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Dashiell, Steven. "Discussions of Fantasy Characters and Demonstrations of a Defensive Hybridity in Gamer Masculinity." *The Journal of Men's Studies*, (April 2022).

<https://doi.org/10.1177/10608265221084017>.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/10608265221084017>

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Discussions of fantasy characters and demonstrations of a defensive hybridity in gamer masculinity

By Steven Dashiell

Abstract

This paper situates gamer discussions of the fantasy race the drow, or dark elves, in masculinity theory. I examine threads from a Facebook group discussing the topic, and code the reactions of men participating. I discuss how some gamer masculinities that are displayed reinforces a belief of epistemic privilege among White men that allows for hegemonic responses to discussions that involve structural racism. I propose larp gamer masculinity as a hybrid masculinity, complicit in its support of hegemonic models but appropriating elements of subordinated populations to allow individuals to feel like an “outsider”. In these gaming discourse spaces, men employ an anti-intellectualized form of digital hooliganism as a rationale for their claims. These men dismiss claims of discrimination as they see those as characteristics outside the scope of the game. The resistance exhibited by these men reacting to changes should be viewed differently than extremist discourses.

Keywords: discourse, hybrid masculinity, gaming, culture, gender, larp

Race is a complex conversation in analog playing games (RPGs). Most often, the term "race" is used to refer to the variety of species that can be encountered in the fantasy world, speaking to different groupings of beings sometimes more different than alike. *Dungeons & Dragons* has, as a system, attached an overall ethical leaning, or alignment, to each race in the games, noting that affiliation with certain dominant religions and ethos change the culture of races, connecting their ethics to broad senses of "good" or "evil". The drow, or dark elves, generate a great deal of discussion due to their depiction (dark skin) and cultural beliefs, but are commonly seen as monstrous. As a role-playing character race, the drow have expanded beyond their original *Dungeons & Dragons* roots, and now appear in many social activities, including live action role playing, or larp.

Because the drow are at times seen as analogues for people of color and women, out of game discussions weave social opinion with gaming praxis. These conversations are known to be emotional and contentious, and those involved in them take assaults on their positions personally. However, it is common in gaming to have voices, particularly those of heterosexual White men, who dismiss the conversation and downplay its significance through a series of techniques. I investigate the arrangement of analog (non-digital) gaming masculinity, and how it benefits these men with the ability to use techniques associated with a hybrid form of manhood. Discursively, they can highlight their outsidership while dismantling the opinions of detractors via a heavy leaning on the subculture as representative of "only a game". I examine a discussion thread of over 1000 posts on a larp Facebook group concerning portraying the drow in larp to illustrate the techniques used to accomplish this effort.

This research builds on three bodies of literature in the field of analog role-playing games studies. First, it adds to the comprehensive work done by Stang and Trammell (2020) which discuss the place of monstrosity in fantasy role playing game settings, particularly around discussions of races like the drow. Second, my research compliments the more recent work of Trammell (2016, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c), adding to conversations on masculinity and tabletop gamers and the complexity of identity at the gaming table. Lastly, it builds upon the significant amount of research on the manifestations of gaming masculinity, framing a discussion specifically on more analog gaming and live action gaming-motivated discussions (Condis, 2018; DiSalvo, 2017; Salter and Blodgett, 2017; Taylor and Vorhees, 2018). My research seeks to illuminate the locus in masculinity theory that fantasy role playing gamers inhabit, and to illustrate how the complex social strategies are more intentional than what is assumed by "toxicity". Gaming occurs in a subculture inhabited by others, but a decidedly male-oriented subculture with norms influenced by masculinity stereotypes, which can be quite monstrous. This predominance of "male ideas" has colored perceptions of the gaming subculture since its inception.

Dungeons & Dragons, Larp, and Race

It was a culmination of interest in the fantasy world and the hobby subculture that birthed the game *Dungeons & Dragons* in the 1970's. The brainchild of Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, *Dungeons & Dragons* was a style of gaming known as role-playing, where individuals played an imaginary character. Much of the imagery of the game *Dungeons & Dragons* is built off the works of JRR Tolkien, as sources note how Gary Gygax and others who contributed to the game were positively affected by *The Hobbit*, *Lord of the Rings*, and other literary elements of the British author (Mizer, 2014, Laycock, 2015). Contemporary academics have noted that while

Tolkien's imagery was vibrant and powerful, it was littered with contextualization that would insinuate analogues between his fantasy races and racial categories in the early 20th century (Fini, 2008). However, it must be noted that Tolkien created a deep interwoven history, one that could provide a familiar framework for a gaming system, providing creators of *Dungeons & Dragons* a ready-made cosmology in some senses.

With the popularity of *Dungeons & Dragons* came offshoots into exploration of fantasy worlds.

One ludic cousin to tabletop role-playing games is larp, or live action role-playing.¹ In these games, players double down on the idea of becoming their characters, transferring the efforts of pen and paper to the physical world. Thus, unlike tabletop roleplaying games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, “larping necessitates that players physically embody a character in order to participate in the collaborative narrative” (Eddy, 2020, p.143). Enthusiasts adorn themselves in armor and weaponry to bring the imaginary fantasy world into reality (Kamm, 2019, p.626).

Moreover, as a collaborative act of engagement, moreso than tabletop gaming does larp rest on the concepts of “improvisation, immersion, and consent” (Owen, 2019, p.33). Larping has a wide appeal, with different “styles” of larping occurring in different parts of the world (Hellström, 2013; Stenros and Montola, 2010). While forms and topics of larp are varied, and not every larp is patterned after D&D-style fantasy games, there is strong influence. It is not unheard of for concepts of elves, orcs, and dwarves to be participants in many larps, brought into corporeality by players.

One particular race from *Dungeons & Dragons* portrayed in larps is the drow. The drow, or dark elves, are a race of characters that first appear in *Dungeons & Dragons*, specifically as an

¹ While the term ‘larp’ is indeed an acronym, there is a concerted push in the community to use the lower-case form. Adherents and dominant voices in the field have likened the word to laser and radar, which are acronyms that now have a significant meaning beyond its components (Stenros and Montola 2010). Most literature uses the uncapitalized term, as I use here.

identifiable race with game statistic in the hardcover Fiend Folio in 1981 (Turnbill, 1981). Hailing from a society that is antithetical to what most would understand as “good”, “the subterranean drow (or dark) elves are set up to be bad guys”(Johnson, 2020, p.77). In the game cosmology, the drow made a pact with an evil goddess, and thereby became imbued with her evil. They are presented as a society “based on slavery, subjugation, and matriarchally-based misandry”, with men relegated to lesser roles, notably guarding and breeding stock (Long, 2016, p.26). The drow are particularly known for their dark skin, and how color is a proxy of their evil. In the complexities of culture surrounding fantasy role playing games, then, the drow are a constant point of contention and debate. A number of gamers, particularly racial minority and women players have seen the drow as analogues for negative characteristics of race and feminism (Johnson, 2020). Van Os (2021) points out how the drow are historically associated with people of African descent “which is a problematic idea when one considers that [drow] are supposedly inherently evil” (p.91). Discussion on the topic of drow invariably devolves into an argument of about issues of racism, inclusion, and cultural sensitivity. While Wizards of the Coast, the company who produces Dungeons & Dragons and, by extension, most products about the drow, has attempted to change this, the debate rages on. Further, this issue only becomes more complicated in larp, where individuals act out particular races with accoutrements such as fur, pointed ears, and claws. In larp, a common means of representation of drow has been the use of black facepaint, which larpers of color have found offensive and likened to blackface (Long, 2016b). The issue generates several online discussions, dubbed “drowgate” when it occurs, where participants argue the finer points of how to physically portray the drow.²

² “Drowgate” is a semi-tongue-in-cheek name for conversations that occur in the larping community regarding the wearing of dark face paint, particularly in a person attempting to play a drow. Individuals who view the action as “not racist” use this term to bemoan claims of racism attached to the action and the creation of an issue when they deem one isn’t present. Individuals who are bothered by racist undertones invoke the term to punctuate how

Masculinity and Male Preserves

While gender studies accept the concept of multiple masculinities, for the purpose of this research, I use masculinity as defined by sociologist Raewyn Connell as "the pattern or configuration of social practices linked to the position of men in the gender order, and socially distinguished from practices linked to the position of women"(Connell, 2005, p.77). In gaming, there has been deep discussion on different manifestations of "gamer masculinities" and the overarching effects of specific practices in the subculture when displayed by principally men (Condis, 2018; DiSalvo, 2017; Salter and Blodgett, 2018). Condis (2016) highlights how digital gamer masculinity is seen as analogous to heterosexual White masculinity, as it is related to "expert, fan knowledges of gaming mechanics, and discourses"(p.4). Others, such as Anastasia Salter, and Bridget Blodgett (2012), have noted how much of gaming gatekeeping involves the reinforcement of a hypermasculinity reinforced to keep particularly women sidelined in digital and analog gaming communities. The research on expressions of gamer masculinities notes a complexity in its presentation: on one hand, gamer masculinities highlight skills and characteristics that would be less valuable in the Western social world. However, men who are gamers do participate in gatekeeping efforts to limit the expression and participation of women and minorities in the gaming subculture. Certain expressions of gaming masculinity can prove complicit in hegemony, even though those who employ those practices are often targets of more hegemonic expressions of masculinity. Moreover, expressions of gamer masculinities can be complicated by the variety of "games" that could be encountered: while masculinity manifests itself from cultural concepts, the efforts of online/digital gamers are not necessarily analogous to

even though most larpers understand that the act can be found offensive, it is brought up regularly by larpers who feign ignorance of the ongoing conversations.

those who play board games. However, gaming is competition in its many forms, and reinforces historically masculine values and norms.

This nexus where men reify masculine ideals while appropriating those of marginalized or subordinate populations can be characterized as a hybrid masculinity. As theorized by Tristan Bridges and CJ Pascoe, it is "men's selective incorporation of performances and identity elements associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities"(Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, p.246). Gamers in some formats, such as tabletop role playing games and larps, express themselves in a social position of marginalization, capitalizing on the geekiness or nerdiness of their presentation. However, within the gaming subculture, men both directly and indirectly support the notion of gaming as a White, heterosexual, male zone through gatekeeping methods. These behaviors, in the enactment of a hybrid masculinity for analog gamers, asserts gaming occurs in a male space. "The construction of a masculinized culture has also helped reinforce masculine behavior between male members of the community in which they participate" (Schelfhout et al, 2021, p.27).

Eric Dunning investigated what he refers to as male preserves in his original research on sporting spaces. Dunning and his colleagues found spaces that were a "keystone of a heterosexual but all male subculture" which may "involve the contravention of a specific set of social taboos" (1973, p.6). As designated sites of socialization, male preserves allow men to engage in behaviors that run counter to acceptable social behaviors, without the fear of stigma. Similarly, gaming spaces have a side effect of not being welcoming to those who are outside of the "gamer" archetype, traditionally understood as White, heterosexual, and male. "These spaces not only discourage women and nonbinary people from participating in discussions and gaining experiences related to games but are also where they are harassed and subjected to sexist attitudes"(Schelfhout et al,

2021, p.27). The discursive patterns are evidenced commonly in digital gaming spaces, where comments can be harsher towards those who are flagged as not being White or male. These explosive behaviors are seen as normal in an activity where individuals can "let off steam" (Chan and Gray, 2020; Kuznekoff and Rose, 2013). Research has suggested that analog gaming creates a cultural space that is not only a male preserve but has gatekeeping functions (Dashiell, 2020). Targeted discourse can be a way to close individuals out full participation to the point of erasure.

Framework and Methodology

My research builds upon a premise of not only the configuration of a particular gamer masculinity manifesting itself, but the impact of its effects in terms of managing social order in a male dominated subculture. I argue that the gamer masculinity evidenced in the Facebook posts, and by extension analog gaming spaces from which the participants engage, is a hybrid masculinity, which emphasize its countercultural status but uses mechanisms such as online hooliganism and outsidersness to demonstrate its complicity to hegemony and to gatekeep critical arguments. While gamers, who have been subjected to not being "manly" enough in their pursuits, have an oppositional relationship with the expectations of what makes manhood, I assert behaviors which emulate strategic borrowing, discursive distancing and boundary fortification from more subordinate standpoints - particularly in White, male, heterosexual gamers - have a result of sidelining diverse voices, a monstrous action in and of itself.

Carley (1994) tells us that language is "frequently viewed through a window of culture" (p.292). In the study of the sociology of language, we believe that language and culture are inexorably tied. As such, language simply isn't an outcropping of culture – it is a deep, measurable signpost by which we can understand complex cultural practices in the social world. Textual analysis,

then, an in-depth assessment of the texts produced in a subculture, proves a useful manner to understand sophisticated cultural notions like masculinity. In this research I employ a textual map analysis, which “emphasize the situated concepts and the relationships among them” (Carley, 1994, p.293). Thereby, the core situated concept is one of an expressed masculinity, or as Connell (2005) notes it, a configuration of gendered practices those identified as men are expected to perform. I then use the data of the text to connect this particular gamer masculinity, analog gaming subculture, and the conflict created by the discussion of the dark elves as a means to better understand how otherwise hegemonic men would handle the charge of racism swirling around the game-world debates.

I used participant observation techniques of Facebook, as described by Baker (2013), to refine the analysis of the comments, given this discussion occurred in social media. Baker notes that Facebook “permitted insight into the participants’ lives that could have previously been hidden from the researcher’s gaze”, which proves important given how worldwide the larp phenomenon is (p.136). I joined several Facebook groups associated with fantasy role playing and its outcroppings, finding significant discussion of the drow on groups dedicated to live-action role playing, where immersive behaviors might lead to skin coloration that could be seen as offensive. In one particular group, discussed above, I found several discussions concerning the drow and their presentation, singling out one robust thread that had more than 1,000 respondents in a very short period of time.

I selected responses that fit into the paradigm of my research demographic, notably those made by individuals who identified themselves as, or used accounts of, White men. Thereby, any individual who was physically presenting as non-White or non-male were not analyzed. Further, I checked remaining comments for variability, so comments were grouped based on coding, but

also noting if the same individual made more than one comment. The purpose of this was to reinforce the opinions and discourses under analysis were not simply from one person or a small group but were significant and interspersed through the threads. I then coded and grouped comments in themes that resonated first with principles of hybrid masculinity, and then with emerging themes that linked to the concepts described by the manhood conceptualizations. The resulting analysis demonstrates two notably emerging themes, and how those themes intersect with aspects of hybrid masculinity.

Population, Data Collection

There are many physical and digital locations where discussions of fantasy races come into the public sphere. One space where this is evidenced is in the Facebook group Mega Larp Discussion, a pseudonym for an actual online group. Mega Larp Discussion is a larger collection of live action roleplay enthusiasts, claiming over 15,000 members worldwide. While live action role play, or larp, is not the same as Dungeons & Dragons, many versions of larp use the fantasy history and cosmology that Dungeons & Dragons created. The links between larp and Dungeons & Dragons are widely recognized in the gaming world (Martin et al, 2015; Stark, 2012; Tresca, 2014).

Mega Larp Discussion is known for its conversation and wide array of opinions, as members use the space for functions such as critique of character outfit (kit), discussion of rules, and advertising events. Periodically there is a "drow discussion", where a participant will post a question about the use of darker face paint color (black or violet) to simulate the skin color of dark elves. These conversations invariably break down into camps of interest, with some members adopting a defensive stance of "live and let live", with others referencing the behavior

as racist, the equivalent of blackface, and insulting to minorities. Interestingly, these conversations – draw discussions – occur frequently, and while there is never a consensus, multiple group participants bemoan the “return” of the issue before they profess their opinion on the topic.

The particular thread which I analyze for this research is a "draw discussion" in Mega Larp Discussion that was started in early October 2018 by one member of the group. This discussion drew over 1000 comments before dying down after a few days. In this conversation were hundreds of participants, with varying levels of involvement. The method mentioned above resulted from an in-depth analysis of those comments, with the emerging themes being interlinked to interpretations of hybrid masculinity theory.

Anti-Intellectualism as Online Hooliganism

An aspect of the male preserve that can encourage these behaviors is what Dunning references as hooliganism. While the sociologist Dunning commonly referenced this with violence among the fans of a sport, a disorderly behavior associated with the male preserve, others saw it in a different light. Notably, Horne and Jarry (1985) note elements of hooliganism "bring a reversion of 'rough' and relatively 'uncivilised' patterns of social behavior"(p.96). Thereby, active misogyny, for example, can be explained through social awkwardness that is stereotyped amongst gamers. I would argue hooliganism in the male preserve can manifest itself in differing ways.

Mortensen (2018) outlines a common display of online hooliganism in gaming spaces, something of a “scorched Earth” approach in attempting to protect their subculture:

Like the football hooligans, these gamer fans organized into groups and were ready to attack the other team. Like hooligans, they appeared to join the fight for the thrill, not because they always believed their actions would be the best persuasive tactics. They were not afraid to ruin the image of the leisure activity they followed or attack the infrastructure and the arena, and they were frequently criticized by those who wanted to see gaming taken seriously (p.796).

Philosophically, this hooliganism can manifest itself as anti-intellectualism. First used by Hofstadter, anti-intellectualism involves “disagreement... over the value of knowledge” (Shaffer, 1977). Giroux (2009) sees the anti-intellectual as “neither uneducated nor unintellectual” individuals who are “deeply engaged with ideas, often obsessively engaged with this or that outworn or rejected idea” and disillusioned with the intellectual aspects of postindustrial society and its institutions (p.296). The anti-intellectual can employ “impassioned obsessions, absolutist pretensions and forms of willful intellectual myopia (even purposeful misdirection)” all to further their arguments, seeing the need to adhere to niceties or “political correctness” as the epitome of an oppressive state of thought control (Giroux, 2009, p.303). Hofstadter (1965) describes the behavior of the anti-intellectual, and how it mirrors the online hooliganism as it develops ideas “with obscure and ill-directed grievances and frustrations, with elaborate hallucinations about secrets and conspiracies” (p.37).

In the gaming subculture, the expression of online hooliganism is a form of anti-intellectualism, where beliefs are dismissed based on an inability to separate one’s lived experience from the game; an object of fantasy and not subject to some real-world phenomena. This type of online hooliganism was apparent in the drow discussion, specifically when individuals attempted to relate their own identities to those of the drow. On many occasions, individuals would dismiss

these arguments in two emerging thematic ways: (a) arguing that it is "only a game", and (b) using historical references to justify why portrayal of the drow is different than "blackface", and thus not offensive. These techniques are similar to what Giroux (2009) characterized as anti-intellectual behavior: denial, dismissal and deflection.

Easily the most common method of anti-intellectualism as online hooliganism was simply dismissing the argument because the drow are a fantasy race, and part of a game, and not subject to the critique being levied on them. The following extracts demonstrate this.

Extract 1 "I don't think it's racist at all. You're playing a fantasy race of elves, you're not trying to be a racial stereotype."

Extract 6 "Dark elves are dark elves, in no way were they meant to be racist. I don't know why this kind of "discussion" is being baited to bash an imaginary race."

Extract 19 "Why are we even asking this question? We are playing a game folks and we are dragging real world themes into our escapism. I do this to get away from the crap of daily life not to dwell on it. Oh well"

Extract 27 "it would only be racist to elves, and since elves arent real, then it isnt racist.....unless some elves come up and are offended, then you can work it out with them."

Extract 40 "I don't think it's racist at all. You're playing a fantasy race of elves, you're not trying to be a racial stereotype."

Extract 51 "No. If you're playing a fantasy non human race then really not."

Through anti-intellectualism as hooliganism, the men engaged could always argue the clear delineation between the gaming world and the "real" world and emphasize that the overarching desire to connect out-of-game inequalities with ludic systems is misplaced. This mechanism implies that these men are aware of the magic circle, a concept in gaming that allows for the individual to immerse themselves into a fantasy world (Consalvo, 2009). The implication is the larpers making these comments about racism are not immersed, as such concerns are not part of the game. In short, the privilege of being able to compartmentalize racism as an experience of others influences the ability of the straight, White male gamer to suggest, and subtly imply, they are the "better gamer" for their ability to fully immerse themselves in the game world and eschew inequality concepts as something inappropriate. This anti-intellectualism dismisses, then, the experience of minority gamers and the truism of the fantasy setting. The technique serves as a "celebrated marker of the professional expert's detachment and decorum", as they can rise above emotion to engage the topic (Giroux, 2009, p.303). As Eddy reminds us "fictional races, such as those found in larping and other player-determined gaming spaces, are not simply fictional" (p.145). She notes that fantasy races are, in some part, connected to the socio-cultural understandings of the "parent" culture in which the game race was developed. By boiling the concept down to pure fantasy, the anti-intellectualist allows for an argument that gaming races are the result of a spontaneous generation- negating them as culturally situated objects. This positioning allows for those who defend use of dark makeup to "transcended 'real world' conceptions of race" in their belief (Eddy,2020, p.157).

The other common theme emerging in those utilizing anti-intellectualism as a manner of online hooliganism involved more thorough interrogation of racism, blackface, and the historical act of painting/adorning oneself, as evidenced in the following extracts.

Extract 12- defines racism - "A core aspect of racism is the *intention* of portraying a race as inferior, or your race as superior. Therefore, using black face paint to portray yourself as a fantasy race is likely never a racist action.

Extract 9 "No. Because it's not blackface. End of discussion. Stop trying this bollocks that I spent 2 years of my life writing lore for and trying to make it a thing. It's a fantasy race, not a hate attempt. Just leave it alone."

Extract 18 "What of the Vikings who used charcoal to paint themselves? Or the assassins of many countries who would paint themselves black? Is it racist to imitate them simply because it resembles someone's skin color?"

Extract 31 "Dark-elf isn't blackface. Blackface is very offensive but that's not what is being portrayed. Svartalf of Norse mythology is the basis (I assume) for most portrayal of dark-elves."

In the first extract, the participant goes as far to define racism for the group, and express reasons why, if there was no intention, then racism could not be the end goal of using a darker paint. Statements such as these (which occurred 11 times in the conversation) did not dismiss the argument due to a perceived inability to understand the distinction between the real and fantasy. Indeed, the participants are assuming the audience does not understand what the concept of

racism is, and seeks to explain it, in a favorable way, to position those who portray the drow with black face paint as patently inoffensive. This tactic presents itself as patronizing, explaining racism to participants who have identified themselves in the discussion as people of color and women. However, it reinforces a difference between the speaker and the audience; they believe they understand nuances of a social construct better than others. Interestingly, the participants who used this method of anti-intellectual hooliganism never cited sources where these definitions came from. The men assert an authority, then, that does not require attribution.

The other extracts demonstrate a less common method of anti-intellectualism but using the same manner of thought. The respondents used knowledge of other populations, such as Vikings, who had similar behaviors. The comments help to cement the place of the individual commenting as something of an "authority" on the historical topics and allow the deflection of charges of racism by centering on what is presented as similar populations who do not incite the same type of reaction.

I would argue a key component of this mechanism of anti-intellectualism as online hooliganism is the degree to which it is a huge gamble. The respondents are making comments based on the fact they are the most knowledgeable about the topic, unable to be challenged on their facts. One of the reasons I would, further, cite this anti-intellectualism as a form of hooliganism is that, if challenged, the conversations would devolve into minutiae about definitions and historical fact - further obscuring the true issue at hand. The use of anti-intellectualism to dismiss the problem may begin conflicts that are initially based on fact but devolve into emotional exchanges of feelings and perception. Again, the original argument would be lost if one were to interrogate the anti-intellectualism.

Beyond being an aspect of hooliganism, using a detached relationship to gaming, the behaviors of men on the boards highlight a clear delineation they personally make between the gaming world and their own identity. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) suggest "young straight, White men's hybridizations often obscure the symbolic and social boundaries between groups upon which such practices rely. Through this process, systems of inequality are further entrenched and concealed in historically new ways, often along lines of race, gender, sexuality, and class" (p.254). As heterosexual White men, the "default" for gaming subculture, there is an ability to divorce one's lived experience from the circumstance of the game. It is easy to imagine oneself as someone else, and to erase notions of racism, sexism, and homophobia as they are understood in the world, as they do not exist in the same manner in the gaming world. Thus, through fortification of the boundary between the real gamer and conceptualized game, these men enjoy an access to a gamer masculinity as practices that would require erase factors of the gamer that would otherwise trouble women, sexual minorities, and gamers of color.

Gamer Masculinities as Insider Space

A second theme, criss-crossing with masculinity and gaming, involves insiderness and outsidersness. Sociologist Robert Merton defines these terms as

"Insiders are the members of specified groups and collectivities or occupants of specified social statuses; Outsiders are the nonmembers" ... The Insider doctrine claims a "monopolistic" or "privileged access to particular kinds of knowledge". Groups or collectivities that claim Insider status are not themselves homogeneous groups. For example, the collectivity "women" is striated by such social categories as race, class and

sexual orientation. The Insider doctrine depends on suppressing those contradictory positionings for its validity." (Griffith,1998, p.363).

Each gaming type represents a subculture full of knowledges and references not known or open to the larger social world. The individual gamer prides themselves on having a command of gaming knowledge, and their connection to other gamers, who share their passion and interests. At the same time there is a notion of outsidership, as those who are a part of most gaming subcultures are seen as exemplifying a "geek" masculinity (Kendall, 2000; Reagle, 2015;). The configuration of practices that compose the fantasy role player masculinity can be seen as "non-hegemonic" and subject to stereotype, scorn, and ridicule. Those men, particularly White, heterosexual, middle class men, who populate larp and analog role-playing groups commonly pride themselves on their fortitude and hold some scorn towards masculine performances that lean more heavily towards hypermasculinity (Salter and Blodgett, 2018; Vorhees and Orlando, 2018).

The minority gamer, either by race, gender, or sexual orientation, is in no way the rarity it sometimes seems to be. However, the relationship of between minority status and gamer identity is more complex than it superficially seems, as Shaw (2011) proposes "gamer identity exists in relation to, but is not determined by, other identities like gender, race, and sexuality" (p.31).

Still, the male preserve of most Western gaming promotes White, heterosexual masculinity, with any deviations from this "default" being seen as a novelty. While White heterosexual men cannot engage association with stigma in the same way minority populations do, they can call on those who fit into this category as affirmation of their belief systems. These phantom friends appear in conversations to support the beliefs of the original poster, used to minimize the enormity of the issue. The following extracts demonstrate this:

Extract 7 "I've met more PoC who either didn't care, or who were offended at white people politicizing the issue and trying to turn their race as a vessel for social renown."

Extract 15 "The last time this raised it's head, on another forum, a friend of mine asked a black guy if he thought it was racist the response was "Oh fuck, do they think we look like elves now?""

Extract 20a (same person as 19) "I have never heard a black person I have played D&D with complain about the fact that Drow in artwork are portrayed as black. So for this reason I don't see why it is a thing here."

Extract 22 "I dressed up like dark link black faced and everything and the African Americans not only welcome me in but treated me like a brother for the night. "

Extract 44 "Funny thing, we never see POC criticizing them dark elves, and calling them racist"

The respondents referred to others who are, themselves, minorities and unbothered by issues of blackface as proof that the claims expressed about the circumstance not being racism is, indeed, true. In effect, this effort represents what Bridges and Pascoe call strategic borrowing, or how "men who occupy privileged social categories strategically borrow from Others in ways that work to reframe themselves as symbolically part of socially subordinated groups" (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, p.252). In the case of the analysis of the posts, the borrowing occurs in two ways - first, the men "borrow" the voice of their ethnic minority friends and appropriate an out-of-

context opinion that would, as presented, provide validity to the White male commenting.

Because this is a second-hand report, there is no way for others (who might be scrutinous) to bring question: these individuals are unnamed and not present. Second, the men "borrow" the diverse identities to include into their friend circle; the fact that there has been a conversation on race implies a depth to the conversation that would not be expected of an acquaintance. Thus, the man making the claim doesn't just have a Black/Asian/Latino friend, but he is also so connected to this person that he can have a conversation about race - known to be a touchy topic in Western cultures.

The borrowing highlights the colorblindness in which those men who leverage a minority friend employ in their own defense. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva sees colorblindness as the state where “whites rationalize minorities status as the product of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and presumed cultural deficiencies” (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick, 2006, p.22). In short, “race” can be either objectified or essentialized to the point that it “shouldn’t matter” in the minds of those who are of the dominant group. The “racelessness” conferred then to minority population does not confer privilege as much as it absolves guilt of participation in structural racist practices. Giroux (2009) reminds us that “the leap from ‘Whites Only’ signs to the anxiously insistent claims that ‘I don't see race’ ..is perhaps not so great a leap after all”(p.303). Thereby, the discourse surrounding can both cause harm to persons of color and protect those who engage in conversations that downplay the issues surrounding race.

There is a degree of the third component of hybrid masculinity, discursive distancing, that underlies these pronouncements. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) define discursive distancing as "men can embrace political stances that seem to distance them from hegemonic masculinity" (p.251). By engaging in these deep conversations with people of color, the men discursively

affirm they are not a racist. How could they be, and have these discussions? Would a racist have minority friends? Thus, by the designation of the "minority friend", the men are noting they are indeed an "insider" and are so attuned to issues of social inequality they can start these conversations with other gamers. More than that - they are enough insiders, in terms of gamers, that they can speak for gamers of color without any issue. Bridges and Pascoe (2014) note "these practices often work simultaneously to reaffirm these subordinated groups as deviant, thus supporting existing systems of power and dominance" (p.253).

Another manner of discursive distancing was evidenced in the following extracts:

Extract 50 "But the American trend goes to being offended by everything, a desperate need to claims, shouting how hurt you are by every detail you come across in daily life, and forcing the world around you to make everything neutral/tasteless/indistinct by playing the discrimination card..."

Extract 52 "Anything now a days can be defined as being racist to the wrong butt hurt person. Blackface used to be used as a racist thing yes. {...]. You shouldn't allow others to detract from your Larp and fun because they "think it's racist" if your intentions aren't hate then it's fine."

As demonstrated, this method of discursive distancing allows for the men to call question with perceived social niceties and "political correctness" that makes even the simplest thing "an issue". Unlike the forms of anti-intellectualism discussed previously, this type of comment leans into a conspiracy to drag inequality into gamer spaces. Again, this speaks to an arrogant insidersness - an assumption that there are no racist issues in games, and individuals are seeing social ills that simply aren't there. Grioux (2009) notes that colorblindness allows for "the right

to express one's own private racial preferences with no regard for the consequential exclusions of an entire group”, as long as it is not governmental policy to be in favor (or opposed) to racial politics (p.304). Unlike the comments about racial adjuncts, which bolster the insiderness through connections to others more aligned with the topic, this attempts to designate racism as an "outsider" concept, one that hasn't infiltrated the overall gaming community. Shaw (2011) notes that in gaming spaces race is often not heavily interrogated, for “if race seems to disappear as a dominant factor in how people relate to the category of gamer, this may be because Whiteness itself often disappears as a subject of inquiry” (p.37). White gamers, then, have the privilege to subscribe to “raceless logics” given their ability to see beyond race (and gender) as White men (Bonilla-Silva and Embrick, 2006). Moreover, the sentiment of these posts is an irrational fear that conversations about race will overtake the “fun” of the game and threaten the male preserve that is the larp gaming space. These discussions would act as “a Trojan horse for femininity to creep in and fundamentally alter the gendered game experiences that culture values” (Vanderhoff, 2013). Discursively distancing from the “culture wars” allows the protagonist men to protect the social norms of the larp gamer space, and to return conversations back to game issues, and not “grievance issues”.

Discussion

Much of the conversation surrounding displays of masculinity in gaming spaces has surrounded the existence and concentration of anti-feminist and anti-diverse rhetoric that is part of the subculture. The subtext of the need for this type of research, highlighting counterproductive discourses and behaviors in specific subcultures, could be understood as stemming from a belief that gaming spaces, as a haven for outsiders, would have less precedence of sexism, racism, or

homophobia. As this research echoes, this could not be further from the truth. The same social ills present in the larger social world are part of gaming, as would be true in any subculture within the larger structure.

Past research has demonstrated women and minorities have always been present in gaming subculture (Brown, 2015; Garcia, 2017; Trammell, 2018a). However, their existence has always been sidelines to the point of focus on White, heterosexual men as the principal demographic of gamers. When gamer subculture is referred to as a male preserve, it is not because women (or other groups) are not present; simply that White, heterosexual men have set the parameters for social norms in gaming spaces with little regard to diversity. Thereby, when diversity conversations do rise, they can be easily quashed through use of what I label as online hooliganism, an anti-intellectualization of situations that has the dual effect of invalidating inequality arguments and casting aspersions on the gaming "cred" or skill of those who would bring up these issues. The dominant men in gaming subculture can fortify boundaries between gaming and mundane social worlds, and convincingly decree those discussions related to contemporary ideas of race have no place in the gaming world. In the male preserve, there is the ability to disregard what Consalvo (2009) reminds us, game rules matter, "but in addition to, in competition with, other rules and in relation to multiple contexts, across varying cultures, and into different groups, legal situations, and homes" (p.416).

The notion of gamer outsidership is not, in and of itself, any balm against efforts to support and uphold hegemonic masculinity, and the benefits afforded heterosexual White men in the gaming (and broader) world. What is evident is that there is a sense of outsidership that is embraced by these men, which gives them a false sense that they have a closer affinity to marginalized and subordinated populations. The men, then, are using strategic borrowing to appropriate the idea of

being victims of the system to tie their experiences to those of minorities. When enacted, comments about race and sex inequality are more easily dismissed because an internalized self-perception of being someone who is subjected to the stigma of appropriate masculine performance is used as an analogue by heterosexual, White, male gamers. As Bridges (2021) notes, this imagined affinity of men who align themselves with groups heavily impacted by social inequality leads to a “(mis)understanding of themselves as either solely or best understood as victims of gender and racial inequality” (p.685). This perpetuates, as I discussed, an overarching sense of "I got over it, why didn't you" when confronted about perceptions of discrimination and marginalization. These behaviors, I argue, illustrate the discursive distancing done by White male gamers from others, using their ability to not wallow in social ills that have affected them in life. As I discussed, these are false equivalences that only reinforce the idea of the (White male) gamer having an ability to rise above impediments, something minority gamers seem to lack by not "letting go" of personal experiences while in the game space.

Bridges and Pascoe tell us that hybrid masculinities show "the ways that men are increasingly incorporating elements of various 'Others' into their identity projects"(Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, p.246). It is clear that gamer masculinities are not hegemonic, as its members are not stereotypically seen as embodying the traditional symbols of manhood in Western society.

However, my research highlights how the practices of analog gamers do represent a hybrid masculinity, as the men who participate appropriate components of subordinate and marginalized populations while benefiting from their proximity to a hegemonic masculinity surrounding them. The relationship between gamer manhood practices and the broader hegemonic expressions of masculinity are complicated. While game studies research sees these some expressions as toxic, it is more appropriate to note how they are complicit to a hegemony with which these men have a

strained relationship. The male preserve of gaming subculture provides these men the freedom to critique and be dismissive of their fellows, using subculture-granted freedoms as rationale for their behavior.

While this textual analysis of comments provides one lens to analyze the actions of men in gamer social spaces, it does not cover the infinite possibilities that could be driving the pushback. As Pascale (2011) notes, “if people create the meaning of social realities through symbolic interactions, we must accept a limitless number of layers to the meaning-making process” (p.93). However, the concept of gamer culture being governed by norms that are associative with traditional and stereotypical performances of masculinity, and that those norms then provide some insulation to men when new or non-normative ideas manifest can shed light on why these behaviors, labeled “wrong” or “problematic” persist. Cultural spaces, in a critical realist approach, are heavily dictated by a historical sense of socialization. When things seek to disrupt historical truths, men who engage in online hooliganism, as a result of their hybrid masculinity, see themselves as “appropriately engaging” rather than being obstructive. Hence the reason, as I discussed, these men remain unfazed by claims of “toxic masculinity”; they inherently do not see their behaviors as toxic.

In order to effect real change in non-extremist male preserves, the aberrant behaviors among its members cannot be blithely connected to those seen in incels, white supremacist, and antifeminist groups. The defenses of the hybrid masculinity of men in non-extremist spaces lean heavily on their internalized sense of marginalization suffered in the past (a nerd masculinity) that grants insight into subaltern experience, as I mentioned before. Thus, the colorblindness practiced by men in these online spaces, such as the Facebook group, is not internalized as such. These findings resulting from this research need to be taken into account. Mortensen

(2018) reminds us, “[w]e need to be willing to go into such uncomfortable conversations and face the risk that comes with research. Playing games is not an isolated event” (p.800). In gaming subcultures such as larping, these conversations become doubly important, because “Larps and TRPGs also venture into areas that go beyond having fun” (Kamm, 2019, p.624). Without scrutiny, discussions of these populations and their “toxicity” occur in echo chambers- reinforcing what minority population in these spaces already believe and strengthening the resolve in these men in terms of conflating extremism and the structural support of hegemonic masculinity – realities when combined they do not see in themselves.

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