DIALOGUE
The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy

D&D Beyond Bikini-Mail: Having Women at the Table

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ABSTRACT

Dungeons and Dragons represents a space that is often treated as an echo chamber for young (usually white) men to act out fantasies of power and control, which makes up for their inability to perform such actions in the real world. Using the work of Sherry Turkle and Michelle Dickey, I posit that this game is a nuanced location acting as a safe space for people to act out different aspects of their identity or life experiences in a low-risk environment enhanced by the connections made between the players and their characters. In this work, I have utililzed feminist frames of criticism and analysis developed by Gesa Kirsch, Jacqueline Royster, Sonja Foss, and Cindy Griffin to show how the developers of the fifth edition of *Dungeons and Dragons* have made a feminist intervention on their own product. This feminist intervention, comprised of changes to rules and art policies, invites players to consider their preconceptions of race, gender, and sexual orientation. These challenges now materializing from within a space traditionally associated with the toxic masculinity of western popular culture are designed to make players think about the nature of the imagined worlds of gameplay while also considering the ways that their own world's norms and expectations have been constructed. Hence, through this game, players are offered the opportunity to learn and understand complicated concepts that impact their daily lives.

Keywords: *Dungeons and Dragons*, *D&D,* Invitational Rhetoric, Rhetoric, Strategic Contemplation, Critical Imagination, Role-play, Toxic Masculinity, Popular Culture, Critical Role

INTRODUCTION

The words "Dungeons and Dragons" (*D&D*) typically evoke variations of a mental image: a group of unclean white men, huddled around a table in their parents' basements, rolling dice to murder monsters, acquire loot, and seduce fictional women. Women are usually absent from the table, but those that are present are there at the behest of one of the male players. Usually, the woman is a girlfriend who has been cajoled into joining in order to spend more time with their significant other. The world that these men encounter can also be easily imagined as a variation on "White Fantasy Crypto-Europe", which is populated by noble (almost exclusively white) heroes wielding swords, practicing sorcery, dramatically fighting dragons guarding piles of gold, facing crude humanoid monsters that coincidently share visual similarities with one ethnic group or another, and rescuing damsels in need of saving (Wundergeek).

The women that appear in the worlds imagined by these players are not always damsels; sometimes they are sensual sorceresses with thin, gossamer robes. Sometimes, women appear as barbarian queens wearing the finest of bikini mail (leather or metal bikini-like garments) and wielding broadswords (so chosen because these swords are both physically broad and wielded by broads, an often offensive term for women). Other times, the women are nameless bar-wenches, existing solely to provide the male characters a way to sate their lust without upsetting the male players' perception of "historical realism. Attempts to move away from these familiar heteronormative and masculine tropes are frequently decried as breaking the players' immersion due to moving away from "historical realism".

In many ways, *D&D* has historically represented a masculine power fantasy that is uninviting to those outside its intended audience; it represents a community space in which those who do not identify with straight, white, and male norms are excluded unless they uphold those norms. This space is an echo chamber of normalized misogyny and racism, pushing men who are otherwise outside such popular hegemonic constructions of masculinity to embody these characteristics, if only for an evening. In an effort to embody an elusive masculine power fantasy, even those men who are otherwise rejected by the fantasy are still able to wield its power to further reject others whose presence does not fit with the fantastical norms they are attempting to embrace. This whole process becomes interesting, however, when this fantasy is challenged from within that space.

Dungeons and Dragons is currently experiencing a renaissance of sorts; its player-base is increasing dramatically as people are introduced to the game by other media such as popular television shows (e.g., *Stranger Things*, *Community, My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic, etc*), podcasts (Penny Arcade's *Acquisitions Incorporated, Dungeons and Daddies,* and *High Rollers)* and Twitch streams (*Critical Role, Adventure Time*, and *Dice, Camera, Action)* (Deville). What is especially interesting is that many of the players in these media depictions, as well as the real-world players rolling dice and writing out backstories for the first time are not the traditional audience, but are increasingly including players who identify as queer, woman, or people of color.

In analyzing the most recent edition of the game, I posit that this increased player diversity is not only a function of the game's more recent popularity in popular culture, but also stems from changes in art, storytelling, and amended rules made by the game's designers to challenge the exclusionary space the game has perpetuated. These changes have constructed a deliberate feminist intervention on the game itself in order to expand the types of stories that can be told through it, who they are told by, and who they are told for; making it explicit that this game has been designed to provide players the option to play diverse characters that better represent their own life-experiences. This feminist action, which I tie to Royster and Kirsch's concepts of critical imagination and strategic contemplation and to Foss and Griffin's theory of invitational rhetoric, denormalizes harmful fantasy tropes while opening spaces for female, queer, and racialized bodies. By extending these theories to *Dungeons and Dragons,* I will show both how role-playing games are still an

evolving realm of interaction that deserves further study as well as how small changes to these games can have real-world impacts on their players.

PLAYING THE GAME

In order to fully understand conversations about *Dungeons and Dragons*, it is necessary to have at least some understanding of how the game is played. Abbreviated to *D&D* by its fans, the game is an exercise in collaborative storytelling, in which each participant takes responsibility for certain aspects or characters within a shared and expanding narrative. One player takes on the mantle of Dungeon Master (DM), working behind the scenes to create the outline of the world in which the other players then create characters. The creation of this world is not the end of the DM's role, however, as they are also also responsible for choosing the rules that are to be in force in the game world, upholding these rules, determining the plausibility and results of player actions, controlling the actions of non-player-controlled inhabitants within the fictional world, and taking on other roles, in accordance with their personal style or the general agreement of the group.

Based on the set-up established by the DM, the other players engage in what is commonly known as role-play, in which they create and then play out the actions of their character, a special and empowered participant of that world. Players have free rein to create characters based on their desires and the rules of the game, selecting such components as their species, profession, name, history, personality, and abilities; which in turn are reflected in their ability to influence or interact with the world. These choices taken together, sometimes referred to as a character's statistics (or stats), might confer a numerical bonus to dice rolls (instead of rolling a twenty sided die and comparing the result against a set goal, they also add a set number to that roll), adjust game mechanics entirely (normal people cannot cast magic spells, wizards gain a feature that allows them to do this), or exist solely to connect the player to their character and to help the player determine what their character will do. The specific rules determining the impact these decisions have, as well as the available options, are grouped together based on the version of the game being played at that time with the original game being retroactively called 1st Edition and the most recent being called 5th Edition, or 5E for short.

It is important to note that while the options listed in the game's documentation guides/books are considered core to the game, the DM and their players are encouraged to come up with new ones as needed. The 5E *Player's Handbook* specifically says that, "You aren't limited by the rules in the *Player's Handbook,* the guidelines in this book, or the selection of monsters in the *Monster's Manual*. You can let your imagination run wild" (Crawford and Mearls 263). The text is littered with advice on how to tweak the game to suit the stories, adventures, characters, and rules that the group wants to engage with.

Once the players have designed and equipped their fictional characters, the 'real' gameplay can start. The DM's authority undergoes a shift from world-builder to storyteller, now acting as the eyes and ears of the other players' fictional characters and describing scenes for the players to react to. At this time, the players basically have the freedom to do what they want, with the likelihood of success being based on their creativity and a literal roll of the dice. As a reward for dealing with a variety of situations, the characters have the possibility of receiving treasure with which to acquire more equipment, experience-points that can be used to improve their characters' abilities, or other non-quantifiable awards such as noble titles, advantageous political alliances,and access to new areas (Bowman 30). While this experience was originally designed to be experienced in person, chatting with your friends around a table, with advances in technology came changes in format, allowing people to play via forum messages, synchronous video conferencing software such as *Skype* or *Zoom,* and even specially designed programs such as *Roll20* or *Fantasy Grounds* (Abbott). While different play formats do impact gameplay, for the sake of this article we will focus mostly on the in-person table-top gameplay experience.

While there are many and varied situations for players and their characters to confront, there is a heavy emphasis on combat situations, which can be seen in the disproportionate number of rules and abilities that have no use outside of battle (Schick 20). Because the game is based on the creative imagination of its players, the stories that are created are effectively endless. Similarly, there is no way to 'win' the game; sessions continue as long as the DM is willing to create situations for the players to encounter and the players are willing to engage with them. While my father is fond of saying that "The real treasure was the friends we made along the way," for *D&D* it might be more accurate to say that "The real game was the story we made with our friends along the way."

PLAY TO LEARN

Character construction and control are crucial to the enjoyment of the game, and so is the game's importance as a location for feminist intervention. In this context, I use feminism not as a theory solely for observing gendered understandings of a text, but as one that takes into consideration the ideological positions of author, audience, and text in relation to "gender, race, class, sexuality, identity, image, place and more" (Royster and Kirsch 32). As Bowman explains, because the players create the characters and their interactions from nothing but statistics, rules, and their own imagination, the players can form a special attachment to their characters. Further, Bowman notes, their enjoyment stems from stepping outside of their own mundane worlds and into the game world; they feel anxious when their characters are placed into dangerous or tricky situations and exhilaration when these obstacles are overcome. The catharsis experienced when a player's character accomplishes a task is greater than when a character performs that same task in a movie or book because the player is not just a passive participant in the story, but rather a co-author in the world (Bowman 74).

While character construction and control are significant from a feminist point of view as a place of listening and shared authorship, the spaces in which these characters are played are conducive to the player's broader education. Drawing from Michele Dickey's "Game Design and Learning: A Conjectural Analysis of How Massively Multiple Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) Foster Intrinsic Motivation," role-playing games teach the player how to interact with both their created world and the real one. These games, according to Dickey, allow players to "experiment in a safe, non-threatening environment and to expand, explore, and reflect on different aspects of themselves" through the medium of characters who "players often feel an emotional proximity to" (Dickey 258). While players are enjoying the game's narrative or mechanics, it is also teaching them how to "share information, test understandings, and reflect on learning" while working with others to "communicate, collaborate, plan, strategize, and socialize," giving them an opportunity to challenge their own modes of thinking (Dickey 255).

Dickey's article is focused on computer games; however the games she looks at are strongly rooted in *D&D*. MMORPGs are, as the title suggests, role-playing games that have been reformatted to be massively multiplayer, usually via the Internet. These games include complicated chat rooms, graphically enhanced multi-user dungeons (MUDs), and fully animated video games. At the end of the day, however, they are all just different variations of role-playing games. Role-play itself is a complex phenomenon, either on or offline, that allows people to "'act out' unresolved conflicts, to play and replay characterological difficulties on a new and exotic stage," facilitating growth and development through the actions of an imagined other ("Cyberspace and Identity" 644). The creation of this alternate persona within a controlled space allows the player to act in ways that are not constrained by existing societal or personal norms, such as exploring parts of themselves that they may not be fully comfortable expressing in their everyday lives, for example, their sexuality, insecurities, or fears (645). This persona allows people to try understanding situations from different perspectives, projecting

shadows of their current dilemma onto the game from where they can be examined from different angles, which, in turn, allows them to gain a deeper understanding of the situation by approaching the problem in another person's shoes ("Life on the Screen" 188). *D&D* might not be the only role-playing game that has graced the table-top, but it is considered to be the first modern one, exerting great influence over the others and their descendents, leading me to argue that Dickey's claim regarding the power of roleplaying for social development and grown is just as applicable to *D&D* as they are to computerized versions games, if not more so (Bowman, 11).

While the depth of character customization in computer games can be staggering, in *D&D* it is even more so. Video games such as *Baldur's Gate* or *Pillars of Eternity* might include dozens or even hundreds of possible actions programmed into them, but ultimately any given situation has a strict limit of solutions in keeping with what has been pre-programmed into the game, hence cutting off potential avenues for players to connect with their character's behavior. *D&D*'s ruleset, on the other hand, offers guidelines that can be applied to almost any situation and invites DMs to create new rules in response to player inquiries occurring outside of those situations. Doing so allows players greater opportunities for interactions with the game, which, in turn, creates emotional connections and catharsis that can be more personal to the player and their character, potentially allowing for greater connections than those found in video games. The players thus have opportunities to try almost anything, to be anyone, and to explore whatever experiences of human existence they can dream of.

This ability for players in *Dungeons and Dragons* to do *anything* is complicated, however, by the player's historical tendency to repeatedly perform the same, very specific actions, using the game's stakes-free world to "act out" their frustrations rather than "work through" or explore them ("Life on the Screen" 200).

THE FIRST STEP IS ADMITTING YOU HAVE A PROBLEM

On September 16th, 2014, shortly after the release of *D&D* 5E, a user named Grubman, on an RPGnet thread, made a post commenting on one of his most significant perceived issues with the new edition of the game's rulebooks:

> I certainly don't want this next bit to come out sounding wrong, but I also have to ask what's up with the excess of women? Call me a chauvinist if you like, but it's just… weird…they [the developers] tried to be so politically correctly racial diverse that none of it [the book] looks like a part of any coherent fantasy world (Wundergeek).

While conversations about the number and depiction of women in *D&D* have their place (this essay's next section, for one), what I find to be the most important part of this quote is the last sentence, which implies that the presence of a diverse population is antithetical to a coherent fantasy world. To put it bluntly, Grubman cannot conceive of a fantasy world in which members of diverse races, genders, and ethnicities live, suggesting that the only worlds that make any sense to him are those in which the cast of characters is massively skewed towards a specific type of man. After Grubman's initial thread was locked by moderators, he made another post to apologize for his "poor wording" before repeating his assertions in less divisive language in yet another thread. When forum member Devlin1 asked what Grubman considered an appropriate amount of diversity he redirected them to the apology thread and refused to engage in any critique of this claim over the next 200 or so exchanges in the thread ("RE: D&D 5 Art IMHO better").

While I do not wish to speak for Grubman at an individual level, this situation is a example of a common problem that must be faced when discussing any issues pertaining to ideological positions: the conflation of an individual's or individual group's experiences and bodies with universal experiences and bodies such that their experiences are seen as 'normal' and all others as seen as 'abnormal' or deserving of special attention.

When people such as Grubman claim that some depiction of a fantastical world is abnormal, incoherent, or historically unrealistic, they are invoking an unspoken, yet specific, notion of normality that they have been taught to perceive as non-political and non-controversial: their own worldly experience. According to the work of Karma Chávez, readers do not consider all bodies or aspects of bodies to be equally worthy of attention or mention. Specifically, bodies that are white, cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual, and male are identified as being abstractly 'normal', and thus devoid of inherent meaning, while bodies that deviate from this model are seen as inherently significant, necessitating justification for deviating from the more coherent or historically accurate norm (Chávez 242-244). While any particular signifier is realistically a signifier of a particular subjective position, because many of these are maintained through recurring societal effort, groups subconsciously perceive them as being more normal than others on a general level.

Keeping within the *D&D* community, role-play blogger David Prokopetz described the normative *D&D* world as "'Generically medieval,' by which we mean our peerage is French, our castles are German, our weapons are Italian, and everybody speaks English." The idea that Prokopetz appears to be trying to get across is that players' notions of historical accuracy are false, instead focusing on merely ensuring that the normal (vaguely European) people are properly represented as normal. Groups not meant to be taken as normal, for reasons of culture, race, sexuality, gender identity, or other characteristics are exoticized within the game, and removed from the realm of normal stories or fantasies.

This concern with deviations from the norm seems to be why Grubman is so alarmed at the presence of women and people of color in *D&D* 5E. Within this worldview, women and people of color cannot be normal, and thus must have been added to be so "politically correctly racial diverse that none of it [the book] looks like a part of any coherent fantasy world" (Wundergeek). Thus, it is not the presence of women or people of color, but the absence of a majority of white men, that appears to be distressing to Grubman. This distinction is evidenced by two points: (1) his lack of response to a forced racially motivated inclusion that has rendered his perceived normal group more distinguishable and (2) a closer analysis of the art he judged as radically diverse. Regarding the first point, let us discuss a fictional character named Regdar.

The art team for *D&D*'s third edition designed a collection of adventurers to be used as exemplars of different races and classes, one being the human male fighter, Regdar. Such characters were pictured in their associated class section, as well as in other artwork within the books and promotional material for the games. According to Morfie, Monty Cook, a prominent developer of the third edition, the game's sales and marketing team insisted on the inclusion of a more prominently white and male heroic character for the player base to associate with. Regdar was thus shoehorned in, replacing the previous fighter, a white-skinned dwarf who was considered too far from normal to be properly associated with, in the class page (Morfie). Additionally, Regdar was highlighted in much of the out-of-book promotional material, such as cardboard props and DM's tools (Morfie). While Regdar's prominent place in the game's advertising might not be common knowledge, it was brought up in the same discussion thread that Grubman frequently posted in, although he never engaged with this information the way that he did with the "excess of women" discussion (Wundergeek).

While a lack of response does not necessarily suggest a lack of concern, when it is coupled with a deeper look at the art that offended Grubman, we gain insight into his worldview. Blog author S. Ben Melhuish performed an analysis of the 5E *Player's Handbook* by tracking the characteristics of humanoids as depicted in its art. If we adjust the data to only include people the author was able to make a hard decision on, male bodies out-represent female bodies 58% to 42%, whereas light-skinned bodies out-represent dark-skinned bodies 76% to 24%. While the author goes on to make several interesting points about the correlations between perceived gender/race and active/passive poses or perceived martial ability, the fact that these percentages were considered so outrageous that some fans of the game complained is rather telling. Even with most depicted bodies being male and light-skinned bodies, Grubman considered this situation too radically diverse

to be coherent. Then again, by these standards our own world is too diverse to be a logical land, even in its imagined form. . Looking at 2010 U.S. census data and comparing these numbers to the numbers in the 5E *Player's Handbook*, the world depicted in the book is less diverse than the United States of America, where Grubman lives, according to his profile. While these numbers are more impressive than previous editions, the fact that these depictions, skewed from the real world as they are, are still too problematic to be considered a "coherent fantasy world" by some is alarming (Wundergeek).

This is not to say that Grubman and those like him have reached these conclusions by accident. As discussed by Chávez, Western society reinforces the universality of the white, male, heterosexual experience, allowing this segment of the populace the "privilege of denying their body", of assuming experiences coded towards their bodies are universal to all bodies (hooks 137). In studies on male perception of gendered presence in discussions, men report discussions in which they men twice as frequently as female participants as still being female dominated (Cutler and Scott 254). The hegemonically created 'normal' male body is positioned as being unworthy of consideration, whereas 'abnormal' or 'othered' bodies (such as the female) are noted as distinct and worthy of note. *D&D* is no exception to this and the core books of the game have included specific language that defines normalization work. In a *D&D* book from 3rd edition, *Oriental Adventures*, every weapon with a Japanese, Chinese, or Indian origin is classified as an "Exotic Weapon," requiring an extra allotment of resources for the characters to use. That these weapons are considered exotic and unusual for all characters, even those with roots in those real-world regions, identifies them as abnormal and unusual in any game-play scenario while reinforcing the norm of a vaguely European fantasy as universal (Wyatt 72). Another example, dating back to the first edition of the game, placed a lower limit on the maximum potential strength of female fighters compared to that of male fighters, making their gender necessitate an exception to the normal rules of play (Spalding).

While such overt sexism written directly into the rules has not been common since the days of the first edition, notions that sexuality and gender must be displayed in ways that match the expectations of their audience are still alive and well. Depictions of women typically focus on eroticized equipment, such as armor that emphasizes female characters' breasts at the cost of the armor's protective utility, or human sexual characteristics being applied to species that do not demonstrate sexual dimorphism in a human-like fashion. Mike Mearls, one of the head developers of 5E, has even expressed frustration that artists working on the project continued depicting female dragonborn (a species of lizard people descended from, you guessed it, dragons) with breasts. This was despite the species' description which clearly stated that they were not visibly distinguishable from male dragonborn and were six-foot tall lizard people who were in no way, shape, or form mammals (Wundergeek). The fact that the presence of "fully-clothed, actively posed, heroic looking women… brown people…*heroic looking brown women…" with "NO BOOBPLATE"* in *D&D* 5E is considered noteworthy and can be seen as an indication of the game's historical problems and their legacies (Wundergeek, emphasis in original).

To live up to its narrative and disruptive potential as well as to expand its player base, *D&D* needed to intervene unto itself. *D&D* creators did this by identifying all the bodies it depicted as being worthy of consideration in order to challenge the norms that the game's older editions had helped create, to break its reliance on Eurocentric fantasy tropes and stories, and to invite players to tell new stories that highlight different bodies, cultures, and norms.

CRITICAL IMAGINATION, STRATEGIC CONTEMPLATION, AND INVITATIONAL RHETORIC

Critical Imagination, as conceived by Jacqueline Jones Royster in her work, *Traces of a Stream,* and expanded upon in a book coauthored by Gesa Kirsch, *Feminist Rhetorical Practices: New Horizons for Rhetoric,*

Composition, and Literacy Studies, is a tool of inquiry that is meant to help the user see "the noticed and the unnoticed, rethinking what is there and not there, and speculating about what could be there instead" (20). Royster and Kirsch propose the use of this tool to help examine scholarly work and relationships and think about the frame in which that work was developed and the impact of that frame, all with a focus on listening to what is being said as well as that which is left unsaid.

By applying this tool to the whole of *D&D*, it becomes easier to see the frame that the *D&D* players who resist diversity frequently operate within. These players, who have often been denied real-world masculine power, feel entitled to and attempt to regain it through alternate means. While achieving moments of fictional glory in a game of *D&D* might not be considered as masculine as, say, catching a football while riding a motorcycle, it still aligns men into societally accepted, hegemonic understandings and norms. Thus, they play these games to "increase their group status" while pushing themselves against the anti-man, typically relegating women "to subordinate positions" (Martin et al. 293). This leads the women who do remain present in such environments to frequently act in very specific ways, by adopting their own masculine personas and mindsets, or by only partly participating with the rest of the group. Such half participation is frequently seen when players drag their partners along to play *D&D* but don't let them explore the worlds in the ways they desire (Martin et al. 299).

To counteract this frame, the designers of *D&D* 5E used a similar approach to Royster and Kirsch's second term of engagement, *Strategic Contemplation.* By taking time to reflect on what the current situation is and the voices of those affected, these developers were able to create a feminist intervention within their product, allowing "new vistas to come into view, unexpected leads to shape scholarly work, and new…questions to emerge" (Royster and Kirsch 22). Despite the toxic environments, often filled with fantasy purists, low-key to high-key sexism, and frequently insecure men, women still made up approximately 20-25% of *D&D* players in 2012, according to a survey conducted by the game's owners, *Wizards of the Coast* (Kane).

By gathering demographic data on the people who used their product and taking their considerations seriously, rather than just playing to their historical base, Wizards of the Coast and *D&D* 5E's development team came to the realization that if they made the game's space less exclusive, they could not only better satisfy many of their game's consumers, but also potentially broaden the game's demographics. While I would like to think that their motivations were primarily ideological, such widening of the game's demographics would also help increase revenue.

One of the ways chosen to widen the games demographics was by explicitly inviting their players, the co-authors of these fantasy worlds, to perform their own Strategic Contemplations and spend more time considering who might populate their game world, and thus, who might one day appear at their game table. As mentioned above, the artwork in the 5th edition *Player's Handbook* is some of the most diverse the game has ever seen, inviting readers of various social groups and minoritized communities to see themselves in the game world while inviting those in positions of hegemonic power to consider whether their version of 'normal' needs to be the norm in the fantastical worlds they are constructing.

It is not a coincidence that the first piece of art in the 5E Player's Handbook depicts a man of color taking on a heroic position, slaying (presumably) evil goblins. Not only a man of color, but a dark-skinned man of color with his hair styled in locs. This intentional choice in physical appearance was likely to surprise some older players and spur them to question their position on race in the game, while also showing people of color that their experiences, cultural heritage, and stories have space in the game as well (Wundergeek). This fore-fronting of people of color continues throughout the rest of the book, with the artwork accompanying the most popular class and race options (fighter and human, respectively) depicting a non-eroticized or demonized woman and man of color, respectively, as their representatives (Crawford and Mearls).

While it would take too long to account for *every* noteworthy depiction of a minoritized group in the game materials, suffice to say the developers tried to place representatives of diverse groups in numerous

places throughout the game, aligning groups with roles that some would view as surprising. For instance, one can find a woman with East Asian features acting in an unremarked upon martial capacity; a man of color serving in an ascetic tradition; a half-orc (traditionally associated with evil) serving as a warrior of divine light; and a Tiefling woman who is *not* overtly sexualized. While that may not sound like a substantial accomplishment, female Tieflings have traditionally been portrayed as quite alluring, leather-clad succubae, to be seen as sexual objects rather than actual living women with a ribcage or a need to breathe.

Beyond artwork, the development team also placed textual items in the game's rules that preemptively called out the acts of limited imagination common to previous generations of games. One of these is the subheading for sex and gender appearing on page 121 of the *Player's Handbook,* the only book that the developers explicitly suggest all *D&D* players should own. This subheading makes it clear that characters can be "male or female…without gaining any special benefits or hinderances" as well as asking players to "think about how your character does or does not conform to the broader culture's expectations of sex, gender, and sexual behavior…" or "binary notions of sex and gender" (121).

The presentation of sexuality as something to be approached within the game is invitational, to use the language of Sonja K. Foss and Cindy Griffin. The developers knew that they wanted to change the way their game's community treated sensitive topics such as sex and gender, but they also knew that if they attempted to impose different values on their audience they would fail in their goal of convincing those leery of change that bodies unlike theirs have a right to exist within their imagined worlds. Instead, they invite players to "think about" the choice rather than forcing them in any one direction, to spend time and resources strategically contemplating what place gender and sex might have in their games and how the lived experience of different characters might differ.

A common criticism of this persuasive approach is that nothing is really forcing people to engage with it. Players are not prevented from creating characters who fit into the same heteronormative and masculine tropes as before, nor are DMs prevented from fashioning worlds rooted in historical realism, but in many ways this is part of the point. What this approach does, however, is make players confront the fact that this is a choice they are making, encouraging them to consider the possibility that their consideration of "normal" is constructed. Since individual groups can choose to ignore or even de-standardize the rules, there is little that the book's authors can actually do to enforce any one way of understanding or of playing the game. However, by having the in-book rules specifically state that diversity is a choice players can make, resistant groups can be challenged by individual members who wish to understand why they have moved away from the written material in a sourcebook, calling on those who resist to explain their position and engage in a potentially educational dialogue. In any case, it invites more conversation and consideration than previous systems have. Sometimes these conversations are more confrontational than others, as we saw with Grubman, but they are important nonetheless.

The invitation encourages the strategic contemplation of the players, giving them the chance to imagine worlds with different accepted norms within a safe space that provides value to their thoughts and opinions (Foss & Griffin 10). Because of the deep connections players make with their characters, as discussed above, this invitation is particularly effective, asking players to strategically contemplate not only their game worlds, but ultimately, the real world that they live in as well.

THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES

While it is too simplistic to claim that these efforts of inclusivity alone have made *D&D*'s 5E successful, several pieces of evidence suggest that there is a connection. Between 2012 and 2017, during the time frame that *D&D* 5E came out, the percentage of *Dungeons and Dragons* players who identified as women almost

doubled, stabilizing at around 40%, according to the company's surveys. The game also saw a massive growth of 40% in sales between 2016 and 2017, which represented the period in which early adaptors to the 5th edition would have had the chance to be inspired by the game and share it with their friends (Kane). The normalization of the Internet, and specifically streaming services such as *YouTube* and *Twitch,* have also played an important role in the game's growth.

As pointed out by blogger Vivian Kane in her article, "How Women Are Driving the Dungeons & Dragons Renaissance," in 2017 "10 million hours of *D&D* were streamed on Twitch, and only about 500,000 of those were produced by Wizards of the Coast." (Par. 3). This data reveals a clear and massive interest on the part of users in sharing and watching *D&D* related content as well as the powerful way potential players can discover first-hand what the game is actually like through its introduction via other media. While all these streamed games have indeed helped to establish interest in the game and show how easily it can be played, special interest should be paid to what is often considered the most popular live-streamed *D&D* game, *Critical Role*.

Critical Role, a web-series whose players are eight friends in the voice-acting and television industries, had its first season run for approximately 373 hours of gameplay over two years and 115 episodes (Par. 5). The show remains so successful that the group recently earned over 11 million dollars from fans through a Kickstarter campaign to convert parts of their game's story into an animated television series (*Critical Role*, Par. 5). While there are many facets that contribute to the success of *Critical Role,* one significant aspect of the show is the way it forefronts stories outside of male or heterosexual norms. The core cast contains three women who actively encourage other women to play and who are active participants in the story's creation. Additionally, the players have been able to represent and depict various queer identities or alternate gender expressions without stigma while the world itself draws on non-European cultures in a respectful way. This show lives the dream that the development team put forth, imagining a world in which different voices and bodies may coexist, while sharing that dream even further through the internet. While this particular game is, perhaps, not indicative of every gamer's experience, the wide number of people in the *D&D* community who state that they were inspired to play by *Critical Role* shows that it is very influential (Shea).

This is not to say that *D&D*'s toxicity problems have been completely resolved. Just as *Critical Role* serves as an example of how *D&D* can challenge patriarchal, heterocissexist, and white supremacist norms, its player community also shows that these norms continue to exist. Two of the three female players on *Critical Role* are scrutinized at a much higher rate than their male counterparts, with the most criticized player being the DM's wife, Marisha Ray. This scrutiny has frequently resulted in threatening emails to Ray, cries for her to quit the game, claims that she is a bad gamer, and other such harassment ("Between the Sheets: Marisha Ray"). For example, following a particularly heated argument in-game between Ray's character and two of her male counterparts' characters, one of her male counterparts felt the need to not only break character during the game to address the audience and tell them that "it's just a game", but also to tweet after the game that everyone was acting out their character, and that they shouldn't send hate-mail to anyone involved (O'Brien). While many within the community were already defending Ray in forums and online, the fact that one of the players felt the need to go to this extreme indicates the viciousness and offensiveness of some of the comments towards Ray.

This reaction shows us there is more research that needs to be done on the potential backlash that the game's evolution might spur. If inviting players to consider who should be at the table results in whiny fanboys attacking players who would not have been welcome previously, to what extent does this damage the game's potential as a tool to act out alternate identities?

There remains much work to be done before players who are not white, cisgender men can expect to openly play the game without drawing more fire than their white, cis, male party members. The changes

made in *D&D's* 5th edition have not completely eradicated the harmful social norms and normalization that were present in previous versions of the games, nor has it eradicated such social norms and normalizations in the broader world. What these changes have done, however, is to have helped the game's audience envision new possible worlds to play in and new possible characters to inhabit those worlds. By helping foster this environment, one that does not *have* to be rooted in sexist or racist traditions, in *D&D* 5th edition has enabled a feminist intervention in its player base, providing a learning opportunity that could be applied to their own table. As is the case with any good game of *D&D*, the journey forward is a long, potentially fruitless quest, full of traps, monstrous people, and danger; there is no promise of success, although if success is achieved, the reward can be truly world-shaking and monumental. Sounds like an adventure to me.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

MLA

Carlson, Daniel James. "Beyond Bikini-Mail: Having Women at the Table." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy,* vol. 7, no. 3. http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v7-issue-3/dd-beyond-bikini-mail-having-women-at-the-table/

APA

Carlson, D. J. (2020). Beyond bikini-mail: Having women at the table." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy, 7*(3). http://journaldialogue.org/issues/v7-issue-3/dd-beyond-bikini-mail-having-women-at-the-table/