WOMEN AND ROLEPLAYING GAMES

Introduction

We live in the age of the RPG. Advancement in computers and high speed internet have created the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online RolePlaying Game) where millions of people can create a new persona with fantastic powers and quest for treasure and magic with people they have never met. The MMO formed a unique community, united in their passion, yet disunited by their anonymity. It would be easy to think that this phenomenon is the result of the technological developments of the last twenty years. However, the underlying basis for most of the MMO's, indeed for the entire RPG industry springs from the basements, and dorm rooms of the table top RPG community. *Dungeons & Dragons*, created in the mid 1970's by wargamers Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, created an industry that has remained a popular subculture for more than thirty years, has gone through five major revisions and spawned countless imitators and now computerized versions of the game. These MMO's have found an appeal among women that the pen and paper game never achieved. In fact, there has been a great deal of scholarship and debate centering on getting women to play these games,
primarily as a way to get women to engage with technology, thereby improving their everyday lives in the process. Very few people have addressed getting women to participate in the tabletop ancestors of these games. Table top RPGs seem to have been relegated to a quaint backroom hobby shared only by reclusive, nerdy boys, and dominated more by the smell of feet, Funyuns, and Mountain Dew than by perfume or herbal shampoos. This is a shame. While engaging in technology is a useful habit to cultivate, there is something to be said for the human element. It is commonly observed that the anonymity of the 'net often brings out the worst in people. It just does not teach us how to deal with each other the way face to face interaction can. We need other people. We need community and collaboration if equality is the goal, and the table top RPG can provide a small scale forum for achieving that. The question is, how to get females to enter the dungeon, so to speak, and face the apparently terrifying male nerd? This paper will look first at how the game Dungeons & Dragons itself, and in general other RPGs address the issue of sex and gender in the language they use, and then examine the female experience with the game, how they came to be involved, what they enjoy about the game, etc. in an attempt to formulate how women can be enticed into playing the greatest game of all, society¹.

**Gender Usage**

Sex has no impact on a character in Dungeons & Dragons. Even in the 2nd Edition of Advanced Dungeons & Dragons written in 1989, it is reduced to a mere extra detail players would use to flesh out their character. Version 3.5 of the game, released in 2003 also relegated sex to a extraneous detail. Pathfinder, an edition of the game that keeps the rules set of 3.5,¹

¹ Albeit a very small scale, often awkward society, but one desperately in need of feminine interaction.
rather than the new 4th Edition rule set, does not even mention sex directly, instead referring to a character's "physical appearance." 4th Edition does as well.

In 3.5 an effort is made to switch between gendered pronouns as much as possible, abandoning the clunky "he or she" construction. When detailing the various classes of hero a player can choose from, the pronouns used invariably reflect the sex of the character portrayed in the artwork. Thus, the section on bards—portrayed in the book as a male—will use masculine pronouns, while the druid—a female—will feature feminine pronouns. Pathfinder follows this same pattern. 4th Edition does this also.

However, while most of the avatars of classes switched sexes between editions, there were some that stayed the same. Bard, Ranger, and Fighter classes remained male. While Druid, Paladin, and Rogue classes remained female. What does this mean? For the "male" classes, the Bard depends on Charisma, the Fighter primarily Strength, and the Ranger on either Dexterity or Strength, backed up by magical abilities based on Wisdom. For "female" characters, the Druid is a Wisdom based magic user, the Paladin a Charisma based fighter, and the Rogue uses Dexterity and Intelligence2.

Gender roles

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2 A quick word about Ability Scores in Dungeons and Dragons, the six ability scores represent the basic talent of the heroic character and influence the success of each action taken as well as defining a number of derived statistics. The six abilities, and their primary functions, are: Strength (determining how good a character is in melee combats), Dexterity (Ranged attacks, as well as a number of skill checks), Constitution (How many hit points a character has), Intelligence (How many skill points a character receives, as well as how potent a wizard's spell's are) Wisdom (How potent a Divine magic user's spells are, as well as some skills), and Charisma (How potent a Sorcerer or Bard's spells are, as well as some skills).
The linking of the sexes with these classes demonstrates certain underlying assumptions within the game. While there is some overlap of abilities and gender, there is no female representation of Strength in the game. The female class that fills the role of the tank—that is, the frontline fighter—is the Paladin who draws her effectiveness from her Charisma. The Paladin uses magic granted from faith to protect herself and her comrades from disease, fear, and a number of other dangers, as well as channeling her Charisma into attacks boosted by the outside agent of the Deity she serves. In other words, she is powerful because of the intercession of an outside force, not powerful in and of herself, unlike the male Fighter.

The Paladin does offer much normally associated with being male, however. Leadership is her primary role. The Paladin represents the "knight in shining armor" archetype within the game, the rescuer of princes and princesses, the slayer of dragons, nobility, and chivalry, all of these are normally associated with maleness in medieval fantasy. Another traditionally male archetype is the barbarian, most notably represented by Robert Howard's Conan. In *Pathfinder* the Barbarian is represented by a female. The Barbarian's primary class ability is Constitution, the ability to take hits and shrug them off. They are the hardest to kill of all the classes. Furthermore, the Barbarian possesses the ability to go into a berserker rage—a traditionally male thing to do—during which time they become even harder to kill and do more damage with attacks than even the Fighter can.

**Why Women Play**

I asked several women who regularly play *Dungeons & Dragons*, or a derivative game the following questions about their involvement in the hobby:
1) How did you get into pen and paper role playing games? How did you wind up playing with the group you currently game with?

2) What is your favorite type of character to play and why?

3) What is your favorite thing about rpgs? What is your least favorite thing about rpgs?

4) What do you think would be a good way to get more females to play rpgs?

The responses were varied. One woman answered question one with: I was introduced to Star Wars rpg by a friend my sophomore year in college. we played a campaign...[the group] was three girls, and two guys, one of them was gay." Another said, "I got into them partially because I'd heard so much about them at my local gaming shop, and partially because my brother’s been a [Game Master] for the past thirteen years." This seems to be a common theme, not unlike how most males get into the hobby.

In Getting Girls Into the Game (Tracy Fullerton, Janine Fron, Celia Pearce, and Jacki Morie (Ludica)) several women involved in the game design industry recount how they got involved, first in computer games, then transitioning into Dungeon's & Dragons. One says, "When I was a teen, I started to play more pen & paper RPGs [role--playing games] (again with boys) and then later started to play more computer games again." Another game designer said, "later, I got into D&D [Dungeons and Dragons], and was the only girl “allowed” to play in our group." (Fullerton, et al. 168)

This link between female gamers and computer roleplaying games is well known. Women are an active part of World of Warcraft, probably the most massive game of the MMOverse. These games owe a large part of their construction to the traditional pen and paper
roleplaying game, and in a sense have now come full circle to influence table top rpg design. *Dungeons & Dragons 4*th* Edition* incorporates a variety of MMO tropes, including special abilities with cool down times, tiered leveling systems that expand player options as they advance, and a more modular construction than the often ad hoc development of past editions. These changes, along with the abandonment of gendered avatars for classes, could be an attempt to draw more females into the hobby. *Dungeons & Dragons Online* clearly aims at this demographic. In *Game on Girl: Identity and Representation in Digital RPGS*, Elizabeth McMenomy discusses her experiences with online games and the appeal of *DDO*. First, she lists playing with friends from her off line life as a factor in *DDO*’s appeal, where the camaraderie was more real, and she stood less chance of being "judged" for being a female. (McMenomy 5) She further notes that a key element to her enjoyment is the social atmosphere. This follows with the experience of the women in the survey who all reported joining their current gaming groups because of friends inviting them, and found a higher degree of satisfaction in the game after becoming friends with the rest of the gaming group.

As a follow up question, the women in the survey were asked their favorite type of character to play. Here responses were varied. One woman said bard because. "I am a supportive person by nature and bards buff their group. Also, I'm not a very good fighter, so buffing people is right up my alley."

A second woman responded, "for DnD I'm partial to the kick-arse female who's rather sarcastic and just a tad bit bloodthirsty. Slow to temper, but quick to the blade."

Varied responses were as common for women as for men. McMenomy reported feeling
empowered on DDO when she switched from a ranged based DPS (Damage Per Second) character to a "tanking" as a front lines melee fighter. "Finally, my gaming experience had come full circle and was filled with empowerment." (McMenomy 6) In one study done by E. Thomas Erikson of the game *Neverwinter Nights*, an rpg based on the *D&D 3rd* rules, the females created a character together. "The informants used great time and effort for designing a game character they found compelling and interesting, a redheaded tattooed female from the druid class, good with animals, half elf, 30 years old with a hawk as animal companion and with a neutral temperament." (Erikson 7)

*Ritual Discourse in RPG* by Chris Lehrich notes "the protection of RPG's allows a male player to play a female character, a heterosexual player to play a homosexual character, without its being read as relevant to the player's out-of-game identity; we do not, that is, assume that a male player who chooses a female character is actually conflicted about his sexual identity." Here, there appears to be a difference between males and females. Where males enjoy the ability to play as something different, i.e. an orc, or a female, etc. women, according to McMenomy find a fulfillment in creating an idealized, empowered version of themselves. "Reconciling the hyper-sexuality often associated with female avatars was not as much of an issue for most of the women...throughout the study." In fact, "most embraced the female images, conscious of that creation as an idealized self." McMenomy's own experience provides a good example, "this concept was completely foreign to me when I began gaming and instead was discovered when someone saw my avatar and pointed out that it looked a lot like me (same haircut and color, similar color eyes)." (McMenomy 22) In this area, the MMO has the edge over the tabletop RPG, where the customization of physical appearance is not possible—a player is simply limited to the appearance of whatever plastic miniatures she is able to find, unless she happens to be handy with painting.
The third question female gamers were asked, "what is your favorite/least favorite element of the game," also showed varied responses but in general reflected a preference for interaction and an aversion for the combat aspect of the game. "Favorite thing about rpgs is the people and the interaction. Watching the story unfold is also fun, since I love fiction stories. It's always fun to see how the characters react in any given situation." She followed up with her least favorite aspect, "least favorite thing is probably the fighting...however, it is an essential part of the game." Another respondent indicated that her favorite aspect was the freedom to do whatever you wished, her least favorite being when the freedom prevented the story from moving forward. Erikson noted the same thing in his study, saying that many of the girls failed to make it past the opening sequence of the game before losing interest due to the extended combat scenario. (Erikson 7) The social interaction was near universal in most experiences with online games as reported in McMenomy's and Fullerton's studies. McMenomy speculates further that "the idea of experimenting with gender performance is accepted in a way it is not outside of many game cultures." (McMenomy 22) In general, women experiment with empowering their own gender, abandoning the traditional roles, and even current roles, women are expected to perform in society for the highly masculine role of "adventurer," violence.

So, given the generally positive attitude of women towards MMOs, given their preference for the environment among those that played DDO, and given that the table top game is much more compatible to the social aspect of roleplaying, why do more women not play table top RPGs? While answering such a question requires further study, and could probably amount to a book, let alone another paper, several factors are apparent and can point us toward a solution. The women in the survey had responses like, "usually it is a bunch of guys and stereotypical nerd guys are creepers," and "the idea of being in such a male nerd dominated group really scares some girls." Lehrich reported that
women often face opposition, or are seen as outsiders and not true players. (Lehrich 15) The problem seems to be less pronounced when a female is included from the beginning as opposed to joining after the group is formed. Most of the female gamers in the survey listed their initial exposure to table top RPGs in such a fresh scenario. This could be because of the "freedom" of the game in an exclusively male group, one that traditionally feels uncomfortable around, or ostracized by, women, that a misogynistic tone develops that now must be curtailed in the presence of a female. Whatever the reason, most women feel that simply knowing that other women play the games, or being friends with the individuals in the group is more than enough to draw women into play. Again, the social aspect, more than any other element, is what drives women to engage in RPGs and from where they derive the most enjoyment.

Table top RPGs present a unique chance for males and females to interact in person, not obscured by the anonymity of online play, to form a community that fosters understanding and collaboration, mutual respect and equality. After all, it is only by associating with one another that people can become a community, whether that community is in a farming community in Iowa or a dungeon in a fantasy world.