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The Power in Dice and Foam Swords: Gendered Resistance in Dungeons and Dragons and Live-Action Roleplay

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THE POWER IN DICE AND FOAM SWORDS:

GENDERED RESISTANCE IN DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS AND LIVE-ACTION

ROLEPLAY

By

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  Much of the existing research on gaming suggests that women are often excluded from or discriminated against in gaming communities. However, few scholars focus on women's positive experiences within those communities, and even fewer examine tabletop and live-action roleplaying games. In this thesis, I utilized Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative action, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, and James C. Scott's theory of hidden transcripts to analyze how in-game and out-of-game comradery among players created a space in which passive resistance against normative gender expectations was possible. Specifically, the question I wanted to answer was how do women communicatively enact passive resistance in roleplaying games? In order to answer this question, I interviewed twenty-four women about their experiences playing Dungeons and Dragons and live-action roleplay and conducted participant. During the interviews, many interviewees described the gendered expectations that they were subjected to in their everyday lives. They also described how supportive gaming groups allowed them to subvert those expectations through roleplay. They did this by adopting two distinct roleplay styles: Oppositional Personas and Reflective Characters. I concluded that although few participants overtly challenged gender expectations with Oppositional Personas, many used Reflective Characters to passively resist gender expectations. In-game resistance was not relegated to that arena; it had a positive impact on the participants' everyday lives, e.g., gaining closure from past trauma and creating equitable racial policies in LARP companies.

THE POWER IN DICE AND FOAM SWORDS:

GENDERED RESISTANCE IN DUNGEONS AND DRAGONS AND LIVE-ACTION

ROLEPLAY

Roleplaying games are becoming increasingly mainstream. Stranger Things, the wildly successful Netflix-original series, is based on Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), a popular tabletop roleplaying game. Live-action roleplay (LARP) is featured in popular movies like Role Models (2008) and Knights of Badassdom (2014). Scholars are even beginning to research ways that roleplaying video games can be integrated into education (Delwiche 2006). Despite the increased popularity of roleplaying games, much of the limited literature is not considered serious scholarship.

However, scholars have used roleplaying games to study important social issues like racism (Garcia 2017), transgender identity issues (Cross 2012), and hegemonic masculinity (Martin, Vaccaro, Heckert and Heasley 2013). This project will contribute to this timely research by addressing another important social issue: how women communicatively enact passive resistance in roleplaying games.

BACKGROUND

Roleplaying games are structurally complex and require a brief explanation. Roleplaying games allow the player to adopt a new persona. The player creates a character with physical characteristics and personality traits that may be very different from their everyday identify. The player then guides that character through an interactive fantasy narrative. The way that the player navigates the narrative is determined by the type of roleplaying game. This project will examine two roleplaying games that are

similar enough to be compared, but different enough to be contrasted: Dungeons and Dragons (D&D), a tabletop roleplaying game, and live-action roleplay (LARP).

Dungeons and Dragons

   Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) is a tabletop roleplaying game. "Tabletop" means that the game is played while the players are seated around a table, facing the other players in the group. A group is composed of players and a Dungeon Master (DM), the person in charge of telling the story and making judgment calls. To create a character, the player uses a die to randomly generate numbers that indicate how proficient the character is in areas like strength and charisma. The player then records those numbers on a paper character sheet that contains all the information about that character, e.g., how strong the character is, the gender, the height, how much charisma the character has, etc. Additionally, the player creates a personality for the character using an alignment system that cross tabulates morality and ethics. The player chooses to be good or evil, chaotic or lawful. For example, a lawful good character would always follow the rules, and they would never make a decision that would hurt someone. A chaotic evil character, however, does not subscribe to any set of rules and does whatever they want, even if it gets other players hurt or killed. Once the player creates the character, the player enacts it through an interactive narrative. The DM's primary job is to read the narrative. The narrative can either be commercially published or written by the DM, provides the story and most of the structure for gameplay, and is referred to by the players as the "campaign." Any character that is not controlled by any of the other players is called a non-playable character (NPC). All of the NPCs are played by the DM.

Throughout the campaign, events will occur that will require the player to make a choice. When the player makes the choice, they tell the DM what their character will do, and the DM rolls a die to see if they "succeed" or "fail" that die roll. The requirements for success vary on the action taken. For example, if an elf wants to try to convince an NPC who is guarding a gate to open the gate and allow the group to enter the village inside, the requirement for success of a dice roll will be much lower than if that elf is trying to attack a powerful, high-level NPC in the game. The DM also has secondary jobs like determining how experience points will be rewarded based on the format of the narrative. Experience points are needed for the character to level up, or get stronger and more efficient. As the character goes on adventures, they become more proficient. The proficiency is represented by experience points. When the character gains a specified total of experience points, they advance in capability and gain new talents. This advancement is called "leveling up." If the narrative is combat-based, the DM will award experience points after combat. If the narrative is roleplay-based, the DM will award XP either for excellent roleplay or exploration of the fantasy world. Character creation, character leveling, and dice mechanics are often the extent of the structure in many D&D games, which is a key aspect of its appeal. Many groups create their own stories, and some even manipulate the rules of character leveling to achieve a specific gaming experience.

Live-Action Roleplay

Live-action roleplay (LARP), as the name implies, is a physical activity in which the player dressed up as the character they create and wield real, albeit foam, weapons

through an interactive narrative, or a campaign. Like D&D, LARP can be entirely combat, entirely roleplay, or anywhere in-between. The group composition in LARP is also similar to D&D. There are player characters and the individual responsible for narrative, the Game Master (GM). Counterintuitively, and in contrast to D&D, the NPCs are also played by LARPers. The main difference between a player character (PC) and an NPC in LARP is that an NPC's actions are determined by the narrative, but the playable characters actions are determined by the player.

LARP also differs from D&D in another important way. Rather than the player saying what the character will do, the player must do what the character will do. For example, in D&D, a player might say, "I swing my battleax at the undead." In LARP, the player, dressed as the character, physically swings a foam sword at an NPC who is in character as the undead. The NPC's response, then, is largely dictated by the PC's action and the script, and NPCs often have less creative control than PCs do.

The rules in each game vary depending on the type of LARP and the group. All groups have their own written rulebooks that determines, among other things, how the players will create their characters and what kind of weapons are permitted, i.e. latex or foam weapons. Ultimately, like D&D, the players and the GM collectively structure the game. The most important aspect D&D and LARP have in common, however, is that provide an excellent environment to study gendered resistance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Roleplaying games (RPGs) are an effective medium for studying gendered resistance for two reasons. First, both pen-and-paper and live-action roleplaying games

are communicatively created. The world and all the character interactions within it are created through player communication. The player communication produces action, and in some cases, gendered resistance. Second, as scholars have demonstrated, RPG players consciously and unconsciously identify social problems, like sexism, and interactively challenge them in roleplay (Waskul and Lust 2004; Hayes 2007; Garcia 2017).

Communicative Action

  D&D and LARP are games that require active communication between players. In contrast, most video games follow a one-sided, sender-receiver communication style. In other words, the game sends information that the player receives. However, pen-and-paper and live-action games require communication between multiple players. Without the players, and the communication between them, the game would not exist. Therefore, it is necessary to analyze the games through a communicative lens. Jürgen Habermas' theory of communicative action can be used to illustrate how communication is action.

  Habermas is best known for his communicative approach to sociological problems. The primary goal of his theory is social change. To achieve that goal, scholars must begin with a communicative focus. In other words, Habermas (1981) saw language as one of the most important mediums for bringing about action. The goal of communication between two or more people, Habermas argues, is reaching an understanding. In this way, communicative action differs from other types of action because it requires group collaboration and consensus as opposed to individual action (Habermas 1981). To produce social change, all members of the group are expected to contribute in that search for understanding. In a tabletop or roleplaying game, the players

contribute to the experience and attempt to build consensus with each other about how the game will unfold. Is it possible that the players are also building consensus about larger social issues? What could possibly stand in the way of players reaching consensus about social issues in roleplay? Habermas (1981) notes that systematic distortions, i.e., differences in power and status between individuals, stand in the way of all people reaching understanding and consensus.

Gender is one systematic distortion. Gender, according to Judith Butler (1990), is a system of domination that is constructed through communication. When an individual is born as biologically male or female, the child's parents expect that their behavior be masculine or feminine (Butler 1990). That parental expectation is a reflection of societal expectations. In other words, society communicates that one must perform gender, and one should perform gender is a way that is congruent with one's sex characteristics. Gender expectations, the expectation to behave in a certain way based on perceived gender, become normative from a very young age. Butler undoes those gender expectations by asserting that gender is performative rather than innate (Butler 1990).

Many psychologists argue that girls freely choose play kitchens and boys freely choose racecar tracks (Geary 2010; Kimura 1999), but Butler finds this problematic. She argues that gender performativity is not a voluntary choice. Instead, Butler asserts, gender is so ingrained in culture that we do not realize we are always teaching gender expectations through gender performance (Butler 1990). Butler often uses drag to illustrate the concept of gender performativity. The way drag performers adopt a stage identity, behave as if that is their true identity while they are on-stage, and then revert to their everyday gender identity when the performance is finished is how we know that

gender is not innate. Therefore, Butler argues that drag is a parody of the notion that gender is innate and derived from an inner truth about gender identity. As Butler might explain it, I do not put on makeup and a dress because I am a woman. Instead, the act of putting on makeup and wearing a dress signals to others, and myself, that I am a woman. In other words, Butler suggests, it is the way in which a person *performs* gender that creates that person's gender.

Butler argues that gender expectations are present in every aspect of everyday life. Therefore, they are necessarily also present in gaming. According to Waskul and Lust (2004), fantasy and reality are inextricably bound: "Fantasy, imagination, and reality," the authors elaborate, "are notoriously porous: experience, knowledge, and understanding routinely slip from one to another" (339). In other words, fantasy worlds do not exist entirely separated from the real world. For example, Baker (2012) has shown that inequalities in the game, like sexism or gender discrimination, reflect inequalities out of the game because, "fantasy does not escape reality but exposes, subverts, and creates it." D&D and LARP, then, should expose the gender expectations. Does it also provide a way to subvert those expectations?

Habermas provides a useful model that can be used to address gender expectations. Gender expectations, like other forms of distorted communication, can be addressed using Habermas' three-step model: First, all affected parties must be able to participate in the communication. Second, there must be a mutual search for common understanding. Third, all parties must listen to the ideas and arguments presented by other participants. In other words, undistorted communication requires that every person willingly engages in communication with the ultimate goal of reaching consensus. As

Haberman (1981) explains, the discourse that occurs during undistorted communication is "a court of appeals . . . when disagreements can no longer be repaired with everyday routines" (17-18). This quote implies that the discourse that occurs during a conflict, or in response to a conflict, is necessarily separated from everyday communication. Is it possible that roleplay can be viewed as "a court of appeals" in a fantasy world that is separated from Habermas' "everyday routines"?

The fantasy worlds that roleplayers create are popularly considered an escape from the everyday. However, scholars argue that the games are created and sustained by the players, and as such the fantasy remains inextricably bound to everyday social values, assumptions, and biases (Waskul and Lust 2004; Garcia 2017; Baker 2012). For example, Waskul and Lust (2004) argue that the boundaries between the individual, their fantasy persona, and their status as a D&D player "roughly adhere to the more general trinity of reality, imagination, and fantasy" (340). As evidence, Waskul and Lust's (2004) participants explain that it was both easier and more enjoyable to choose a persona that was relatively close to who they were outside of the game.

Garcia (2017) expands on this idea, demonstrating how D&D rulebooks are imbued with gendered values. Garcia's work suggests that there is a dialectical relationship between society and roleplaying games in which each one is capable of producing change in the other. Garcia explains that in early iterations of the game, female characters were not as strong as male characters, and argues that this reflects prevalent social assumptions/values at the time the book was published. Garcia concludes his article optimistically, noting that the D&D rulebook has changed; the sexism that was once prevalent is in the process of disappearing. This, Garcia argues, proves that societal

changes have positively impacted D&D. To understand how, we look to James C. Scott and the concept of hidden transcripts.

Hidden Transcripts

The notion that small, private social groups, like D&D groups, impact society was explored by James C. Scott. *In Weapons of the Weak*, Scott (1990) examined how Malaysian peasants use folklore and songs to resist the oppression they face from the upper-class. He argues that the songs and stories the oppressed tell are not forms of active resistance, or even resistance in the traditional sense, because they do not occur in public transcripts. Scott (1990, 2) defines "public transcript" as "the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate." Because the oppressed do not resist in public view, the oppressed may appear passive. But if one simply looks at public behavior, Scott argues, they will miss the fact that the oppressed always question their dominance. The questioning and resistance to domination, Scott notes, occur in hidden transcripts, interactions out of the view of the dominators. Can these concepts can be applied to other cultural artifacts, including roleplaying games, in places other than Malaysia?

Some existing research on gaming examines how passive resistance is enacted in video games. Elisabeth Hayes (2007) uses ethnographic observation to examine how two women use a roleplaying video game to challenge gender expectations. When the two women in her study started playing Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind, an online roleplaying video game, they seemingly acceded to societal gender expectations. For example, both women consciously avoided creating characters that relied on fighting or physical aggression (Hayes 2007). As Hayes notes, this choice is consistent with gender

stereotypes, as combat is not socially acceptable for women like it is for men. Over time, however, the women experimented with, and sometimes challenged, those expectations (Hayes 2007).

At the end of the study, Hayes found, the two women's digital selves were a combination of traits from their everyday self and traits they had experimented with in the game. For example, one of the women became interested in collecting armor in the game, but then realized that the armor could only be collected after killing things (Hayes 2007). Although she initially resisted combat, the desire to collect armor drove her to reframe and embrace combat as something that were necessary in the game. This player's reframing of combat evokes Butler's (1990) theory about gender performativity. She rejected societal expectations by engaging in physical violence, an activity that is more acceptable for men to perform than women. The women in Hayes' study questioned gender expectations, and they did it using hidden transcripts, or passive resistance. Additionally, the women resisted in front their peers just like the Malaysian peasants did (Scott 1990). Is it possible that other types of roleplaying games facilitate resistance? How is passive resistance enacted in other games?

Martin, Vaccaro, Heckert, and Heasley (2015) discuss the ways in which the men in their study use LARP as resistance. The authors argue that the men they observe LARPing use roleplay to challenge the threats to masculinity they experience in society because of their status as "nerds" (296). For men who do not participate in LARP, being a "nerd" is a subordinate form of masculinity (Martin, Vaccaro, Heckert, and Heasley 2015). One way the men in the study challenge masculinity threats, the authors note, is by exaggerating their masculinity while engaging in combat. The men in their study created

a game that was very combat-heavy, and also forced the female players in their gaming group into inferior positions (Martin, Vaccaro, Heckert, and Heasley 2015). For example, the men would not allow the women to hold leadership positions in the group, like game manger or storywriter. They also gave the women in the group fewer character choices, and they expected the women to "defer to the men on the battlefield" (Martin, Vaccaro, Heckert, and Heasley 2015:309). The men in this study used an overt form of resistance. Their masculinity was threatened, so they responded by exaggerating their masculinity. Would the authors' findings be similar if they had focused on women rather than men? If women are concerned with gender expectations, will they react by directly challenging those expectations?

Together, the three theorists discussed in this section, Habermas, Butler and Scott, provide a useful theoretical lens for examining how women may be able to fight against out-of-game societal gender expectations through in-game roleplay and communication with other players. This research will utilize that theoretical lens to examine how communicative action occurs and whether and how gendered resistance occurs within the roleplay gaming group.

DATA AND METHODS

For this project, I employed a two-stage research design. This design allowed me to compare how women use RPGs as resistance to gender performativity expectations. Both stages involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 12 women who play an RPG, resulting in a total number of 24 research participants. Both stages also involved 15 hours of participant observation, resulting in a total number of 30 observation hours.

In the first stage, I conducted in-person interviews with 12 women, all of whom play D&D, at a national tabletop gaming convention; Gen Con. In the second stage, I conducted voice over internet protocol (VoIP) interviews with 12 women who LARP. I recruited LARP participants from online LARPing forums and threads on social media websites, like reddit and Facebook. I used the same interview schedule for both stages (see Appendix A).

Case Selection

Within the realm of gaming, three popular categories are tabletop games, live-action roleplaying games, and video games; each of those categories have subcategories. For example, D&D falls under the category of tabletop game, and Dagorhir is one example that falls under the category of live-action roleplaying games. I chose to study one subcategory within tabletop roleplaying game and the live-action roleplaying category in general.

At first, it may seem like an unequal comparison. However, D&D is often enacted as if it were a category of games. That is, there are rules and character creation guidelines that are D&D specific, but they can be customized and adapted based on the group's interests. For example, I could decide to run a D&D campaign that is based on Harry Potter but still use D&D rules and guidelines. The campaign I create would look and feel very different from a campaign someone else creates. In that way, I am using the game as a format to create my own custom RPG with D&D rules and guidelines. It is very unlikely, if not impossible, for two D&D groups to have the same storyline (unless they are running campaign published by Wizards of the Coast).

Additionally, I chose D&D because it is the most popular tabletop RPG. In the 40 years since its creation, D&D has attracted over 20 million players and generated 20 billion dollars in sales of merchandise, including gaming guides and equipment (Wizards of the Coast 2017). Part of D&D's success is tied to an annual tabletop gaming convention that the creators started, called Gen Con. Over 200,000 people from across the country, and some from other countries like Canada, attended the 2016 convention (Kirby 2016). I attended the convention in order to collect data for the first stage of data collection.

Specific games within the LARP format, however, are easier or more difficult to find based on the player's geographic location. First, specific LARP games are region specific. For example, Dagohir, a popular LARP game, has chapters in many cities in the United States, but they are mainly on the east coast. I could not find a nation-wide LARP game that had a chapter anywhere near where I live in Montana.

I chose D&D and LARP because they are similar in many ways, e.g., collective story creation, fantasy settings, predicated on group communication. Additionally, I chose D&D and LARP so that I could examine how face-to-face interaction among players enables or constrains resistance. Gamers certainly do interact with each other in online multiplayer videogames, but there is no face-to-face interaction. Scholars have long suggested that the kind of interactions that are possible is categorically different when communication is computer-mediated (Walther 1992).

Although D&D and LARP are very similar, LARP is different in one significant way: LARP is grounded in physicality. In other words, a story-writing committee writes a loosely structured narrative to guide the players through a story and the players enact that

story in real-time at a real location as they interact with other players and the environment. The player embodies the character in mind and body. Alternatively, in D&D, the group sits around a table as the dungeon master reads a verbal narrative aloud, and the players respond with verbal descriptions of how their character will behave within that narrative. Therefore, the player embodies the character in mind only.

Benefits of a Qualitative Research Design

I chose to conduct in-depth interviews and participant observation because those methods allowed me to observe how interactions between players unfolded in real time. Additionally, conducting interviews allowed me to understand the richness and depth of women's experiences in roleplay. In the interviews, I built rapport with the participants, which allowed me to gather rich, detailed data that would have been inaccessible to me through other methods, like surveys. Participant observation allowed me to see D&D, a game I have been playing for years, through a more critical lens and provided me with first-hand LARP experience.

I also chose to conduct in-depth qualitative interviews and participant observation so that I could identify negative cases, or experiences that differ from the majority of participants. Other methods, like surveys or questionnaires, would have certainly provided insights about women and roleplay, but they do not allow for negative case analysis or meaning interpretation.

First Stage: Dungeons and Dragons

In the first stage, I conducted ethnographic observations and interviews with women who play D&D (see Appendix B). In the weeks leading up to the convention, I posted a message on an official Gen Con forum asking women who were interested in participating in a research study of women's experience in tabletop gaming to contact me. I received approximately 20 responses and was able to complete in-person interviews with 10 women at the convention. I conducted ten interviews that took place at Gen Con in the cafeteria of the Indianapolis Convention Center (ICC) and in various hotel lobbies near the ICC. My interview schedule consisted of twelve questions, which covered how and why participants started playing D&D, the characteristics of the groups that they play with, and the kind of characters and stories they create (see Appendix A). The interviews had an average length of 41 minutes. I recorded all of the interviews on a digital recorder to ensure accurate transcription.

The remaining two interviews in stage one were conducted in Missoula. I recruited those two participants using snowball sampling. I asked some people I had gamed with who I should talk to, and they suggested I talk with "Yara." After my interview with Yara, I asked if she knew someone I could talk to, and she put me in contact with River. I chose to interview acquaintances rather than friends or people I have played with to avoid contaminating the data. I followed the same semi-structured interview schedule I used for the other twelve participants.

Building rapport was an important component of the research process in both stages of the project. In the first stage, I began establishing rapport with the participants online in the months leading up to the convention. In the recruitment post on the forum, I

disclosed that I also play D&D and provided a brief introduction of myself, including

information about where I live and where I go to school. The goal of this was to enable

the participants to feel comfortable with me even though I was a stranger. As the

interviews unfolded, I could tell the participants became more comfortable with me, as

they were more willing to share personal stories. At the beginning of the interviews, most

women I interviewed gave short, broad answers. After I demonstrated that I was

genuinely interested in their experiences by asking follow-up questions, their answers

became longer and more detailed. Overall, the participants were eager to discuss the topic

and willing to reveal information about their experiences.

During the first stage, I conducted fifteen hours of participant observation at a

local gaming shop in Missoula and at Gen Con. At the gaming shop, I attended the

weekly D&D game and took detailed ethnographic notes after I left. At Gen Con, I left

the convention center during lunch time to write detailed notes describing what I had seen

and experienced. These notes allowed me to look at D&D through a more critical lens.

From the perspective of participant observer rather than just player, I paid close attention

not to just what I was doing but to what everyone else was doing around me.

Second Stage: Live-Action Roleplay

In the second stage of the research, I conducted ethnographic observations and

interviews with women who LARP (see Appendix B). I interviewed twelve LARP

participants using the same interview schedule I used in stage one (see Appendix A). I

recruited the participants from reddit, a social media site that is popular among gamers,

and private Facebook LARPing groups. Women from around the world volunteered to

assist me in my research. To match my recruitment methods in stage one, however, I only interviewed women from North America, including both the United States and Canada. The average length of the interviews was 46 minutes.

I also conducted participant observation in stage two. This was the most difficult portion of my thesis, as there were not many LARP groups in Missoula. Most of the groups in the area said they were LARP groups, but few engaged with roleplay. Instead, they were battle reenactment groups. The groups engaged in combat and sometimes dressed up, but when they did dress up, the characters were not developed and did not have backstories. Eventually, I found a LARP group in Missoula that at least claimed to engage with roleplay. To mirror stage one, I conducted fifteen hours of observation of one group. I took detailed ethnographic notes after each gaming session. Although this was the most difficult aspect of my thesis, it was also one of the most important. Through participant observation, I was able to better understand the LARP experience. For example, after observation, I could empathize with new players. Getting into LARP was an anxiety-inducing process for many participants because it was so unlike what they did in their everyday lives. Generally, they were not encouraged to hit other people with weapons, but in LARP, they were. At first, the interactions were very jarring and uncomfortable because there was no frame of reference for how to behave. If I had not participated in LARP, I would have had no way of knowing what that process actually felt like.

Analysis

Once the interviews were transcribed, I uploaded the files to NVivo and coded in both an inductive and deductive manner. In other words, some of the codes were created based on themes that emerged from the findings (inductive), and some of the codes were informed by literature (deductive). For example, the Oppositional Personas and Reflective Characters theme was inductive because nothing in the literature led me to code for two distinct roleplaying styles. Alternatively, Collective Storytelling was deductive; Habermas' theory enabled me to look for that particular code.

Confidentiality

In both stages, I gave each of the women I interviewed the choice to either use their real name or choose a pseudonym. I chose to give my participants this choice in my thesis because the women I talked to felt strongly about having their voices heard. Some people believe that only men play these games, but that, of course, is not true. By participating in my research and using their real name, the women I interviewed were essentially saying, "I am here. I matter." Most women chose to use their real name. The five women who did not want to use their real name chose pseudonyms that I used in the results and discussion section. They are marked with an asterisk in the participant table on Appendix B. The other 19 women will be discussed using their real names.

FINDINGS

After I analyzed the data from interviews and participant observations, I identified 26 themes. From those 26, I identified the three most important themes: (1) Collective

Storytelling, (2) Oppositional Personas and Reflective Characters, and (3) Personal and Societal Impact.

Collective Storytelling

When I asked the participants what attracted them to D&D or LARP, the most common answer was collective storytelling. Participants discussed collective storytelling by breaking it down into two parts: creativity and comradery. The participants had other interests that were either purely creativity-based or purely comradery-based, but only roleplaying games adequately satisfied both parts. Therefore, I begin by arguing that D&D or LARP was a unique creative outlet because it was a collective creation. Second, I examine how comradery among players in the group facilitated collective storytelling. Third, I explore how an absence of comradery hindered collective storytelling. Finally, I share some of the structural limitations to collective storytelling in D&D and in LARP.

Collective creativity.

When I asked the women I interviewed why they play these games, many participants cited creativity as the primary reason, and when they did, they often compared D&D or LARP to other creative outlets, like theatre or writing. The women I interviewed argued that D&D or LARP were better than acting or writing because they were collaboratively enacted. Ashley was a graduate student studying theatre and D&D participant, and when I asked what attracted her to D&D, she said it was "the idea of a collective imagination, to have a group of people who are okay with suspending disbelief and going, 'Yup, we're all going to be here, we're all going to contribute to this story

together.'" She went on to say that producing shows in the theater was an excellent creative outlet for her but that D&D provided a richer experience than theatre did. Ashley suggested that collaboration created a unique creative process; one that did not rely on specialized roles. In theatre, producers give direction and stage every action from start to finish. In D&D, however, DMs provided narrative prompts to get the story going and then let the players decide how the story continues. Therefore, Ashley concluded that the final product of this creative process, a collectively created story, was "richer and more meaningful" than producing shows in the theater. This finding reflected what most of the participants said about both D&D and LARP. For the women I interviewed, these games offered a unique experience because they were collaborative, and the key component in that collaboration was other players and their relationship to them.

Comradery.

When Ashely and the other participants focused on D&D or LARP as a creative outlet, they also always discussed how comradery was necessary for collaboration. In focusing on comradery, the participants suggested that the people in the group were more important to the collective storytelling process than the story itself. For example, a LARPer named Ericka was also involved in the theatre, and she was an actor. In her interview, she discussed the role other players had in the collective storytelling process: "I'm in the theater scene, but theater is generally one person wrote a story, and we all act it out. That's cool, but the ability for 10 or 20 of us, or 100 of us, in some of these games, to all be writing the same collective story is amazing." In theatre, actors are expected to receive direction from producers and follow that direction. In LARP, however, players

worked together with other players and the storywriters to collaboratively decide on an artistic direction. Most importantly, the D&D players and LARPers I interviewed had control over the creative process.

My findings suggest that comradery among players was the key to collaboration. When the participants discussed the comradery they shared with other players in their groups, they discussed the attributes of those other players, often focusing on their positive characteristics. Those characteristics include fair, accepting, and, most frequently, a feeling of comfort when they were around. Those positive attributes, in turn, made the women I interviewed feel comfortable and accepted. Some of the participants even likened their gaming group to family. When I asked a participant in the LARP group, Jess, to describe the kind of people she played with, she gave me mostly demographic information, i.e., race, gender, and age. When I asked if she felt comfortable with her group. Jess emphatically replied, "Oh, yes! We're all, like, one big happy family. We can say things in front of each other that I wouldn't say normally in my professional life. We have this great comradery, and it's very much like being part of a family." In this quotation, Jess touched on a common theme in both groups: the freedom to behave in ways they would not at work. This theme is explored in the next section on how the women I interviewed used their characters in roleplay.

For many of the women I interviewed, their gaming group was also their primary friend group. This finding suggested that connections made between players in-game were not limited to that particular space or activity. Instead, those connections led to out-of-game friendships that kept participants coming back each week. For example, Sierra

had been playing D&D with the same group for seventeen years. When I asked her about

what attracted her to D&D, she explained how comradery manifested in her group:

> Once you find a really great table and a really great group that you wanna see
> every week, that, you know, you're like, 'Well, I wanna go see my friends and
> hang out AND play D&D.' You know? It kind of goes together. I'm really lucky.
> . . we have this really great mix of people, and so there's all this acceptance that
> goes along. Like, you are who you are.

The strong comradery that she and the other players developed together enabled Sierra to

participate in the collective storytelling process in a way that felt authentic. What would a

group look like without comradery?

Without strong comradery between players, there were limits to what players

were able to do with their characters. For example, Sierra explained that because her

D&D group was accepting, they felt comfortable playing a campaign in which all of their

characters were evil, and it was their job to fight the heroes. Sierra told players outside

her group that they were playing an evil campaign, and they told her it was never going to

work because all the players would "backstab each other." To that, she responded:

"That's not true when you have the right mix of people and sort of the right motivation of

character." Her response suggested that with an accepting group, some of the assumed

limits of roleplay and player interaction do not apply.

Some of the participants, however, suggested that not all groups enjoyed strong

comradery. If comradery made collective storytelling possible, then the absence of

comradery hindered it. Maggie's dichotomous roleplaying experiences in D&D

illustrated this point. Maggie was a nurse who, like Ashley and Ericka, believed that

participating in collective storytelling was more fulfilling than other creative outlets: "I

enjoy being able to let go of everyday crap and do stuff you couldn't do in your usual

life. I get some of that from writing, but it's a lot more fun with [my gaming] group." For Maggie, the enjoyment came from creating a collective story with a group. However, the type of group and the relationships among the players was a significant concern. In some of her previous groups, she felt like she "was being talked over a lot" because she was "a quiet person." In her current group, though, the players were "pretty good about bringing it back" to her. The important thing to note in Maggie's experience was that, unlike her in previous D&D groups, she had established comradery with her current group. Her experience suggested that comradery among players ensured a respectful gaming environment.

All but one of the women that I interviewed had negative experiences to share. However, the experiences were not a monolith; they ranged in severity. For example, Ashley's experiences with "mansplaining" in D&D is on the low range. Ashley had a supportive, close gaming group, but at conventions, like Gen Con, men would speak down to her and assume she did not know anything about the game: "[emulating male voice] 'Thiiis is a character sheet. Thiiis is called polyheeedral dice. They're funny looking!' A lot of that, or a lot of just talking over or, OR in the middle of the move suggesting, 'Well, I would do that. If I were you, I would do that. That's the smartest thing to do.'" Some male players at conventions even asked her if she was "in the wrong spot," assuming that because she was a woman there was no way that she would be interested in playing D&D with them. Fortunately, her regular group did not treat her that way, and she only really had those experiences at conventions. None of the women I interviewed had problems with their regular D&D or LARP groups. Instead, the problems occurred once a year at conferences or when they first joined new groups.

For example, the most severe example was Camryn's early LARP experience. Camryn was a trans woman who had been LARPing for eleven years. One of the first groups she started LARPing with, however, was not accepting of her gender identity, which led to severe form of gender discrimination. The LARP Camryn joined was at a girl scout camp in Western Pennsylvania, and "[she] heard that it was sexually segregated, as far as the lodging goes. So, [she] reached out to the game masters, and [she] asked what [she] should do in that regard. And they told [her] that [she] would be stuck with the men." Camryn stated that she was "uncomfortable with that" and decided to stay by herself in a tent on the property. The game masters were initially okay her decision. When she arrived, however, Camryn said the game masters had changed their minds: "I was told there were some boy scouts in that campsite and I would not be allowed to camp there, so I just have to suck it up and deal and go lodge with the guys." When Camryn said she was would just leave, they allowed her to stay in the foyer of the women's cabin, but the game masters forbade her from going into the lodging area of the cabin, even just to grab a mattress. In an effort "to be respectful of the whole situation," Camryn asked the women to just hand her a mattress, but "nobody would do that," so she "ended up enjoying hypothermia, sleeping on a wonderful concrete floor in the middle of a walkway." The gender discrimination in this example was built into the structure of the LARP group. They had policies that forbade Camryn from staying in the women's cabin even though she was a woman. Rather than attempting to radically alter the structure of a group she had just joined, Camryn stopped playing with that group. Instead, she found a new group that was accepting of her gender identity, one in which she could develop comradery with other players. Despite the stark difference in severity between Ashley's

and Camryn's experiences, both demonstrated the sexism and gender discrimination that existed within the D&D and LARP communities and limited comradery among participants.

During participant observation, I also experienced sexism. After I experienced sexism in the groups, I did not feel like I had developed comradery with them. In the D&D group I joined, I had a similar experience to Ashley. I was the only woman player in the group. When I expressed interest, they seemed surprised and "asked if I had played before." I told them I had been playing for over five years. One of the players "kept asking if I needed help, but he didn't ask any of the other players." This was particularly frustrating for me, as I had just told them that I have played for years. The unsolicited advice did not stop once I was done creating my character. Throughout gameplay, the male players and male DM would say things like, "Roll for initiative. You use the D20. That's this one. [DM holds up die]" I felt mildly annoyed with my experiences in that group, but I never felt unsafe because it was in a public gaming store. The hinderance to comradery that I felt here, that Ashley likely felt in her convention experiences, was that I did not feel like I was being taken seriously.

I did, however, feel unsafe with the LARP group I observed, which made developing comradery difficult. The field notes I wrote after the first game reflected my anxiety:

> As I waited in the car for other players to show up to the park, I realized I was wearing pants that didn't have any pockets. I got nervous about where I would put my phone. I wanted to make sure that it was nearby just in case I needed to reach out for assistance. I decided to put my phone in my jacket and keep my jacket on, even if I got hot.

When the players arrived and I met them, I was not quite so worried anymore. The GM and one of the players, "Jack," were welcoming and friendly. However, after the first game, Jack found me on Facebook and started messaging me regularly, first about in-game topics but then he gradually moved beyond gaming to asking about my personal life. At the last session I attended, he and a couple of the male players were talking about the "evilest" characters they have played. One of them talked about a character that "got [their] whole party killed in one night." Another talked about a character that "only cared about gold and didn't give a shit about people." Jack's contribution, however, demonstrated how masculine these gaming space can be. In an almost bragging tone, he stated that one of his characters "raped another character to death." After Jack said this, "the GM immediately looked at me then turned back to Jack and asked, 'Which group was that with? I know it wasn't with me." Some people who are not members of these communities may read experiences like mine and Camryn's and wonder how or why women continue to play.

Many of the participants addressed problematic groups in their interviews by sharing their experiences and offering solutions that were effective for them, like finding a new group or pushing for changes in their current group. At the end of my interview schedule, I asked the participants if there was anything would like to add. Most of the participants used this opportunity to encourage me that positive experiences are possible. For example, a LARPer, Jill, responded to that question by saying:

> It's just important for women in general getting into these hobbies to stand up for themselves and find a space that they feel safe in from the beginning and know that there's other games, there's other spaces and so, if someone's making you uncomfortable or hurting you or anything like that, there's so many other avenues out there to stay involved.

In this quote, Jill addressed player comfort and safety through comradery. She suggested

that comfort and safety were the most important things for new players to focus on when

finding a group. If a player did not feel safe or comfortable with a group, Jill urged them

to stay involved but find a new group rather than stop playing altogether. By saying

"there's other games," Jill implied that women did not need to suffer through sexism and

gender discrimination to play these games, that there were groups in which comradery,

thus collective storytelling, was possible.

Structural limitations.

Up to this point, I primarily focused on the similarities between the two games

and the social interactions within them. However, there were some important structural

differences that impacted how collective storytelling unfolded. Many of the women

LARPers I interviewed started out playing D&D and other tabletop roleplaying games.

Therefore, the LARP participants used D&D as a contrast when they discussed their

experiences with LARP. Many of the participants who compared the two games in their

interview said they preferred LARP because it moved at a quicker pace and because it

was more immersive. Therefore, in framing the differences in this way, they discussed

the structural limitations of D&D. For example, Camryn, a LARPer, said that, in D&D,

"you sit around and wait for your turn. Then you narrate a few actions and then you wait

your turn for like 20 minutes before you actually get to do anything. So, it can be kind of

boring. But LARPing is way more interactive." Because the player was physically

performing the actions, all of the other players could see it happening. In D&D, however,

the players vocalized their actions. Therefore, the players needed to take turns vocalizing

what actions their characters would take. Camryn's quote suggested that she thought the pace of D&D constrained collective storytelling.

The physicality of LARP allowed the game to move at a quicker pace, but it also created some limitations within roleplay. When Samara, a LARPer, explained the differences she saw between D&D and LARP, she explained that character creation was more limited in LARP than in D&D because "LARP, by necessity, has to be you in certain ways, because it is your physical body telling the story." The limitations not only affected appearance but also how players interacted with each other. For example, Ericka said that roleplay in LARP was different because "you're still in character even when you're just going to the bathroom or getting a glass of water. People will sometimes shy away from those really intensive [emotional] highs because they can't maintain it for 39 hours at a stretch." The women I interviewed also discussed how the physicality of LARP limited the scope of secondary and tertiary fantasy elements that can be introduced into the game, like the setting and opponents. For example, Samara says that, in LARP, "it's going to be really difficult to bring a dragon onto the field in a believable way, but with D&D, you can go fight that fucking dragon." Samara's and Ericka's quotes suggest that the physicality of LARP can sometimes limit how well a creative vision can come to life. Therefore, they saw certain aspects of LARP as limited in its collective storytelling capacity.

Oppositional Personas and Reflective Characters

In the previous section, I discussed how comradery affected out-of-game interactions between players. In this section, I discuss how the out-of-game comradery

positively impacted the way in which participants roleplay their characters. This section will also demonstrate how out-of-game, player-level comradery and acceptance translated to better roleplaying experiences. The participants' experiences with roleplay are summarized using two distinct roleplay styles: Oppositional Personas and Reflective Characters.

I define Oppositional Personas as characters that are foils to the players' out-of-game personalities. For example, a woman may be quiet and timid in their everyday life but play a loud, aggressive male character in the game. Alternatively, I define Reflective Characters as characters that reflect the player's personality with a few changes. For example, a woman may play a charismatic female character who uses her charisma to get whatever she wants.

Oppositional personas.

Based on Hayes (2007) study about women who use physical violence in Elder Scrolls to challenge gender norms, I expected to find that many of the participants would adopt Oppositional Personas. However, only three LARPers and only one D&D player did so. One of the LARP participants who adopted an Oppositional Persona, Brianna, described her experience as "fun" and "completely different" from how she acted in her everyday life. She thought of herself as "quiet and agreeable," but her favorite LARP character acted completely different:

> It was actually a goblin, and that goblin was a man, and his name was Jetteral Z and he was just this over-the-top, super bombastic dick, basically. And he was just really funny, and it was really fun to play because I had the face paint and the nose, and I stubbled on a beard and everything. And it was a lot of fun. People would be like, "Oh, I didn't even realize that was you." And then I just acted so differently. I would just say stupid, crazy, mean things, and people would be like,

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"Whoa." And I just had this really fun, ridiculous character that I had never really played before, so I just, I ran with it. And I decided I was just gonna be completely different. So, I went in the complete opposite direction of myself.

When the other players responded to Brianna's goblin by saying "Whoa," Brianna assumed it was because her character was so unlike her out-of-game self. Because she drastically changed her appearance and personality, even people who knew her well did not recognize her or her behavior. When I asked Brianna if, despite the drastic changes, Jetteral Z represented her, she said, "I don't like making people upset, so I did my best to get away from me." In other words, Brianna attempted to roleplay her goblin in a way that made him exist almost independently of her out-of-game self. Based on the reaction of the other players, it seems she succeeded.

The one player who played an Oppositional Persona in D&D was Tina. Tina played her character differently and received a different response than Brianna did. At the time of the interview, Tina had only been playing for a year, but in that short time, she had established a presence in the community as her male character, Criv. When we met to complete the interview, Tina even had business cards with Criv's name to give out to other players at the convention. She had also just started DMing when we met for the interview and was using those business cards to recruit players to join her group. Tina described her Oppositional Persona, Criv, as a noble-born, dragonborn fighter who is "completely opposite" from her own personality. Tina was in the military, so she and Criv had that in common, but they differed dramatically in every other way. The most important of those differences, for Tina, was social class. Tina said that she was "raised in a low-income family" but Criv was a noble-born character. The first way that Tina and Criv differed from Brianna and Jetteral Z was that Tina and her character did not exist

independently of each other like Brianna and her character did. In fact, Tina integrated him into her gaming life:

> My Facebook page is Criv. All my DM and interaction stuff is all under Criv. When I made a new character for another game, so my husband could play [instead of DMing], I created a female character, and one guy in our group had a hard time with that. I went, "Well, I am a female!" And he said, "I know, but you will always be Criv to me. You were Criv for so long because I didn't know your name. I couldn't remember what it was!" So, that was kind of funny.

Criv took on a life of his own outside of D&D but still remained inextricably tied to Tina. In contrast, once roleplay had ended, Brianna was no longer Jetteral Z. He only existed within the LARP.

Another important difference between Brianna's and Tina's experience was the reaction Tina received from other players. When Tina first created Criv, the other players had a difficult time accepting that she was playing a male character: "But what was interesting was, when I first had Criv, they just assumed that it was a female character, and I had to say, 'No. HE is a dragonborn. HE is blank.' I guess they just assumed that I would play a female character." This quote suggests that other players expected Tina to perform gender in-game in the same way she performed gender out-of-game. What was it about D&D that caused players to make this assumption?

The effect of an Oppositional Persona was strong on Brianna and the other players in her LARP group likely because she changed her physical appearance so drastically. In D&D, however, the women I interviewed usually did not change their physical appearance by wearing costumes or prosthetics. All of the differences between character and player had to be explained verbally and accepted.

In my D&D participant observation, I also experienced other players in the group misgendering my character. For the first time since I started playing six years ago, I

decided to play an Oppositional Persona. When the DM introduced my character to the rest of the group, he said: "From across the tavern you see a large orcish-looking figure scanning the room. Go ahead and explain her to the group." I began by clarifying to the group that my character is male: "HE is leaned against the wall of the tavern. On his face, you see distrust and annoyance. HIS eyes are squinted, and HIS lip is curled up to reveal HIS large, yellow tusks." Another player said that his character came up to mine and asked his name. In character, I responded with low, gruff voice: "My name is Vladimir." Despite the traditionally masculine name, attempting to use a more masculine, low voice, and repeating the correct pronouns, the other players constantly referred to Vlad as a "she," e.g., "What is your character doing, Rachel? Will she take the night watch with me?" I reminded the other players every time their characters interacted with mine. It was extremely tiring and made me feel like no matter how hard I tried, I would not be able to separate myself from my character. I spent 15 hours, or five gaming sessions, with that group and they misgendered by character every time we played. Tina's quote suggests that her experience was similar until she established comradery with her group, which allowed them to see Tina as an active player at the table rather than just a woman at the table.

It is important to note, however, that adopting Oppositional Personas did not necessarily require changing genders. Natalie, one of the other LARP participants who used this roleplay style, played as a female character. When I asked Natalie how well her favorite character represented her, she said:

> I think she's not very well representative of me. Her sense of justice, I think, is the biggest thing that I identify with. But, besides that we're pretty opposite. She's very assertive, very aggressive, she'll tell you like it is, kinda. Whereas, I'm pretty

shy in real life. I have difficulty talking to people. She's everything that I can't be in my real life, I guess.

In this quote, Natalie said that her character is "everything that [she] cannot be in [her] real life." The use of the word "everything" was totalizing and suggests that she and her character shared more differences than similarities. Her quote illustrated the major difference between Oppositional Personas and Reflective Characters; the player will try to remove as much of their real-life personality from the Oppositional Persona as possible.

Overall, Oppositional Personas were very clearly a challenge to gender expectations. The women I interviewed who used this roleplay style took traits that were considered masculine, like aggression and assertiveness, and built their characters around those traits. In these ways, Oppositional Personas are distinct from Reflective Characters.

Reflective characters.

When participants chose to play Reflective Characters, they used their everyday self as a foundation but changed certain aspects of how they perform the self. The main difference between this roleplay style and Oppositional Characters was that the in-game character represents who the out-of-game player was, often in an idealized way. The character did not exist independently of the player because the character was so deeply rooted in who the player was. For example, when I asked Ericka how well her LARP characters represent her, she replied, "I think most of my characters represent parts of me very well. None of them are all me." To illustrate the kind of traits she changed when she played a Reflective Character, Ericka explained how she took aspects of personality and integrated them into her characters:

> Through Moira, who was an actress, then became a con artist because of opium and had to give up her career and now is kind of a . . . she's an alienist. So, I'll take my funny side, or my grumpy side, or my violent side. Moira is my actress and my addict, as I smoke a cigarette, side and my moving-on-into-having-a career-that-is not-your-artistic-passion side.

In this quote, Ericka suggested that each of her characters addressed a certain aspect of her personality. For example, if Ericka brought her violent side into LARP, she would have undoubtedly performed that violence and aggression in a more exaggerated manner than she would in her everyday life.

Ericka created Moira and independently decided what her background would be, which begs the question: How did women play Reflective Characters if the character was pre-written by the story writing team? Raquel, a career LARPer discussed this issue in detail when she shared her experience preparing for a LARP in Poland called *Fairweather Manor*. That particular LARP was set in British-occupied Ireland during World War I. As a career LARPer, Raquel was often asked to model for promotional materials as well as fill certain roles that help move the story along for other players. In *Fairweather Manor,* the game managers asked her to play a British woman in Ireland during World War I. As a woman of color, she was uncomfortable with the idea at first: "It caused me a lot of anxiety, and I was worried about how I would fit the role. I was worried if people would look at me and believe that I'm an Irish woman. I was afraid I was gonna be cast as a maid because I was 'colored.'" Thankfully, that did not happen because she was asked to play a character named Helena Fitzgerald. However, she was still uncomfortable with the role, so she then asked herself: "Why does this concept of playing a different race or ethnicity really, really bother me?" To which, she responded, "because here in the United States we are so tied, we are so tied on race and ethnicity. In

Europe, it's just not like that. They just don't think about it like that because— even a lot of people of color in Europe that I've spoken to, they don't have a problem playing whatever." After she talked through it with some of European LARPers and did some research on what it was like to be a British woman in British-occupied Ireland during World War I, she was able to play Helena in a way that she felt comfortable with, in a way that was true to the character but also reflected her own personality:

> I was just allowed to let go as her. There was a lot of myself I put in her because her as a character matched a lot of my personality, not all of it, but a lot of it. I was able to just completely give myself to this character, editing some things about myself, like maybe not being so loud, or maybe being a little bit more gentle.

Rather than choosing her own personality traits to change, Raquel took the personality traits of a pre-written character and adapted them to reflect her own personality traits. Even though it was a pre-written character, she said that Helena provided the most immersive roleplay:

> I've never really played a character that closely matches me as a person. I actually used to stay away from that, I used to think that was "poor form" to play yourself at a LARP. I didn't play myself, I played someone extraordinarily similar to me and it allowed me a lot of different types of freedom and to be the most immersed I have ever been in a game.

A few other participants shared Raquel's aversion to playing themselves at a LARP or in D&D. This finding suggested that playing oneself in RPGs was looked down on or too easy. However, once Raquel played someone who was "extraordinarily similar" to herself, she understood the value in playing a Reflective Character.

Reflective Characters, however, were not always intuitive or easy for the participants to play. When I asked Ashley about her favorite D&D character, she discussed a female soldier in her campaign who is "really, really close to [her]" and does

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"a lot of the same things [she] would do." Throughout the campaign, however, her

character is exposed to situations that make both Ashley and her character uncomfortable:

> Something we're dealing with right now, in my current campaign, is that there's somebody in out party who shapeshifts into something evil, and my character is just sworn to kill them if they do that. [exaggerated sigh] And I hate it. I *hate* that because I just want to be accepting of everybody, but the DM is being really good and keeping me accountable by saying, "You gotta be on her if she does that." I keep looking for ways to get around it. "Just don't do that! I'm looking at you!"

Although the character's personality was similar to Ashley's, she chose to integrate a

strong sense of justice into her character. Therefore, it was not always easy for Ashley to

make choices that were true to her character. Ashley also suggested that she appreciated

when the DM pushed her out of her comfort zone in a constant, supportive way. The

participants' experiences suggested that being pushed out of their comfort zone was not

always easy. However, for many participants, the discomfort paid off in important ways.

Personal and Societal Impacts

When the women I interviewed discussed the way in which roleplay impacted

their everyday life, it was always closely tied to motivation. That is; the women I

interviewed played these games because they were getting something of value out of

them, something that extended beyond in-game interactions. Some women discussed

personal impacts, which include emotional processing and trauma processing. Other

women said that D&D or LARP had larger, group and societal impacts, like group-

mediated leadership changes and changes to game development.

Personal impacts.

Many of the women I interviewed said that expressing their emotions at work or in professional settings was often impossible. D&D or LARP, however, was a place where they could freely express those emotions in a supportive environment. Some of the personal conflicts that women brought into D&D or LARP include depression, anxiety, anger, and past trauma. For example, Maggie, a nurse and D&D player, discussed the personal impact that playing Reflective Characters had on her depression and anxiety. Because she was a nurse, Maggie's supervisors, co-workers, and patients expected her to be nurturing and caring. As she described, she had to "spend twelve hours a day being super nice and helpful." This was difficult for someone, like Maggie, who has "fairly serious problems with depression and anxiety." Her supervisors, coworkers, and patients expected her to maintain control of her emotions, putting her patients' well-being before her own. However, when she played D&D, she allowed "the dark side come out to play a little bit." She liked to play "kind of darkish characters" that allowed her to "let go of everyday crap and do stuff you couldn't do in your usual life." Letting go of "everyday crap," then, was Maggie's motivation for playing D&D, but what impact did playing D&D have on her? When I asked about her favorite character, Maggie told me about one she created when she was "having a rough time with family issues." This particular character started out evil and, over the course of the campaign, became good. Maggie noted that "part of her arc actually came about because I was feeling a whole lot better." D&D, then, provided a space in which Maggie could explore the feelings she was having and process them. The impact of Maggie being able to "let go of everyday crap" in a supportive group of friends was that she felt less depressed and less anxious.

For River, D&D was a place where she could let some anger out in a way that was socially acceptable. When I asked River what attracted her to D&D, she spoke clearly about how D&D allowed her to challenge the gender expectations she faced in her everyday life:

> I think that playing Dungeons and Dragons allows me to enact out some of my more masculine tendencies without fear of retribution. Often times, I've heard that an angry woman is a dumb woman or a scary woman or can never be trusted . . . D&D allowed me to engage that part of myself without fear of retribution. I could be really bossy and angry all the time. My character could act out in ways that I could never act out in real life, but still be accepted by the group.

In this quote, River's experience illustrated passive resistance against gender expectations because, in roleplay, she performs gender in transgressive way. She allowed herself to be "angry" and "bossy," and because she and her group enjoyed strong comradery, they accepted her and her character. River articulated both the motivation for playing D&D and the impacts playing had on her life. Her motivation for playing D&D was to "enact some of [her] more masculine tendencies." The impact of playing, then, was that she was able to enact masculine tendencies without being judged, something she did not feel comfortable doing outside of roleplay.

One of the most powerful examples of the personal impact LARP can have on a player came from Camryn. In her interview, Camryn shared that she had been sexually assaulted and was never able to confront the man who assaulted her. In her interview, she discussed a character she created to address that past trauma in a safe environment:

> And so she was kidnapped as a little kid and as she grew older she was forced into sexual slavery. And then when she was actually introduced into play, she broke free from her captors. And so now she's just trying to make ends meet without really having much of a decent past that she can live her life based on. She's just terrified that she's going to be captured again. She doesn't trust anybody. I've been a victim of similar circumstances. And so being able to try and work through those traumas is pretty helpful . . . If you need to confront somebody for

something that's happened but you can't really do it in real life, getting that little bit of closure, at least through roleplay, can be very beneficial.

Because Camryn and her fellow LARPers had enjoyed strong comradery, she was able to ask the storywriters to work this scenario into the narrative. The impact of this experience, for Camryn, was a sense of closure; something she may have never been able to get outside of roleplay. Overall, the out-of-game impacts like Maggie's, River's, and Camryn's were on an individual level. Some roleplay experiences the participants discussed, however, suggested broader, societal level impacts.

Group and societal impacts.

In addition to personal impact, some women I interviewed discussed how their in-game social justice efforts affected other players and the structure of their gaming groups. This kind of impact operated on two levels: group and societal. On the group level, some participants discussed working with other players to change the gaming group's structure. For example, when I asked Samara about the barriers she experienced, she told me about an experience she had when she was trying out new LARP groups in her area. In one of the new groups, the male players on the story writing team "were just so sexist and so condescending that [she] ended up leaving the game early." When Samara left the game early, the game owner noticed and asked her what had happened. After she told them, the game owner made some important leadership changes within the group:

> He cleaned house, and my friend who had experienced the sexism with me is now the owner of that chapter and actually has been doing some really cool work with that. She has made a huge effort to tell diverse stories, and to get diverse people on the team. Their team is, I think, the queerest one in that game system. None of them are straight, which is really cool.

The changes Samara helped institute materialized because of a collaborative effort between her, the game owner, and other women in the LARP group who had experienced sexism. Therefore, this example illustrated how collaboration and passive resistance could have important, lasting impacts on her gaming group.

A few other participants discussed group level impacts like Samara's. However, only one woman I interviewed demonstrated that her efforts to change her gaming group had societal-level impacts. Raquel, a woman of color, stated that for many companies in the LARP industry, she was their "diversity person." She filled this role both by appearing in promotion materials and actively working to make LARP communities more racially equitable places. When I asked her how it felt to be a company's "diversity person," she was optimistic about the control that position gave her:

> I've educated a ton of companies on problems. I've helped them write new policies. I've helped them write new safety procedures that are imprinted in books across the world, but people don't see that part of what I do. People see the modeling and that's it. They don't see this part, they don't hear about that part, because I can't legally talk about it. I can't post about it. I can't show this part, but that's also a huge part of what I do. Yeah, I may be their diversity person, when they're talking about their content or what not, but I have made change, it's like a silent victory. It's like, I did that thing, but nobody knows it was me.

Raquel's experience was an effective illustration of passive resistance because no one saw the work she was doing, but she was creating real, tangible change both for herself and her groups but also for LARP groups across the world.

DISCUSSION

Before I began collecting data, I had three expectations for what I would find. First, I expected I would find that the communities surrounding D&D and LARP were male-dominated and largely excluded women from fully participating. Second, I expected

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to find that women who played these games would have had a lot to say about the discrimination and sexual harassment they face in the community. Finally, I expected to find that women would have used Oppositional Personas to resist gender performativity expectations. These expectations were grounded in the existing literature on gaming, which largely focuses either on how men interact with this particular kind of media (Martin, Vaccaro, and Heasleyor 2015) or how women are excluded (Garcia 2017). The data I collected, however, contradicted those expectations. All the women I spoke to were able to find a safe and accepting gaming group. Within their groups, most participants challenged gender expectations using Reflective Characters, and very few of the women I interviewed used Oppositional Personas.

The three theorists I used, Habermas, Butler, and Scott, provided a more effective theoretical lens than I had anticipated when I first chose to use them. In application, the theories could all be used to examine the performative nature of these two roleplaying games. As my results indicated, the participants performed gender in complex ways in communicative spaces, and that performance allowed the participants to enact hidden transcripts. In other words, the women I interviewed were able to carve out alternative spaces (Habermas' court of appeals) that allowed for resistance discourse about gendered expectations. In enacting that alternative space and engaging in resistance discourse, they were creating hidden transcripts. However, that experience is not universal. For instance, the discrimination Camryn faced in her early experiences with LARPing served as a counter example to the idea that roleplaying spaces always allow for the enactment of hidden transcripts. Instead, it supports the idea that supportive gaming groups are

necessary to achieve the emancipatory potential D&D or LARP offered to many participants.

Supportive gaming groups shared traits with Habermas' ideal form of communicative action. In his ideal form, communicative action was built on collaboration and consensus. "Safe" and "accepting," were words that the participants used to describe their gaming groups, and they were descriptors that fit well with collaboration and consensus. Participants in this study built consensus with other players, during roleplay, by building strong comradery. While few participants used the word "comradery" to illustrate the interactions in their gaming groups, they all described them as either having a familial feeling or as being their primary friend group. Through the collective storytelling process, the participants also enacted collaboration.

However, I found that access to supportive gaming groups was limited by a number of factors including gender, race, geographic location, and class. In regard to gender, the topic of this thesis, many participants discussed experiencing sexism and discrimination at some point. Jill's quote about perseverance suggested that some women she knew were unable to find to a supportive gaming group. In fact, a few other participants noted that some women they know have quit when they encounter sexism and discrimination. Instances of sexism and discrimination included the mansplaining Ashley experienced in D&D, the structural discrimination Camryn that faced in LARP, and the sexual harassment that I faced during my participant observation of LARP. Most women I interviewed had their own stories of negative experiences. After those negative experiences, the participants sought out new groups and all were eventually able to find supportive gaming groups. For a theoretical understanding of how societal gender

expectations affect how women perform gender, we look to Butler's theory of gender performativity.

As Butler's theory suggests, a person's, especially a woman's, authentic self is constrained by gender expectations. It is important to note that Butler argues a person's authentic self is not what they are but what they do. That is, the authentic self is performed rather than innate. However, if a woman wants to perform gender in a way that society views as masculine, Butler argues that she will often encounter retribution in her everyday life. Many participants stated that they felt uncomfortable expressing their emotions in many spaces outside of roleplay. Through roleplay, however, D&D players like River challenged gender expectations by performing gender in non-normative ways. I argue that their experiences are illustrative of passive resistance against normative gender performativity (Butler 1990). When River talked about using D&D to "enact her more masculine tendencies," she chose to bring societal expectations about how a woman should process emotions into roleplay and engage in a "search for understanding" with other players (Habermas 1981). Like the Malaysian peasants in Scott's *Hidden Transcripts*, most of the women I interviewed who play with Reflective Characters in D&D or LARP, women like River, look as though they are acceding to gender norms and acting how they are supposed to act in their everyday life. After examining how they engage with those expectations in D&D or LARP, however, I found that the passive resistance that occurs in roleplay has substantial effects on their everyday life. Using Oppositional Personas or Reflective Characters, the participants battled societal gender expectations in roleplay and emerged the victor. The victory, for them, was performing a more authentic self that was less restricted by gender expectations.

Overall, there were three major implications of this study. First, my research and review of the extant gaming scholarship proved that tabletop and live-action roleplaying games are serious areas of academic inquiry. As such, there are many important insights to gain from further inquiry, e.g., how race impacts the RPG experience. Second, my research demonstrated how passive resistance occurred in two gaming communities. Third, this study illustrates how enacting resistance in roleplay had an impact on the participants' everyday lives. In other words, the positive impacts from in-game roleplay extend beyond the game.

CONCLUSION

There is a popular belief that tabletop, video, and live-action games are just games; that there is not any meaning in these types of media. However, this research illustrates that players collaboratively construct meaning in D&D and LARP and describes how they do so. The women I interviewed used D&D and LARP to engage in communicative action to resist gender performativity expectations. Because these games are largely played in private or semi-private spaces, many assume they could not be viewed as resistance. However, in showing the personal and societal impacts D&D or LARP have on the participants' everyday lives, I have demonstrated that these games illustrate Scott's theory of passive resistance.

If there is an emancipatory potential in these games, especially for women, it is important to examine the conditions that provide and limit access to that potential. In this thesis, I examined one of the four systematic distortions women discussed in their interviews; gender. The other three are geography, race, and class. Geography matters

more for LARP than D&D. When I was looking for a group to observe, I had a lot of trouble finding one because of my geographic location. In Montana, LARP groups are significantly more difficult to find than D&D groups. Although I live in Missoula, a college town and the third largest city in Montana, I only found three groups that engaged with some aspects of LARP, like battle reenactment, but none of them engaged with roleplay. However, LARP is significantly more popular on the East Coast, which means it is much easier to find a group. It also means that if the group a player finds is not supportive, there are many other groups around that may offer a supportive gaming environment. Research should be done to further our understanding about how geography provides and limits access to supportive gaming groups.

Most of my participants did not address how race provided and limited access to supportive gaming groups. In fact, only two participants, Raquel and Yara noted that gaming groups are largely dominated by white people. In my field notes from Gen Con, I also noted that there was a lack of racial diversity when I attended in 2016. Although Raquel is from New York and Yara is from Montana, they both called attention to the underrepresentation of people of color in gaming groups, which indicates that it is not a regional problem but a national one. Raquel, the only participant who identified as a woman of color, provided a thorough discussion of her experience with race. In her discussion, she stated that her main goal in modeling for LARP events is to inspire other women of color to participate. She also indicated that she worked with corporations in the LARP industry to make it a more racially equitable gaming experience. Her experiences indicated that she was doing applied social justice work within the LARP community. Based on this finding, I argue that scholars should try to examine the racial dynamics in

gaming groups to understand why people of color are either underrepresented or less visible.

I did not expect to find that class could act as a barrier to LARP participation. Many of the women I interviewed stated that participating in LARP events can cost hundreds of dollars. For example, Ericka said that she once paid $800 to participate in a LARP event. Many events do allow players to participate for free if they fill NPC roles, but those roles do not allow the players as much creative freedom as characters they create themselves. Therefore, the potential to use that character in passive resistance likely also diminishes. Class, then, is also a potential avenue for further research on passive resistance in LARP communities.

Future research should examine these three areas, especially using an intersectional approach. There is a wealth of information to be gained from queer women who LARP or Black women who play D&D. In studying their experiences, we can understand the multitude of ways passive resistance against gender expectations manifests in gaming groups and, perhaps, interactive media and popular culture in general.

This study made two important contributions to the current literature on roleplaying games. First, I combined three theories to create a useful theoretical lens for examining how resistance occurred in roleplaying games. Further research could employ this same lens when analyzing other data sets and find additional, interesting, and informative themes. Second, my theoretical conceptualization of two roleplaying styles, Oppositional Personas and Reflective Characters, should be examined in greater depth. It

is possible that other roleplaying styles exist, and those styles could reveal additional

resistance discourse that I was unable to identify.

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APPENDIX A: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Can you tell me how you started playing Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) or live-action roleplay (LARP)?*

2. What aspects of D&D or LARP attracted you most?*

    a. Why?

3. Can you tell me about any barriers you encountered when you started playing?

4. Can you describe the kind of people with whom you play regularly or most recently?

5. How do you find new groups?

6. Can you describe your experiences with DMs/GMs (dungeon masters / game masters - in charge of narration dictation and rule enforcement)?

7. Can you describe the themes and motifs in the content of the game?

    .   a. How well do you identify with those themes?

8. What would you change about gameplay?

    .   a. Why?

9. Can you describe some of the characters with which you've played?

10. How do you choose which race/class your character will be?

11. Can you describe your favorite character with which you've created and played?

    a. Why was this one your favorite?

12. How well do you think your character represents you?

* "D&D" was used in Stage 1. "LARP" was used in Stage 2.

APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT TABLE

Name	Age	Time Spent Playing	Occupation	Location
D&D				
Yara*	25	10 Years	Student	Montana
River	42	37 Years	Military (Army)	Montana
Sierra*	35	12 Years	Tech Industry	Illinois
Stephanie*	37	15 Years	Engineer	California
Maggie	45	20 Years	Nurse	Kentucky
Ashley	23	8 Years	Actress	New York
Nikki*	34	7 Years	Engineer	Illinois
Helen	55	24 Years	Accounting Professor	California
Kelsey	27	4 Years	Retail	Ohio
Mary	56	40 Years	Writer	Kansas
Tina	58	1 Year	Military (Navy)	Missouri
Tara	26	15 Years	Student	Edmunton, AB
LARP				
Jess*	30	17 Years	Pharmacist	Georgia
Rebecca	ND	ND	Ren Faire Staff	Conneticut
Ericka	35	18 years	Magazine Editor	New York
Sarah	22	4 years	Advertising, Retail, Freelance Copy-Editor	Toronto
Melanie	19	2 years	Office Clerk	California
Jill*	27	7 years	Professional	Edmunton, AB
Samara	30	13 years	Registrar at Music School	Northeast
Brianna	22	6 years	Student/Greenhouse Attendant	Virginia
Camryn	25	11 years	Student/LARP Director	Ohio
Rebekah	38	5 years	Actor	New Jersey
Raquel	22	7.5 years	Model/LARPer	New York
Susan*	41	20 years	Stay-at-home mom	Michigan