

THE QUARRY

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Games for Boys: The Myth that Women 'Don't Play.'

The jaws of the dragon swing open and waves of blue flame envelop the dungeon. Black scales shine, and bones protrude through the leathery skin, rippling with each slight movement of muscle.

A colossal figure emerges from a stone archway and plunges a battle-axe into the gaping mouth of the shimmering beast. The Barbarian's chainmail coats his muscular frame and blood seeps through cloth on his arms and legs. An Elven Ranger flings a careful arrow directly into the dragon's icy blue eye, sending it reeling. The roar shakes every inch of the stone dungeon the party had just struggled through.

From the back of the room, a tiny man, with a lute, begins to strum, empowering the efforts of the attackers before him. The dragon bares his murky yellow teeth and claws at the Bard.

At the edge of the party a tall, slender Elven Sorcerer adorned in flowing robes of navy and gold lifts her wand. Cosmic energy flows through the dungeon as the rest of the party turns and waits for the Mage to unleash her devastating power.

The Sorcerer is elegant, proud, sexy; a fourteen-year-old girl's fantasy avatar. *My* fantasy avatar, actually. A deep, too-dramatic backstory involving Fae ancestry weaves in and around my head as she speaks with words that are mine.

‘I cast Burning Hands on the drag –’

My speech is cut off as the party collectively groans. I’m sitting at a makeshift table of books, which is covered with chips, dip, soft drinks and mobile phones. Halo and rock band posters adorn the walls, and I'm resting my head on an unmade bed. Crumpled clothes are spread across the floor like the autumn leaves outside. There is a d20 clutched in my hand as my body slowly begins to deflate.

‘You can’t use Burning Hands. You’ve already used your level 1 spell slots, remember?’ The skinny boy, with a shaved head sighs. ‘Seriously, how many times do we have to go through this?’

‘Leave her alone, she’s getting it,’ my friend the Bard, sitting to my left, gives me a thumbs up. I smile back at him and look down at my cantrips instead.

‘I’ve got this.’ I nod my head and pump my fists a little, hoping that I’m assuring the group.

This was my first Dungeons and Dragons campaign. We were at Matt’s house, our Dungeon Master. I’d only been invited because the Bard wanted to get in my pants. But I'd begged to go because the idea of a group of people sitting together and tapping into our imaginations was intoxicating. At the time, it seemed worth it to put up with the pimply bag of hormones waiting eagerly for his turn to play.

I wondered if, months after starting Dungeons and Dragons, when the friend who brought me along tried to plant a sloppy kiss on my neck and grope my breast that perhaps I'd gone too far in my quest to regain entry into this magical world. I tried not to let this ruin my love of the game, but suddenly every newbie mistake I

made was no longer endearing in his eyes. I couldn't shake the feeling that the seductive Sorcerer had become a liability to the party. I quit a few weeks later.

Growing up, I used to play Power Rangers with boys in my class amongst the grim concrete of our schoolyard. I would go to my next door neighbour, Steve's house, and we would trade Pokemon cards. My friend Nick had a Nintendo 64 and sometimes Mum would let me go over after school to play Banjo Kazooie. These experiences and my sense of play and imagination were ruined so much earlier than my friends for one reason: If you're a woman in a male-dominated space, whether it be in the corporate world, your home life or just in the hobbies you enjoy, there is a danger.

For years, I felt that sometimes I was reconciling my sense of personal safety just to be 'one of the boys' – innocent neighbourly visits as a young girl turned into late night walks to a friend's place with a console with a group of guys I'd just met. Where were all the fellow women?

In 2014, The Internet Advertising Bureau published statistics that 52% of all UK gamers were women.ⁱ

I found this statistic only weeks after it was published. It was a hot topic on many online message boards, including Reddit. It rocked the minds of many young nerds, especially those used to the sausage fest that gaming discussions and events had become. Despite the pervasive and unavoidable belief that women are endangered in gaming culture – to some extent, they represent or are, approaching the majority.

Did the possibility of a more inclusive future of gaming where women wouldn't have to feel at risk excite these guys? Nope - it terrified them.

Why? The myth, that women just 'don't play games' or that it is a male-dominated hobby, seeps through every nook and cranny in gaming literature and representations in popular culture. Let's be real - the first thing many people, myself included, think about, in relation to 'Dungeons and Dragons,' are losers who drink copious amounts of Mountain Dew and don't have girlfriends.

The idea of girls playing Dungeons and Dragons is unheard of in popular media. I had little interest most of my teen years. The image of dweebs with no social skills sitting around playing fantasy games is not enticing to a young girl. Comic book

stores? According to pop culture, always run by lonely, fat men. Not flattering portrayals of people who just have shared interests.

This perception has not gone unnoticed by its participants. Men who identify themselves as gamers have gone so long being referred to as losers that when a woman finds interest in the same area, she's often met with hostility. What gives her the right to intrude on their safe space? Why is she allowed to openly declare she loves *World of Warcraft* when I've been ostracised for it? She hasn't *earned* it.

This idea sounds silly, and rightly so. But it exists. And it's expressed through misogyny. I have a lifetime of experiences to show for this silliness. When working at EB Games, I had a customer roll his eyes and ask, 'Okay, well, can I talk to a *male* that works here?' when I admitted I was unsure about Yu-Gi-Oh cards.

It runs much deeper than just my experience playing *Dungeons and Dragons*. The gaming industry, as a whole, is still obsessed with producing games for boys.

You wouldn't be wrong if you assumed that gaming is dominated by male audiences. Most forms of gaming and geek culture in media have had a heavy focus on being a male past-time, or an activity for boys. The gender bias is obvious. In a 2009 study of the 150 most popular games across nine platforms, it was found that 81% of all characters were male and 80% were white.ⁱⁱ In 2013, *Variety* reported that only an estimated 12% of the video game industry workforce was made up of women.ⁱⁱⁱ

The issues with the 18% of characters who *are* female have been well documented. There are gallons of ink spilt over the topic. There are endless examples of troubling female representation in games: outfits and posturing for women are especially notorious. Women, such as Rydia in *Final Fantasy IV*, are overtly sexualised and pitiful in terms of protection, whereas main male characters, such as Cecil and Kain, are given practical protection - armour. The women in *Mortal Kombat* are interesting to look at, with their large breasted and barely-clothed bodies, they are expected to engage in bloody combat with heavily armoured brutes. Games such as *World of Warcraft*, constantly parodied for their rarest and strongest female armour, also happen to be the most revealing.

Perhaps we are reaching the crux of the reason that we assume women don't enjoy video games. The impracticality and over-sexualisation of female bodies

entrenches the idea that women are objects to satisfy the male gaze. Who cares if her ‘boob plate’ armour actually directs a blade to her heart, as long as she looks good?

Sometimes, being a woman of note, in an industry that caters to men, is dangerous. Anita Sarkeesian, a feminist blogger, runs a channel on Youtube called *Feminist Frequency*, which dedicates approximately one forty-minute video a fortnight to examine the harmful representations of women in video games. She has examined topics from the clothes of characters to tropes such as ‘Damsel in Distress,’ which exists in movies just as often. Pretty standard critiques. Yet, the amount of vitriol she’s received from self-professed ‘gamers’ has been horrific. Amongst public death threats, coordinated brigades to ‘downvote’ her videos and Twitter abuse, Sarkeesian was forced to cancel a speech at Utah State University in 2014 due to an anonymous bomb threat called into the venue.^{iv}

It goes much deeper than just the physical sexualisation of women. Cultural ideas and harmful tropes are plentiful in all facets of the game industry. Developers can conjure up elaborate fantasy worlds in realms where magic, advanced technology, and aliens exist but still, somehow, retain the barbaric gender roles of current society. The *Mass Effect* series includes several races of aliens, which come from various points in the Milky Way all conjoining in one place called “The Citadel”. One of these races, the Asari, are an all-female race who, implausibly, have almost identical body shapes to humans with blue skin and minor variances. And what are the Asari known as being, besides the diplomats of the galaxy with a weird mating pattern? Negatively and notoriously sexually active. And strippers. Seriously – Asari are the only species shown being strippers in the strip clubs on various planets. How is it, that in a culture we’d expect to be drastically different to our human norms, a race with feminised human bodies are considered the sexual objects of the entire galaxy?

Video games currently surpass television in terms of time spent in some populations, with approximately one in five adults playing every day or almost every day.^v It wouldn’t be unfair to say that the troubling representation of women in these games could influence players’ impressions of social reality to some extent.

Deep investigations into the psyche of a regular video-game player aside, the most important thing that the industry can do at this point to encompass 52% of their player base is to reverse the toxic mindsets excluding women. I can’t emphasise my

passion for representation enough. As a young woman who enjoys the hell out of seeing cool women represented without tiny outfits, and needlessly sexualised backstories, I want young girls experiencing this in their media as early as possible. Badass female protagonists have been kicking around in indie titles for years, and we are witnessing an emergence of critically acclaimed AAA titles such as *The Last of Us*, *Beyond Two Souls* and *Life is Strange* that feature interesting women who are grounded, who struggle with real problems and aren't defined by their relationships to men. Despite the clear abundance of men in the gaming industry, amazing initiatives to encourage women to become involved in the industry are springing up. Macquarie University offers a 'Women in Games' panel once a year, and international groups such as WIGSIG (Women in Games Special Interest Group) in the IDGA are fighting the good fight.

But, overall, why is the game industry still stuck in the frustrating mindset that their audience is majority men? Why are 80% of these characters white and male? It all comes back to the 'loser theory.' Game developers know that 'gamers' have gone so long being perceived as non-powerful social outcasts. Young, white men want to be powerful white adults. So, fantasy is created out of these preconceived notions of gamer demographics. It's a self-fulfilling cycle.

Gary Alan Fine wrote a book, 'Shared Fantasy,' that discusses role-playing games and the separation between reality and fantasy. It notes that, in Dungeons and Dragons campaigns, it was common behaviour that 'non-player male characters who have not hurt the party are executed and female non-player characters raped for sport'.^{vi} There's a separation between the game world and real life – the 'magic circle' if you will. But ideas and values are capable of oozing through, venomous and sticky.

In the campaign in Matt's room, when I was 16, and because I'm a girl, my character was allocated unique tasks by the rest of the party. The party stood in front of a merchant, snow beginning to pepper their skin. They had just defeated the monstrous beast in the dungeon, and upon emerging victorious were greeted with another pressing quest on the mountaintop. The mountain in question loomed behind the rickety stall, plastered with weapons, food, clothes and survival gear. The merchant, a Dragonkin with a thirst for gold, hisses at them. 'That's 20 gold for a coat, and that's the cheapest thing I can give you.'

‘Surely we can get it cheaper than that,’ the Bard pleads. Beside him, the monstrous Barbarian scoffs.

‘Look, we don't need this. Listen dude. We have an Elven girl here. She's top of the line. She can get us a discount right?’

The Elven Sorcerer, who had been examining a glass pendant at the stall, froze. ‘Get a discount how, exactly?’

‘You know, give him a favour. Something to remember us by. I'm sure it'll be better than any gold.’ The Barbarian winks.

The entire party starts guffawing. The Elven Sorcerer joins in before the Bard pushes her forward with glee.

‘Make it nice and wet!’ he laughs.

At the time, I thought it was funny. I just wanted to fit in and not ruin the fun. But a part of me knew my proud Elven Sorcerer would want no part of this.

I play Dungeons and Dragons with another group now – they're awesome. We're guys and girls playing a patchwork of genders with no boob plates allowed.

I'm in love with my imagination again.

Works Cited

ⁱ Internet Advertising Bureau 2014, *More women now play video games than men*, viewed 24 August 2016, http://iabuk.net/about/press/archive/more-women-now-play-video-games-than-men?_ga=1.227578909.1233071847.1411029683, para 5.

ⁱⁱ Williams, D et al. 2009, 'The virtual census: representations of gender, race and age in video games', *New Media & Society*, vol. 11, no. 5, pp. 815-834, pg 827.

ⁱⁱⁱ Graser, M 2013 'Videogame Biz: Women Still Very Much in the Minority', *Variety*, 1 October, viewed 28 August 2016, <http://variety.com/2013/digital/features/womengamers1200683299-1200683299/>, para 3.

^{iv} Wingfield, N 2014 'Feminist Critics of Video Games Facing Threats in "GamerGate Campaign"', *The New York Times*, 15 October, viewed 28 August 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/16/technology/gamergate-women-video-game-threats-anita-sarkeesian.html>, para 2.

^v Williams, D et al. 2009, 'The virtual census: representations of gender, race and age in video games', *New Media & Society*, vol. 11, no. 5, pp. 815-834, pg 816.

^{vi} Fine, G 2002, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds*, University of Chicago Press, pg 4.