicated to the field (Mäyrä and Sotamaa, 2017). Historically, technical and computer sciences, education (via serious games studies), and humanities-based game design are the major "clusters" of study within the field (Melcer et al, 2015), but research around the social impact of games and gaming communities has emerged recently as a new cluster within game studies (Mäyrä and Sotamaa, 2017). Given the heavy consumption of video games in the United States, critical examination of the effects of games and gaming communities serves an important role in understand their effects on culture. A survey of researchers within the game studies field found a general agreement that games can have both positive and negative effects, though self-identification as a gamer and the

background discipline of the researcher did affect the strength of researcher's belief in these effects (Quandt et al, 2015).

Determining the demographic characteristics of all people who play games is complicated. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) 2018 report indicates that 60% of Americans play some sort of video game daily, and that 55% of people who play games are men (ESA, 2018). Overall, Americans spent thirty-six billion dollars on video gaming in 2017 (ESA, 2018). Tabletop roleplaying games is a relatively smaller industry, with only forty-five million dollars spent on tabletop roleplaying games in 2016 (Griep, 2017). However, both industries continue to grow: tabletop roleplaying games grew 29% from 2015 to 2016 (Griep, 2017) and video games grew approximately 18% from 2016 to 2017 (ESA, 2018). Tabletop roleplaying game participation is hard to determine, but the Orr Industry Group Report (2018) indicated that in the first quarter of 2018, there were 102,860 unique players participating in tabletop roleplaying games on the popular virtual table site Roll20, up from 73,505 players (40% increase) in the first quarter of 2017 (Orr Industry Group, 2018). The tabletop roleplaying game hobby is growing rapidly, and the foundations of research on video gaming communities provides a strong starting point for research.

The "gamer" label (primarily used in the context of video games) can be used to understand how nerd identities may function as a local masculinity. Research indicates that the gamer label functions as a specific, named masculine identity (Kendall, 2000; Shaw, 2012a; Shaw, 2013; Massanari, 2015; Fron, et al, 2007; Condis, 2015; Almong & Kaplan, 2015). There is a strong connection between the gamer, nerd, and geek labels, particularly since many of these communities exist in in mostly online spaces (Massanari, 2015). However, little research has been done to determine the exact connections or demographic overlap. Most of the research on

gamer identity has been focused on those that play video games but provides a foundation of research to think about how identities function in game-centered spaces. As video games have become more mainstream, policing of who and who isn't a gamer has become increasingly severe (Condis, 2015; Chess and Shaw, 2015; Massanari, 2015; Todd, 2015). There is a significant difference between gamer as an identity, the gamer label, and participation in gaming (Shaw 2012a). Shaw (2012a) found that gamer identity is strongly influenced by other identities, especially race, class and gender. Women often avoid gaming because of how women were treated in the gaming spaces (Shaw 2012a).

Scandals revolving around gender within the gaming community are reoccurring events. While GamerGate received heightened attention, the movement's attempt to police women is not unprecedented. Women have been harassed in online gaming communities due after criticizing online web comics for making and aggressively defending jokes about rape (Salter and Blodgett (2012) and that harassment bled into in-person gatherings. This includes a history of threats of violence to women who are game developers or critics and a historic underrepresentation of women in game development. Women gamers report that their status as outsiders in gaming communities mark their experiences, and that harassment in gaming spaces was common (Cote, 2015). Assunção (2015) found that 62% of women who participated in violent video game communities were exposed to toxic behavior in those communities on a regular basis.

The policing of women serves as a way by which the gaming community constructed the gamer identity. The games that women are more likely to choose to play, such a mobile or social gaming, are less likely to be considered canonical games and are more likely to be considered casual gaming (Shaw 21012a). This is despite the amount of time that the average player spends on the game, the level of narrative depth, or other factors (Shaw 2012a). Women's gaming isn't

seen as real gaming. This is reflected when looking explicitly at the ways people identify as gamers. Men are more likely overall to identify as gamers when compared to women with similar patterns of play (Shaw 2012a) and women are more likely to avoid games due to negative connotations of gaming communities (Cote, 2015). There is nothing inherent in playing video games that excludes women; it is the community and discourse around gaming that limits women's involvement.

### Statement of the Problem

#### Purpose of the Study

This research examines the way that men's experiences and relationships within tabletop gaming interact with their understanding of masculinity. This research is interested in seeing how men relate to their masculinity, how they see masculinity in general, and how men negotiate access to masculinity when it is denied to them. It is also interested in the ways that men relate to other men in these spaces. If these spaces are centered on men, then these spaces offer a homosocial arena for men to access masculinity, particularly in ways that may not be accessible in other spaces. Homosocial spaces not only allow for the construction of masculinities, but also directly contribute to the reproduction of masculinity. In these spaces, and through relationships with other men, men learn acceptable "manly" behavior and learn the consequences for violating those behaviors. This research, in part, seeks to understand why these spaces are so important to the men in them and why these spaces have been the subject of intense social policing.

The central questions of this study are: How do men understand their involvement in tabletop roleplaying games? How do men understand their experiences of masculinity? What connections are there between involvement in tabletop roleplaying games and experiences of masculinity?

#### Significance of the Study

This research advances work within critical masculinity studies regarding alternative masculinities, as well as the possibilities for imagining less harmful ways for men to access and understand manhood. It also advances research within game studies by providing additional evidence and research for understanding how “gamer” identities and organizations are tied to masculinity. In this research, gaming communities serve as a local site of illumination of how power and hegemonic masculinity reproduces. Masculinity is necessary for systems of sexist oppression to function. Hegemonic masculinity is best understood as the process by which some masculinities are made dominant, some masculinities are made to submit, and men are as a whole made dominant over women (Connell, 2005). Masculinities that fail to meet up to standards of hegemony are still made complicit. Men who fail to meet hegemonic standards may still aspire to those standards or wish to only change the standards enough for their full acceptance. Providing an alternative masculinity is difficult and seems to require a community that is aware of the interplay of hegemonic masculinity and sexism, as well as politically organized to resist the siren call of power through masculinity. As a result, masculinities almost always lead to the oppression and policing of women. Understanding the ways men are coerced into masculinity, how power is offered or denied to them, and the ways men cope when they don’t meet hegemonic standards is important in understanding where and how interventions can occur.

This is a particularly concerning dynamic within gaming communities due to the large number of people that play games. Industry reports indicate that approximately 165 million people in the United States play more than 3 hours of games per week (ESA, 2018). Feminist, anti-racist and queer critiques of gaming communities have been met with overt hostility and silencing attempts. Most notably, in 2014 a movement of gamers known as GamerGate began to



form in response to what they saw as “social justice warrior (sjw)” meddling in games. These included claims that activism resulted in unethical collusion between game developers and game journalists (Chess & Shaw, 2015). While the GamerGate movement is an often incoherent movement with diffused power (as it’s made up of anonymous members with no set leadership), the real result of this movement has been a chilling effect” on academic work and work centered on equity within gaming (Chess & Shaw, 2015). Prominent feminist voices have been the subject of threats on a multitude of grounds, including doxing (the public release of personal identifiable information such as home addresses, phone numbers and social security numbers), swatting (providing false leads to law enforcement to lead to raids of critic’s homes by police agencies), and organized online harassment through social media (including rape and death threats directed at critics) (Chess & Shaw, 2015). Understanding the ways that masculinity is constructed in these spaces might provide ways to intervene and restructure those dynamics, as these actions seem to come from a culture rooted in toxic masculinity.

### Methods

This research looks at questions regarding masculinity, subcultural identity, and navigating gendered identity in a changing society. It is also interested in understanding that ways that masculinity is created and contested. In particular, it seeks to see if themes and patterns from video gaming communities are applicable within tabletop gaming communities. Given the nature of these questions, this research was conducted using in depth semi-structured interviews that sought to probe the complications between identity, interactions with others in games, and community standing. While individuals often find it difficult to identify why or how they made decisions regarding identity, this interview structure allowed for participants to speak meaningfully about their experiences.

Participants were recruited through a snowball sample. The initial participants were recruited via in-person flyers at independently owned game stores and word of mouth. These independently owned game stores serve as community centers for people who engage in tabletop roleplaying games. The stores used for this research offer publicly available gaming spaces, community boards for finding games, and organized play programs that offer public drop-in tabletop roleplaying game opportunities. The majority of participants (5 participants, 71%) indicated that they heard about the research via word of mouth, and the other participants (2 participants, 29%) indicated that they heard about this study via flyers in the stores. Participants were screened for eligibility; men who were over the age of eighteen, had played a TTRPG within the past month and were able to travel to the interview sites were considered eligible. The limitation of in-person interview was the most significant factor in determining eligibility. The majority of interested participants were only available for remote interviews.

Interviews were conducted in person at independent game stores. Seven participants were recruited and the average length of interviews was 29 minutes. Participants were recruited on a rolling basis until thematic saturation was reached. While participants were not asked about their sexuality or racial identity during the research process, many participants self-identified this information during their interviews (see Table 1). This recruitment strategy focused on ensuring that the sample included those who engaged in tabletop roleplaying games in a variety of settings and roles (see Table 2). This sample size allowed for sufficient cases to have a diverse set of experience while also ensuring that the data remained manageable for analysis (Babbie 2015). Interviews were initially recorded, then transcribed by the researcher using Nvivo's transcription features. After transcription was complete, the original recordings were deleted.

The interviews were conducted in order to allow for participants to speak freely and at length about their experiences. Interviews began with questions regarding tabletop gaming and interest in their favorite characters in order to establish rapport. As Taylor (2018) examines,

**TABLE 1: Descriptive Characteristics**

	n (%)
<b>Gender</b>	
Man	7 (100)
<b>Race</b>	
White	4 (58)
Mixed Race	1 (14)
Did Not Provide	2 (28)
<b>Sexuality</b>	
Heterosexual	3 (43)
Gay	2 (28)
Demisexual	1 (14)
Did Not Provide	1 (14)

Note: Race and Sexuality voluntarily self-disclosed during interview

gender, sexuality and race each mediate the researcher-participant relationship within games. Straight white men are to build rapport quickly, as they're accepted as potential participants within the space (Taylor, 2018). While Taylor's methodological reflections focus on resisting complicity in research, the mediation of perceived gender and sexuality required particular concern for rapport building. After initial questions about tabletop gaming, such as how

**TABLE 2: Tabletop RPG Engagement**

	n (%)
Tabletop RPG Participation	
More than once a week	3 (43)
Weekly	1 (14)
Biweekly	1 (14)
Monthly	0 (0)
Less than once a month	2 (28)
Preferred Community Role	
Primarily Play	3 (43)
Equally Play and Gamemaster	3 (43)
Primarily Gamemaster	1 (14)

participants got involved or what they enjoyed about playing the games, the interviewer then asked questions about how participants saw and understood their masculinity. Given that men often struggle to engage with critical questions about masculinity, and that the interviewer was not a man, follow-up questions and probes were utilized to substantively engage with larger questions regarding masculinity. This included asking multiple questions regarding perceptions of masculinity and their experiences with them across multiple life stages.

Transcripts were analyzed with a focus on hybrid thematic analysis and utilizing Nvivo software. Thematic analysis permits for a flexible analysis of data within a structured framework. It also provides the ability for the researcher to incorporate a “hybrid approach” to analysis, focusing on both the data gathered in the study and the underlying theory guiding the questions

(Swain, 2018). By utilizing both deductive and inductive approaches, this research attempted to balance the participant's reported experiences with a critical understanding of masculinity. This reflects the epistemologies that underpin this research: it both utilizes established theories regarding masculinity while applying these theories to new communities (Swain, 2018). As the interviewing and initial coding process were completed concurrently, later interviews utilized more probes where more details were needed for clarity. Later interviews focused more on participant discussion of power dynamics in group roles, as the differences in social power between gamemasters, players, and other roles became apparent. Interviews continued until saturation was reached, to a total of 7 participants. Some initial ("pre-empirical") codes were created from the questions, utilizing the theory underpinning those questions (Swain 2018). Other codes were created from the data during the initial analysis. After creating the codes and performing analysis of all the interviews, the interviews were then re-read to apply codes and ensure that all applicable instances were coded appropriately. These codes were then collapsed into themes, which were identified around dimensions of social capital, participant perceptions of tabletop roleplaying game spaces, benefits of participation and perceptions of gender within tabletop roleplaying games. Codes and themes were organized using Nvivo for analysis.

**TABLE 3: Themes and Subthemes**

Themes and subthemes	Example statement
Theme 1. Participant views of these spaces	
1a. Spaces are seen as inclusive.	“It was a very good table, very inclusive, very representative.”
1b. It’s hard to find a good group.	“Most of the time, when people are playing, it’s hard enough just to find a group. So you have to jump at the opportunities that are available...”
1c. Participation requires teamwork and commitment.	“Everyone is sacrificing their time and their life to come play with you. You need to be willing to put the same commitment in for them:
Theme 2. Perceptions of Gender in TTRPGs	
2a. Women used to be excluded but aren’t anymore.	“Women aren’t having to hide behind their boyfriends anymore.”
2b. Playing a woman is the same as playing a man.	“They just said ‘she’ instead of ‘he’.”
2c. Rules lawyering and power gaming are an expression of a certain type of masculinity.	“For a lot of dudes, nothing gets them off more than rolling a fistful of dice and throwing a huge fireball.”
2d. Policing of gender is rendered invisible	“Just to imagine that scenario [masculinity being questioned] seems ridiculous”
Theme 3. Benefits of participation	
3a. Connection with others	“The storyteller is another human at the table that can react instead of being based on a pre-programmed script.” “It’s a wonderful escape” “It is an outlet for my energy and creativity”
3b. Player agency and shared story telling	
3c. Escapism	
3d. Self-expression	
Theme 4. Social capital in TTRPGs	
4a. Rules knowledge and leadership are connected	“People tend to ask me the rules questions... I tend to take on the role of party leader”
4b. Serving as GM is work but allows for control of group	“As GM, you have control... You’re arbiter of what happens.”

## Analysis

Participant discussion of their experiences in TTRPG communities falls into roughly four themes: how participants viewed these spaces, what they got from their involvement, how social standing and power is determined within those spaces, and how they experience masculinity. Of these four themes, four subthemes emerged as consistent aspects of involvement in these communities. All four themes – participant social standing, benefits of involvement, sense of masculinity, and understanding of these spaces – naturally inform each other. The highlighted subthemes focus on illustrating how these four areas interact with each other. There is also a focus on themes that reflect construction and meaning-making of gender. Given the way that masculinity is typically made invisible, this analysis pulls out threads of masculinity to make their role in these communities apparent.

Theme One: *These spaces are filled with diverse characters... but not people.*

One of the central questions of this research about these spaces serving as homosocial spaces. Homosocial spaces, broadly, serve as the sites where men interact with other men. In general, the more restrictive spaces are in terms of gender, the more likely it is that the space serves as a homosocial site. Some homosocial spaces are formally restricted by gender, such as single-gender sports teams or clubs. However, some spaces are informally restricted. Bird's (1996) research into bars noted that there were women in these spaces. What characterizes these spaces are that they are structured around men's relationships with other men.

Participants generally reported that they considered the groups that they played with as diverse, or that they preferred to play with diverse groups. However, when pressed, the majority of participants reported that most of their groups were majority men or all men (n=5, 71%). Two participants indicated that their groups were an "even split" of both men and women (n=2, 29%).

Only one participant indicated that they were in a group that was mostly women (14%). One participant indicated that a nonbinary person had been involved in one of their previously groups. That participant indicated that they were a member of three regularly meeting groups and participated in weekly public games hosted as drop-in events at game stores. Those that reported on the racial makeup of their groups (n=2, 29%) indicated that their current groups were all white, though the participants in both cases indicated they had been in groups with people of color previously.

Participants offered varying reasons for the lack of women in their regular groups. A general theme among participants is that the TTRPG community used to be hostile to women, but things had changed to be more inclusive. In particular, participants identified that women were now able to participate in groups without having to be the girlfriend or wife of another player. However, participants reported that a substantial proportion of women in their groups were in a relationship or family members of another player in the group. Participants reported playing with a total of 11 women, and 8 of those women (72%) were identified as being either family members (such as in-laws, daughters, or sisters) or as being in a relationship (wives, fiances, or girlfriends) of other players within the group. In contrast, men in groups were typically identified as friends, roommates, work colleagues or acquaintances of other members of the game. Only one participant discussed a man who was invited to the group because he was the boyfriend of a woman in the group.

However, participants described these spaces as generally diverse spaces that allowed for a wide range of experiences. In particular, participants focused on the ways in which women weren't treated poorly in their gaming groups or the ways by which the characters people were playing provided diverse representation. Participants overwhelmingly noted that playing a



character of a different gender didn't affect the way in which they played the game. Out of the six participants that reported playing a character that was a woman, all reported that that playing a woman did not notably differ from playing a man at the table. In particular, participants indicated that because they were clearly men playing women, the way the other players treated them didn't affect their interactions beyond, as one participant put it, "they said she instead of he".

Despite identifying these spaces as open to gender exploration, participants overwhelmingly indicated that women were treated differently in these spaces as whole, both through explicit observations and implicit ones. Participants generally indicated that their groups were welcoming to women, even if women weren't currently playing in their groups (n=6). Several participants indicated that this was as a result of what they valued in choosing a group (n=3). One participant explicitly indicated that they kept an even balance of men and women in their group because it "makes for a better storytelling experience". Compared to their own groups, men indicated that women were marginalized in the large community in a new of ways. In particular, women were expected to be more interested in support roles (n=2), to be involved because of a significant other (n=3), and to be less adept at knowing the game rules (n=2). Likewise, while participants didn't explicitly indicate that women were less interested in the game, four participants discussed women who left their game groups because they were uninterested in playing. Only one participant indicated a man left because of disinterest in the game. This interpretation by players is notable, as men were identified as leaving due to scheduling difficulties or conflicts with other players. Scheduling difficulties and disinterest can be linked, as they both involve whether or not a particular game is a priority.

The desire for a space to be inclusive and welcoming does not make it so. Participants overwhelmingly discussed inclusivity in TTRPGs as a positive aspect of the community (n=6,

86%). Diverse characters do not mean that there are diverse players. These character representations are also prone to misstep. Three participants told anecdotes of playing a diverse character that included problematic assumptions, at least from the abbreviated version. For example, one participant (who self-identified as heterosexual) said that he once had a secondary character who was a closeted gay man. An ongoing joke for this character was that the rest of the party would attempt to out him. While the participant indicated that their decision to play a gay man showed how inclusive their table was, what they shared of that character exemplifies the complications of representation and representational politics. The elision of representative characters and inclusion of diverse players allows for participants to feel as though they are meeting the needs of typically underrepresented and oppressed populations, while failing to include players who come from those populations.

Men are centered in these spaces and overrepresented in the population of tabletop roleplaying game players. As men talk about their experiences and relationships within these spaces, they generally discuss the ways that they are interacting with other men. This supports an understanding of these spaces as homosocial. They're spaces that are centered on men's involvement, with a mostly token inclusion of women and other participants who experience gender-based oppression. However, since each gaming group is a separate space and community, there are groups that exist that don't serve as this role for men (such as all- or mostly-women groups). For spaces to function as homosocial spaces, they have to also focus on the symbolic exclusion of women, non-men and people only conditionally accepted as men (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004). In addition, the way by which masculinity is rendered invisible and made the "default" makes it difficult for men to see how their experiences are gendered experiences. By

being able to articulate the way women are treated differently, they are only able to identify they experience gender by pointing out where women are harmed.

Theme Two: *You don't have to be manly to play TTRPGs, but you do have to be smart. Being smart is the alternative to being strong.*

When asked about how they defined masculinity, the majority of participants (n=6, 86%) showed some struggle with defining masculinity. Participants generally paused for a long period of time (n=6), said that they didn't have a good definition (n=2), or asked for the question to be repeated or rephrased (n=3). This reflects the ways in which masculinity is expected to be unremarkable. Masculinity serves as the default, and the policing of masculinity typically hides its nature. Instead, the policing of masculinity focuses on “emotional detachment, competitiveness, and the sexual objectification of women” (Bird, 1996, p. 131). Four participants provided no articulated definition of manliness or masculinity, two participants focused on values-based definitions of manly, and one participant indicated that manliness was “very strictly the physical aspect”. In general, participants focused on the positive aspects of masculinity more than the negative aspects. When discussing masculinity as values-based, participants focused on leadership skills (n=2), being accepting of other people (n=3), and being self-confident (n=2). These definitions of masculinity miss crucial aspects identified within masculinity studies. All definitions of masculinity were focused individual identities, excluding broad social construction of masculine identities.

In comparison, when asked if they were seen as manly or masculine enough as children, participants were able to quickly and readily answer. Four (57%) participants indicated that they did generally feel manly enough as children, and three (43%) said that they did not. Participants also identified broader social constructions and fewer values-based definitions of masculinity.

Those that discussed their childhood experiences focused on the way their bodies defined them as masculine or not (n=4). This continued into their discussions of how their characters were seen or not seen as masculine. Characters who were created to be “strong”, such as barbarians that solved most problems with swords or wizards that cast powerful damaging spells, were typically discussed as more manly characters. Support characters, such as healers and thieves, were characterized as more feminine. This also matched with the expectation for player behaviors. While most participants (n=5) said that playing TTRPGs did not require them to be manly, they did indicate that there were specific roles women were expected to play. These were primarily support roles that assisted other characters, as opposed to characters that were more solo players or received the support.

Participants were interested in TTRPGs due to the ability for them to engage in intellectual (n=2), escapist (n=3), or imaginative activities (n=3). They also often contrasted TTRPG interests with interest in sports, particularly football. Two participants specifically identified TTRPG participation as a “beta male” choice, and sports as an “alpha male” choice. The ways in which participants discussed their TTRPG participation mirrored how they discussed their experience being nerds (n=6) or gamers (n=7). All but one participant indicated that they now thought of themselves as nerds, and that being a nerd was generally positive for them. One participant describe identifying as a nerd as reclaiming a slur. Participants who strongly identified as nerds indicated that they felt as though this label was originally a negative stereotype that was thrust upon them as children (n=3) or was something they were destined to be (n=2). These participants felt as though being smart or excelling at classwork was part of this negative stereotype, as well as having passion for their various hobbies (n=3).

Through contrasts of intellect and athletics, it is clear that participants generally see their intellect as a constructed alternative way to access masculinity. Participants (n=5) indicated that they felt empowered while playing the game. In addition, participants identified that they felt powerful because they were able to be someone that they weren't (n=4) and that their ability to master the rules of the game was related to how much power individual players had. One participant describes TTRPG participation as "escapism to the point that they make a competition out of it" and as a form of "improvisational math". In this way, TTRPGs and other forms of gaming allow for participants to engage in competition with other men for intellect, rather than athleticism. This incorporates a trait that participants originally saw as negative and turns it into a trait that can be used to prove themselves to other men in their social lives.

*Theme Three: These spaces facilitate intimate connections, even if these connections are only between characters.*

Every participant pointed toward some sort of social dynamic when discussing why they choose to play with the people they play with, and why they continue playing. Participants discussed their experiences in TTRPGs as being commitments (n=3), group-oriented (n=2), and enjoyable because they were playing with other people (n=3). Participants often compared TTRPG experiences to playing video games. Unlike video games, participants saw that TTRPGs allowed for more autonomy as both players and GMs. Participants indicated that they liked that they were able to experience a shared storytelling experience without a pre-determined ending. For example, one participant explained that they were serving as a GM for a game where the players opted to befriend the villain instead of choosing to fight him. This wouldn't be possible in a pre-scripted video game and allowed for both the GM and the players to feel as though their actions were meaningful and unique to their group.

This sense of community was consistent throughout participants. Those that participated in public drop-in games (n=3) indicated that part of the appeal of those games is that they became closer with strangers as they continued to play with them, and that those connections became more meaningful as they participated more. Three participants indicated that they most enjoyed their experiences when there was a sense of cohesion and community with their group.

Participant One: There's something different about it when you have a committed group of the same people that you build your characters with... You have these very intimate relationships. They just know each other well.

However, as much as participants discussed connections with other characters, few participants discussed the importance of connections with players. Rather, they framed the role of players as commitments or responsibilities to show up and engage with the game. Two participants discussed the importance of players being able to manage the separation between their characters and themselves for the purposes of the story. One participant explicitly said:

Participant Two: I think that playing with people that you're close and good friends with can work out, but it can also cause trouble or issues with the relationship.

Given that five of seven participants (71%) reported playing multiple times a week, and that typical game sessions last several hours, participants spend a considerable amount of time with the people that they play with. For participants to express the fulfillment of connection from character to character instead of from player to player implies that the character-character relationship serves as a proxy for the player-player relationship, to the point that closeness between characters may supersede distance between players.

Alienation is a well-established aspect of contemporary U.S. masculinity. Men's loneliness, lack of touch, and stigma around mental health struggles are often identified as one of

costs of masculinity (de Boise & Hearn, 2017). Particularly, it is the display of men's emotions that are limited. In discussing these experiences, it seemed that the performance of a character allowed for men to express emotions that they normally wouldn't be permitted. Given the way that men describe character policing and their reaction to it, it seems negative reactions to character actions are separate from negative reactions to the players themselves. While Kimmel (2004) identifies this as part of the connection between masculinity and homophobia, other frameworks focus on how this is a result of discourse (de Boise & Hearn, 2017). While these two frameworks can be connected, frameworks about discursive power illuminate why there is a difference between character performance and player actions.

Theme Four: *Power gaming is an undesirable but masculine practice.*

“Power gaming”, “rules lawyering” and a general focus on mastery of the game mechanics was typically identified as a masculine trait by participants. In particular, characters that were built to be good at the mechanical aspect of the game were associated with doing damage in combat situations. Rules lawyering and power gaming also serve to establish capital within gaming spaces (Dashiell, 2017). However, other research on rules lawyering identified it as a tactic only available for men, as it relies on other participants accepting the rules lawyer as being correct in their interpretations (Dashiell, 2017). Rules lawyering also typically involves participants interrupting others to correct them and runs the risk of having other participants in the game choose to shun or exclude the rules lawyer (Dashiell, 2017). As a result, rules lawyering tends to be almost exclusively available to men as a way to gain capital in these social circles. This tactic can be connected to a general use of technological language and interruption as a way men are able to gain power in conversations (Salter, 2018). Salter (2018) discusses how a combination of aggression, competition and gamification combine in a way create

“technological rationality” to justify harassment. Rules lawyering and power gaming both involve players creating an argument based on a pre-existing rules to have the game resolve in their favor.

One participant explicitly identified another player’s rules lawyering as a way that he was made to feel less masculine. The connection to the character’s power and the player’s sense of masculinity was explicit. As the participant put it:

Participant 1: “When I was talking with the same person who was ranting about how I had sub-optimized my character... I felt sort of emasculated... I don’t think it was anyone else questioning my masculinity as it was me questioning my confidence in character building...”

Other participants discussed the ways in which powerful characters were able to negate encounters in the game. This is important, because when one character at a table is able to single-handedly complete an encounter or task, it prevents others from being able to participate in the game. One participant described themselves as a former power game who created characters to overcome specific challenges, and then would complete the challenges themselves. He noted that he stopped creating powerful characters because it upset him when other people in the group reacted poorly to how his character would finish combats before other players could participate.

This is in opposition to the traits that participants indicated that they valued when choosing a group. Generally, participants indicated that their overwhelming preference was for a group that worked as a team and allowed for everyone to participate (n=5). Participants specifically indicated that they did not value knowledge of the rules when choosing who to invite to participate in groups (n=6). New players could be taught rules, but they cannot be ‘taught’ a focus on the storytelling aspect of the game. However, the some participants (n=3) that indicated



that rules knowledge was not an important prerequisite for joining said that they preferred groups that had more of a focus on the combat aspect of the game.

Rules knowledge was also associated with being the party leader. All participants that indicated that their characters took on leadership roles (n=3) indicated that they also were particularly knowledgeable about the rules system for the game they played. Those who served as in party leader roles downplayed their interest in taking on those roles. They described the role as being something they took on because no one else would step up, the story wasn't progressing because no one know what to do or that no one was interested in the plot. Likewise, the one participant that indicated that they solely served as a GM described themselves and their GM style as being particularly mechanically-minded, while also being focused on telling a story that they couldn't tell in "someone else's game". This connection between party leaders and rules experts is an interesting overlap, as both traits (leadership and knowledge of the game mechanics) are typically coded as masculine traits. More importantly, it potentially means that knowledge of rules provides an air of authority that positions both the player and the player's characters as the one in charge of determining the rules underpinning the game's fictional reality.

The participants who self-identified as being mostly interested in the rules and being party leaders specifically identified enjoying TTRPGs because it allowed them to feel both powerful and to be someone else. These participants also indicated that they generally felt as though they were masculine enough, and that they had felt as though they were masculine enough as children. The clustering of power, rules knowledge, leadership roles, and sense of masculinity shows the through line of how neutral game-related experiences (such as being seen as knowledgeable of the rules set) and masculinity are connected. Although participants did not explicitly identify masculinity as an important trait for determining social standing, it seems to

serve as an underpinning factor. This may also serve to obscure the way that gender affects participant's experiences.

## Discussion

### Implications

Research into masculinities have illustrated the ways that men struggle to negotiate the tension between vulnerability, self-reliance, and social connections with others. The act of connecting through proxies may serve resolve these tensions, particularly with a population that reports being bullied or otherwise ostracized in youth. This form of play may allow for expression of emotions that men are expected to suppress, and it is because there is a proxy that men can express vulnerabilities they typically could not. This means that men involved in these communities may be particularly attached to them, as these communities give them access to masculinity-affirming relationships. However, this vulnerability is done via the proxy of the character. One participant described playing a character who purposefully resolved conflict in a non-violent way by writing his grievances in a notebook. It served as a running joke within the gaming group where the other characters would mock that character for being womanly or be otherwise "vindictive". However, the player himself wasn't affected by this, as he was in on the joke. The character was eventually redeemed within the fiction when they were revealed as a powerful spellcaster who was able to engage in violence through magic. This anecdote illustrates the playful way that participants were able to negotiate tensions, by both being part of the joke and by being able to take in-game actions to redeem "unmanly" characters. It seems to serve as a way for men to test the boundaries of acceptable masculinities while having a form of plausible deniability. It's only a game and they're only doing what their character would do, after all.

Gaming communities have an established connection to harassment campaigns, and those harassment campaigns have connection to white supremacist movements (Salter, 2018).

Understanding that men use these spaces to gain connection to masculinity also provides a frame for understanding why the borders of these communities important to these participants. This allows for a way to consider possible future interventions within gaming communities, in order to counter recruitment by white supremacists, men's right activism, and other extreme conservative groups looking for disaffected young men. This research shows that participants are invested in these communities due to the way it gives them access to a sense of masculinity that they are otherwise denied. Due to this, future interventions that focus on a reduction of harassment and increase in player diversity must counter the implicit idea that gaming somehow belongs to men. This can start by the creation of events that are focused on providing protected spaces for historically underrepresented groups within gaming communities, such as women-only events at gaming conventions. However, these need to occur alongside programs that raise awareness of how these spaces perpetuate. While women's harm is well-established, men's benefits and the insidious ways masculinity reproduces itself in these spaces are less known. While awareness campaigns do not solve gendered oppression, it can start a much-needed conversation about divorcing a personal sense of masculinity from an ever-diversifying hobby.

#### Limitations and Strengths

Utilizing a hybrid thematic analysis approach and semi-structured interviewing provided both rich data and a way to shift through it. Discussing masculinity is difficult; it is rendered invisible and participants tried to present masculinity as positively as possible. The semi-structured nature of the interviews provided room to probe and ask for details that participants did not provide. In particular, asking questions that compared the participants' childhood masculinity with their current understanding of masculinity provided insight into how the participants navigated their personal sense of masculinity. By asking the participants to talk

about how they think women's experiences in these spaces differed, it provided a way to begin comparing and contrasting experiences. This, most notably, brought to light that most participants saw TTRPG communities as a place with less pressure to be manly than other areas of their life, but that women had a more narrow range of expected behavior. Both of these findings helped illustrate the role these communities play. In the analysis process, the hybrid thematic analysis process allowed for both centering men's understanding of their own experiences while also providing a theoretic framework that they may not have access to.

Snowball sampling was the most effective method of recruitment for this research and would likely be a strong strategy in future research. The majority of participants indicated that they had heard about the study via word-of-mouth. Likewise, the nature of these groups mean that participants would be able to provide contact to additional potential participants. Online recruitment would also likely be a strong for future research, as TTRPGs are a relatively niche hobby and also have a strong internet presence. Online recruitment would also be able to reach a larger geographic area.

This research is limited in terms of sample size and geographic area. While the small sample size is acceptable for initial research into how other bodies of study would apply to this subject, it is limited in its ability to do more than that. The limitation of in-person interviews created a logistical limitation to geographic area. There is no one "tabletop roleplaying game community" that includes everyone in it. Rather, there are communities of varying sizes, from national organized play communities to three-person weekly groups. There are also different contextual histories for these groups. Groups from Wisconsin or Seattle, where tabletop gaming companies are located and where tabletop gaming has a deep history, may develop in ways that notably differ from groups in religiously conservative areas. Likewise, groups that have war

gaming backgrounds are going to differ from a LGBT community center's tabletop gaming night.

This small sample size provided only a narrow view into the ways these communities function. A larger project would allow for both a greater diversity in gaming community backgrounds and from participants with a more diverse set of experiences. In particular, this research would have benefited from being able to discuss the role that race, sexuality and social economic status plays. It also would have allowed for more insight into the power dynamics within groups. Only one participant indicated that he was primarily in a gamemaster role and he said that he preferred it because he didn't want to play "someone else's game". Given the structural power this role is given and the way that homosocial spaces work closely with power, having more participants who prefer gamemastering could have provided more insight. Likewise, it would have been interesting to see what themes may have emerged with a larger sample.

Of particular interest would be seeing the connection between race, sexuality, transgender experience, and socio-economic status with play habits. Would straight white cis men be more likely to take on leadership roles while and gamemastering roles? Would there be a difference in of preferred gaming style by racial or ethnic background? How does being the imagine audience for these game affect the ways that participants first got involved? As participants discussed the ways they first became involved in TTRPGs, four participants indicated that they felt like they were destined to be involved in the games or that it was somehow their fate. The participants that discussed this also self-identified as white, but self-identified as a wide range of sexuality (n=2 were straight, n=1 was both demisexual and heterosexual, n=1 was gay). A larger sample would allow for a deeper analysis of those connections. In addition, this research leaves a space for how

transgender people play into homosociality and masculinity construction. None of the participants self-identified as transgender, and only one participant indicated that he had played with a transgender person. Given the possibility for these sites to provide access to masculinity, it would be valuable to understand how transgender men are involved in these communities. The over-representation of LGBT people within the initial sample and the participants indicate that these communities are accepting of gay and asexual spectrum men, though it remains to be seen how transgender men would be treated.

The research was limited in the information it collected regarding participant demographics. While participants did voluntarily present demographic data as part of their interview, having consistent data for the participants would have allowed for more robust analysis based on race and sexuality. Likewise, having information regarding participant's socio-economic standing would have been beneficial for this analysis. These traits define access to power, and with that, access to hegemonic masculinity. The failure to live up to patriarchal dominance becomes a heightened concern for high SES white men, whose failures are then ascribed to societal failings rather than personal ones. Since these groups are societally imagined as belonging to white men, not collecting participant race and sexuality for all participants removed the possibility of understanding any additional negotiations.

#### Future Research

Queer game studies, as a field, offers an avenue for researchers to look into the construction of normative masculinities. This research provides continued backing for that possibility. It supports that analog gaming spaces are important for meaning-making for individual's place in the world. This is not just related to gendered experiences, but to questions of morality, purpose and connection to others. There are several possibilities for future research

about this topic, depending on what aspect of this topic is emphasized. Creating and testing intervention is an under-researched area in game studies despite the overwhelming body of literature outlining the ways the marginalized people experience acute forms of oppression in gaming spaces.

Participants also saw their positive experiences as the typical experiences for TTRPG participants, including those who had previous bad experiences in groups. Those bad experiences were described as anomalies, and as non-indicative of TTRPG communities. Ethnographic work would provide both a look into how typical these experiences are, and a better understanding of the ways that masculinity is negotiated within interactions during these games. In particular, ethnographic fieldwork would allow for researchers to directly observe how different traits are valued within the game, as it would allow for firsthand observation instead of secondhand reporting. This is a particularly fruitful, as this research is interested in looking into aspects of masculinity that typically are not remarked upon. This topic turns a critical eye on the ways that alternatives are created. This means that even if participants can identify the constructive of normative masculinities, they may not be able to see how alternatives are subjected to the same power structures. It also will permit researchers to have more ready access to interactions that are undesirable, which often includes policing behaviors.

Discourse analysis also provides a rich avenue for research. Discourse analysis would provide researchers the ability to better engage with the interplay between texts, the games, and power. This avenue would be more applicable to stakeholders interested in changing the landscape of gaming, particularly publishers who are interested in understanding how the games that they publish affect the communities that build around them. Many of these games are oriented toward combat and subjective resolutions to combat and examining how this affects the

way that people interact with other players at the table could provide interesting insights. This also could provide some of the most actionable results for companies interested in intervening in these communities.

Social network analysis also offers possibilities for future analog game studies. Analog games require people to participate in groups, and typically groups run for several meetings. Given that the tabletop gaming community is composed of individuals and organized into loose groups, and there is a strong possibility that social network analysis would have surprising insights into how power is organized and diffused within these groups. It also would provide an opportunity to see where interventions can be most effectively applied, as certain participants within the larger TTRPG community structure will be more able to affect change. In particular, understanding the relationships between individual tabletop gaming groups, people who work in the TTRPG publishing industry, and celebrities within the industry.

### Conclusion

Tabletop roleplaying game communities both provide benefit, in that they allow for men to mediate their need for connection and the constraints of masculinity. However, there is also risk, in that these communities can ignore this connection and patrol the borders with harassment and exclusion of women, other non-men, or people who are only contingently accepted as men. By offering spaces for men to access masculinity that they may be otherwise denied, these participants become heavily invested. At the same time, the nature of these spaces as masculine reserves is itself obscured from men involved in these spaces. The push for greater representation has made it so that representation can be viewed as an adequate substitution for diverse players. Likewise, community hostility to historically underrepresented population is both erased by the perception of diverse representation and the backlash to it. This research provides a starting



understanding of the way these dynamics are created. As game studies continues to study the reality of harassment within gaming communities, understanding the creation of communities provides a start to disrupting communities built around harassment.

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## Vita

Rigby Lynn Bendele was born on July 10, 1990 in Bethesda, Maryland and spent their childhood in Stafford, VA. They graduated from Mountain View High School in Stafford, Virginia in May 2008. They earned their B.A. in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and minor in Sociology from Longwood University in Farmville, VA in May 2012. They have been involved in tabletop gaming communities in a variety of roles for over five years, including as a writer of tabletop gaming materials. When they aren't playing games, they're trying to make game communities better.