

ABSTRACT

SHAY, HEATHER LEE. *I Am My Character: Role-playing Games as Identity Work*. (Under the direction of Michael Schwalbe).

This dissertation examines the identity implications of table-top role-playing fantasy games.

Based on nineteen months of participant-observation of a gaming group, twenty in-depth interviews, and archival data from email lists and websites, I show gamers used gaming to construct a moral identity, court self-testing risks, and explore possible selves. Gamers created the moral identity “good gamer” through display of six qualities:

dedication, cooperation, selflessness, creativity, intelligence, and authenticity. By displaying these qualities, gamers constructed themselves not only as good gamers, but as good people.

Gamers courted self-testing risks by engaging in “edgework without the edge.” This involved gamers testing the limits of fantasy characters’ abilities and putting those characters’ lives, rather than their own, at risk. Gamers also engaged in fictive heroism, creating characters who were slightly better versions of themselves. By putting these characters through adventures and ordeals in a fictional game world, gamers explored alternative moralities and possible selves. My research shows how activities that are largely based on imagination and might be seen by many as frivolous can have serious real-world consequences. Future research might thus fruitfully examine how other activities that occur in virtual or imaginary worlds come to shape real-world identities and self-conceptions.

© Copyright 2013 by Heather Shay

All Rights Reserved

I Am My Character: Role-playing Games as Identity Work

by
Heather Lee Shay

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Sociology

Raleigh, North Carolina

2013

APPROVED BY:

Michael Schwalbe
Committee Chair

Richard L. Della Fave

Sinikka Elliott

Maxine Thompson

BIOGRAPHY

Heather was born in Norwalk, Ohio, on May 6, 1978, to Kim and Sandra Bostwick. She has a younger sister, Colleen. After moving through several states, she graduated from high school in Boiling Springs, South Carolina. She enrolled at the University of Kentucky, where she obtained a B. A. in psychology and sociology. After taking a break from school to work on the Rural Substance Abuse and Violence Project (RSVP) housed at UK, she obtained a Master's in sociology from Florida Atlantic University. She then began doctoral studies at North Carolina State University. She lives with her partner, Buddy, and her dog, Joey.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank my dissertation committee for all their help. Most importantly, I appreciate all the guidance from Michael Schwalbe, my chair. He read countless drafts as I struggled with how to analyze and explain role-playing gaming to outsiders. I also appreciate the efforts of my other committee members: Rick Della Fave, who provided valuable insights on how to think about the implications of my research, even though he retired while I was writing; Sinikka Elliott, whose insights regarding qualitative research and gender helped me immensely; and Maxine Thompson, who helped me think about how role-playing is related to other activities. I would also like to thank Kim Ebert, who graciously stepped in to help out at my defense at the last minute. My (current and former) fellow graduate students also helped me complete my dissertation. Kylie Parrotta and Amy McClure gave me advice and encouragement and helped me explain role-playing gaming lingo to people unfamiliar with it. Katrina Bloch and Tiffany Taylor helped me when I got stuck trying to think about what it all meant. Elizabeth Chivers read repeated drafts and had numerous conversations with me that pushed me to think about what I was saying and how to say it. Finally, I could not have made it through this process without Buddy, my partner. He read draft after draft, using his expertise in English to improve my writing and his familiarity with role-playing to help me think about my data. He also supported me both emotionally and financially throughout the entire process.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Real-Life Consequences of Fantasy Gaming.....	1
ROLE-PLAYING GAMES	3
Studies of Role-playing Gaming	4
SETTING AND METHOD	8
THE INDUCTIVE EVOLUTION OF THE STUDY	11
DISSERTATION OVERVIEW	20
Gamer as Moral Identity: Becoming a Good Role-Playing Gamer (or Not).....	23
CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD GAMERS	23
Dedication.....	24
Regular Attendance.....	24
Accounts for Absence from the Game.....	25
Lengthy Games.....	27
Acquiring and Using Game Materials.....	28
Challenging Other Players' Dedication.....	29
Cooperation	30
Privileging Role-playing Games.....	31
Pooling Resources.....	32
Helping Each Other Create Interesting Characters.....	32
Selflessness.....	33
Serving as Game Master.....	33
Serving as Leader of the Party.....	34
Playing a Different Character Archetype.....	36
Creativity	37
Novel Strategies for Solving Problems.....	37
Getting into Character.....	38
Intelligence	42
Thinking Your Way Out of Trouble.....	42
Justifying Your Actions within the Game World.....	43
Authenticity	45
Role-Playing Game Knowledge.....	45
Geek Knowledge.....	46
THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING A BAD GAMER	47
Collective Sanctions	47

GM Sanctions	49
Becoming Better Gamers.....	49
ROLE-PLAYING GAMES AS AN OPPORTUNITY	50
TO CONSTRUCT A MORAL IDENTITY	50
The Creation of New Role-Playing Gaming Groups.....	51
Buying One’s Own Dice.....	52
Valuing of Knowledge Not Valued Elsewhere	53
Playing in Game Stores	53
GENDER AS A RESOURCE.....	56
CONCLUSION	62
Edgework without the Edge: Negotiating Risk and Safety in	66
Role-playing Gaming.....	66
GAMING AS EDGEWORK	67
Negotiating Boundaries	67
Preparing for Gaming	72
Control as Skill	75
Sensations Gamers Get from Playing.....	80
PLAYING WITHOUT AN EDGE	90
Safety from Out-of-Game Consequences for In-Game Risk-Taking.....	91
Safety through Invisibility	95
CONCLUSION	98
Gaming as Fictive Heroism: Making Yourself a Hero through Play.....	102
THE NEED FOR HEROES	104
Exploring Alternative Morality	105
Leaving Competitive Play	106
Avoiding the Celebrity Cult	107
Owning Your Heroes.....	109
Keeping the Hero Alive.....	110
HEROIC CHARACTERS	113

Talking about Heroes.....	113
Acting Heroically	115
Not-So-Heroic Characters	116
Heroism as Exciting.....	118
FEELING LIKE A HERO	120
Invincibility	120
Control over Heroes.....	122
Becoming a Legend	126
Collective Storytelling.....	128
CONCLUSION	130
Conclusion: Creating Identity through Imagination	136
DEVELOPING MORAL IDENTITY THROUGH FANTASY	137
IMAGINARY RISK-TAKING.....	144
HEROISM AND POSSIBLE SELVES	147
LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	152
REFERENCES	155

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Real-Life Consequences of Fantasy Gaming

It was the summer following my first year of college when my boyfriend suggested I try role-playing gaming. I had never heard of it, but he seemed really excited by me joining him and his friends for a game. So, I tried it. With his roommate and two other friends, I sat down to make a character with the help of my boyfriend. I made a Malkavian, a crazy vampire. My character thought she was the queen of France and could make others see and hear things. The game enthralled me. I got to pretend to be someone else, but could replicate the parts of me I wanted. I could do things I would never do in real life, like use a flamethrower in a gas station parking lot (and my character lived to tell the tale). Where had this game been my entire life? How had I not known about it?

I soon found out that my boyfriend and his family and friends had been role-playing for years. There were tons of games available, covering supernatural phenomena, fantasy creatures, science fiction, spies, soldiers, and more. But I also found that it was mostly white males who played. I played for years before I ever sat down at a table with another female (and she was my boyfriend's sister). I played for even longer before I met a non-white gamer. Fifteen years later, there are more women in the gaming community, but it is still heavily dominated by white males.

When I began looking for a dissertation project, I thought about how much of my gaming experience was spent with nerdy white men. While my boyfriend and his brothers were high school wrestlers, and the males I first played with were fraternity brothers, most gamers I had met were geeks. I began to wonder if gamers were using the game to enact

compensatory masculinity. I thought the game might be a way to pretend they were manlier than they were in real life. But, as I began my study, I found it was not that simple.

While gender is clearly relevant to gamers' experiences (and I discuss social inequality throughout), it was not what intrigued me the most. I also met gamers who had claims to conventional manhood and did not need to compensate. Henry and Dave were former military. Jeremy had been the star of an elite soccer team in high school. Moreover, I met Claire, a female who preferred in-game social interactions to fictive violence. How could a desire to do gender explain her participation in an activity largely populated by men who enjoy fictional combat? There had to be more going on than doing gender.

Using inductive analysis, I returned to the questions I asked myself when I first discovered gaming. I thought about why I enjoyed it so much and what I got out of it. In trying to answer those questions, I came to realize that participants gained several real-life benefits that, while sometimes connected to manhood, gamers of both genders sought and frequently succeeded in obtaining. Those same benefits, I realized, were premised on gamers' ability to hide their activity, making it difficult for people to find gaming. The question, then, became not, Why nerdy white men? but, Why gaming?

Sociologically, I realized that gaming allowed gamers to show their positive characteristics. They gamed because in the game they could be what they could not be outside of it. Studying gamers, then, could help us better understand identity construction. On the surface, gaming seems like frivolous entertainment. What I came to see, however, is that fantasy games have real-life consequences for players. So by studying gamers, I hope to

show how people use seemingly unimportant activities to create better selves, more exciting lives, and heroes worthy of emulation.

ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

A role-playing game is “a recreational activity based on the assumption of roles in a fictional setting by the participants, where rules are presented for the resolution of tasks and conflicts (usually involving a facilitator), and where the participants are not placed in direct competition to achieve their goals” (Fannon 1999:87). Role-playing games require at least two people, although most games have three to ten players. The Game Master (commonly referred to as the GM) organizes the game, decides on the plot and other characters of the game (termed non-player-characters or NPCs), describes the setting and actions of the non-player characters, determines the outcome of player actions, and is the final referee. The players create their own characters (referred to as player-characters or PCs), verbally describe the actions of their characters, and roll dice to determine their character’s action in the game world. Role-players sit around a table and collectively imagine an alternative world – with the aid of character sheets, books, and sometimes miniature figurines to represent their characters.

In role-playing games, players work together to overcome imaginary obstacles and enemies. The game is not zero-sum; for one player to win, another need not lose. Rather, the premise of the game is that the players must cooperate to overcome the obstacles the GM puts in front of them. As such, there are no opposing teams. Even the GM, who dictates the behavior of the imaginary foes, is not seen as an adversary. He or she presents challenges to

the other players, but those challenges are expected to be balanced against character abilities. Additionally, the games do not have an inherent end or scenario under which players clearly win. Games are open-ended, and the same role-playing group can play the same characters regularly over the course of several years, “winning” the game only when players decide they have defeated a powerful enemy and are ready to move on to a new game.

Role-playing games, then, are different from most other games people play. If gamers tell others what they do, they are often met with surprise, confusion, or disdain. Most people have not heard of role-playing games. Of those who have, many hold negative attitudes, assuming gamers are emotionally immature or mentally unstable. What, then, draws people to this activity? What benefits do role-playing gamers get out of pretending to be someone else in a fictional setting?

Goffman (1997:138) argues that fun requires becoming “unselfconsciously engrossed” in an activity. Participants in any game, then, have to get caught up in the game itself or it will be boring. However, engrossment is not enough to explain the investment gamers have in role-playing games. It is not just that gamers enjoy the game. It is also that they get real-life identity benefits from it. This study examines what drives role-players to engage in a leisure activity that others rarely understand or accept.

Studies of Role-playing Gaming

While many people consider games trivial and mere entertainment, sociologists and other scholars have paid a good deal of attention to games in the last twenty years. Studies of sports and video/computer games make up the bulk of the research. But, sociologists have

also studied games of chance (Goffman 1997), poker (Zurcher 1970), casino gambling (Sallaz 2008), educational games (Fridman 2010; Williams, Hendricks, and Winkler 2006), and simulations such as military war games (Zurcher 1985) or Second Life (Gottschalk 2010).

Typically, studies examine how video/computer games represent women or minorities (e.g., Beasley and Standley 2002; Brenick, Henning, Killen, O'Connor, and Collins 2007; Ivory 2006; Leonard 2003; Ward Gailey 1993) or the link between video games and violence (e.g., Gilmore and Crissman 1997; Leonard 2004). While studies of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMOs) have multiplied recently (e.g., Brignall and Van Valey 2008; Burn and Carr 2006; Chee, Vieta and Smith 2006; Chen 2009; Williams and Kirschner 2012), there are few studies of table-top role-playing games. Despite the fact that role-playing games have been around since the 1970s, most sociological studies have been done since 2000.

While scholars have occasionally examined role-playing games, much of the attention has come from reporters and Christian moral entrepreneurs. Generally, media stories suggest role-playing games and gamers are involved in Satan worship or encourage obsession and insanity (Grouling Cover 2010; Williams et al. 2006). Instead of examining the stigma attached to role-playing games or why gamers would choose to participate, most scholarly studies focus on how the games work internally or the relationship between real selves and fictional, game-world selves (see Grouling Cover 2010; Hendricks 2006; Mello 2006; Myers 1992; Nephew 2006; Tychsen et al. 2006; Waskul 2006; Waskul and Lust 2004).

The first sociological examination of role-playing games was Fine's (1983) ethnography of Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) players. He showed how gamers create a shared fantasy through their activities, detailing the subcultural norms of D&D. For instance, he documented the tendency for gamers to hold dice superstitions. Fine also found that gamers, almost entirely white males, perpetuated social inequality in various ways. He observed male players having their characters sexually harass and assault female characters. Most women he observed and interviewed dropped out of gaming, and the few that remained expressed dissatisfaction with the way others treated them.

Later scholars emphasized the way players made the game actually work. For instance, Myers (1992) found that D&D players, who generated characters largely through random dice rolls, emphasized their characters' main attributes (such as wisdom or dexterity) and their ability to use them in combat. By contrast, Shadowrun players, who picked their characters' features, emphasized their characters' specific skills (such as hacking into a computer) and personality. Furthermore, Hendricks (2006) found that players are more likely to use the first person when describing character actions (e.g., "I pick up the sword") than when describing character appearance (e.g., "she is a large, stocky orc") and to speak in character more frequently as the game progresses. Such language helps players see the action and the world in their heads, but also helps them to keep players and characters distinct.

Table-top role-playing and similar activities, such as live-action role-playing (LARPs) and MMOs, focus on fantasy and magic, requiring players to use their imagination (King and Borland 2003; Tychsen, Hitchens, Brolund, and Kavakli 2006). All three also provide numerous opportunities to establish social relationships through in-game activities

(Brignall and Van Valey 2008; Chen 2009; King and Borland 2003; Moore 2005; Tychsen et al. 2006; Williams and Kirschner 2012). Studies of how role-playing games work help us understand how gamers simulate imaginary, yet realistic people in their heads and show that people treat imaginary others like real others.

Only a few studies have related gaming to the non-game world. For example, Kociatkiewicz (2000) argues that the creation of game worlds is similar to the creation of real-life social worlds. As in reality, gamers need others to understand the elements of the social world that are important, but they do not worry if others have different images of minor details; if there is enough agreement to ensure smooth social interaction, a sense of reality is achieved. Similarly, Waskul and Lust (2004) argue that self-presentation in role-playing games parallels real life. According to Waskul and Lust, gamers attempt to maintain boundaries between themselves as individuals, themselves as players in a game, and the characters they play – the same kind of boundaries that people try to maintain in everyday life. In a later study, Waskul (2006) further argues that the main difference between the creation of characters in role-playing games and the creation of selves in everyday life is that the latter are considered serious and important, while the former are not.

Studies such as Waskul and Lust (2004), Waskul (2006), and Kociatkiewicz (2000) suggest that studying role-playing games can enhance our understanding of how people create selves and social realities. While this is an important point, these studies fail to examine what role-players get out of the experience. Do players take different selves away from the game? If selves can be created in a fantasy game, what else can games do for those who play them? To answer these questions, it is necessary to do more than compare gaming

to real life. It is necessary to consider, as I do in subsequent chapters, how games spill over into real life.

SETTING AND METHOD

The role-playing group I observed was originally formed to play a game set in a fictional feudal world. I located the (newly forming) group online, and then contacted the group's organizer/GM, Henry, who consented to my attending the group's organizational meeting. At that meeting, I described my research interests and asked permission to study the group. Everyone consented.

The group first met at Henry's house, and then later moved to a newly opened gaming store, Play Science. Around the same time, another member of the group (Matt) became GM. On a few occasions, Malcolm, normally a player, also served as GM. Over a 19-month period, the group played a variety of games, including Harnmaster, Shadowrun, Spycraft, and varieties of Dungeons & Dragons. Most of the members were experienced players. The initial GM (Henry) had over 20 years of gaming experience and was part owner of a local game store that went out of business shortly before the study began. Several members of the group played in multiple regular games during the period of the study. Only three group members (Christy, Austin, and Emily) had no prior role-playing experience.

I participated in and observed weekly game sessions from May 2009, when the GM organized the group, to November 2010, when the group dissolved. The group typically played between five and seven-and-a-half-hours at a time. As a full participant, I was involved in organizing the group, all aspects of the game sessions, and social interactions

before and after games. I tape recorded the games and surrounding activities. I also jotted notes as games unfolded. Afterward, I typed complete fieldnotes, transcribed the tapes, and wrote notes-on-notes.

The gaming group varied in size from four to eight over the course of its existence, with a total of 12 people (other than me) participating in the group at various times. Matt and Malcolm participated the entire 19 months, while other group members joined or left during the study. Many group members were friends prior to joining. Malcolm and Matt were roommates and had been friends for years, while Jeremy, Ryan, and Toby had been friends since high school. While all group members did not know each other initially, every person who joined after the group's formation knew a current member.

Group members ranged in age from 18 to late 40s. Nine of the group members were male, three were female. All were white and all had some college experience. The majority were current or recent college students. Two group members were involuntarily unemployed for part of the study period. Several group members worked while attending college, including three group members (Jeremy, Ryan, and Matt) who returned to college after hiatuses.

All participants originally signed up expecting to play a specific game, but as it turned out, we played eight different games in the fantasy, science fiction, spy, and techno-thriller genres. Over the course of the study, three different people served as GM. Under Henry's leadership, we usually played Harnmaster. After Henry stepped down, the choice of which game to play on any given evening was frequently decided by players.

In addition to participant observation, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 20 role-playing gamers. Six of the interviewees were group members, while the other 14 were not involved in the group. I recruited interviewees through personal contacts and through a local online social networking group for gamers. At a couple of face-to-face meetings of the networking group, I asked people if I could interview them for a study of role-playing gaming. I asked each interviewee to recommend other gamers who might be interested in participating.

Of the 20 interviewees, 16 were male and four were female. All but three of the interviewees identified as white. Two males identified themselves as Asian, while the remaining interviewee considered himself “other.” Two interviewees were high school graduates, while the rest had at least some college. Most of the interviewees had middle-class jobs, and ten of them had or aspired to jobs in the computer industry. Interviewees ranged in age from 21 to 48. These demographics are typical of the role-playing community as a whole, which is largely white, middle class, and male (Grouling Cover 2010). Many gamers start playing during middle school and high school, so the participants in my study do not represent the full range of ages.

The interviews lasted approximately an hour-and-a-half to three hours. I asked questions about what makes role-playing fun, about good and bad gamers, about non-gaming interests, about conversation with others about gaming, and about gaming experiences. I conducted interviews from March 2010 until October 2011, with most of the interviews conducted in summer and fall 2011. I transcribed each interview and coded transcripts for recurring themes.

Additionally, I participated in and observed GENCON, the national gaming convention, in August 2009 and 2010. In 2009, I observed two days' worth of convention activities. In 2010, I attended the convention for four days. I jotted notes during and after convention related activities. Upon my return, I typed complete fieldnotes and wrote notes-on-notes. Additionally, I collected convention "swag" (the publications and free items that GENCON gives to participants). Lastly, I also collected e-mail, mailing list, and website posts from a variety of sources relevant to the gaming group.

THE INDUCTIVE EVOLUTION OF THE STUDY

When I began this project, I expected to examine gender identities. Although some gamers enact hegemonic masculinity, most are geeks. Before entering the field, I anticipated that I would be adding to the literature on nerd masculinity. As Cooper (2000) and Kendall (2000) argue, geeky white males emphasize their intelligence, computer savvy, and dedication, as opposed to their strength or athleticism. I expected that gamers, who are mostly male, created a place in which they could be rewarded for nerd masculinity. The group I joined started off all male, except for me, providing me ample opportunity to examine the phenomenon. Most group members were even computer science majors, as were the people Cooper (2000) and Kendall (2000) studied.

Moreover, Fine (1983) found gaming to be a sexist environment where male gamers had their characters sexually objectify and assault female characters. Many of the women he studied left gaming because they felt uncomfortable with how male gamers treated them. While my personal experience did not match what Fine found, I anticipated that I would have

much to say about sexism based on my observations. Yet, as I observed the group, it became clear that there was more to the story than compensatory masculinity and gender inequality. Game-world characters and game-world actions were clearly “gendered,” and this could have been the basis for an analytic story. But I found myself drawn more to the less-explored, generic identity-construction aspects of gaming than to its gender-specific aspects. I suppose, too, that the lack of overt sexism in the group I studied made it easier to shift focus away from the gender story I originally anticipated telling.

First, some gamers were masculine, having served in the military, played elite sports, or participated in other manly pursuits. Nor were all the gamers middle class, despite the assumption that most geeks are. Henry suffered from chronic poverty and had only sporadic blue-collar or retail employment since leaving the military. Claire held a working-class job and was attending college for the first time in her 30s. Claire’s participation also helped me think more about gamers generally, not just male gamers. In my personal experience, female gamers were like me – not particularly feminine and more interested in killing imaginary villains than in shopping, appearance, or domestic activities. Not so with Claire. She baked for the group, disliked in-game combat, created characters that had feminine traits, and seemed more concerned about what her characters said than what they did. Thinking about the different people involved in the group actually shifted my focus away from nerd masculinity.

Instead, what stuck out to me was how much emphasis gamers put on cooperation. Unlike most games, in which players compete, role-players work together to achieve goals. When I told people that I was studying role-playing gamers, I found that the hardest part to

explain was the cooperation. People could understand pretending to be a character (though they often thought it strange). What they had a harder time understanding was that everyone, even the GM, was working together as they played, and that there was no actual opponent (merely imaginary villains). I knew that cooperation was important to making the game work, but as I memoed about my observations, I realized the high value that gamers placed on cooperativeness as a trait.

The realization that role-playing gamers valued cooperation, in contrast to the cultural expectation that games are competitive, got me thinking about what other characteristics gamers valued. I continued memoing and eventually figured out that gamers valued six characteristics. I then began to think about Goffman's (1997:130) argument that games not only give people enjoyment, but also give them a chance to "exhibit attributes valued in the wider social world, such as dexterity, strength, knowledge, intelligence, courage, and self-control." Goffman's list of characteristics reads like the statistics on a role-player's character sheet. The majority of role-playing games include statistics for strength, dexterity, constitution (capacity to take damage), and intelligence (Myers 1992). Role-playing games "simulate human characters" through the requirement that players describe their character's abilities, personality, appearance, possessions, and so on (Myers 1992:420). Like Goffman (1997), I realized that such rules gave players opportunities to develop and/or display these characteristics not just in the game, but in themselves. Role-playing gamers, then, engage in what can be called a form of identity work.

According to Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996:115), identity work is "anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others." As I

considered the identity work gamers do, I came to see that gamers attached moral significance to displaying the six characteristics. It was not merely that they established who they were as people, but that they crafted images of themselves as good people. Gaming created special opportunities to do this; that is, to create a moral identity.

Creating a moral identity seems like serious business. For example, Schwalbe (1996) examined the men's mythopoetic movement, showing how participants used Jungian psychology and ancient myths to reconstruct "man" as a moral identity. Similarly, McMahon (1995) showed us how women construct themselves as good mothers, thereby creating positive identities through their efforts to care for their children. In a study of holistic health centers, Kleinman (1996) found that people can depict themselves as progressive and "alternative," despite practices that reproduce inequality. In American culture more generally, people construct moral identities by emphasizing their qualities as hard and reliable workers (Jackall 1981; Newman 1999; Wilson 1981).

It seems clear that this kind of identity construction has real-world consequences. It is not so clear in the case of fantasy gaming. Nothing about pretending to be a fictional character suggests it will have consequences for a person's identity. Children's pretend games are often seen as harmless diversions (Jones 2002). When fantasy is seen as consequential, it is typically feared, as when parents worry that their teenager spends too much time playing video games or talking to an imaginary friend. Surprisingly, however, I came to see that gamers – mostly young adults – construct positive identities through fantasy gaming.

Few studies of moral identity consider similar situations. There have been several examinations of leisure and identity. Anderson and Taylor (2010) show that skydivers and gun collectors highlight certain aspects of their activities when explaining them to others because they feel misunderstood. Pomerantz, Currie, and Kelly (2004) show that female skateboarders develop feminist identities, albeit not ones that fit with conventional feminism. Wheaton (2000) and Wheaton and Beal (2003) examine the importance of authenticity in extreme sports, while Williams and Copes (2005) do the same for the Straightedge subculture. But those studies focus predominantly on sports and/or assume that there are no moral dimensions to the identities developed through leisure. In fact, morality is often mistakenly seen as set apart from everyday life (Turowetz and Maynard 2010).

When morality is addressed within leisure, the focus is on activities people often see as immoral or morally questionable (Anderson 2011; Fine 1991; 1992; Olmstead 1988). Olmstead's (1988) examination of gun collectors provides an example. Like most scholars, Olmstead focuses on how collectors deflect the stigma they face, ignoring the possibility that they could develop a positive moral identity from their activity. Gamers, however, were doing exactly that. I saw, then, a chance to broaden our understanding of how people construct moral identities in domains not obviously defined as moral.

As I gave further thought to what gamers got out of gaming, I noticed that gamers exercised a great deal of control over the game. In interviews, gamers repeatedly told me that they could do whatever they wanted in the game. While I could see that they did *not* have complete control or freedom, gamers nonetheless constantly talked about these things, and talked about them in remarkably similar ways (cf. Irvine 2000). Gamers, however, do not

belong to an organization that provides them with a script, and so the similarity of their accounts was puzzling.

In trying to make sense of what they meant and why that response was so common, I thought about other settings that give people chances for freedom and control. For instance, research shows that people who do extreme sports, such as surfing, skateboarding, and roller derby, enjoy them because they are informally organized and run by participants (Beal 1996; Bogardus 2012; Breivik 2010; Pomerantz et al. 2004; Wheaton 2000). Similarly, youth sports that are not run by adults have gained popularity in recent years, while those typically organized by adults, such as football, baseball, and basketball, have not (Breivik 2010; Wheaton and Beal 2003). While some gamers had been athletes, many felt constrained by their experiences with sports or were uninterested in or unable to play them. Gaming, in contrast, offered an alluring degree of freedom and control.

But gamers also enjoyed the safety of gaming as much as the freedom and control. After all, as they repeated regularly, they were only playing a *game*. They seemed glad they could hide their participation and did not suffer physical consequences because of the game. Such a situation is different from that of most athletes, whose actions are often widely recognized, and who frequently face consequences when the game goes badly (Adler and Adler 1991; Coleman 1976; Connor 2009). Moreover, gamers' actions were not physically dangerous, and outsiders could not tell if they participated. To understand this contradiction, I memoed about the relationship between freedom, control, and safety. As my dissertation chair and I discussed the memo, I came to see the similarities between what gamers were doing and what edgeworkers do.

Lyng (1990) defined edgework as activities that require participants to tread boundaries, such as those between life and death or sanity and insanity. Generally, edgework activities require the participant to use their skills to ensure that they do not end up dead, hurt, or crazy. While there are studies of edgework in non-sports – e.g., Smith’s (2005) work on stock traders, and Holyfield, Jonas, and Zajicek’s (2005) study of whitewater rafting guides – the bulk of edgework studies deal with leisure. Initial studies, including Lyng’s, focused on extreme sports, such as skydiving or motorcycling (Ferrell 2005).

The gamers I studied seemed to enjoy the excitement of the game just like traditional edgeworkers. Still, gamers did not take any physical action, and they seemed more concerned with safety than Lyng’s edgeworkers. As I read other examinations of edgework, I noticed the commonality: in all cases, the risk was clear. Risk came in many forms, not just physical. For instance, Miller (2005) showed that adolescents committed crime because of the excitement stemming from the possibility of getting caught. Likewise, Reith (2005) showed that it was not just death that drug users feared, but addiction and the social implications attached to it. Lois (2005) found that voluntary rescue workers worried that they could not handle the situations they faced emotionally, mentally, and physically. Smith (2005) demonstrated that stock traders risked their emotional stability and clients’ money. In each case, it was easy to recognize the courting of risk.

By contrast, risk in gaming was not so obvious. As my dissertation chair and I discussed how edgework related to gamers, I realized that the risks gamers took frequently escaped the notice of others. Gamers, it seemed, had found a way to do “edgework without the edge.” This kind of edgework seems increasingly common as people seek to avoid the

real dangers of living in modern society (Roth 2010; Simon 2005), yet also seek activities that provide opportunities for authentic self-expression outside the confines of everyday life.

As I worked on my analysis for the edgework chapter, I read Klapp's (1969) *Collective Search for Identity* to help me better understand the mystique surrounding gaming. But Klapp (1969) also discussed heroes. As I read about the benefits of heroes and hero worship, I kept thinking about what gamers do. Klapp (1969:221) argued that people commonly "choose heroes quite different from themselves in personality because they admire their roles." Gamers chose their characters for the same reasons – deciding what position they wanted in the game. After reading Klapp's book, I recognized heroic behavior in what the players did, how they talked about their characters, the descriptions in the rulebooks, and the advertisements for game products. Hero worship has been popular throughout time (Beatie 1983), and I initially saw what the players did as a form of worshipping their characters.

At first it seemed that what happened in gaming was similar to reading about comic book superheroes, or pretending, as children do, to being a superhero one's self (Jones 2002; Rosenberg and Canzoneri 2008). Such fantasies help people deal with fears and problems, as well as learn coping strategies (Jones 2002). Mello (2006) shows that gamers get such benefits from their participation, learning social skills, increasing their math and statistical skills, and so on. Moreover, hero worshippers escape into a more enticing world where they are more powerful and/or important than they are in their real lives (Caughey 1984; Klapp 1969). All this seemed true of gamers as well.

However, as I continued writing, I realized that gamers were not engaging in hero worship. According to Klapp (1969), hero worship comes in three types: reinforcement, which encourages people to accept their position in society; seduction, which provides them with a chance to engage in deviance; and transcendence, which gives them a different viewpoint from what they are used to. Military and political figures, explorers, and cowboys provide reinforcement or transcendence, while celebrities and infamous characters (e.g., gangsters) offer seduction or transcendence (Boon 2005; Dotter 1987; Edelstein 1996; Hakanen 1989). Regardless of the type, hero worship is passive, involving identifying with someone else. Gamers, on the other hand, were active in the game, creating the very personas I thought they were worshipping. They were not *identifying* with a distant figure, like a celebrity or historical figure, but *fashioning* the hero themselves.

On the one hand, gamers seem uninterested in heroism. Unlike soldiers, police, and firefighters, most gamers do not have jobs that allow them to act heroically, nor are most gamers involved in political struggles or social movements. Yet, as a group, gamers tend to have strong concerns for honor and justice. How, then, could these concerns be expressed?

To try to make sense of what was going on, I turned to the literature on everyday heroes. The media frequently publish stories about people who help the community, do good, or otherwise sacrifice themselves for others. The implication is that anyone can be a hero (deLuse 2008; Edelstein 1996). But of course not everyone has the opportunity to be a hero. What gamers did, it occurred to me, was to create their own opportunities.

In his book on imaginary social worlds, Caughey (1984) describes people's fictional romances with celebrities. In reflecting on Caughey's analysis, it occurred to me that gamers

created similar relationships with their fictional characters. In one sense, it was all imaginary. This did not, however, make it inconsequential. In fashioning game-world heroes, gamers discovered and reinforced in themselves the impulses to heroism that testified to their goodness as people. This was part of a process of creating a possible self, a process I discuss in chapter four.

Fictive heroism, edgework without the edge, and moral identity thus seemed central to what gamers got out of fantasy gaming. Gamers were able to make themselves heroes, take risks and get thrills without danger, and depict themselves as good people, all while playing a game. Despite the stigma attached to gaming, I could see that gamers got real-life benefits from their participation. While they also seemed to get other benefits, such as improved social skills, logical reasoning, and knowledge of history, the identities gamers created seemed more consequential. The chance to be better than they were in their everyday lives meant more than merely acquiring intricate knowledge of medieval society or weaponry. Although gamers frequently enjoyed the trivial knowledge they picked up while playing, that was not what drew them to gaming. Feeling good, alive, and full of potential greatness – that is what kept them coming back to the table and the fictional world they constructed around it.

DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

This study deals with the role-playing gaming subculture. I show how gamers used the game, in the ways described above, to create real identities. In the next chapter, I show how gamers constructed a moral identity through the game. I describe the characteristics

gamers expected each other to display and the strategies they used to do so. I also examine the sanctions gamers imposed on those who failed to display these characteristics. I argue that the subcultural norms that gamers developed allowed them to show others they were not only good gamers, but by virtue of being good gamers, good people.

In chapter three, I show how gamers derived excitement from the game. By taking risks with their characters, gamers felt alive, powerful, and brave. Of course, these were imaginary risks. Gamers thus engaged in what I call “edgework without the edge.” My analysis examines how gamers used their skills to experience the sensations of edgework. I also show how gamers protected themselves from the risks associated with traditional edgework, thereby removing the edge, through the invisibility of their activity and the lack of out-of-game consequences for their in-game risk-taking.

Chapter four analyzes the experiences of gamers as fictive heroes. Gamers spent much of their role-playing time pretending to be classical heroes, vanquishing evil through imaginary combat. Such experiences allowed them to feel heroic, unlike in the rest of their lives. Gamers did not find heroes or heroism in religion, sports, or the media. They thus turned to gaming to find what they were missing elsewhere. My analysis shows how gamers created heroic characters that were fantastical, but still believable as slightly better versions of themselves. I argue that gaming thus provided an opportunity to explore “possible selves.”

In the conclusion, chapter five, I discuss the sociological implications of this study. Specifically, I show that studying leisure pursuits like gaming can enhance our knowledge of how people construct serious moral identities. I also discuss how this study highlights the need for more attention to non-physical risk-taking and the construction of heroes. I argue

that the relationship between fantasy and reality is not only a matter for gamers. Sociologists who are concerned with the construction of real-life identities need to pay attention to this relationship. Lastly, I offer suggestions for further research.

Overall, my study demonstrates that when people play role-playing games, they are not merely having fun. They are constructing who they are as people. By examining people's leisure, we can see how people craft identities in an increasingly regimented, bureaucratic society. There are multiple avenues for finding one's place in a fragmented social world. Through fictional characters and a fantasy game world, gamers end up creating positive worth for themselves and exciting experiences, despite the expanding iron cage of rationality.

CHAPTER 2

Gamer as Moral Identity: Becoming a Good Role-Playing Gamer (or Not)

According to Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996:115), identity work “is anything people do, individually or collectively, to give meaning to themselves or others.” In this chapter, I examine the identity work that gamers did to construct “good gamer” as a moral identity, one that implies special virtue. First, I discuss the six characteristics – dedication, cooperation, selflessness, creativity, intelligence, and authenticity – that players needed to demonstrate to claim the identity “good gamer.” I then discuss the consequences of failing to construct one’s self as a good gamer. Third, I examine how players used role-playing games as opportunities to construct moral identities. While all gamers tried to signify similar qualities, men and women placed different weight on the characteristics. Men also had more resources with which to construct themselves as good gamers. I conclude by discussing the implications of these differences for how men and women are able to construct moral identities through gaming.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GOOD GAMERS

Gamers held implicit expectations for what gamers are supposed to be like. Because gaming is a leisure activity with few rules, gamers did not write these expectations down. Nevertheless, experienced gamers knew what characteristics they needed to display if they wanted others to see them as good gamers. Experienced players also socialized new players through praise for conforming and punishment for failure to demonstrate the right characteristics.

Gamers needed to demonstrate six characteristics if they wanted to be viewed positively by others. They needed to display dedication, cooperation, selflessness, creativity, intelligence, and authenticity. I discuss each characteristic in turn and describe how players displayed the characteristic.

Dedication

Just like being a good worker or teammate, good gamers fulfilled the expectations of their activity. Gamers demonstrated their dedication in five primary ways. Players attended regularly, even when they found it inconvenient. They offered accounts to explain their absence. Players participated in the group for lengthy periods of time, even when they could not get adequate sleep. Fourth, players acquired and used game materials to show financial and symbolic commitment. Finally, players discounted the dedication of others.

Regular Attendance. Gamers showed dedication by coming to the game whenever possible. The game occurred once a week, with a few exceptions, for 19 months. Other than when Henry, the middle-aged white male who served as the group's first GM, was in the hospital, the group did not miss more than one week. While individual players might not attend every session, players assumed the group itself would meet every Tuesday, regardless of what else was happening. Additionally, the group collectively decided to meet every week. In the organizational meeting, Henry asked how often everyone wanted to play:

Henry then inquires as to whether the group prefers "once a week or once every two weeks." Jeremy immediately states, "Once a week." Henry says that's what he "prefers except in cases of burnout." Jeremy adds that only

playing “two times in 30 days makes it hard to stay with the game” to which Henry adds, “drift.” Jeremy points out, “If something comes up, only playing once in 30 days.” Henry concurs, “It’s easier to miss if it’s once a week.”
[Fieldnotes]

Here, Jeremy, a 24-year-old white male player, and Henry concurred that the group would eventually disband if people failed to attend regularly. They feared what eventually happened to the group. Members slowly left the game until Matt, a 23-year-old white male who served as the group’s second GM, basically dissolved the group. Because players needed others to play the game, they expected everyone to show up. Thus, they expected others to commit to regular (in this case, weekly) game sessions as part of what it meant to be a good gamer.

Gamers saw regular attendance as the foundation of good gaming. Players who failed to show up could not effectively present themselves as good gamers. Attendance was seen as so basic to being a good gamer that players did not generally discuss an individual’s attendance unless s/he missed the game repeatedly. On the rare occasion players did so, others derided them. For instance, Matt described James, a white male gamer, as “flaky” when we debated whether to allow him to join. When I interviewed Daniel, a white male in his mid-twenties, he told me about a player who had a reputation for leaving a game after only a few sessions. As Daniel further argued, a player’s lack of attendance could make his other characteristics, good or bad, irrelevant.

Accounts for Absence from the Game. Because they expected regular participation, players were obliged to provide accounts for their absences. Players generally offered medical problems, academic responsibilities, work obligations, and travel as accounts. They most

commonly invoked illness, which is a culturally accepted excuse for missing activities. Since many of the players were college students, they commonly cited academic responsibilities. While some players used a specific homework assignment to account for missing a game, other players used academic responsibilities to explain long-term irregular attendance. Similarly, players used work as an account. Finally, players frequently offered travel as their account during the summer or near major holidays, when they claimed that visiting their family was more important than gaming.

While players did not always offer one of these four accounts, only one player ever failed to offer any account. Claire, a white female player in her early 30s, missed for a few weeks. After I emailed her about it, she responded with the following: “I’m sorry I haven’t gotten back to you guys sooner. It doesn’t seem that my play-style is really fitting in with the Tuesday Night Crew. I really should have called about it.” She indicated remorse for her lack of communication, but did not account for her failure to inform the group until prompted. When I told the group what Claire said in her email, Malcolm, a white male in his mid-twenties, stated, “Just couldn’t bother to tell us,” in an annoyed tone. He implied that Claire had not provided a proper account and thus depicted her as a bad gamer.

Players usually provided accounts ahead of time, especially if they would be out of town or attending a celebration. In other cases, gamers offered the account around game time, typically because of illness. A few times, however, players failed to give accounts until their return. For example, Malcolm and Matt missed two weeks and no one knew where they were. When they returned, the following interaction occurred:

Matt says, “Yeah, long time no see ... Sorry to disappear on you.” I say, “Yeah, you just disappeared.” I ask, “How are you?” Matt responds, “Not dead.” After a pause, he continues, “Jeremy was like we thought you were dead.” I laugh. He tells me, “We were out of town. He (pointing at Malcolm) at least has an excuse. He left town in a hurry.” Malcolm comments, “I thought he would tell you all.” Matt says, “But I forgot. We were out of town.” [Fieldnotes]

As this exchange shows, players expected advance notification of an absence, or a good account later. Failing to meet these expectations elicited resentment from other players, as Matt discovered.

Lengthy Games. Players also demonstrated dedication by playing the game for long stretches of time, including late into the night. The players agreed the game would have a “6 p.m. start time, go for four hours.” Four hours is not a particularly long role-playing game session, as it usually takes a couple of hours to run through a battle or set of social interactions. However, the group never actually played for only four hours. Play times ranged from five-and-a-half to seven hours per session. Gamers only occasionally left the game before 11 p.m. and often did not leave until around 1:30 a.m. In the broader culture, people expect to be at home and asleep before that time. Just by playing, gamers demonstrated that they considered the group more important than sleep.

Because the game did not begin until early evening on a weekday, players often already had a full work or school day before the game. Players sometimes had difficulty fulfilling work and school obligations the next day due to these hours. For example, Malcolm worked at 8 a.m. One week, he commented that he was falling asleep in his cubicle and therefore wanted to leave earlier than normal. Malcolm made an atypical statement and

potentially threatened his image as a dedicated gamer. To minimize the negative impact, Malcolm did not mention his desire to leave until after the game had already ended for the evening. While Malcolm left immediately after the game ended the next few weeks, his statement did not result in the group wrapping game sessions up any earlier. Not only would doing so threaten the gamers' sense of themselves as dedicated, it would have required effort. As Csikszentmihalyi (1977) and others (Belk and Costa 1998; Sanford and Madill 2006; Stallabrass 1993) demonstrate, people often experience "flow" during leisure, creating a situation where they do not realize how much time has passed. Thus, gamers might have inadvertently suggested they were not having fun by keeping track of time.

Acquiring and Using Game Materials. Players also displayed dedication by being properly equipped for the game, including having and using their own dice, dice bags, pencils, rule books, and character sheets. Experienced players all possessed numerous sets of dice and acquired new ones. New players quickly learned the symbolic value of dice for demonstrating dedication. For instance, Emily, a white female in her late teens, played for only about a month before the following interaction occurred:

Emily walks into the room. She is holding a set of dice in one of the cube containers. She states, "Rewarding myself for working today. I got new dice cause they're shiny." [Fieldnotes]

By purchasing more dice (she already had a set) just because she wanted them, Emily conveyed dedication.

Challenging Other Players' Dedication. Players also challenged the dedication of other gamers. For instance, Henry referred to Malcolm, Matt, Toby, and I as “the core crew,” differentiating us from those who had played for less time and attended less regularly. Most commonly, experienced players challenged the dedication of newer players. As shown below, several players questioned whether Christy and Austin, a white couple who were the two newest role-players, were appropriately dedicated:

Toby comments, “It’s hard because with Austin and Christy, I don’t know if they can show up every week ... I get the feeling that Austin is never going to show up if Christy doesn’t and she has to work sometimes.” Emily comments, “They missed this week because it’s Austin’s grandfather’s birthday.” Matt states, “Right, I understand that.” Emily then comments, “She should be able to get off. Her last job, she had off Thursdays” ... Toby comments, “Like last week, she asked off, but they scheduled her” ... Malcolm interjects, “Maybe we should bring that up. I understand it’s her job and everything, but.” Matt comments, “Real life comes first, but.” Matt then pauses. After his pause, he states, “I don’t know where else that is going. I don’t have anything else to say there.” Malcolm comments, “If they can’t come every week, maybe they should find somewhere else to game.” Matt says, “We have had a lot of missing people. Maybe it’s still summer craziness. I don’t know.” Malcolm adds, “It was a lot more stable last summer ... and we knew everybody would be there.” [Fieldnotes]

Here, Emily positioned her friends as dedicated, while the other interactants positioned Christy and Austin as un-dedicated. Matt, Malcolm, and Toby constructed themselves as dedicated because they showed up regularly despite work and other real-life commitments. They considered themselves to be good gamers who ensured the group’s continuity. Furthermore, the most dedicated players had greater control over what games the group played. They were present for discussions about what to play and who would play. Additionally, they could argue they would be there in the future and therefore, they derided others to gain control.

Players also retroactively questioned the dedication of players who left the group. They sometimes suggested the person did not have a legitimate reason to leave or left inappropriately. For example, after Jeremy stopped attending the game, supposedly because of his new girlfriend, the following interaction occurred:

Jeremy comes into the house, followed by a short, black haired white female. He starts to walk toward the living room and then looks in the dining room. He states, "Oh, it's Tuesday night." Everyone says, "Hey." Jeremy says, "I'm not joining you all." Matt comments, "We know." Claire says, "You weren't invited." [Fieldnotes]

Both Claire and Matt suggested, through their comments and tone of voice, that Jeremy betrayed the group. Jeremy's departure altered how they saw him and resulted in failed identity work. By positioning Jeremy as un-dedicated, Claire and Matt made themselves feel like good gamers who would not leave the group the way he did. Claire later became the only member to never offer an account for absence and irked others. Thus, Claire and Jeremy demonstrated that players needed to constantly display the characteristics of a good gamer if they wanted others to affirm their identity.

Cooperation

When gamers competed a great deal, they hurt each other's characters, engaged in separate social interactions that complicated the game, or failed at tasks because the group did not have the requisite skills. By extension, the more cooperative a person was, the better gamer he or she was. Players signified a cooperative spirit in three main ways. Role-players privileged role-playing games over competitive games. Second, players pooled their

resources and helped each other out. Third, they offered advice on how to create characters that others found interesting.

Privileging Role-playing Games. Role-playing gamers often play a variety of other games, such as collectible card games, miniatures games, board games, and video/computer games. Most of these games are competitive rather than cooperative. With the exception of video games, all participants spent more time role-playing than playing other games. The experienced players all preferred role-playing over competitive games. For instance, Malcolm expressed reluctance to play a competitive game when Henry did not show up to GM one week:

I walk out into the main room of the game store. Matt has a small, rectangular box in his hand. He shrugs and says, “We still don’t know.” Malcolm comments, “I came to roll dice.” ... Matt asks me, “What do you think?” I say, “I don’t like games that require bluffing.” Toby tells me, “You don’t have to bluff.” Malcolm adds, “Sounds too much like *Diplomacy*.” Malcolm states, “I just want to roll dice.” Toby indicates that it’s “a board game.” Malcolm further explains, “I don’t really do board games.” [Fieldnotes]

Here, Toby attempted to convince the group to play a non-role-playing game. Malcolm rejected the alternative several times. Furthermore, Malcolm and I both rejected the game because we thought it sounded similar to *Diplomacy*, a board game in which players win by deceiving others. The debate about which game to play continued for almost an hour. Malcolm eventually rejected every competitive game suggested and repeatedly attempted to get the group to play a role-playing game. His actions thus suggested that he did not like competitive games as much as role-playing games and thus crafted himself as cooperative.

Interviewees often preferred role-playing games because they enjoyed the cooperative social interaction. Daniel and Simon, for instance, talked about how the best game sessions involved the whole group cooperating to come up with a plan to overcome an enemy.

Brandon, a 48-year-old white male gamer, compared role-playing games to the heyday of the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), Renaissance role-playing re-enactors, arguing that both consisted of people who worked together to overcome obstacles while enjoying each other's company. Gamers argued that the joint social action made role-playing better than their other leisure activities. They positioned themselves as cooperative because they enjoyed working together more than competition.

Pooling Resources. Gamers also pooled their resources. For example, group members shared their "role-playing luck coupons." During one game session, the group aided a character who suffered a serious wound. Matt, a player, had his character attempt to heal that character, but could not do so on his own. Group members immediately proceeded to discuss how best to pool role-playing luck coupons to ensure Matt's success. I offered Matt my role-playing luck coupon, which had higher value than anyone else's and was the highest bonus Henry gave out. Players, thus, pooled their resources to demonstrate that they cared about the others and to ensure that the game continued.

Helping Each Other Create Interesting Characters. A final way gamers cooperated was by helping others develop more intriguing characters. Players regularly advised each other during character creation or updating. For instance, Malcolm, Toby, and I had a difficult time

creating our characters for Shadowrun, which is a game involving magic. The following week, Malcolm told Toby, “We were doing some math and we recommend reducing resonance [magic] to five” and told me they “did the math and I think we can get you some points back.” By spending his time thinking about our characters, Malcolm demonstrated that he wanted to help the group be better, not just have the best or most important character. Therefore, Malcolm showed his willingness to cooperate with his fellow gamers. His efforts gave Toby and me more useful characters, making the game more enjoyable for everyone.

Selflessness

Good gamers privileged the interests of the group over their own interests. Players constructed themselves as selfless by enacting one or more of three roles they preferred not to have. Players served as GM, served as leader of the party, and/or played a character archetype they did not normally play. In each case, the player took on the role because the group needed someone to fulfill the role, even if the player did not feel comfortable with it.

Serving as Game Master. Players demonstrated selflessness by serving as GM, whether for a single session or multiple sessions. GMs did more than others did. While others granted them power for serving in this position, gamers often saw GMs as particularly selfless. Both players and GMs often thought that the costs of serving as GM outweighed the rewards. For instance, Matt served as GM after Henry did not want to, despite his preference to play a character. Matt told me:

I think I like playing a little bit better, but (pause) it's pretty close. I guess, um (pause) maybe just a little bit better I like playing ... There's less work involved for one. Ah (pause), don't have to worry about (pause), you know, all the things the Game Master has to worry about like, ah, involving everyone at the table, thinking up (pause) new, non-player characters, coming up with new adventures or finding the whatever. Knowing, trying to know every (pause) last little bit of the rules and things. [Interview]

He acknowledged that serving as GM meant more work. Moreover, he told me that it had been a "very long while" since he had GMed, highlighting his sacrifice. His selflessness ensured the group's continuity after Henry refused to continue as GM. It also constructed him as a good gamer.

Gamers' emphasis on depicting GMs as selfless hid the power differences between players and GMs. While a few gamers, such as Corey, mentioned the "power" that GMs gained, most gamers acknowledged that power only if they felt the GM misused it. For instance, when he served as GM, Henry often told the group that combat would be "especially deadly" because he was in a bad mood. No one complained about those statements during sessions, but during his interview, Malcolm suggested that his ideal GM would be "a guy that ... can [be] flexible and not kill you cause he's in a, having a bad day." GMs always got to decide how dangerous the combat was, yet gamers noted Henry's power only when they thought his decisions were unfair. Instead, they typically depicted the GM as sacrificial for their extra effort, not power hungry.

Serving as Leader of the Party. Players also served as party leader. The player who made decisions if someone had to do so individually and/or did much of the talking with non-player characters fulfilled the role of party leader. Typically, Malcolm served as party leader.

In some cases, he did this without much or any discussion, such as during a months-long Harnmaster game. In other cases, he fulfilled the role because others did not want to. One week, Malcolm played the character with the least experience. Based on his character, he should not have played the party leader. But no one else wanted to do it. Matt and Malcolm had the following exchange:

Matt says, “You did a pretty good job of it last time.” Malcolm states, “[his character’s name] will be cell leader.” [Fieldnotes]

Malcolm had already created the image of himself as a good party leader. When he agreed to take on the role again, he reinforced his positive, selfless image.

When we played Wraith Recon, a game involving Special Forces characters, Malcolm chose a character that Henry dictated could not serve as party leader. Only Toby and I could serve as party leader. When Toby acted unhappy with the idea, I volunteered. Toby responded, “Alright, trying new things.” With his statement, Toby accepted my identity as selfless group member willing to do what I did not want to do so we could play. Later, Henry praised me, saying I had “good tactical sense. In a situation not used to being tactical person, listened to others, made decisions when necessary.” Thus, gamers saw party leaders as good gamers because they allowed the game to continue and helped the group accomplish goals.

While it did result in greater status, becoming party leader was seen by group members as selfless. Rather than vying for the opportunity to make group decisions, players often seemed relieved to avoid serving as party leader. They often expressed discomfort with

social encounters, and no one ever complained that a party leader acted unfairly, probably because the power differences between players were not always obvious.

Playing a Different Character Archetype. Experienced players generally had character archetypes that they preferred to play. For example, Toby generally played a scholarly character. But because of the cooperative nature of the game, all participants could not play the same archetype. Sometimes, players felt like they could not create the type of character they normally did. Players who forwent their general preference to ensure the group was a well-rounded party demonstrated their selflessness.

Matt constructed himself as selfless when he played a healer:

When a group didn't have a, a healer type, so and I didn't usually play that sort of character and I wasn't really (pause) not necessarily uncomfortable. But, it's just not my, ah, preferred choice ... of a archetype. So, but I thought, well, the group needs one and in fact, I, ah, um, thought it might be good to, you know, sort of a new thing. [Interview]

Matt's choice, then, ensured that the group could effectively play the game, increased players' odds of accomplishing their goals, and crafted him as selfless.

While good gamers needed to demonstrate selflessness when the occasion arose, they could often successfully craft a positive identity without displaying selflessness. Within many gaming groups, one person regularly serves as GM, as Henry did until he had major medical problems. Likewise, groups that play together over the long term often establish a consistent party leader, as our group did with Malcolm. Henry and Malcolm, then, demonstrated selflessness on a regular basis. Once they stepped into those roles, everyone

else let them do it. That meant the rest of us were free to present ourselves positively in other ways.

Furthermore, interviewees often talked about playing with the same people repeatedly. In fact, most argued that the main benefit of playing with friends was that friends were predictable. Gamers thus knew which archetypes others in their groups tended to play. This reduced the likelihood of ending up in a situation in which it was necessary to display selflessness because players' preferred roles were well established.

Creativity

Players constructed themselves as creative by solving problems in novel ways and by getting into their characters. In the first case, this meant offering unusual, new, and otherwise interesting strategies for handling routine situations. In the second case, this meant enjoyment of and competence at character interactions and creation.

Novel Strategies for Solving Problems. Gamers often came up with unexpected ways to interact with non-player-characters (NPCs). Players also developed new plans to deal with enemies or made unanticipated choices during combat. Alternatively, they sought to use otherwise mundane items in interesting ways. Whenever players came up with something that others saw as creative, they were praised for it.

Often, the GM praised players. Henry gave out “role-playing luck coupons” for good role-playing. One week, Henry gave me a role-playing luck coupon “for thinking of an interesting use of a spell” and gave one to Jeremy “for interesting use of maintain [another

spell].” When he handed us the coupons, Henry commented, “That’s the kind of thing I like to see.” Henry explicitly rewarded us for coming up with a novel solution to the problem facing the group at the time. Players also praised each other for novel ideas, as in the following situation:

As Toby picks his gear, specifically looking at “gadgets,” Matt laughs. He then states, “I was just thinking about the gadget Austin took.” Malcolm states, “It’s an acid attack. He said it was in a Coke can, so he just shook it, does like 66 damage.” Toby comments, “That’s pretty inventive.” [Fieldnotes]

Here, Matt, Malcolm, and Toby, through their conversation about the “gadget,” depicted Austin as creative for coming up with it.

Such praise encouraged players to take risks and use their imaginations, thereby making the game more exciting. If players feared that others would regularly reject their novel ideas, the game might have become monotonous as everyone engaged in the same behaviors over and over. Too much repetition could even result in the group losing members and the game ending. As I show in chapter three, gamers also considered the chance to come up with new ideas one of the main benefits of role-playing.

Getting into Character. Gamers displayed creativity by “getting into” their characters. Players developed their character’s background, interests, and abilities. They also helped create storylines, solved puzzles or mysteries, and interacted with other characters. Role-players got into their characters in two primary ways. First, they privileged games with a lengthy, complicated (termed “in-depth”) character creation process that involved numerous

social interactions. Second, they denigrated players who did not seem able or willing to get into their character.

Group members depicted games with “in-depth” character creation as better than games in which players quickly make a character using a limited list of pre-determined abilities. They also viewed games that involve numerous and sometimes lengthy character social interactions as better than games in which the characters immediately set out on a quest to physically defeat an enemy. The group members felt that the game the group was originally formed to play, Harnmaster, offered both of these advantages.

Most commonly, players depicted Harnmaster and Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) as polar opposites and the gamers who play them as different kinds of gamers. Because D&D is the most well-known role-playing game and is often players’ first role-playing game, players could rely on others recognizing the differences between the two. Sometimes, they suggested that creativity and intelligence were necessary for Harnmaster players, but not for D&D players. During the organizational meeting, Henry told us:

Henry tells us, “Knee jerk reflexes don’t work, encourages you to think your way out, even in combat, tactics.” He throws mock punches, saying, “This is not working. Be free-minded and to try to encourage going outside the simple parameters. If you live by the sword, you eventually regret it. That’s one reason some can’t play. [They’re] too enmeshed in D&D” [and the repetitive actions taken without thinking]. [Fieldnotes]

Henry argued that players who do the same thing repeatedly lack creativity (and intelligence). According to Henry, Harnmaster players who lacked creativity suffered consequences, such as getting their characters killed, in a way that players of D&D did not.

Gamers also derided players who did not effectively get into character. Austin, an inexperienced white male role-player, was a frequent target. For instance, Henry once unfavorably compared him to the other new players, saying, “Christy [Austin’s girlfriend, another group member] has the basic package to be a role-player, has the attitude, the interest to actually play her character instead of just roll dice. I assume Emily will be coming out of her shell.” Unlike Christy or Emily, who could develop into good role-players, Henry did not think Austin had the capacity or desire to do so. Specifically, Austin lacked the creativity to pretend to be someone else.

While gamers usually denigrated others when they were not present, there were times when players derided others directly. For example, one of the group’s running jokes involved the time Austin tried to verbally interact with a friendly non-player character. I was not present that week, but when I returned, Christy immediately told me about Austin’s bad role-playing. She said Austin told the “doctor” he was talking to, “I have burned. Take it away.” Other players found his statement funny because no one believed that anyone would actually talk the way he did. Thus, they thought he could not come up with anything better for his character to say. Her statement was followed by this interaction:

Matt says, “It was a very, ah, it was, it was special. It was a special moment.”
Austin states, “I accept that. I knew it was horrible.” [Fieldnotes]

Group members described this verbal exchange as funny and note-worthy for Austin’s inability to portray his character as a real person.

When gamers did not successfully get into character, others had a difficult time maintaining their suspension of disbelief. Since role-playing games are based on collective

fantasy, players who fail to get into character threaten everyone else's enjoyment, just like reenactors with poor costumes (Belk and Costa 1998; Decker 2005; Thompson 2004) or a stage actor who does not seem interested in his part of the play.

Many interviewees depicted creativity as the most important quality of a good gamer and the opportunity to be creative as one of the major benefits of role-playing games. Most of the examples gamers provided of especially good game sessions and gamers entailed players coming up with a creative idea that succeeded. But sometimes players got too creatively into their characters. For example, one week Jeremy felt his character would disagree with the action others decided to take. This caused some trouble:

Matt states, "Now you've gone and split the party." Henry laughs. Jeremy comments, "Could have just left the nest [of bugs] alone. There wouldn't be any splitting of the party." Matt states, "Well, I can solve this problem, errr." Jeremy says, "Okay." Henry then tells us, "Maybe he can't hear. The door's thick. (pause) Oh, you're opening the door while he's right there." Matt comments, "You can come back now Quincy [Jeremy's character]. None of the big, bad bugs got us." Malcolm asks, "Is that really necessary Thulbek [Matt's character]?" to which Matt replies, "Yes," loudly, as Ryan laughs. [Fieldnotes]

In this incident, Jeremy argued that his decision to "split the party," meaning separate the characters, fit with what his character would do. Gamers often argued that splitting the party was bad. The few times the group did it in a year and a half, we had lengthy debates about the costs and benefits of doing so. Therefore, others questioned Jeremy's decision to act like he thought his character would.

Players also questioned Jeremy's later decision to allow his character to become evil. Jeremy justified his choice, arguing, "What's terrible is when we rolled up his [the character's] morality, we rolled really, really low on [the] corruptible

table.” He decided that his character would accept an offer to betray his fellow party members, an unusual development in a role-playing game. While Jeremy’s move could be seen as creative because he played his character to the hilt, other players found it disruptive. Creativity was good if it made the game interesting, but not if it undermined cooperation.

Intelligence

Gamers tried to create the impression of being intelligent in two main ways. Instead of resorting to violence, players tried to show that they could think their way out of difficult situations. Players could also display intelligence by explaining how their actions made sense given the game world.

Thinking Your Way Out of Trouble. Players showed their intelligence by not immediately resorting to in-game violence to solve a problem. Instead, they considered alternatives, sometimes out loud (that is, talking out loud to themselves) and sometimes collaboratively. During a session of Spycraft, a game in which the characters are spies, Malcolm’s character used some special equipment to look inside an apartment the group was considering breaking into. In doing so, he acquired some surprising information. Rather than simply rushing into the room to kill the enemies we did not anticipate, group members discussed the situation for almost 15 minutes before deciding to have our characters enter the apartment. In this interaction, Malcolm demonstrated his intelligence when he suggested we use his character’s equipment before breaking down the door. Furthermore, the entire group considered various

options, not all of which included violence, which showed they could think through unanticipated situations.

Displaying intelligence did not preclude the use of violence. Players could convince others that violence was the smart choice, given the situation. One week, the group debated how to handle a room with “bullet bugs” in it. Several different possibilities were offered, but eventually most of the group agreed that my character should set the “bullet bugs” on fire. After I had my character cast a spell that set the insects on fire, Henry stated, “What was just done is essentially a really good standard. If you don’t have a, if a patrol doesn’t have special support with ‘em, bring out the oil.” He later stated that “the possibilities of this room could be such an amazing shit storm for you.” Both statements implied that we made intelligent choices that kept our characters from suffering. As GM, Henry could dole out praise, not just for intelligence, but for good gaming generally.

Justifying Your Actions within the Game World. Players also demonstrated intelligence by explaining why some choice of action was logical within the game world. When we were playing Harnmaster, Matt’s character and mine were sitting in a tavern, waiting for the other characters to return. The retinue for a local lord our characters had upset came to arrest everyone. Matt and I debated what to do. Both of us seemed unsure what course of action to take, given that our characters were without the rest of the group. Matt then made the following statement:

“Well (pause) basically, I wanted to make it known (pause) that (pause) I find (pause) the humans in this area and their boorish frontier notions of law and order to be a morally repugnant and (laughing) contrary, contrary to the basics

of society” (laughter in the background, including me). Henry comments, “Way to win friends and influence people.” Matt continues, “and also (pause) furthermore (pause), come on Chloe [my character]. Let’s go (laughs, as do I).” Henry says, “You’re just gonna walk out.” (sound of dice rolling) Matt says, “Walk.” Henry adds, “Well, you’re gonna.” (laughter in the background) [Fieldnotes]

Matt chose to have his character run from the retinue, which was a somewhat surprising and potentially dangerous choice. I had wanted to make the same choice, but was reluctant to do so because I could not think of a good reason.

However, Matt’s soliloquy provided a rationale for both of us. He referenced his dwarf character’s views on human social customs and the more “enlightened” justice of dwarf culture to explain why his character would not submit to the lord. I was then able to provide a rationale for my character to run as well – I could argue that my character was being loyal to her fellow adventurer and that both characters had a better chance of survival by leaving together. Thus, we were both able to offer reasons why our unanticipated choice actually made sense based on our characters and the general principles of the game world. Had I chosen to run without a satisfactory rationale, I would have lost status within the group, even though other players could not prevent my decision. On the other hand, GMs do have the power to refuse a player the action they want to take. Henry had denied players the chance to take actions he felt were unjustified in the past. Henry’s acceptance of our rationale affirmed us as intelligent gamers.

When Henry later recalled the experience, he suggested Matt’s actions were particularly impressive:

I had the same reaction to that as your soliloquy in the tavern. I liked that and in conclusion, looks at you (Henry looks at me). Run...Needless to say, I let

them get away. I didn't have the heart to catch them... Those are the moments Game Masters truly live for. We wait for weeks and weeks. [Fieldnotes]

Henry not only remembered the rationale behind Matt's escape about nine months after the incident. He also argued that any GM would have been equally impressed and that Matt had done a superb job of justifying an unexpected action.

Authenticity

Gamers attempted to construct themselves as authentic in two primary ways. First, they displayed knowledge about role-playing games. Second, gamers displayed knowledge about the larger geek subculture.

Role-Playing Game Knowledge. Harnmaster players displayed authenticity by properly using esoteric terms such as "Peleahan," "lovecraft skill," and "Harnic." Gamers also needed to recognize role-playing archetypes and describe formal rules (e.g., how to calculate the dice roll needed to cast a spell) and informal norms (e.g., players with mage or healer characters should position their characters farther from enemies than players with warrior characters). Knowledge of a wide range of games attested to a gamer's authenticity.

Austin, a new player, demonstrated the importance of authenticity when the group discovered that he lacked familiarity with the character type "intruder." Within role-playing, intruder is one name for a character type that possesses skills to bypass security systems. One week, while we discussed having our characters break into a building, everyone else expected Austin to have his character, the intruder, try. However, Austin informed the group

that he lacked those skills. Since he had not taken them, and other characters had different specializations, the break-in was thwarted. Everyone else presumed that Austin understood the character archetype (and therefore had taken those skills), so his lack of knowledge made it difficult to accomplish the group's goal. More experienced players joked about the incident for several weeks, underscoring Austin's failure to know what a good gamer should.

Geek Knowledge. Role-playing games are part of the broader geek subculture. Players were therefore expected to have knowledge of other geeky interests. Players with knowledge of science fiction, fantasy, military history, spy movies, video games, comic books/graphic novels, and Japanese anime/manga showed they were really geeks. In one instance, Henry referenced *Star Trek*, a popular science fiction TV show, during the course of the game:

Henry: Kirk [Captain James T. Kirk from *Star Trek*] with Gorgon [minor *Star Trek* character who had psychic powers].

Chorus of voices: Aahhh.

Ryan: Just an aside. How many groups can you say that and everyone's like, aahhh? [Fieldnotes]

Everyone else in the group responded positively to Henry's reference, giving him status as a knowledgeable geek. Since role-playing games draw from the larger geek subculture for themes, motifs, and character archetypes, gamers who can make those connections will be effective players, even if they have little experience with the particular game.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF BEING A BAD GAMER

Players who displayed the six characteristics discussed above were considered good gamers. Failing to display these characteristics was not without consequence. Bad players were removed from the group or denied participation in new groups. Less severe sanctions involved talking about the player when s/he was not present. GMs sometimes imposed additional sanctions, such as injuring or killing the player's character. These sanctions sometimes spurred people to become better gamers. Sometimes bad gamers just dropped out.

Collective Sanctions

The most extreme sanction role-players could impose on a bad gamer was to deny them the opportunity to participate in a gaming group. Claire told me about a time that a group she belonged to asked a bad gamer to leave. She described what the teenage male player did that made him a bad gamer and how the group sanctioned him:

Claire says, "He has to roll up a new character, completely new character, has never met my character. He was out to get my character from day one ... But, (pause) the new character had no reason ... We didn't [have] a grudge with the new character, whereas his old character that had died, had some issues with my character, so and kind of carried it on ... That was really the only time though that that's happened." ... I ask, "Was there any resolution of the situation or did it pretty much continue until you stopped playing there or?" Claire responds, "We actually asked them to stop coming ... because he was being very disruptive, um, to the game. He was getting hyper. He was fine most of the time when she [his mom] was there. But, sometimes he would come and play when she wasn't and (pause) he wouldn't listen, like at all, to the storyteller or who was hosting the game or anything. He had some discipline issues, so we just decided we couldn't deal with that (laughs)." [Interview]

The teenage player did two separate things that made him a bad gamer. First, he held a grudge against a player. Second, he disrupted the game by acting “hyper” and not listening to the GM. Claire depicted him as being more concerned with his own experience than the rest of the group. He acted in a way that others saw as selfish and competitive.

In this situation, Claire interpreted his behavior as bad gaming. However, she did not interpret her own behavior as bad gaming. That does not mean she actually displayed cooperation and selflessness. She explained that the teenager was upset because she had her character poison his character, so his character died. While his new character had no reason to hold a grudge, he, as a player, did. She privileged her own interests (the suspense as she waited for him to use the poisoned item and the feeling of being more intelligent than him because he was tricked into taking it) over the interests of the group, which would include him. That no one else saw her behavior as problematic shows that the same behavior can be seen differently, depending on the circumstances and the individuals involved.

Often, the violation was not severe enough to warrant removing the player or keeping him/her out of a new group. Players may also have been reluctant to hurt another player’s feelings, or to lose a group member. In these cases, players would discuss the bad gamer when he or she was not around. While more experienced players suggested that Austin should not be allowed to play certain games or participate at all, no one ever actually told him that he did not belong. Rather, others had frequent conversations about his inadequacies when he was not present, such as when Henry suggested he was not good enough to play Harnmaster.

GM Sanctions

During a game session, GMs could impose additional sanctions on bad gamers. Usually, they punished poor gaming by injuring and/or killing the player's character. Matt argued that unintelligent behavior was one of the few legitimate reasons for a GM to kill a player's character:

If I've made some sort of secret roll and (pause) the dice have come up in such a way that it will result in a player-character's death ... I'm not just gonna say alright, you die and you have, there's nothing you can do about it ... If a player-character is gonna die, it should be, um (pause), either through the result of horrible luck on their part, although I try to, I would also try to keep that from happening as much as possible (pause) um (pause). Usually, it should be through secondary, if they do something stupid (pause) within the context of the game ... I usually give a warning. I'll say well, okay, just so you know, what you're doing, you'll probably die if you do this ... And then they go ahead and do it and fail and end up dying, that's too bad for them.
[Interview]

Here, Matt claimed that players should not do things that others, especially the GM, think are not smart. If they did take such actions, even despite "warning," Matt felt they deserved to lose their character. While bad dice rolls (or other situations) might result in character death, only players who were bad gamers deserved it.

Becoming Better Gamers

When GMs injured or killed players' characters for bad gaming, players often realized that they did something wrong. This sanction was particularly effective with new role-players. As Corey, a middle-aged white male gamer, explained, "I learned that charging the dragon alone is a bad idea (laughs), you know? ... I learned that by doing it three or four times and going, you know what? This is not working." While it took multiple attempts, the

GM's injuring of Corey's characters for making poor choices about how to handle an enemy eventually resulted in improved gaming. Corey changed his behavior from having his character attack by himself to strategizing with the group about the best action to take, thus increasing the chances that the group would accomplish its goals.

Although players talked about learning lessons from GM-imposed sanctions, no one said they learned to be a better gamer because they were gossiped about or denied participation in a group. I did not witness or hear about a single player becoming a better gamer from sanctions the group imposed collectively. Instead, those gamers ended up ostracized from several gaming groups. Despite numerous discussions about Austin's poor role-playing, his behavior did not change. Nor did Emily, Christy, and Austin become more dedicated because others discussed their inconsistent attendance behind their backs. Likewise, Todd, a white male who wanted to join the group, became isolated from yet another group after Malcolm and I discussed his prior bad gaming.

ROLE-PLAYING GAMES AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO CONSTRUCT A MORAL IDENTITY

Gamers did not just punish others who failed to demonstrate the characteristics of a good gamer. They used the very act of role-playing to construct themselves as good. The way players formed new gaming groups, the norms gamers established regarding possession of game material (especially dice), the trivial information that players valued, and where gamers chose to play all helped gamers create impressions of themselves as moral.

The Creation of New Role-Playing Gaming Groups

Gamers used the creation of new gaming groups as opportunities to demonstrate several qualities. Specifically, these were opportunities to display dedication, cooperation, selflessness, and authenticity. For example, group members used the initial organizational meeting to create images of themselves as good gamers. During that meeting, the group determined when to play and some general features of the campaign (i.e., the setting, character options, and storyline). While the group debated when to play, Henry demonstrated selflessness:

Henry says that this start time [8pm] would accommodate James, who “is getting off now” from his job. He indicates that he wants to accommodate James because James really wants to play, but that he understands that people have “day jobs.” We can “be nice and take it easy or in the colloquial, we can fuck James.” Jeremy states that the “easiest thing to do in this situation is for James to change his job.” Henry responds, “A job getting in the way of gaming, like that that’s the first time. I feel sorry for him, but others have normal schedules.” Jeremy asks, “How many people have normal schedules?” Malcolm and Ryan raise their hands. Matt says, “I have to get up at some point in the morning.” Henry points out that James is “jonesing,” [pining for the game], but that he doesn’t want to “stress all the others. I hope there is a way to accommodate him but I want an early start.” [Fieldnotes]

Above, Henry suggested that the group’s playing time be dictated by the interests of the group as a whole, not a single member. It was a generous suggestion.

Likewise, gamers used the meeting as an occasion to demonstrate dedication. For instance, James, the white male above, who did not end up participating in the group, displayed his dedication when he arrived for the meeting shortly after getting off work:

Henry and James discuss what time the group is going to start, why they decided on a start time that James can’t make because of his job, and whether James can rearrange his schedule to make it work. James indicates that he will

try to see if he can get it rearranged. He says that if he asks really nice, it might work, but he doesn't commit to playing the game. [Fieldnotes]

In this interaction, James suggested that he was dedicated enough to attempt to rearrange his work schedule to participate, even though it was inconvenient. While the suggestion James made was his own, he could do so only because of the circumstances. Had the group not already debated when to meet and Henry not relayed the conversation to him, James would not have been able to make his symbolic gesture of dedication.

On one occasion the group made a decision to accommodate a single player. We altered the start time of the game temporarily for Matt when his boss insisted he work late for a few weeks. Unlike when James could not attend because he did not get off work until after the scheduled start time, Matt's situation was temporary. Additionally, Matt had been participating in the group for a couple of months at that point, so he had already displayed his dedication and had constructed himself as a good gamer. Had he not done so, the group might have refused to adjust the start time for him. Even if the group had waited for him, players might have complained about it. Christy and Austin were regularly late and other group members bemoaned their tardiness, even when they had a culturally legitimate excuse, such as a car breakdown.

Buying One's Own Dice

Unlike board games, in which everyone uses the same dice, in role-playing games players brought their own dice. Because players sometimes roll dice simultaneously, having multiple dice sets increases the pace and efficiency of the game. While the GM could have

brought enough dice for everyone, having one's own dice was a way to show dedication. With their initial purchase of dice, gamers displayed an early sign of dedication. The more dice and related products a player purchased, the more dedicated s/he was taken to be.

Valuing of Knowledge Not Valued Elsewhere

Gamers used gaming sessions to display knowledge not valued elsewhere. In most situations, Matt's in-game reference to the "Lando Calrissian speech" from *Star Wars*, a scene where the character Lando explains why he betrayed the movie's main characters, would draw blank stares. But in the gaming group, Matt not only could assume that others would understand, he could display his authentic geekhood by mentioning a scene from a science fiction movie. Since we were playing a science fiction game, it made sense for Matt to describe the interaction using a *Star Wars* reference. Others were favorably impressed.

Gamers constituted a receptive audience for displays of esoteric knowledge. Rather than being derided as geeky for doing so, gamers were rewarded for displaying knowledge of science fiction and other game-world trivia. Gamers could thus construct themselves as both intelligent and authentic, given the peculiar norms of gaming culture.

Playing in Game Stores

Many gaming groups play at small, locally owned game stores. Gamers often choose to play at game stores for reasons of convenience and continuity. The availability of gaming products in a store also allows gamers opportunities to show authenticity and dedication.

When a gaming group plays in a game store, other gamers can see that they are playing, and playing frequently.

The group I studied moved to Play Science, a local game store, shortly after it first opened. Within a few weeks, the owner knew our names. As the group continued to play at the store, I found myself recognized as a member of the gaming community when I went there, while others did not recognize my husband, a gamer who did not regularly play in the store. Some gamers, such as Henry, hung out in game stores when they were not playing or browsing. Almost every time I went to Play Science, there was at least one gamer set up at a table with a laptop or gaming materials. Gamers who spent time in gaming stores could gain status within the community, get opportunities to participate in new games, meet other gamers, and even get jobs as game store employees.

In a store, gamers could also show they were familiar with products, indicate they possessed them, and/or offer product assessments. One week, when Henry unexpectedly could not serve as GM and Matt did not feel prepared to do so, the group debated what to do. This fieldnote excerpt shows how players used the presence of game products to show their geek knowledge:

I take the box, which I can see says *Citadels* on it from Matt and look it over. ... Toby explains, "You just kill the king and then do that over and over again." Malcolm says, "Eventually, they figure out not to be the king." Toby tells us, "The assassin is busy killing the king over and over again, so they aren't paying attention to you as you build up your city over there."
[Fieldnotes]

As we debated whether to play the board game he suggested (*Citadels*), Toby showed Matt, Malcolm, and me that he was very familiar with a game we did not know. Toby showed his gaming knowledge using the products in the store and therefore signified his authenticity.

Gamers could also make assessments of games they saw at the store. In the following interaction, several players did so:

Toby, Malcolm, and I follow Matt. We begin looking through the racks, trying to locate something to play. We all look at the role-playing books and keep going around to the other side of the rack, which has board games on it. Toby suggests, "*Twilight Emperium*," as he rounds the corner. As he rounds the corner, Matt says, "It's too late for *Twilight Emperium*." Malcolm adds, "It's like eight. If it was eight am and we had all day." Matt suggests "*Arkham Horror*, but it'd take forever to punch out (pause). We do have six people we could put to punching." Toby says, "*Arkham Horror* doesn't take long to set up." Matt reminds him, "But we have to punch out." Toby says, "Oh." Matt asks, "Do they even have *Arkham Horror*?" Malcolm responds, "I don't see it." I say, "Me either." Matt keeps walking down the aisle, saying, "*Acquire*'s good." [Fieldnotes]

Several players offered their opinions on the feasibility and benefits of playing certain games. Most of the group members displayed their geek knowledge during the process of deciding what to do that evening. As a gaming venue, the store provided plenty of props for doing identity work.

The store location also allowed players to show dedication by offering to buy game products for the group. Toby offered to buy the game he recommended and Austin volunteered to help pay. While they did not end up purchasing the game (because no one else wanted to play it), Matt eventually bought *Munchkin Booty*, a card game, which the group played. Toby and Matt might have recommended specific games because they could excel at them, but Toby offered to purchase a game he had at home and Matt talked about having

little money to spend. Furthermore, both games cost \$20 to \$25. Therefore, Toby and Matt demonstrated dedication because they were willing to spend money on a game that the group would play only once. Willingness to purchase gaming products suggested both dedication and selflessness. Gamers who played in stores, then, had more opportunities to craft a moral identity as a good gamer than did gamers who played at someone's home.

GENDER AS A RESOURCE

Men and women both attempted to present themselves as good gamers, but they did not do so equally. Male gamers valued dedication and authenticity more than female gamers. They more successfully presented themselves as dedicated, selfless, intelligent, and authentic than female gamers. Men also benefited from holding more privileged positions within the group than women.

Male gamers were more likely to challenge others' dedication than female gamers. Only once did a female challenge another's dedication -- when Claire suggested Jeremy no longer deserved the identity of good gamer as discussed above. On several occasions, male group members lamented James's "flakiness." Additionally, male interviewees often complained about others' unreliability. Ethan described how one LARPer lacked dedication, which negatively impacted his wife's experience:

[My wife's] character died. But they had turned over responsibl[ity] for deaths and resurrections to a player for the first time and who went to bed at like 10 [p.m.]. (Me: So, then she couldn't be resurrected.) Yeah, and ... it's not unusual for boffer combat [fake battles with foam swords] to run to 4 in the morning ... A lot of boffer combats do a lot of stuff at night (Me: So, then that's really consequential) ... Yeah, she was, like, "I'm done" and I'm, like,

“okay” and we had driven, like, seven hours to get there too, ‘cause it was way the back country. [Interview]

Alternatively, Emily tried to defend her friends Christy and Austin when the male group members depicted them as unreliable. Toby did not defend them, siding with the other male gamers over his girlfriend.

Male interviewees were more concerned than females about projecting an authentic identity. Several male interviewees engaged in name-dropping by listing famous game designers they knew or had played with. Trevor’s statements are representative:

We interviewed Justin Achilli, who was one of the White Wolf bigwigs for, for many years. (Me: Yes, I know who that is. That’s cool.) ... I’ve also met other writers ... The one in particular that wrote the scenario that I was talking about earlier is ... he goes by the handle Black Hat Matt. (Me: I think I know who you’re talking about.) Matt McFarlan. He was the lead developer for the, uh, second, um, role, Dark Ages setting. [Interview]

By drawing connections to “famous” gamers, Trevor boosted his status. Female interviewees did not name drop. It is possible that female interviewees did not know famous gamers, since most of the women had less experience than the men. Alternatively, they might have felt that with less experience, they would be less successful at displaying authenticity. Such a concern would make sense, as males were more successful at constructing their identities. For instance, when Trevor told me about his interaction with Justin Achilli, I validated his display by responding “cool.” Not only did Trevor not reciprocate, he attempted to one-up me by mentioning someone else he knew.

Male gamers displayed gaming and geek subcultural knowledge more than female gamers. Men were more likely to reference other game experiences, to make recommendations, and draw connections to other geek knowledge. Displaying this geek

capital affirmed their authenticity. During his interview, Malcolm commented on his bond with Toby:

He, ah, shares a lot of the interests with me. He watches weird animes [Japanese animation] and plays weird video games. So, I find that to be sort of a (pause) some kind of link that occasionally, he'll like talk about an Internet thing and I'll laugh. I'm the only one at the table who knows about it.

Their recurrent displays of authenticity impressed each other, especially when others did not get the reference. By contrast, Claire's non-game-related talk did not bolster her authenticity as a gamer. For example, Claire's comments about refraining from eating the snacks she baked alluded to cultural stereotypes about thinness making a woman attractive.

Women also struggled more than men to display intelligence, as one white woman at GENCON noted during a panel:

The assumptions male gamers make about women, not good at math ... I was worried about making a mistake. [It took] a long time before I felt comfortable. [Fieldnotes]

Unlike men, women were assumed to lack the skills necessary to be good gamers.

Female interviewees told me that they tried to avoid blatantly sexist male gamers.

This was not always possible, however. Jane told me about a time when she tried to get a GM to stop a male's inappropriate behavior:

I did talk to the Game Master about it and she said because we were on such a limited schedule, this wasn't a game that was going to go on for longer than six weeks, she tended to (clears throat) want to let it slide, um (pause) and I didn't want to make waves either, so I kind of went along with it too [Interview]

In this case, Jane's appeal to the GM failed, even though the GM was female. Norms of cooperation and selflessness, as discussed above, made it even harder for women to call out men on their sexist assumptions and behaviors.

While most female interviewees felt they eventually overcame negative impressions of them, some formed a female-only group to cope with continued sexism. Some men, including Daniel and Lucas, recognized the mistreatment their partners endured at the hands of male gamers. While at GENCON, Adam, a male panel member, described his wife's first attempt at role-playing:

Some gamers are intimidating [to women]. "You don't know the rules. I'll explain it to you, little lady." She spouted out two nine-pounders [babies]. She's tougher than you think. [Fieldnotes]

These men usually did not sit by while their partners were treated unfairly. For instance, Adam convinced his fellow gamers that his wife was competent. Daniel chose to leave several groups that seemed too sexist. Unfortunately, their strategies did not necessarily help female gamers overall. Keeping with gamers' unwillingness to directly critique others, Daniel did not tell those groups why he left. While Adam suggested his group members changed their behavior, his intervention positioned him as protector. Moreover, they saw her as a good gamer only after a male vouched for her.

Male gamers were more successful at creating a moral identity for several reasons. First, men benefited from gendered stereotypes, while women did not. Men could activate stereotypes that enhance others' perceptions of them as competent gamers (Ridgeway 1993). Gaming is coded masculine and gamers strongly associate gaming with geeky white men (Cooper 2000; Kendall 2000). Several gamers described themselves as geeks and talked

about non-gamers seeing them as nerds. Furthermore, subculture membership overlaps with the computer geeks Kendall (2000) studied. As Kendall (2000) argued, geeky white men do “nerd masculinity” because they do not want to or cannot live up to the standards of conventional manhood. Because gaming is identified as a male domain, female geeks are suspect.

Second, because gaming groups often form through gender-segregated friendships, women are excluded or represented in small numbers. When I first joined the group I observed, I was the only female. Most of the participants knew each other. One member, Malcolm, was familiar with everyone except Dave and me. Malcolm seemed to readily accept Dave, but was leery of me. He would double-check my character sheet and rolls to make sure I was playing correctly. Such experiences can intimidate and alienate women. Playing in game stores further complicates women’s self-presentations because of sexism in those environments. I have been repeatedly ignored by game store employees¹ and watched by every man as I browsed. Women’s access to gaming and ability to construct a positive gamer identity is diminished by such conditions.

Men were also more able to present themselves as good gamers because they more often served as GM or party leader, providing them with power over the game. During observations, no female served as GM. Likewise, most interviewees talked about male GMs. Additionally, the only time a female group member served as party leader was the week I did. Male interviewees frequently told stories about their characters as leaders or as making

¹ The game store that I observed is the one exception to this pattern. At that game store, I was never ignored and was treated as a valuable customer. At other stores, I often waited at unoccupied counters until a male customer approached before an employee would come over.

important group decisions, suggesting they saw their characters as party leaders (even if others did not), while no female interviewees did.

It is not surprising that men were more likely to serve as party leader. Combat is central to role-playing games, and although most participants did not have real experience in combat, male gamers were assumed to have more experience and knowledge of tactical violence. During interviews, males frequently remarked on some males' tactical abilities, but sometimes criticized females' perceived lack of combat savvy. Unconscious biases were potentially activated (Ridgeway 1993), making them more likely to accept a man as party leader. Because men express more confidence in situations coded masculine (Ridgeway 1993), female gamers might be reluctant to serve as party leader. While in the field, no other female offered to do so, and I offered only after other gamers declined. Serving as party leader provided male gamers more opportunities to display selflessness and exercise power than female gamers.

Men are more likely to serve in positions of power in most realms of life (Johnson 2006), and role-playing games are no exception. By serving as GM, men gained power to impose sanctions by harming players' characters. Men in my study expressed confidence about serving as GM. On the other hand, several female interviewees, particularly Jane and Claire, noted that they were initially worried about GMing, fearing they would not be good at it. Likewise, Lacy started a series of women-only games to provide a safe space for women to try GMing. She desired to spare women from the harsh critiques dished out in co-ed games with male GMs.

CONCLUSION

Gamers crafted an image of themselves as moral through their participation in role-playing games. They displayed six characteristics to show they were good gamers: dedication, cooperation, selflessness, creativity, intelligence, and authenticity. While no one talked explicitly about wanting to be seen as a “good gamer,” players clearly valued that identity and the qualities necessary to claim it. Gamers did sometimes argue that gamers are good people. During his interview, Brandon told me how gamers longed for a time of “honor” and “honesty.” Likewise, Daniel talked about not wanting to deal with people who “annoy” him because “life’s too short.” Both individuals implied, as did several others, that gamers are better than most people. Gaming was thus more than just a leisure activity. It was a way to create an identity as a good, moral individual, while doing something that outsiders considered weird or immoral.

Yet not everyone found it easy to be a good gamer. Given the dominance of men and the emphasis on nerd masculinity, female gamers had a harder time presenting themselves positively. Most of my female interviewees reported negative experiences (with male gamers) that discouraged them from participating. Although all of my interviewees stayed in gaming, other female gamers might not have responded similarly. Many gamers told stories of women who never returned after their early role-playing experiences. Similar stories can

be found in online forums. It is fair to say that sexism made gaming less attractive to women as an arena in which to construct a moral identity.²

While I have little data on non-white gamers, it seems reasonable to speculate that non-white gamers may also face difficulties in crafting moral identities. Neither of the two Asian males I interviewed complained about racism or the lack of non-whites in the gaming subculture. Yet Malcolm's assessment of the only black gamer I met or heard about during the study seems telling. He described the player as bad for failing to play his character archetype as expected, thus violating authenticity, and for being uncooperative. While it is possible that this black male would be seen as a bad gamer even if he were white, he would in any case experience the problem of tokenism (Kanter 1977). Additionally, it is possible that Asian males have an easier time adhering to nerd masculinity, given cultural stereotypes of Asian men as good at science, math, and computer technology.

Bad gamers frequently became a topic of gossip. As Willer, Feinberg, Irwin, Schultz, and Simpson (2010) argue, gossip is a means of social control. Gamers' tendency to talk about each other corroborates Willer et al.'s argument that much prosocial behavior is governed by concerns over getting social approval and avoiding gossip, rather than material rewards or official sanctions. To be gossiped about was to lose hold on the claim to "good gamer" as a moral identity.

² A recent *New York Times* article demonstrates that table-top role-playing gamers' experiences are not unique. Female online gamers are regularly harassed and mistreated as they play, often in a more explicit and sexual manner than my participants ever experienced, making it difficult for them to continue playing (Huffaker 2012).

Most discussions of moral identity focus on characteristics such as dedication and authenticity, often associated with manhood (Armato and Marsiglio 2002; Jackall 1988; Messner 1990). Usually, people (typically males), whether athletes, re-enactors, or employees, do so by demonstrating they are tough, knowledgeable, persistent, and confident (see Belk and Acosta 1998; Decker 2010; Jackall 1988; Wilkins 2008). While gamers used many of these strategies, they also emphasized a characteristic that has been ignored in the moral identity literature: creativity. Such a characteristic does not, at first glance, seem like it would be part of the moral identity of people outside the arts. Yet creativity was the most important characteristic gamers needed to demonstrate.

Most examinations of moral identity also focus on activities conventionally seen as serious (e.g., parenting or professional work). Gaming, however, often seems frivolous, strange, and childish to outsiders. Several interviewees told stories of how others suggested they should have grown out of role-playing, implying that “playing pretend” is for children. Despite these outsider perceptions, adult gamers were able to craft positive moral identities that mattered in real life.

Stebbins (1982; 2001) argues that serious leisure gives people opportunities for self-expression and self-development, and that enthusiasts also gain social rewards: connections, feeling like the group did something important, feeling needed, and exerting independence. While scholars have examined the social benefits of serious leisure (Anderson and Taylor 2010; Green and Jones 2005; Patterson and Pegg 2009), they have still neglected the moral component of such activities. My study of gamers shows how they used the game to imbue

themselves with moral worth. This suggests that seriousness of leisure is in the eye of the beholder, and that when selves and identities are at stake, sociologists should pay attention.

CHAPTER 3

Edgework without the Edge: Negotiating Risk and Safety

in Role-playing Gaming

Lyng (1990) introduced the concept of edgework to develop an analysis of voluntary risk-taking. Edgework involves treading the boundary between “life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, an ordered sense of self and environment versus a disordered self and environment” (Lyng 1990:857). Any activity that people do that represents a threat to their physical and/or mental health or their understanding of themselves and the world around them is edgework (Lyng 1990). A wide variety of activities have been examined using the edgework concept, including skydiving and other extreme sports (Lyng 1990; Simon 2005), voluntary rescue workers (Lois 2005), drug use (Reith 2005), and stock traders (Smith 2005).

In this chapter, I examine how gamers engage in what I will refer to as “edgework without the edge.” Gamers create many of the same experiences as edgeworkers – freedom, control, excitement – without the dangers faced by typical edgeworkers. By participating in the game, they get the benefits of treading the line between different states of being, yet because the game is not real, they do not have to deal with real-life danger. First, I discuss how role-playing gaming can be thought of as an edgework activity. Second, I show how gamers use gaming as a way of treading boundaries without having to sacrifice their safety. Finally, I conclude with some implications of gamers’ participation in voluntary risk-taking without any real risk.

GAMING AS EDGEWORK

All edgework activities entail some risk of negative consequences. Lyng (1990) argued that the quintessential edgework activity is one where even a slight miscalculation can lead to death or serious injury. However, he and those after him have also pointed out that the possibility of physical harm is not necessary for edgework. Additionally, edgework involves careful preparation, the use of special skills, and a set of extraordinary sensations: exhilaration, being superhuman, speeding up or slowing down of time, and oneness with the world. Edgeworkers also believe that their experiences are ineffable and known only by other edgeworkers (Lyng 1990).

In this section, I will show that role-playing gamers do edgework when they play. I will begin by discussing the boundaries that gamers negotiate. Next, I will describe gamers' preparations for their risk-taking. Third, I will examine how gamers demonstrate the ability to control the uncontrollable. Lastly, I will talk about the sensations that gamers experience when they play.

Negotiating Boundaries

There are four different boundaries edgeworkers can negotiate. Because the action of a role-playing game is almost entirely verbal, gamers do not tread the line between life and death. Nor do they negotiate the boundaries of consciousness/unconsciousness, as drugs and alcohol are not central to gaming. However, they do attempt to push themselves as close as possible to the boundaries of an orderly sense of self/environment and sanity.

Gamers, unlike other edgeworkers, primarily engage in edgework by proxy because players test the limits to their characters' abilities, rather than their own. The idea is to engage in as much combat, do the riskiest actions, or attempt the most grandiose actions possible, without exceeding the character's ability to survive the damage. Because the character is not real, the damage taken and any resulting death does not mean the death or injury of a player. Rather, it would be the loss of something that the person might consider a part of herself and thus represent a threat to her sense of self and environment as orderly.

Players regularly attempted actions that tested their characters' powers. Jeremy, in particular, was known for exceeding his characters' limits. During the course of the Harnmaster campaign, he lost three characters, more than anyone else, because of his efforts to see how much his characters could take. Here is an excerpt from my fieldnotes describing one such time:

Jeremy begins calculating how long it will take him to cast a spell he wants his character to use. Ryan says, "Close to three rounds [turns]." Jeremy comments, "Close to three rounds, eh, that's gonna be way too long." Henry suggests it is viable "as long as you keep them off your ass ... Put it this way, if you maintain your defensive status for your most part, you'll probably be alright (pause) should be alright." Jeremy decides, "Alright, we're gonna try it." Jeremy proceeds to begin casting the spell and rolls. After he does, Henry states, "So far, so good, you've not necessarily lost it yet, but ... spell concentration is a tenuous thing ... Put it this way, you're able to keep going, but it may have screwed up something you didn't catch. So, at this point, it doesn't interrupt [a failure] it right away, but there will probably be some negatives [penalties to the next roll], variable of which that you're not going to know about." When it is Jeremy's turn again, his roll does not keep the spell going, so Henry states, "Your choice, force it or let it go." Jeremy replies, "Force it." Henry laughs, saying, "Oh man." Henry rolls to see what happens to Jeremy's character. He rolls the worst possible number, prompting Henry to remind us, "Total release, a devastating and dangerous variety of misfire." Ryan jokes, "So, next week we're making characters, right?," which

prompts laughter from others. Henry tells us, “This can cause unpleasant effects for bystanders and is often fatal for the spell caster.” [Fieldnotes]

Jeremy took a series of risks with his character. First, he chose to have his character cast a spell while fighting, which he knew was dangerous. He then proceeded to continue casting as his failure got progressively worse. His choices led to the death of his character and the near death of other gamers’ characters. Because gaming is social, when gamers fail at edgework, they often create problems for others. In most cases, as in Jeremy’s, one player’s failure led to serious injury for other players’ characters. Such excessive risk-taking could alienate one gamer from the group.

Gamers also pushed themselves toward the limits of sanity. Like workaholics who work as long as they can without collapsing from sleep deprivation, gamers put long hours into their activity (Cooper 2000; Lyng 1990). As I discussed in chapter two, gamers displayed their dedication by playing for many hours, even if doing so intruded on other obligations. Most gamers presented themselves as completely competent at negotiating that boundary. They generally acted as if it was not a problem to play until after 1:00 a.m., even though they had to be at work by 8:00 a.m. or earlier. Claire, who had to be at work at 6:00 a.m., even lamented that we did not play longer, suggesting she was nowhere near the edge of her sanity. Only once during my observation did a gamer actually suggest he needed to leave the game because he needed sleep. The same player, Malcolm, later told me about another time when he went over the edge:

We played for 24 hours. Around hour 22, I began or around hour 18, I actually began to go insane from lack of sleep. At the end, I was almost physically ill and then nearly got in a fist fight with one of my friends because I had

abandoned all social niceties and I was this screaming little ball of rage.
[Interview]

In both cases, Malcolm suggested he had gone over the edge into insanity from lack of sleep. Playing lengthy games late into the night when the gamers have already expended mental energy earlier in the day from school or work or playing for exceedingly long time periods can also be seen as a way to tread the border between order and disorder. In this case, they are testing their own mental capacity by exercising as much of their mental prowess as possible without breaking down. Basically, gamers try to think as hard as possible to play smart and creatively for hours without ending up mentally exhausted and unable to think clearly.

Another aspect of treading the sanity/insanity line is negotiating the balance between fantasy and reality. Many gamers talked about how important it was to keep the game (i.e., fantasy) separate from the rest of their lives (i.e., reality). For instance, Ethan's response to a question about what fictional concept from gaming he would like to bring into the real world highlighted his desire to draw a clear line between the two:

I realized I never thought of it I, part of it, part of what I, for me is one of those things that's always been a pet peeve for me is people that can't draw the separation ... and so things, those things tend to be, I try to keep very, very separate. [Interview]

Ethan suggested that any blurring of the line constituted failed edgework. For him, even a minimal intrusion of gaming into the rest of his life meant he had gone beyond the edge. To ensure that he kept the balance, Ethan even made efforts after game sessions had officially ended to make sure others recognized the boundary:

But I very much intentionally keep things separate ... to the point of if I've had a combative night with somebody, I will go to that person after game and make sure, speak to them like we cool ... you know, anything, any problems, you know, here's what I'm doing. [Interview]

By doing so, Ethan, like others, could reassure both themselves and those they played with that they had successfully negotiated the line between fantasy and reality.

Other gamers talked about not wanting to seem like they confused their characters with themselves or the game world with the real world. During the 1980s, moral entrepreneurs depicted Dungeons & Dragons (D&D), the most popular and well-known role-playing game, as Satanic and claimed that role-playing games lured innocent children into cults (Grouling Cover 2010). According to critics, gamers did not understand that the games were not real. While the moral panic eventually died down, the media continues to portray gamers as delusional or otherwise mentally ill. For instance, the tagline for *Gamerz*, a movie about a fictional gaming group made up of University of Scotland students, is "One Game to Rule Them All," suggesting that the game takes over their life in the way that the "one ring" in *Lord of the Rings* dominates those who possess it. In the movie, the female character wears elf ears in many settings outside of role-playing and the gamers get so upset about their characters dying at the end of the campaign that they attempt to physically kill the GM. That movie, thus, could be read as a situation in which the players' attempts to tread the line between sanity and insanity failed.

The gamers I studied did not want others to think they had crossed over from suspending disbelief into actually believing the game was real. Gamers repeatedly said "it's just a game," reminding others that they understood the game world was not real. They also

frequently made jokes about movies like *Gamerz*, laughing at the movie characters who did not successfully retain their sanity. On several occasions, Henry lamented the making of the movie *Mazes and Monsters* (1982), starring Tom Hanks as a gamer who began to think the game was real. Henry complained about all the damage it did to gamers because the movie implied that gamers could not tread the edge successfully.

Preparing for Gaming

Edgeworkers typically engage in a great deal of preparation, including checking equipment, planning trips, practicing skills, fortifying themselves mentally, and so on (Holyfield, Jonas, and Zajicek 2005; Lois 2005; Lyng 1990). Gamers likewise put much time and effort into preparing for play. They make characters in advance, engage in organizational meetings or online interactions before starting a new gaming group, and think about games between sessions. But, they also prepare for risk-taking during the game itself. Because the action is not constant, gamers spend a large percentage of any game session debating what actions to take and forming plans.

The main preparation for role-playing is creating characters. The group I observed spent six-and-a-half hours making the first set of characters. Even after that lengthy time, Dave, Jeremy, and I had not finished our characters. I, alone, spent about another two hours on my character. While the eight-and-a-half hours I spent creating my first character was above average, the group often spent entire evenings making characters. There were times when the group created characters in as little as one or two hours, but this was uncommon.

Players put a great deal of time and effort into character building because a poorly made character increases the likelihood of failed edgework. Like shoddy equipment increases the risk of a skydiver getting hurt, a poorly or hastily constructed character will be harder for a gamer to keep alive. Players often offered each other advice on what skills, powers, and items to take, indicating that it was important to prepare your character for anything. For instance, when the group played Spycraft, we spent around an hour each session determining what gear our characters would carry, with players frequently commenting on the decisions others had made.

During an initial organizational meeting prior to playing, group members spent nearly three hours discussing the campaign and character possibilities, as well as how frequently to play. While gaming groups do not always begin with an organizational meeting, gamers usually either meet to discuss the possibility of a game or have email or listserv discussions. Such preparations not only allow them to participate in the game, but enhance the experience. Players get a chance to know each other (if they do not already) and decide what to do, giving them a sense of ownership of the game, and determine which character archetypes everyone is interested in. Moreover, such preparations regarding the game can make it more likely that the gaming group will remain together and the game will go well.

Gamers also think about upcoming games. For instance, after I struggled to make a Shadowrun character during one game session, Malcolm told me that he and Matt “did the math and I think we can get you some points back,” then offered me suggestions for how to improve the character I needed to finish. Gamers regularly made statements that showed they thought about how to improve their characters and solve in-game problems, as well as

wondered what would happen in future games. Group members regularly shared ideas they had come up with since the last session. By thinking about the game between sessions, gamers increased the odds of successful edgework. They helped themselves and others develop intelligent and creative solutions to in-game challenges and create better characters that can take more damage, do more amazing actions, and win harder battles.

Lastly, gamers continue to prepare for edgework while playing the game itself. This tendency makes gaming different from some other types of edgework. Once a skydiver exits the plane, preparation is over. A gamer, however, can prepare for situations that are especially risky for her character, whether combat, major social interaction, attempting to break into a building, or so on, during the game. It is standard practice for gamers to debate how to handle a problem or what to do in a situation prior to doing it. These debates can take minutes or hours. Matt and I once spent several minutes deciding whether to have our characters cooperate with a lord who was trying to arrest them. When we finally decided to have them run away, they succeeded in doing so in a much shorter time than we debated it. The following week, most of the session was taken up with debating how to get our characters out of the legal trouble they were in. Similarly, group members would often spend several minutes debating when and how to use the “role-playing luck” coupons Henry gave out. All of these debates enhanced the ability of players to do edgework. By considering various options, gamers could more effectively push characters to their limits.

Control as Skill

All edgeworkers make use of specialized skills to participate in their activity. Some of those skills are particular to the experience in question, such as knowing how to position one's body during free-fall for skydivers or knowing how to read a character sheet for a role-playing gamer. The most important skill, however, is "the ability to maintain control over a situation that verges on complete chaos" (Lyng 1990:859). Edgework, then, involves the ability to control situations that might seem uncontrollable or that most people would not be able to effectively control (Lyng 1990). Lyng notes that edgeworkers consider this quality to be innate to the person because they have to respond to situations without thinking and without the help of others.

While many edgework activities can be done alone, gaming is a social activity. Thus, gamers are more likely to seek help from others or accept such help than the edgeworkers Lyng studied.³ Players regularly asked each other for advice and argued about the actions their characters should take. Yet GMs sometimes imposed conditions on players that more closely resembled the experience of edgeworkers. For example, Henry and Matt, the group's GMs, often admonished players for attempting to help each other decide what to do. Moreover, Henry counted time and often reminded players that they were holding up the game. His actions pushed players to quickly decide on a course of action. He was, in other words, keeping players close to the edge.

³ This is not to say that skydivers do not need help from others. Skydivers of course need instruction from others and need a pilot to fly the plane. My point is that gamers are more likely to need and receive help as the action is unfolding. Skydivers, in contrast, are on their own once they step into the air.

Gamers do not just seek the edge by trying to decide what to do quickly on their own. They also seek to test their abilities by demonstrating they can control the uncontrollable, which translates into maintaining an illusion of control. Lyng (1990:863) argued that edgeworkers want to “exercise skill ... rather than turning their fate over to the roll of the dice.” Gamers, however, do just that all the time. The rolling of dice is the main mechanism by which outcomes are decided in a role-playing game. Thus, it is even more difficult for them to maintain the illusion of control than it is for skydivers, motorcycle racers, and other edgeworkers.

Gamers engaged in two behaviors to emphasize that skill was more important than chance, even though dice rolling is a central feature of role-playing. First, they emphasized that they, not someone else, decides what their characters do. By doing so, they could take credit for the edgework that they do through their character, ensuring that they and others do not attribute their success to merely luck.

Role-playing game books emphasize, in their descriptions of what the games are like, the control players have over what their characters do. For instance, the creators of *Shadowrun* described it this way:

the players control their characters' actions If the player does not want his or her character to go through the door, the character will not. If the player thinks the character can talk him- or herself out of a tight situation rather than resorting to that trusty pistol, he or she can talk away. (Catalyst Game Labs 2009:15)

Unlike video games in which players cannot control what characters say, or even what their characters do during cut scenes,⁴ role-players can decide what to say and do. Because they can decide what to do, they are responsible for the outcome, not the dice.

When players attempt to encourage others to make certain kinds of characters, they are sometimes seen as helping, especially when the other player is relatively inexperienced. However, when the advice intrudes on the individual's control over his or her character, an opposite reaction occurs. For instance, the week we first made Shadowrun characters, Toby tried to decide which skills his character would have. As he debated one particular skill, Malcolm said, "I think you should make room for it." Matt immediately jumped in with "let him make his character." Because Malcolm had already made several other suggestions to Toby and me, Matt interpreted Malcolm's repeated suggestions as crossing a line from beneficial to controlling. Similar incidents happened almost every time the group made characters. Thus, gamers emphasize control over their own characters. They can then cite that control to claim credit for building a great character, as Kevin and Toby did during their interviews.

Gamers considered control over their characters so important that they referred to GMs who took control from them as engaging in "railroading." Matt told me that good GMs did not "try to railroad" players and "shouldn't be afraid to go (pause) sort of off the beaten path," pointing out that players should have the ability to make decisions about the actions their characters take. In the same vein, Claire noted that some sanctioned D&D events force

⁴A video game cut scene is a break in game play when a pre-generated scene takes place. Players cannot control their characters during this scene. The scene is used to convey information to the player. For example, in a military game, the orders for the next mission might be delivered in a cut scene.

players into specific combat situations and do not allow players to decide what to do with their characters.

Moreover, gamers repeatedly told me that they disliked it when GMs would not let players take actions, or prevented those actions from succeeding. For instance, as Toby said in an interview,

I wasn't the happiest about it at the time because it was a character that I had made to exploit the rule ... Henry was actually running it and so I was rolling to intimidate and I had, when you do that, you're supposed to roll a d20 [a 20 sided die], add that to your intimidate score and then compare it to the target's ... and when I had done that, I had rolled like a 23 or something [a very high score that would succeed under most circumstances] and Henry didn't even look at the monster's defense. He just said, nope, didn't work (pause) so ... ah, that kind of, I mean it upset me at the time because I had made the character to do that.

Toby was upset by Henry's refusal to let him succeed at the action. In essence, Toby felt that Henry denied him the chance to decide what his character did. While Henry let Toby make the roll, Toby thought Henry had already decided on the outcome. Toby took a risky action, but instead of succeeding through his own skill or failing because of bad dice rolls, he failed because Henry did not want him to succeed. Because of the GM's position of authority in the game, players always face the threat that their risk-taking will end badly for their character, even if they have prepared adequately and luck is on their side (i.e., they roll well).

Interviewees equated control over their characters with fun and were annoyed when GMs denied them control.

This constant emphasis on having control over characters reinforces the illusion of control despite the element of chance. In denying or minimizing the importance of chance, gamers are like the volunteer rescue workers Lois (2005) studied and the whitewater rafting

guides Holyfield et al. (2005) studied. For rescue workers, the chance comes in the form of who needs rescuing, when, where, and under what circumstances. For the whitewater rafting guides, it comes in the form of who the tourists are on a given day and what the water on the river is like. In the case of the gamers, the chance is even more obvious, as die rolls are major events within the game. By depicting character creation and decision-making as entirely their own, they minimize the role of chance and maximize the illusion of control.

Second, many gamers held dice superstitions that allowed them to believe that the rolls were not entirely random. Fine (1996) also found dice superstitions to be common among the D&D players he studied. Gamers held a wide variety of superstitions, including keeping the same dice you started the game with no matter how badly they rolled, switching dice if the ones you initially chose were not rolling well, not rolling other people's dice, not letting others touch your dice, and not rolling on your character sheet. These superstitions gave players opportunities for exercising a kind of pseudo control. According to Langer (1975), there are four main aspects of skill-based situations that people can use to create feelings of control over chance encounters. They are choice, familiarity, involvement, and competition (Langer 1975). Gamers' dice superstitions demonstrate all of these except for competition, which is probably lacking because the game is cooperative, rather than competitive. Additionally, cooperation is one of the qualities of a good gamer, so participants would be unlikely to embrace competition to maintain the illusion of control when there are alternative ways to do so.

For example, Matt's dice superstition rested on adding choice (Langer 1975; Lyng 1990). Matt had "high rollers" and "low rollers," dice that he thought tended to generate high

numbers and ones that he thought tended to generate low numbers. By choosing to roll either his “high rollers” or his “low rollers,” he created the illusion that he had some control over the outcome, even as he acknowledged he could not determine the actual number. His dice practice also invoked the idea of familiarity (Langer 1975; Lyng 1990), as Matt was familiar with his dice (because he had owned and used them for a while) and had a conception about which ones were the best to roll under certain conditions.

While most dice superstitions involved adding choice or familiarity, Malcolm added involvement (Langer 1975; Lyng 1990). He crossed his fingers when he made crucial rolls. During our first combat in the game Traveller, our outnumbered characters tried to reclaim a village overrun by insurgents. As my fieldnotes from February 23, 2010, described, “Malcolm crosses his fingers on his left hand, then rolls his dice.” By taking extra measures to sway the dice on special occasions, Malcolm implied that he had power that could be used to exert control – or at least influence – as circumstances brought him closer to the edge.

Sensations Gamers Get from Playing

Lyng (1990) found that edgeworkers experienced several sensations while participating in their activity: self-actualization, altered perceptions of time, and oneness with the world. They also felt that one can understand the activity only by participating in it. Gamers’ experience were very similar.

Lyng (1990:860) described self-actualization as being really alive, along with “exhilaration and omnipotence.” Gamers often described the excitement they got out of gaming, along with how it made them feel especially powerful. In almost every case, players

created characters that were stronger, more dexterous, tough, and quicker than real people. Furthermore, most group members' characters, including mine, could do things that people cannot physically do. One of my characters could shoot fireballs out of her hands, while one of Claire's characters could kill with its claws. Likewise, Kevin joked that the main difference between one of his favorite characters and him as a person was that he could not turn invisible. He enjoyed that character because he felt it gave bodily manifestation to his personality:

So to go invisible or something like that. But, um, I just liked him because, um (pause) ... again, I think I kind of play similar to my own personality a little bit ... I like to be the more of an observer than, um, than a reactor or a participant, so I like to see what's going on first, before I react to it and being the Halfling [like a hobbit from Tolkien's books] thief who can hide and see what's going on all the time before he can do something ... I just enjoyed that, that concept. [Interview]

Kevin and many other gamers used their characters to give them a sense of power impossible to achieve in the real world. Such perceptions of power are like the omnipotence reported by skydivers and participants in other extreme sports (Ferrell 2005; Lyng 1990).

Gamers also derived a sense of power from the opportunity to take a wide range of actions in the world of a game. A lot of gamers also played video/computer games, which Sanford and Madill (2006) found to generate excitement and omnipotence. For instance, one of the adolescent males in Sandford and Madill's (2006:295) study stated that "you're not limited to what you can do" about his experiences playing video games. His statement is strikingly similar to those made by role-playing gamers. Gamers, however, felt that even video games were restrictive compared to role-playing games. As Malcolm pointed out, in a video game, the options are limited by the designer:

[I] always get annoyed in ... like a video game when your character says something and you're all like what, no, no (louder), why would you say that? ... And so if you were playing a role-playing game, you could not say that ... You can say whatever you want. [Interview]

Malcolm argued that there are only a few dialogue options in most video/computer games, and many times, none of them seem reasonable. Moreover, in games like *Mortal Kombat* or *Call of Duty*, a player cannot decide to talk to someone instead of injuring or killing them. While the video gamers Sanford and Madill (2006: 295) studied pointed out that they had options, such as “explor[ing]” areas, “fly[ing] with a jet pack,” or “grab[b]ing a pizza,” they could not try to befriend, rather than kill, enemies. In role-playing games, gamers are limited less by game designers than by their own creativity.

A player in a role-playing game is freer to, as Malcolm and others described it, “go off the rails,” i.e., do something no one else saw coming. Gamers often were exhilarated from taking such actions, and interviewees often said that the chance to do something unanticipated was one of the main draws of role-playing gaming. Additionally, good game sessions, they said, were ones in which they could do something unique, interesting, or unexpected, and make it work, thereby getting rewarded by other gamers for their choices and gaining a sense of themselves as powerful. For example, in the game *Spycraft*, both Austin and Toby developed unusual weapons -- a Coke can with acid in it and a machine gun in a saxophone -- that earned them praise and that they seemed proud to have imagined. Players who did the unexpected were praised within the group. Interviewees also told numerous stories about the benefits of novel actions they took, describing such games as

exciting, and emphasizing how their character succeeded at some action because of what they had tried.

Experiencing an altered sense of time is another aspect of edgework. During edgework, participants either experience a time compression, where time passes quickly, or a time expansion, where time passes very slowly (Lyng 1990). Role-playing gamers often experienced the compression. Members of the observation group demonstrated that they were often not aware of how much time passed during game sessions. When we first started playing, we usually finished around 11:30 p.m. At that point, Henry, the GM, would look at his cell phone and announce the time. Later, Henry stopped doing this. Games also got longer. We went from playing for about five-and-a-half hours to playing for about seven hours, yet no one even mentioned the time until at least 12:00 a.m. Usually, around 1:00 a.m., Malcolm or Toby looked at his cell phone and told us how late it was. When they did so, others expressed surprise, suggesting they had experienced a time compression. While continuing to play late into the night also displays dedication, it is easier to present yourself as dedicated if you are too wrapped up in the experience at hand to recognize that you have been playing for hours.

This experience of time compression often contrasts with what is happening in the fictional world of the game. Gamers regularly spent hours on a character fight that corresponded to only a few minutes within the game world. For example, the group spent over two hours on a single combat the week Jeremy's character was turned into a mentally competent zombie. The two hours were spent debating what combat actions to take, verbally

acting them out, and making dice rolls for a combat encounter that was supposed to be less than 15 minutes within the time frame of the game world.

Corey's main complaint about the newest version of D&D was that it increased how much real-world time passed for every few seconds in the game. After describing an example turn to me, Corey said,

That one turn [single player's actions]... took two minutes, three minutes ... so the half-hour encounter [combat event] between the four guys and the four monsters becomes the three-hour encounter in D&D 4.0 [the latest version of the game]. [Interview]

Gamers were well aware that they spent a long time deciding what to do for some situations and that combat encounters were time consuming. Group members often made comments about how they should stop at a certain point because a fight was getting ready to start and it would take too long. Additionally, players sometimes had interactions like Matt and Henry did during a Millennium's End game session:

Matt gets up and moves toward the door. Henry comments, "Pre-fire fight piss." Matt says, "You don't want to interrupt the fire fight." [Fieldnotes]

Before a fight, group members often took breaks for refreshments, smoking, or to use the bathroom, because it could be a long time before the fight was over, and because they did not want to slow down the game by not being available when their turn came. Interviewees often argued that combat took long enough when everyone was prepared, available, and focused. They usually complained about gamers whose behavior made it take longer. Such statements suggested a perception of time that was altered in two ways: by taking a long time in reality to cover a short amount of time within the game time; and by having a large amount of real time going by without them realizing it.

A third aspect of edgework experience is a sense of oneness with the world or environment (Lyng 1990). While motorcyclists often consider themselves one with their machines (Ferrell 2005; Lyng 1990) and drug users commonly feel as if their bodies are becoming indistinct from the world around them (Miller 2005), gamers develop a sense of oneness with their character. Gamers expressed this connection to their characters in several ways. First, and foremost, gamers usually referred to their character as “I,” not by name or impersonal pronoun. Many gamers made comments similar to Ethan’s:

So basically they set me up as the hit man in this honor duel. I totally like schooled [easily defeated] the other guy cause I was like I set it up. I set up the whole encounter ... my insults to him that caused him to challenge me.
[Interview]

As was typical, Ethan described what his character did as if he had done it.

Some gamers explicitly recognized that they saw themselves as connected to their characters:

I’ve had words said (pause), people yelling at each other ... cause you get invested in what you’re doing ... This is my character. Why are you messing with my character? Why are you doing these stupid things just because you think it’s funny? ... You don’t say oh, that guy hit this car that I owned, you say he hit me ... He didn’t hit my car. He hit me (emphasizes) because you have invested your personality. You have invested yourself in your vehicle ... so it’s a personal slight against you. He didn’t do this to my character. He did it to me. [Corey, interview]

Gamers could get upset when bad things happened to their characters because it felt like those things were happening to them. Players often looked back at negative experiences related to their characters, recalled them in great detail, and sounded upset when describing them. Annoyance was evident in Malcolm’s voice as he told me about a time he felt a GM acted inappropriately toward one of his characters:

Basically, [his character's name] can polymorph [i.e., change] into a snake. When you polymorph, all your gear comes with you. Basically, what I did was I turned into a snake and swam [across an ocean] ... Then every like half an hour, I'd have to turn back into a dude briefly and like sink like stone cause I was in plate mail (I laugh) and then turn into a snake again ... During the course of all this, the ring of protection, which I was wearing inside of my gauntlets [armored gloves], uh, fell out, uh, determined randomly and washed away into the ocean. I tried to point out how silly this was to [the GM], point out there were many, many different objects which could wash away, not the ring that I was wearing inside my gauntlets ... the ones that were locked onto my hands with the plate mail and he wasn't hearing any of that. [Interview]

The game occurred a couple of years prior to our interview, and he had not played the character since then. Yet he expressed frustration that his character did not have positive experiences and lamented the danger his character was in.

Group members also got upset when their characters were threatened, especially when they thought the threat could have been prevented. The week that Jeremy pushed his third character past its limits, getting the character killed, other players nearly lost their characters, too. Both Matt and Malcolm expressed frustration when they thought their characters had died. It was not failed edgework on their part, so their frustration does not seem reducible to disappointment in themselves. I remember feeling frustrated with Jeremy for putting all our characters at risk. I was emotionally spent after the game, relieved that I had not lost my character, yet upset that I had come so close to losing a character that I felt attached to.

Gamers also told stories about their characters. At every game session, someone recounted with excitement and pride stories of their characters' prior exploits. For instance, Ryan had played a Harnmaster character that was infamous because

He ended up making a redheaded skinny, ah, bard [archetype where the character plays music, usually to calm enemies or heal others] who was left-handed and also gay, which pretty much describes Ryan except for the gay part (pause). He was also useless in combat. The moment that anything happened, I give up. [Toby, interview]

Although group members felt that Ryan's former character did not contribute to that group and they disparaged his character for being gay, Ryan referenced the character frequently, talking about how he enjoyed the character. Ryan even kept all of his character sheets with him in a single binder. Several other players claimed to have every character they had ever played somewhere. Gamers also talked with pride about their favorite characters. Altogether, the emphasis on talking about former and current characters suggests that gamers felt connected to their characters, much like other edgeworkers experience connection to machines, nature, and the world around them.

Finally, Lyng (1990) argues that edgeworkers believe their activity cannot be understood without participating in it. Gamers likewise claimed that gaming does not make sense to non-gamers, that it is difficult to explain what the activity involves to an outsider, and that the only way to understand gaming is to play.

Corey told me he talked to his mother all the time about his games as a child. Both he and his brother played and the games were usually at his house. Yet he also told me, "My mother didn't understand what the hell we were doing." Kevin, too, believed that his family never understood his gaming:

I never talk to them about it (Me: okay, any particular reason?) ... My brother's is, um, more of a yuppie ... business more, um (pause) and in the beginning the reason why I didn't tell them was is because I don't think they would have understood ... I was raised in a, in a religious family, Christian, religious family, so they are, they heard the rumors like I did that Dungeons &

Dragons is a bad, evil game ... and I tried to explain it, but they're [his parents] just from a different generation, so I don't think they understand that concept of how the game goes. [Interview]

Kevin believed that certain types of people would never understand gaming, no matter how much explanation he offered.

Many of the gamers told me that they did not even bother trying to explain their activity to others. Others indicated that they had come up with ways to explain it, although even these individuals said it took years to figure out how to do this, and they rarely did so unless directly asked. One interviewee said,

I have at certain points. I just tell 'em it's just a bunch of fun, you know? It's, it's like telling a story, it's, I mean I do the cooperative story telling spiel now. I didn't do that in the past because I didn't really understand what was going on. It was just, it was just fun. [Corey, interview]

Corey claimed that, as a role-player himself, he did not even know how to put his experience into words. Corey initially shared the sentiment of the skydivers Lyng (1990) studied, who felt that language could not capture the essence of their experience. Corey later came to the conclusion that he could put at least part of his experience into words, just as some of Lyng's skydivers found ways to articulate their experiences.

The difficulty of putting the gaming experience into words meant few of the interviewees or observation group members knew what role-playing involved when they first tried it. In most cases, they were told nothing or almost nothing about it when they were first invited to play. Emily's introduction to role-playing was typical. During my interview with Toby, he and I discussed what he told her before the first game session she attended:

Well, when I introduced her, she was actually with us at Play Science ...
When I introduced, I told her Tuesday nights I have this thing that I do and

she wanted to come ... (Me: So she didn't really know, like you didn't really tell her much about what you were doing beforehand) Not really, no.

Basically, Emily showed up to the game with little idea of what gaming entailed. She had participated in MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons/Domains),⁵ so she had experience pretending to be someone else, but had never played a role-playing game before. Even knowing that she had some relevant experience, Toby did not try to explain it to her.

Gamers' refusal to explain their activities, even to those who might understand, reflects their desire to cultivate mystique and generate feelings of specialness (cf. Klapp 1969). By refusing to articulate their experiences, those experiences took on special value. Group identity searches often valorize insider knowledge as a way of making the experience more special for participants (Klapp 1969). Thus, when gamers like Toby do not tell non-gamers what playing is like, they contribute to the mystique surrounding gaming, making it more satisfying for everyone.

Gamers sometimes pointed out that even watching a group play would not really help people understand the experience. When Emily arrived her first evening, she seemed bored watching the group play. Interviewees reiterated the idea that she would not find watching the group interesting. For example, Trevor argued,

We've had a couple of people [come to the game] who've been like oh, I know this person. I want to come hang out, but I don't want to play. I just want to watch ... That seems to be the death sentence for their ability to participate in the game ... Because watching 5 people, 6 people sit around a table, talk back and forth at each other and occasionally pick up a couple of

⁵ MUDs are text-based online environments where participants type out what statements and actions their characters take. There is no structure to the interaction (beyond rules of civility or the like) and there is no mechanism for determining whether the actions occur, as the MUD is not a game. Instead, it is a "free form" opportunity to interact with others who are pretending to be someone other than themselves.

weird shaped dice and throw them has got to be, at least in my opinion, one of the most boring activities you can possibly engage in ... I always feel bad (laughs) when somebody does this because it typically is somebody who's like well, I don't know what's going on. I don't feel like I can participate (pause). But role-play gaming is so much about just kind of getting involved in a story ... that if you're not gonna get involved in the story, you're not going to get anything out of being there really. [Interview]

According to Trevor, merely watching would not only leave a person unaware of what role-playing is like, but would not even be interesting. Trevor's statement mirrors what other gamers said. It also mirrors what the skydivers told Lyng (1990) when he asked what skydiving was like. If he wanted to know, they said, he should try it himself.

PLAYING WITHOUT AN EDGE

Although gamers tread several boundaries, exhibit the preparations and skills of edgeworkers, emphasize the importance of control over the game, and experience the same sensations that other edgeworkers do, they do not suffer the same threats. Gamers are safe from the dangers of mistakes in a way that extreme sports participants, voluntary rescue workers, and stock traders are not. Gamers are willing to take risks in gaming for two reasons. First, there are few, if any, out-of-game consequences if things go wrong. Second, their pastime is not readily visible, and so they can often hide it to preserve their social standing.

Because they can take risks without putting their lives or livelihoods on the line, gamers engage in edgework without the edge. As Lyng (1990) and others (Lois 2005; Reith 2005; and Hamm 2005) have noted, the very essence of edgework is the edge, the boundary that is important to come as close to as possible without going over. Even though there is no

life-or-death edge in gaming, gamers use strategies similar to other edgeworkers, such as whitewater rafting guides, who try to make trips seem exciting and dangerous, while minimizing the actual risk tourists experience (Holyfield et al. 2005).

Safety from Out-of-Game Consequences for In-Game Risk-Taking

Edgeworkers spend a great deal of their time trying to prevent the negative consequences that come from failure. For the skydivers Lyng (1990) studied and others engaged in risky physical activities, failure can result in death. While other types of edgework failure do not necessarily lead to death, serious negative outcomes are possible. For instance, drug users and volunteer rescue workers can suffer mental or emotional breakdown (Lois 2005; Reith 2005), stock traders can lose income and/or their jobs (Smith 2005), criminals can end up in jail (Miller 2005), and so on.

Gamers, like other edgeworkers, desire to avoid suffering from risky actions they undertake. Unlike the edgeworkers scholars have previously studied, however, gamers have a different solution to the problem. Although they also engage in extensive preparation for their activities and hone relevant skills, gamers choose to participate in an activity that involves no physical danger and consists of fantasy actions. Thus, they keep themselves safe from the consequences of their risk-taking because they generally only suffer within the game, not outside of it, even if they fail.⁶

⁶ While there are generally no out-of-game consequences for in-game failure at least one person has committed suicide after participation in role-playing. In the early 1990s, a young adult *Vampire: The Masquerade* (a gothic role-playing game) player killed himself, making national news and temporarily reviving the moral panic over role-playing games (Grouling Cover 2010).

Gamers can take risks safely within the game partially because some of the behaviors they engage in are not even possible in the real world. For example, Ethan, during his interview, told me, “I ended up doing various things to sacrifice parts of my soul in character.” He also told me about another gamer who was “rolling out my WMDs I had ... they just had an extra-dimensional invasion that burned her home city to the ground ... so apparently she’s contemplating throwing some of my, uh, my, my weapons back through the hole.” Role-players regularly create and play characters with superhuman powers, magical ability, and futuristic technology. Gamers’ risks thus have little basis in reality. This means no one can lament that they should just try it in real life, as edgeworkers often argue when someone asks them what it is like to participate in their activities (Lyng 1990).

Gamers can, then, project an image of themselves as courageous, without having to face physical danger. Male gamers can also thereby affirm their manhood without putting their bodies or lives in real jeopardy. As geeks who predominantly have or want careers in the computer field, their occupations do not connote courage in most people’s eyes. Therefore, gaming provides them with a chance to take more acceptable risks in the pursuit of manhood.

Male gamers are not the only men who use risk-taking to create a manly identity. For instance, young working-class and poor males with low-paying or no jobs may binge drink, fight, or commit crime – all risky actions – to compensate for their lack of economic success (Canaan 1996; Collison 1996; Copes and Hochstetter 2003). Moreover, men who suffer from serious illness or disabilities often highlight their manhood by emphasizing the risks their

everyday lives involve (Riessman 2003). Risk-taking in gaming might thus be seen as a form of compensatory masculinity, a form that puts neither body nor middle-class status at risk.

Gamers sometimes take risks that they could potentially take in real life. Several gamers mentioned that their characters engaged in a variety of “shady,” “mischievous,” and illegal actions, including developing dangerous weapons, spying on others, stealing, and trying to kill other characters. While criminals face potential jail time for their risks (and injury or death in some cases), the worst consequences gamers suffer if they fail are character death, mild disapproval from other players, and being excluded from games. Given that gamers are reluctant to deny others’ participation in the game and GMs often feel that characters should not be killed unless a player does something foolish, even failure might not result in any of those negative consequences. For example, gamers often felt that if failure at an action was the result of a poor dice roll, rather than a player’s poor planning or decision-making, they did not deserve to see their characters die.

This perspective, then, is another difference between other edgeworkers and gamers. Lyng (1990) found that edgeworkers denied the role of chance in their activities. Because there is a clear mechanism for including chance in role-playing games, participants do not deny that some of what happens is out of their control. Although gamers cultivate an illusion of control, they also visibly see the outcome of meticulous planning coming down to whether someone’s die roll to cast a spell, fire a weapon, or pick a lock succeeds. Players cannot always blame poor performance on chance, but sometimes they can deflect negative appraisals by claiming that they had a great plan that failed only because their dice did not roll as they desired. For most edgeworkers, all failures are seen as evidence that the

individual could not tread the boundary effectively (Lyng 1990:859). Gamers could cite an unlucky dice roll.

Despite the fact that gamers are safe from experiencing the consequences of their in-game actions elsewhere, they realize that some degree of risk is necessary to increase the excitement of the game. As an example, Simon insisted that role-playing in a Massively Multi-player Online Game (MMO), such as World of Warcraft, was “a completely different style” than table-top gaming because

You can run into pack of enemies and die, and voila, you're back at the graveyard, you rez [resurrect], you're back... You RP [role-play] out that a person gets into a fight, a person dies... They're not gonna delete the character because the amount of time and effort put into getting them up to whatever level ... versus ... in a table-top role-play, they die, that is the end of it ... because the GM won't just allow them, you know, to bring that character back. [Interview]

Simon made the point that, compared to other forms of gaming, table-top role-playing gaming actually involves cost for actions. Simon, like several others, framed the need for actions to have outcomes in terms of increasing the “realism” of the game, which he preferred. Likewise, many of the observation group members argued that the “lethality” of Harnmaster, as Malcolm put it, appealed to them. Most group members lost characters during the campaign, yet all of the experienced role-players who remained in the group considered Harnmaster one of their favorite games. The threat to their characters enhanced the excitement of the game, as they knew that their choices could get their character killed, making it important to tread the edge successfully. Yet no matter how many characters a role-player loses, s/he lives to play another day.

Safety through Invisibility

Many edgework activities are leisure pursuits, so edgeworkers do not necessarily have to reveal their participation to others. Yet edgework is often public to at least some extent, whether it is leisure or work. Often, the activities occur outdoors or in the presence of non-edgeworkers (such as the customers of whitewater rafting companies or the people being rescued by the voluntary rescue workers). Moreover, they usually see their edgework activities as central to their lives, and so often acknowledge their participation to others (Ferrell 2005; Simon 2005). By contrast, gamers expressed a belief that gaming is a safe avenue for risk-taking because role-playing can be hidden. There are two main ways gamers expressed their desire for invisibility of their activity. One, they did not talk about gaming to non-gamers or people they thought would not understand. Two, they almost uniformly disparaged LARPerS (live-action role-players) for being too visible.

Like other edgeworkers, almost all of the interviews and most of the observation group members felt role-playing was central to their lives. Few, however, discussed gaming with non-gamers or acknowledged their interest to others. Most said that they did not bring it up unless they had clear evidence that the person to whom they were talking would be open-minded toward gaming. For instance, Kevin suggested that computer gamers are people with whom role-playing games could be safely discussed:

The only time it ever came up was when I was working for Circuit City ... I worked in the computer section. So, occasionally, um, there would be guys who worked in the computer section that the only reason they want to work in the computer section is because to, they're computer gamers ... Eventually, through conversation, role-playing games will come out and then eventually, it's the appropriate time to say, you know, oh, no, I play World of Warcraft. Yeah, I also play Dungeons. It's the perfect fit ... But, it's just something that,

like, for instance, I work at IBM now. It's just something I just can't bring up to other business guys. Yeah, I play Dungeons & Dragons cause I think you would just get the (speaks louder) what (laughs) ... cause generally when I ever told anybody that I play Dungeons & Dragons where, um, they weren't a gamer or they never knew anything about it, they would give you like that sideline glance of like what is that ... like it's an oddity. [Interview]

Several gamers made similar statements. Not talking about their activity helped protect them from the stigma attached to gaming or being a geek. While some gamers, such as Ryan, look stereotypically geeky (i.e., skinny, white, male, wire-rimmed glasses), not all do.

As I noted before, several of the gamers in my study, including Kevin, were former high school athletes. Gamers thus usually remain in the category of the “discreditable” rather than the “discredited” (Goffman 1963). While the stigma associated with gaming is not especially severe, gamers control information like those with more discrediting qualities or experiences, such as ex-psychiatric patients (Herman 1993). In some ways, then gamers are more like criminals and drug users than like other recreational edgeworkers. Instead of publicly touting their edgeless edgework, gamers, like criminals, try to pass as normal by keeping their game lives hidden from unsympathetic outsiders.

The second way that gamers minimize risk is by disparaging those with a more visible activity. Specifically, they compare themselves to LARPer, who participate in a related, yet more public activity. According to my interviewees, LARPer take their pretending “too far” by doing *everything* in character. Table-top role-players who did this sort of thing were considered bad gamers. For instance, Malcolm talked about how players who tried to use funny or otherwise altered voices actually disrupted the game and made it uncomfortable for him:

I have learned that men role-playing women in a creepy, falsetto voice is a big, is a big, uh, a big bad thing... that was disturbing like I actually, uh, frequently would not want to play anymore after he spoke (I laugh) even though I wasn't playing anything else at the time. [Interview]

While most gamers I interviewed had never experienced table-top players doing this, everyone who had disliked it intensely. Likewise, they generally did not want to have to physically act out their character's actions and preferred only verbal descriptions and the occasional hand motions.

Additionally, many interviewees indicated they did not want to have to dress up. Only the two regular LARPer, Trevor and Ethan, and Jessica, who had never LARPed, expressed any interest in costuming. Even Lucas, who had done war re-enacting, did not want to dress up as any of his characters. He made a distinction between dressing as a historical figure and putting on a costume for a gaming character. The latter would court the risk of stigma. Gamers preferred less visibility. They also disliked LARPer for courting risks – of stigma – that could spillover to other gamers.

The table-top gamers engaged in defensive othering. Defensive othering, as Schwalbe, Godwin, Holden, Schrock, Thompson, and Wolkomir (2000) define it, occurs when some members of a subordinate group try to deflect the stigma they experience by arguing that a negative stereotype applies to some members of the subordinate group, but not to them. Gamers used this strategy when they suggested that what they did was not as weird as LARPing. Role-playing gamers commonly proclaimed that their activity was “just a game,” thereby distinguishing themselves from LARPer, and further implying that table-top gamers were capable of negotiating the boundary between reality and fantasy. By portraying

LARPer as having gone too far, table-top gamers implied their greater competence at staying on the sane side of the edge.

CONCLUSION

Role-playing gamers engage in a form of edgework. Gamers can stand up to people, get into fights, or try out new behaviors and skills. They can participate in risk-taking in a social environment where others will witness their edgework and applaud them for successful negotiation of the boundaries of ordered self/environment and insanity/sanity. They prepare for their edgework experiences both before and during play and display the ability to control the uncontrollable. When they play, they get a sense of themselves as alive and powerful, experience alterations in their perception of time, come to feel one with their character, and believe that only other gamers can understand their experiences.

Yet gamers risk little. They are safe from out-of-game consequences for their in-game risk-taking. No real person dies in a role-playing game. Gamers can also hide their participation in the activity, thus avoiding the risk of stigma. Altogether, it seems fair to describe gaming as edgework without the edge. Gamers get the emotional benefits of edgework without putting their bodies on the line.

Prior studies have examined activities that involve behaviors a clear edge –extreme sports, dangerous occupations, and crimes. Such activities involve real danger and thus keep out those who are unwilling to take real-world risks. As I have shown, gamers do not need to take major risks to enjoy many of the sensations of edgework.

Role-playing gaming is not the only activity in which people do edgework without the edge. Low-stakes card games are another activity that provides people with the chance to take risks, yet not suffer many serious consequences for failure. For instance, people play “friendly poker games” with only small amounts of money (Zurcher 1970). Likewise, prepackaged adventure vacations, such as those mentioned by Holyfield and Fine (1997), sometimes provide the benefits of edgework without the threat of serious danger. Another example might be packaged big-game hunts that seem risky, but actually involve little likelihood of contact with dangerous animals. Virtual reality games and training simulations also allow people to do edgework without the edge; they experience the same safety as role-playing gamers, while feeling thrillingly immersed in another world. As computer technology advances, more people may come to seek edgework on a virtual edge.

Unlike other edgeworkers, gamers hide their participation and so they do not get the benefits of telling non-gamers about their risk-taking. Few outsiders become aware of the risks gamers take. Gamers, then, rarely get much social approval for their efforts. They can only effectively use gaming to reinforce their manhood amongst other gamers, whereas skydivers can more easily display manhood – by talking about skydiving – to anyone with whom they interact. Even if gamers do reveal their participation, they are not likely to get approval.

Additionally, the lack of physical danger means that gamers probably experience less intense sensations than other edgeworkers. While they feel alive, powerful, exhilarated, and so on, life-or-death situations often produce physical reactions and strong sensations that are generally not present among gamers, such as increased heart rate, shallow breathing, and

muscle contractions. Although Lyng (1990) does not discuss such sensations, it seems reasonable that many edgeworkers experience them, even as they gain repeated exposure to danger. Gamers, however, sit around a table and use their imaginations, so they do not generally get their hearts racing, even in the most emotionally powerful game sessions. Edgework without the edge thus offers the advantage of physical safety at the cost of less physical stimulation.

Others are drawn to gaming because it engages the mind in a way that edgework activities like motorcycle racing or skydiving do not. While such activities require mental preparation and concentration, gaming requires creative imagining of alternative worlds. It may be, then, that gamers take something back into everyday life that other edgeworkers do not: greater intellectual flexibility, political tolerance, and desires for social change. My data do not allow me to document this kind of cognitive change. Other researchers, however, have found that playing computer games online improves intelligence and enhances social tolerance (DeSousa, Silva, and Roazzi 2010; Kobayashi 2010), and it seems plausible to suppose that highly social gaming—of the kind I studied—might yield greater effects than computer games.

While Lyng (1990) and others demonstrate that other edgeworkers think about their activities frequently, for gamers thinking *is* the activity. When gamers carry this thinking into everyday life, they can create new edges – between the status quo and many possible futures. Gamers’ often said that the game was better than their real lives and served as an escape from boredom, stress, and other negative emotions. As Lyng (1990; 2005) points out, the desire to free one’s self from the repression and boredom of our society can lead to excitement-

seeking through risk-taking. Such efforts can give people a sense that they can control their lives even as economic insecurities mount. Whether this leads to collective action aimed at social change depends on many other factors. The kind of edgework in which gamers engaged might inspire dissident imaginings of better worlds. But it might also produce a kind of temporary, therapeutic relief that inclines gamers to tolerate, rather than challenge, the economic and political conditions of their lives. Real change, as always, requires stepping over the edge and playing for keeps.

CHAPTER 4

Gaming as Fictive Heroism: Making Yourself a Hero through Play

People have used heroes to aid them in their identity searches for thousands of years (Boon 2005; Hollander 2010; Klapp 1962; Klapp 1969; Lindholm 1990; Schwartz 1985). Klapp (1969:214) defines a hero “not as someone who is especially good, but who realizes dreams for people that they cannot do for themselves, a kind of person in which we lose or find ourselves.” Heroes, then, give a person “psychic mobility” -- a chance to gain status and other psychological rewards vicariously (Klapp 1969). Hero worship and heroism can thus be seen as ways to elevate the self (Gal and Gabriel 1982; Gibson, Hogan, Stahura, and Jackson 1007; Klapp 1962; 1969; Walker, Frimer, and Dunlop 2010).

Social psychologists working in both sociology (see Edelstein 1996; Klapp 1962; Lindholm 1990; Porpora 1996) and psychology (see Harvey, Erdos, and Turnbull 2009; Holub, Tisak, and Mullins 2008; Lockwood and Kunda 1997; Rankin and Eagly 2008; Walker, Frimer, and Dunlop 2010) have examined heroes and hero worship. Scholars have distinguished between hero worship involving glorification of another person, and heroism involving a person engaging in noble deeds. They have also distinguished between public heroes and personal heroes. Public heroes are figures that the person doing the worshipping does not know (Graham, Border, DeCaluwe, Foemmel, and McGraw 2001; Holub et al. 2008; White and O'Brien 1999). Historically, public heroes were created through oral or written poetry, books, narratives, or performances. Common public heroes include warriors, military leaders, nobles, politicians, and inventors (Edelstein 1996; Klapp 1962). More recently, people began worshipping celebrities, such as entertainers, athletes, and socialites,

through the popular media (Edelstein 1996; Hakanen 1989; Klapp 1969; McCutcheon, Ashe, Houran, and Maltby 2003).

Personal heroes, on the other hand, are those that the individual knows, such as family, friends, teachers, etc. (Graham, Border, DeCaluwe, Foemmel, and McGraw 2001; Holub et al. 2008; White and O'Brien 1999). While most public heroes in Western societies have historically been male, female figures—usually mothers or teachers—are often held up as personal heroes (White and O'Brien 1999). Female children, while less likely to worship superheroes, still frequently turn to men when looking for heroes (Holub et al. 2008). Women, then, have had fewer opportunities to claim the role of hero or experience the glory of heroism than men have had.

Regardless of whether the person chooses a personal or public figure, they still depend on someone else to be the hero. By contrast, people who become heroes themselves do not have to rely on outside models. In this chapter, I argue that role-playing gamers make their own personal heroes (i.e., their characters) when they play. First, I show why gamers feel the need to create their own heroes through gaming. Second, I discuss how players craft their characters as heroic. Third, I demonstrate that role-players use the game to feel heroic. Finally, I conclude that gamers create more attainable heroes through role-playing than are offered otherwise. While doing so aids them, it disadvantages female and non-white gamers who are not culturally cast as heroes.

THE NEED FOR HEROES

Cultures vary in the heroes offered for public consumption. In some times and places, there are many heroic figures to draw from, while in others, there are few (Boon 2005; Edelstein 1996; Fishwick 1983; Klapp 1962; Lindholm 1990). In recent years, America as a society has suffered from a lack of heroes (Boon 2005; Edelstein 1996; Klapp 1969). In fact, scholars in numerous disciplines, journalists, and others have lamented the lack of national heroes (Edelstein 1996; Klapp 1962; Pretzinger 1976). While there is some disagreement over who counts as a hero, scholars generally argue that Americans are left with only four sets of heroes: fictional heroes, celebrities/athletes, personal heroes, and temporary heroes known for one courageous act (like Todd Beamer, who is considered responsible for downing Flight 93 on September 11th). Yet scholars have shown that these heroes do not often provide the same benefits as classical heroes (Edelstein 1996; Klapp 1969; McCutcheon et al. 2003; North, Bland, and Ellis 2005). Even fictional heroes have lost their luster, as adults rarely say they have fictional heroes and children get less likely to do so as they get older (Graham et al. 2001; Holub et al. 2008; Jones 2002; North, Bland, and Ellis 2005). Moreover, researchers have shown that many Americans have no heroes or mention people who have been dead for years (Graham et al. 2001; North et al. 2005; Porpora 1996).

Most scholars do not think the need for heroes has decreased, only that the available options are fewer or of lesser quality. Edelstein (1996), for instance, argues that when people cannot find national heroes, they look for local ones. For many gamers, however, even local heroes were hard to find. They rejected many typical sources of heroes, including religion, sports, and media. What gamers did, then, was to use the game to create the heroes that they

did not find elsewhere. This process of hero creation involved exploring alternative morality through their character.

Exploring Alternative Morality

Religion has long been a source of heroes (Edelstein 1996; Klapp 1962; Lindholm 1990; Porpora 1996). However, as America has become increasingly secular, religious figures have decreased in prominence (Edelstein 1996; Lindholm 1990). Gamers rarely found mainstream religious figures heroic. In fact, most gamers disliked religion, particularly established ones like Christianity. For Carl and Lacy, in particular, gaming was a way to rebel against their strict, conservative religious upbringing. Several gamers described religion as outdated, recognizing that Christianity has changed little over time (Layng 2010; Lindholm 1990).

In contrast to their dislike of established religions, gamers frequently enjoyed the morality systems found in games. Such systems provided alternative morality. In *Harnmaster*, there was a religion in which the parishioners demonstrated their fealty by having sex. My *Shadowrun* character was an eco-shaman, who drew on the power of spirits in the manner of Native American religion. Malcolm's priest drew on the power of his goddess (who emphasized honor in battle) to smite enemies and heal people. In most games, players chose their characters' morality and/or religion. When playing, then, gamers could draw on a moral code for their characters to live by without having to resort to conventional religion. Such codes not only provided heroic figures to worship within the game (i.e., the higher powers), but also provided characters with motivations for heroic actions.

Leaving Competitive Play

While religion has declined in America, sports have exploded in popularity and intensity. Today, many Americans look for heroes among elite athletes (Graham et al. 2001; Hakanen 1989; Holub et al. 2008; Saltzman Chafetz and Kotarba 1995). Males, in particular, are especially likely to name athletes as heroes and strive to achieve status through sport (Graham et al. 2001; Holub et al. 2008; Saltzman Chafetz and Kotarba 1995). Gamers, despite being largely male, did not tend to participate in the sports craze.

Several gamers played sports when they were younger, mostly in school. While many enjoyed sports, most did not continue as adults and few depicted themselves as competent athletes. Even Jeremy, who participated in an “elite” soccer team, depicted his athletic experience as largely doing what his stepfather wanted him to do. Like Messner’s (1989) former elite athletes, many male gamers told stories of male relatives encouraging them to participate in sports. However, unlike the men Messner studied, most gamers did not have others telling them they were talented. Moreover, several male gamers mentioned medical problems that made physical activity difficult for them. Additionally, gamers frequently depicted sports as repetitive, too competitive, and restrictive. They did not see themselves as becoming athletic heroes and did not idolize famous athletes. They did not talk about favorite sports teams or players, wear sports memorabilia, or spend time watching sports on TV. Some gamers, such as Daniel, told me they found televised sports “boring.” Sports, then, did not provide them with heroes.

Avoiding the Celebrity Cult

The development of the mass media, including televised sports, contributed to the rise of celebrities (Dotter 1987; Edelstein 1996; Hakanen 1989; Liss, Reinhardt, and Fredriksen 1983; Warshow 1963). Political scandals, the Vietnam War, the closing of the frontier, and increasing bureaucratization of society decreased Americans' faith in politicians, military leaders, inventors, and explorers (Edelstein 1996; Fishwick 1983; Klapp 1962). As many of these changes occurred, the media began celebrating the lives of movie stars, singers, athletes, and socialites (Edelstein 1996; Klapp 1969). Today, people spend time discussing the minute details of celebrities' lives (Caughey 1984; Dotter 1987; Hollander 2010; Lindholm 1990; McCutcheon et al. 2003; North et al. 2005).

Celebrities, despite their popularity, are different from famous people of the past (Edelstein 1996; Hollander 2010; North et al. 2005). Unlike prior heroes, celebrities are rarely famous for important accomplishments (Edelstein 1996; Hollander 2010; Klapp 1969). By contrast, celebrities are usually famous for their attractiveness or allegedly charming personalities (Hollander 2010; Klapp 1969; Lindholm 1990). Additionally, because of the constant media attention, famous people today are followed much more closely than those in the past (Hollander 2010; Rollin 1983). Paparazzi literally follow celebrities around to take pictures of them doing even the most commonplace of activities, such as shopping, walking down a street, or dropping their kids at school. Moreover, "the passage of time, which creates and establishes the hero, destroys the celebrity" (Hollander 2010:389). Celebrities live in the moment and need their fans to do so as well (Hollander 2010; Rollin 1983). As people retell the tale of the hero from the past, whether fictional or real, s/he gets more impressive (Boon

2005; Edelstein 1996; Hollander 2010). On the other hand, celebrities rarely do anything long lasting, so they need to keep people thinking about them all the time.

While Americans supposedly seek the limelight that celebrities have (Hakanen 1989; Hollander 2010), gamers did not express such an interest. Interviewees often wanted the power to be invisible, rather than fame or attention. They frequently described themselves as shy or quiet. Even those who argued that they were outgoing or enjoyed meeting new people expressed discomfort with social interaction outside of the gaming community. Most suggested they did not have many friends, and several said that they were unpopular in high school. As I demonstrated in chapter three, gamers used the safety of their invisibility to engage in edgework without the edge. Overall, gamers expressed little desire to become celebrities and did not think they had the looks or charisma to become famous.

Gamers did engage in some celebrity worship, typically of geek subcultural icons, such as Will Wheaton (from *Star Trek: The Next Generation*), Leonard Nimoy (from *Star Trek*), or Mark Hamill (from *Star Wars*). However, even subcultural celebrities were discussed infrequently. Instead of discussing celebrities, gamers talked about the exploits of their characters, emphasizing the deeds their characters had done. Attractiveness was rarely a concern. In fact, gamers more often created homely, non-human characters than attractive human ones. Through role-playing, gamers could reach back to a time when heroes were legendary because of their deeds, not their personality or appearance.

Owning Your Heroes

Throughout history, people have created images of those with “superior qualities,” which “symboliz[e] success, perfection, and the conquest of evil” (Klapp 1954, as cited in Boon 2005:302). Heroes typically need to be both superman and easy to identify with (Boon 2005; Dotter 1987; Edelstein 1996; Lockwood and Kunda 1997). Part of the appeal of many heroes is that they are seen as connected to the worshippers. Traditionally, this connection meant that the hero – e.g., Achilles – appealed to an entire society (Boon 2005; Edelstein 1996). However, as populations grew and became increasingly diverse, it got more difficult to appeal to everyone. As a consequence, heroes are now specific to subcultural groups (Dotter 1987; Edelstein 1996; Holub et al. 2008; Lockwood and Kunda 1997).

As members of a subculture, gamers shared ideas of what made a hero: rescuing others, acting morally, being strong, intelligent, and powerful, and overcoming evil. However, they did not actually share their heroes. Unlike cultural heroes such as George Washington or Daniel Boone, role-playing game characters belong to the individual who creates them. Gamers not only have a great deal of control over character creation and actions, but also own the physical evidence of the character. Usually, players kept their own character sheets, bringing them to each game session. Some players kept every character sheet they had ever made. Ryan, for instance, often paged through his binder full of character sheets before or during games, reminiscing about his old characters. Jeremy kept the sheets for his prior characters in his car. Some interviewees showed me their collections of character sheets, priding themselves on their collection.

Even when characters died, players did not lose their rights to them. Players left with their dead characters and no one ever questioned them for doing so. Several gamers told me about using characters they made for one game in another game. Players also named (or renamed) pre-generated characters to make them theirs. If players were allowed to keep pre-generated characters, they almost always did so, regardless of whether they intended to play them again. Gamers thus regularly felt a connection to any character they played, and so made the character theirs.

Keeping the Hero Alive

Heroes should not die. Because gamers felt connected to their characters and saw them as heroes, they did not like seeing them die. Gamers disliked character death so much that Jeremy's relaxed attitude toward it surprised me. When I missed a game session early in the campaign, Jeremy filled me in on what I missed: "Just to let you know, we've been sucked away to another dimension and my ranger [a character archetype proficient at using bows as weapons] died." He told me this nonchalantly, treating the fact that his character died as no more consequential than the group being transported to a new dimension. I later found out that he did not act angry or frustrated at character loss. His propensity to lose characters was so unusual that others regularly remarked on it. Similarly, Trevor told me about someone who took character death in stride, again highlighting how unusual such an experience was:

That particular player kind of, he had a round robin of characters in that particular game. He would play one for three or four sessions and then some decision he made would either remove him from the game or get him killed,

and then it was a new character ... So, the joke kind of became okay [name of player], okay, player, what, which character are you playing this game?
[Interview]

As in the group I observed, others joked about the player's repeated character changes. No other interviewees mentioned such players and no one else in the group made new characters so frequently.

More commonly, players expressed distress at actual or potential character death. For instance, the most tension filled game session I observed occurred when all characters would have died if Henry had not introduced a miracle. Gamers had a term for when GMs killed off everyone's character, calling it a "party wipe." Some GMs did so deliberately, so they were categorized as "adversarial," and most players did not like it. Even when it was an accident, GMs often lamented killing off player-characters:

I wiped a party out with three skeletons and in D&D terms, skeletons are push-overs. They're something 1st level characters go up against, you know. So, I had these three skeletons and I was misreading the rules cause they were complex and confusing. You know, and I was like you swing your sword at it and according to this, you do a point of damage and it's got like 80 [points of health] left. This is gonna be a while. Oh, it hits you. It does 42 [points of damage]. You're dead. What? (laughs) ... These skeletons seem to have killed you all. I have must have done something wrong (laughs). [Corey, interview]

Corey had not meant to kill off the entire party (he made a rule miscalculation). While players disliked character death regardless of the reason, they were especially unhappy if they felt their character did not die fairly.

Players sometimes saw their character's death as positive, if it befitted the character. They treated their characters the way Edelstein (1996) argues Americans accept a hero's death more readily if the death fits with how the hero lived. For instance, two of Jeremy's

characters did not die, but went insane. In both cases, Jeremy felt that Henry's description of what happened fit the character, and thus made sense. Similarly, Jane agreed to let the GM kill off her character when she left a game, under the promise it would be a "spectacular" death:

He [her character] happened to run across these adventurers who were battling demons and ... my character thought that one of the other player characters was a bad guy and so started fighting that character. When it turns out, she wasn't a bad guy and he got really bad when he found out. But, then, in the next episode [game scenario], she actually did become possessed by one of the demons and ... he didn't want to hit her again. He felt really bad (laughing) about hitting her the first time. But, in the battle, the demon possessed character ripped off his chest. Literally reached in and grabbed his breast bone and ripped it out of his body and, and killed him. And the way it was set up and the final death was, it was great. It was very over the top, but my character was cracking jokes right up until the point where (pause) his chest was ripped off. [Interview]

Because the character died in a manner that was exciting, unexpected, and fit with her character's personality, Jane felt good about her character's death. She, then, got an opportunity to vicariously experience dying heroically in battle, trying to save the world from demons, while not hurting those her character cared about. As North et al. (2005) argue, a hero's death can actually increase the hero's status. That Jane's character, who was not especially powerful, preserved his personality to the end, and required great force to kill, made him look impressive. Moreover, Jane now had a story to tell, creating a legend as she told her character's tale.

HEROIC CHARACTERS

Gamers saw their characters as heroes, not as ordinary individuals, and only occasionally as evil or bad. Thus, they spent a good deal of time casting their characters as the heroes of the story. They talked about their characters as heroes and had their characters act in heroic ways. Players also justified un-heroic actions and frequently rejected GM efforts to position their characters as evil or boring.

Talking about Heroes

Gamers depicted their characters as heroes largely through their talk. For instance, gamers often referred to their characters as “heroes” or “adventurers.” Gamers used hero terminology both inside the game world, as when GMs would have non-player-characters refer to the party as heroes, and outside of the game world when they talked about their characters or the game. They typically used the term “hero” when their characters had superhuman powers or when they were saving others. Most commonly, gamers called their characters “adventurers” when they were exploring new territories or taking risks. According to Pretzinger (1976:37), the classic American hero was an adventurer, one “who undertook a mission and successfully mastered one or more aspects of an unsettled and often uncertain environment.” However, there are few real places left to explore (Edelstein 1996; Pretzinger 1976). In the game world, there are innumerable unexplored worlds.

Gamers so rarely played villains that they developed a subcultural term for such a scenario – an “evil campaign” – that others universally recognized. When players do choose characters that seem evil at first glance, they can make them look moral by having the

character adhere to a moral code. In *Vampire: The Masquerade*, players can choose to follow the “Path of Humanity,” which penalizes characters for acting evil.

GMs also assumed players would be motivated by a story hook positioning them as the classic hero. Typically, GMs offered a scenario in which the characters performed a rescue. In one of the most famous D&D adventures, the characters are asked to come to the aid of a small village facing problems it cannot solve (Grouling Cover 2010). Villagers cannot afford to offer the party much, if anything, in the way of payment, beyond their gratitude, yet the entire storyline is premised on the idea that the players will have their characters investigate (Grouling Cover 2010).

Such story hooks were typical. Most adventures involved the characters serving on the side of good. Likewise, interviewees liked adventures that pitted players’ characters against evil:

Mainly, my stories run along the theme of there’s a big evil bad guy (pause) and he’s out to get revenge on the world for something that was done to him. And to get his power, he made idiotic pacts with creatures and beings you should never agree to work for ... devils and demons and entities from the depths of space and things like that and then it’s how the party learns of this guy. They face him. They defeat his minions. They disrupt his plans. Then, they beard him in his lair and defeat him and the kingdom is saved, the, you know, universe is protected from the planet-devouring entity of doom or whatever. [Corey, interview]

The general theme of game sessions involved characters acting heroically against overwhelming odds and/or powerful evil.

Acting Heroically

Gamers emphasized heroic action during the course of play. They often spent game time helping the downtrodden, even when that was not the point of the session. In Harnmaster, our characters generously rescued an elf locked in a tower. In a different session, our characters took time out of attempting to escape that same tower to perform a religious ritual that sent a spirit to heaven. GMs often rewarded heroic actions by players. Henry later informed us that the elf we rescued was Jeremy's new character. The spirit we sent to heaven later saved several other characters from death when a spell was miscast.

While gamers generally assume characters will act nobly, certain character archetypes are seen as particularly heroic. For instance, one of the characters in *The Gamers: Dorkness Rising* (2008), a movie about a gaming group, was a paladin. Paladins are holy warriors motivated by good. During the movie, the other characters decided to torture someone for information. Because the paladin would not go along with such an action, they distracted him by suggesting a peasant was in danger to get him out of the room. It worked and the paladin rushed off to save the peasant, returning only after the torture was concluded. The movie drew on the subcultural knowledge that paladins are fond of heroism and hate cruelty. When introducing Kevin to D&D, his friends created a paladin for his first character. He told me they thought he would find such a character acceptable, given his religious background. Kevin later used such characters to try to convince his mother that gaming was not Satanic:

But, she did eventually notice the books and, of course, she brang up the thing, like isn't this game supposed to be bad and then I had to crack open the book and say no, look. There's even a character called a paladin, you know (laughs)... He's a good guy. [Interview]

Players typically treated their characters as heroes who would act for good, even if they, as players, were not interested in saving the day. They did so for two reasons. First, many role-playing games are designed so that the characters are set up as heroes. Paladins are not the only characters described as noble, heroic, or good in game books. For instance, players can choose the “good” alignment in D&D, thereby setting them up as moral. Thus, players often expected their characters to be heroic when they chose them. Second, failure to have a character act heroically might mean there was no game session. GMs rarely had more than one story hook planned for a particular game session. While the best GMs were good at improvising and were creative enough to come up with an alternative story hook, not all GMs were willing and/or capable of doing so. Even when the party received tangible rewards as payment, players were often expected to accept quests where the danger or effort outweighed the material benefit to their characters. Group members often joked about not accepting the quest that Henry put forth, which usually involved the characters saving someone or investigating wrong-doing. However, the jokes were always just that, as players almost always ended up having their characters serve as heroes.

Not-So-Heroic Characters

When players did not have their characters act as heroes, it was usually because they had decided to play evil characters from the beginning. Such decisions were often curtailed by the GM, unless the story was designed that way intentionally:

I don't allow evil players in my games. I want to run heroic games. I want to run games with heroes unless I'm specifically running a game like Dark

Heresy ... which is all about backstabbing and getting ahead. [Corey, interview]

Likewise, Henry, the original group GM, banned the “evil” morality choice in D&D and would not let players create characters that practiced magic considered evil in the Harnmaster game world. While several role-playing games allow or encourage players to act nefariously, those games have always been less popular. Moreover, the group never played a single “evil” game, despite playing eight games in different genres with three GMs.

Even when gamers had their characters take less-than-heroic actions, they framed their characters as protectors. During his interview, Corey told me:

You pull out the game and then you can go after the evil wizard and his Orc [i.e., like the monsters in *Lord of the Rings*] minions and, you know, do all the things that polite society says you’re not supposed to do.

Although he had his character kill, he positioned role-playing characters as good because they stopped villains, such as the “evil wizard” and his monsters. Often, when gamers had their characters misbehave, they emphasized how they actually helped others, depicting their characters as heroes. As Klapp (1969) points out, a hero does not have to be inherently good. Role-playing characters, then, are like protagonists in movies and books who engage in deviance to save themselves, those around them, and even the world.

On rare occasions, GMs created situations in which players were expected to treat their previously good characters as evil. Such situations usually involved possession or control by a supernatural force. If GMs offered players a choice about whether to become evil, they usually refused to do so. When Jeremy decided to have his character join the evil

side (as discussed in chapters two and three), his choice was received badly. Matt and I had already refused to have our characters turn evil earlier that session, and everyone expressed surprise when Jeremy did not refuse as well. Gamers, then, treated un-heroic actions as unlike their characters.

Heroism as Exciting

Gamers often assumed that the point of playing was to undertake thrilling adventures. Like American settlers or astronauts (Pretzinger 1976), gamers enjoyed the excitement of adventures. In a segment of “Bring Dice & Chips,” a comic strip in a gaming company’s newsletter, the GM of the strip’s gaming group suggested that the players’ characters had reached a point where they would no longer go adventuring (Fannon 2012). One part of the strip read: “Jake, as Master of the Temple Guard, you need to set up training, recruitment, and an overall security plan” (Fannon 2012). As the comic strip continued, the GM assigned every character bureaucratic administration tasks (Fannon 2012). By the end, one of the players thought, “Well played, Clara [the GM]. Well played,” and then said out loud, “Hang on, Clara. Maybe it’s time to consider retiring these PCs (player-characters) to NPC (non-player-characters) status and starting a new campaign?” (Fannon 2012). Readers were supposed to find the strip funny because they would not want to pretend to be bureaucrats, and so would want to create new characters if they were in that situation.

Gamers, then, not only typically rejected the idea of portraying evil characters, but also disliked the idea of playing ordinary individuals. They rarely picked characters responsible for the sort of bureaucratic tasks the GM in the comic strip proposed. Since many

participants worked in large bureaucracies and held jobs in the computer field, they could easily participate in such tasks in real life. No gamers suggested that their ideal game would involve organizing schedules, recruiting others, or writing computer code. Instead, they wanted excitement, mystery, and violence. Gamers sometimes expressed disapproval at the idea that a game session would not involve any out-of-the-ordinary experiences:

Henry says, “It looks like the day could go by without a hitch.” I comment, “And then.” At the same time, Matt states, “But then.” Malcolm adds, “If nothing was gonna happen, it would be a boring game.” [Fieldnotes]

As Klapp (1969) notes, people rarely pick bureaucrats to be their heroes, tending to favor people who have more exciting lives.

Even when players created characters with ordinary backgrounds, what excited their imagination was adventure. For instance, my first Harnmaster character, like most characters in that game, trained in an ordinary occupation (specifically, fisher) before becoming a mage. Likewise, in Traveller, Matt asked players to explain why their characters left their ordinary jobs to become a “traveller.” Generally, gamers depicted their characters as different from regular people because they were interested in adventure and able to handle its challenges.

Similarly, gamers often glossed over the time when their characters were not adventuring or were engaged in mundane activities. Gamers referred to the in-game time they did not cover as “downtime.” As Trevor pointed out,

I find a lot of times ... table-top games tend to be we end the scene, we cut.
There may be little to no lag time between ... in-game time between sessions.
[Interview]

Gamers rarely expected characters to spend time eating, bathing, etc., unless it was relevant to the storyline. Moreover, GMs often allowed players to claim their characters bought a

difficult-to-locate item, got necessary training, or otherwise completed sustenance activities without spending time role-playing those experiences. Like most heroic tales (Beatie 1983; Edelstein 1996; Klapp 1962), the mundane was generally skipped to focus on the hero's accomplishments. Too much attention to everyday activities can tarnish a hero's image, reminding worshippers that the hero is flawed or making their life seem ordinary (Edelstein 1996; Klapp 1962; Pretzinger 1976). Thus, gamers wanted their characters to live exciting lives, beyond what people usually do, regardless of whether the character was good or not.

FEELING LIKE A HERO

Gamers also used the game to feel like they were the heroes themselves. They imaginarily inhabited their characters, vicariously experiencing their characters' nobility and power. Gamers did this collectively, helping each other feel like heroes. While it was possible for characters to die, part of the imaginary experience of heroism was feeling invincible, at least relative to the reality of powerlessness in everyday life.

Invincibility

Because they typically played heroic characters, players could feel like the perfect, invincible victor. As Rollin (1983) argues, heroes are supposed to be immortal and game characters often seemed that way. In most role-playing games, the characters conquered evil. The D&D session "The Curse of the Gray Hag⁷," which I played at GENCON, was typical.

⁷ "Gray hag" is one example of a sexist term in gaming lingo. Other sexist terms used by gamers include "Guardsmen" to refer to military personnel, "wench" or "bar floozy" to refer to servers in a bar, and

Despite my character nearly being killed by the hag (i.e., a witch), everyone's character survived the battle. The party successfully defeated the hag, saving the nearby village, where prior "heroes" had failed. As typical in games designed to last a single session, the GM brought the game to a close almost immediately upon the death of the hag. Once the characters destroyed evil, with only my character suffering any major wounds, the game was over. Additionally, most game plotlines involved characters fighting more powerful enemies. For example, in a GENCON session of the Star Wars Role-Playing Game, our characters defeated an assassin droid, a particularly feared enemy, with no injuries.

Players did not have to act out any of their character's actions, so they did not have to be able to climb cliffs, use medieval weapons, or walk long distances. Since many participants were not physically fit, they would have found such actions difficult or impossible in real life. Because GMs often skipped over "downtime," even if a player's character was seriously injured, she could sometimes resume fighting, fully healed, during the next game session. Additionally, when the game went negatively, GMs could decide that the session's events were irrelevant to the larger campaign, unlike in real life. Toby recalled one such Harnmaster session:

I think pretty much everyone was blind (laughs) by the time we were done. We never actually finished it [the storyline]. By the time the last person had lost an eyeball, it was just like, you know what? We're just gonna call it and say that this never happened. [Interview]

When we later played those same characters, no one had lost an eye. Like a TV show that brings a character killed off in an earlier season back, or a video game where the player

distinguishing between lords and ladies. The sexist language I heard among gamers was little different from that I hear among non-gamers in everyday life.

continues the game at the save point after a death, gamers can, in essence, redo outcomes they dislike. Being able to return from the dead, or continue when real people could not, reinforces the heroic nature of the character.

Control over Heroes

Unlike traditional heroes in movies, books, or myths, gamers control their characters. As I discussed in chapter three, gamers emphasized control over their characters. Since they (and not a distant author) created the characters, they made heroes exactly as they wanted. While there were limitations imposed by game designers and GMs, players decided which qualities their characters possessed and what actions they took.

Because they had control over their characters, gamers could create more believable characters than are typically part of cultural myths. Sometimes, heroes seem so close to perfect that others feel like they cannot live up to the model. For instance, Lockwood and Kunda (1997) found that people of great achievement can make those who think they have missed their chance for success feel worse. Moreover, people sometimes see heroic acts as overly risky, difficult, and maladaptive, making them negative rather than positive (Harvey et al. 2009). Thus, heroes, while often helping people feel better, can sometimes be too good to accept.

Rather than making a character that was as powerful as Beowulf or as over-the-top as action movie protagonists, gamers created heroic characters who were slightly better versions of themselves. Characters regularly were smarter, more physically fit, had more resources, knew relatively specialized skills (such as breaking into security systems or using unusual

weapons), or were otherwise more competent than the players. Yet most role-playing games are designed so that characters start off only somewhat better than ordinary humans. As the game progresses, characters are expected to improve as they overcome obstacles, just like heroes on quests (Beatie 1983; Rollin 1983).

Role-playing games thus have some mechanism for making improvements to characters as game sessions unfold. Generally, gamers referred to this as getting “experience points.” They emphasized the importance of improving their character over time, frequently reminding GMs that they had yet to provide experience points for a session or challenging the amount awarded:

Matt then gives us our rewards for the mission. He informs us, “You guys are gonna get five reputation [making the characters more well-known] for this (pause). You did make some noise.” ... Matt looks up and says, “There is experience for rescuing people from the explosion.” He asks, “How were you supposed to do that?” Malcolm says, “We rescued two people from the rubble.” Matt informs us, “That’s separate, rescuing survivors from the rubble.” ... Malcolm states, “So, about the experience?” Matt says, “Yes, yes.” Malcolm adds, “So delicious, delicious.” Matt then adds up the experience our characters get and states, “You guys actually make out like bandits.” [Fieldnotes]

Players so much enjoyed gaining experience points and improving their character that they often planned how to spend experience points they had not yet earned. For instance, Malcolm decided on enhancements for his vehicle in Shadowrun long before his character earned enough money to buy them. Likewise, I picked out new spells for my mage to learn in Harnmaster, even though I did not know when I would be able to obtain them.

Some gamers disliked games designed for a single session, or playing with characters the GM created in advance, because this did not allow characters to improve. As Malcolm said,

Since they're all pregens [pre-generated characters], you never get experience tickys [i.e., opportunities for character improvement]. Your gear's all bought for you by the agency, so accumulating mounds of cash is less than useful. Yeah, if it weren't so fun, it'd, it'd almost seem pointless. You go out, succeed at a mission and then you get, you get a duffle full of money and then you take another mission. It's not like you can save up for a magic M16.
[Interview]

While gamers disagreed about the best method for character advancement, they universally agreed that characters should get better as they were played. Some gamers preferred systems that allowed players to improve skills their characters had used recently, while others preferred systems that allowed players complete freedom. Group members preferred Harnmaster's system, which required a player to use a skill and then roll dice to determine if their character advanced. They felt that such a system was more "realistic" than other games because characters, like real people, got better at what they did regularly, and improvement was not guaranteed every time a player used a skill. Conversely, they positioned systems like D&D's – in which players mysteriously got better after a set number of experience points, no matter which skills they had used – as unrealistic. Gamers wanted their heroes to transform in a rational manner, not miraculously.

The capacity to make their character also allowed them to avoid one of the problems Klapp (1969) found: that people often admired only certain parts of their heroes. For instance, he found that women typically admired only one or two of Scarlett O'Hara's traits, telling him that she also possessed many negative qualities (Klapp 1969). By contrast,

gamers who did not want a specific trait in their character generally kept it out. Many role-playing games do not even offer the player the chance to include negative traits. Even games that encourage players to pick “flaws” or “disadvantages” rarely *require* players to take them.

Although it was not uncommon to take flaws for the sake of gaining benefits, some gamers complained about the extent to which certain games allowed players to do so:

So, you basically got to buy all these crippling psychological handicaps and exchange them for power. I’ve never really liked that idea. Like if a player wants to take some crippling psychological handicaps, more power to ‘em ...But, like, you like play that immediately into, like, immortality in the field of battle and, like, a huge, like, fuck-off sword. [Malcolm, interview]

Malcolm, like others, respected players who took flaws because they liked more rounded characters. During initial character creation, everyone praised me when I expressed disappointment that my roll on the psychological table did not result in a psychological flaw.⁸ Henry allowed me to re-roll, so I could make a more “interesting” character. Gamers referred to taking minor flaws for the sake of gaining power as “power gaming” or “min-maxing,” both derogatory terms used about players who overemphasized their characters’ statistics.

Gamers are not the only ones who minimize characters’ flaws. Readers or movie viewers can do the same. However, they have no control over what those flaws are or how prominent they are in the story. Although creators of fictional characters control their design, readers or movie viewers do not. Thus, gamers can eliminate negative qualities in their characters to an extent that people cannot do with other heroes.

⁸ Psychological tables were charts used for character creation in some gaming books. In *Harnmaster*, players rolled their dice, gaining whatever psychological flaw, such as mania, alcoholism, etc., that was listed next to the number they rolled.

Additionally, gamers' control over their characters protects them from loss of face to a greater extent than worshipping a distant figure. As Klapp (1969), Hollander (2010), Lindholm (1990), and Rollin (1983) note, heroes can fall from grace. The media exposes dirty secrets, historians uncover evidence of shameful behaviors, authors write characters out, and so on. There are many ways for cultural heroes to be discredited or disappeared. While players occasionally failed at edgework and ended up destroying their characters, they had more control over what happened to their characters and what information others knew than they would over other heroes. By treating their characters as malleable heroes, gamers could maintain a positive image of their heroes more easily than with conventional heroes.

Becoming a Legend

Not only could gamers do in the game what they could not do in real life, thus feeling better than the ordinary people they are, they could also become "legendary" among other gamers. Henry, for instance, regularly depicted himself as well-connected in the local gaming community. When I first met him, I jotted the following:

He tells me that I can ask him anything about gaming because "I should be qualified after 30 years of gaming." He adds that he has "worked in local game stores" as well and that "for the last few months, I invested in Tolkien Games [a local game store that went out of business before the study began] as a junior partner."

He made numerous statements suggesting everyone knew him. At first, I assumed he was just bragging. But, it turned out, he was indeed well-known in the gaming community.

Eventually, Lucas, the social networking group organizer, who seemed completely disconnected from Henry, even mentioned him. Similarly, John was well-known in the local

community because he was the former owner of Tolkien Games. Whenever I saw him anywhere, people would stop him and ask him if he was the former owner. During our interview, we talked about how he left the gaming community entirely for a while because he did not want to deal with such incidents. As such, gamers could gain local recognition and be famous within the subculture.

Likewise, gamers could become famous for making memorable characters. Henry, for example, had two characters that almost everyone who had gamed with him knew about. One character was known for wheeling around a locker full of firearms to use. Ryan also had a legendary Harnmaster character. In Ryan's case, his character was infamous because it was so similar to him, despite being constructed randomly through dice rolls, and was considered particularly useless. When others remembered their characters, gamers gained status in a real-life community.

Gamers facilitated this process because they sometimes remembered others' characters or their actions more than the person playing the character. For example, I went to one of the social networking group's get-togethers and saw Carl, a gamer with whom I had played many months earlier. When he saw me, he said, "You helped us burn the house down, didn't you?" Although he barely remembered me, he recalled that my character favored burning down a haunted house in a game. Another gamer, Malcolm, accurately recalled a character I had made but never used. Gamers frequently referenced other gamers' characters, rather than the gamers themselves. For instance, when Jeremy and I told the group about a bad gamer we knew, neither of us mentioned his name. Instead, we described his character. No one asked us his name, despite asking for further details about his character.

Collective Storytelling

The collective nature of role-playing games enhances players' feelings of being heroes. When gaming, participants were surrounded by other people, often three to five, who shared the fantasy. The presence of others in the fantasy provided players with a plausibility structure (Berger and Luckmann 1966), making the character and game world seem more real and concrete (Fine 1983). As in a religious congregation, verbalizing fantasies with others helped gamers feel less strange in embracing what others would consider strange.

Several interviewees claimed that pretending to be someone else was difficult, either when they began role-playing or when they played with strangers. For example, Corey told me, "You don't really feel comfortable when you're around a lot of strangers, rolling dice and (pause) trying to act like a certain character." Gamers felt the need to have supportive others around when they pretended to be someone else. Given the cultural idea that adults should put their imaginations away (Jones 2002), many adults are reluctant to acknowledge their inner fantasy lives (Klapp 1969). Some of Klapp's (1969) participants did not talk about their heroes or only did so very vaguely. Similarly, Jones (2002) found that adults often worried about kids who fantasized after early childhood, expecting their children to grow out of it. Gamers thus felt more secure in their fictive heroism within the game than they would on their own. Because the other participants made them feel better about their fantasy, they could be heroes together in a way they could not as isolated individuals.

Moreover, gamers engage in collective storytelling, cooperatively writing the narrative (Grouling Cover 2010). Players frequently complained about GMs who did not let them help write the narrative, referring to their behavior as "railroading" the players. GMs

often thought the best game sessions involved players doing unexpected things that made the game more interesting. Even when players' actions were atypical, GMs often included them in the storyline. Jane told me about a particularly extreme example of a GM altering a story because of a player's actions. When she introduced her "old lady quilting group" to role-playing, one player severely violated gaming norms by making a decision reserved for GMs:

As it got closer to the end, one of them just had, you know, I asked them each in turn what their character was going to do. And one of them said, 'Well, my character goes in the chapel, and lo and behold there's the missing tapestry we're looking for,' when (pause) that was her decision to say that it was there ... We were really having fun, so I went with it and the way that she described it was probably a better ending than it would have been had I pushed them towards (pause) the mechanics [i.e., game statistics] worthy ending. So, we just went with it and we did have fun and we were all laughing pretty hard, so I consider it a success. [Interview]

The player, then, positioned her character as hero, even more than Jane intended. Yet Jane accepted the player's choice and altered the ending she had planned. Instead of seeing it as a problem, Jane felt the game went better.

Additionally, GMs sometimes used player-generated information to temporarily make specific players the central hero. Claire, for instance, talked about how having a storyline driven by her character made the game better. During our Harnmaster campaign, one of Jeremy's characters was a leper. Henry incorporated a leper colony after Jeremy introduced the character. The entire group had numerous interactions around the leper colony, and Jeremy took the spotlight as his character gained importance. Similarly, one storyline took place in the area of Harn (the primary country in the game world) from which Ryan's character originated, so the group interacted with places and people familiar to his character. Wendy, on the other hand, talked about how disappointed she was when she would make a

lengthy background for her character and then none of it would be used in the game. Such situations highlight how both GMs and players contribute to the storyline. Therefore, gamers not only served as heroes, they helped create the heroic tales in which their characters starred.

Because gamers created the story as they went along, no one knew the end. Even when gamers played through the same story more than once, they anticipated that it would go differently depending on the players and characters. Gamers were often willing to replay scenarios; however, they sometimes felt it would be difficult to do so:

Malcolm asks, “Does that say *Blood on the Snow* [name of specific game storyline]? Matt comments, “We know the twist.” Malcolm adds, “We can run through it, but you’ll have to excuse us if we’re a little paranoid at certain points.” Henry states, “That one’s a little hard to run people through again.”
[Fieldnotes]

Henry, Matt, and Malcolm recognized that players acted differently depending on what they knew, so the same scenario would not necessarily develop the same way a second time. Gamers, then, knew that familiarity with the heroic tale did not guarantee heroism or success. The group collectively created the adventure as players reacted to what the GM presented, making for different heroic tales, even when beginning with the same basic storyline.

CONCLUSION

By creating heroic characters, gamers came to feel like heroes themselves. Through collective storytelling, they could imaginatively experience the exploits of a fictional hero tailored to their needs. Overall, gamers used their characters to engage in fictive heroism that

made them feel better than hero worship of celebrities, athletes, religious figures, or others would.

The heroes gamers created as they played enhanced their selves. Gamers felt more important, good, and brave within the game than they did elsewhere. No participants felt that their jobs gave them opportunities to feel like they mattered the way heroes matter. Few had other experiences that allowed them to become legends or make a difference in the world. None were successful athletes, few had been in the military, and none had done anything else to get their “fifteen minutes of fame.” In the game, by contrast, gamers’ actions were consequential. What they had their characters do altered the game world, the storyline, and their own and others’ characters.

While their in-game heroism was fictional, they could be heroes on a regular basis. Chances to demonstrate heroism in real life, however, are infrequent. Many people never experience a situation in which heroism is called for (Gibson et al. 2007). Even those who get opportunities to act heroically are likely to become one-shot heroes, famous for a single deed, such as pulling someone from a burning building (Hakanen 1989). In such situations, the individual gains a lot of attention, but it is short-lived (Hakanen 1989). Gamers never gain the spotlight outside of the gaming community, yet they retain others’ attention for as long as the game continues (possibly years) and even after the game is over.

Moreover, participants were rewarded for making believable heroic characters in the game. Good gamers created interesting characters and got into portraying them (as shown in chapter two). While many qualities of a gaming character are unattainable, such as magical power or super speed, gamers picked the qualities they could imagine themselves possessing.

The heroes they created were more realistic than heroes they might encounter elsewhere, such as in comic books. Many gamers, of course, enjoy comic books and comic-book heroes. But those heroes are created by others, and are usually too far-out to be believable. Self-made game-world heroes were far more attainable “object[s] of desire” (Boon 2005:303).

Heroes are perhaps particularly consequential for men because the hallmarks of heroism correspond to our cultural notions of masculinity (Boon 2005). Men may thus feel more pressure to try to live up to the images of cultural heroes, almost inevitably falling short. Gamers, however, could close this gap by playing and inhabiting a heroic character of their own making. While they cannot fully live up to the image of their character, they can position themselves as heroic because they decide what the character can and will do. In choosing heroic qualities and actions, one partakes of what it means to be hero.

The emphasis on heroes, however, could, like the emphasis on nerdy intelligence, leave female gamers at a disadvantage. There are few female heroes, particularly in the traditional sense (Edelstein 1996; Holub et al. 2008; Rankin and Eagly 2008). Since many role-playing games are set in the fictional past, gender inequality is prominent. Even when games attempt to be gender equitable, there are more images of males as heroes in the rule books. Several male gamers recalled the picture on the original D&D box – a male knight fighting a dragon. Female gamers, then, are not likely to see representations of their characters as heroes unless they choose to play male characters. Since most gamers portray characters of the same gender as themselves, few females have that experience. Moreover, even female gamers who portray male characters would not see themselves represented as heroes, only their characters. Additionally, male gamers often expect female characters to be

highly sexualized. Male GMs frequently depict female non-player-characters as barmaids, prostitutes, or sexual predators. Mauldin (2004) found the same phenomenon in video games, where female heroes had more in common with villains than did male heroes. Women gamers, then, might feel excluded from in-game heroics because others code “hero” as male.

Likewise, there are few non-whites represented in gaming books. While there are numerous other species or “races” in role-playing games, there are few images of blacks, Asians, Hispanics, or Native Americans as characters. Heroes are not only classically male, but, in most tales, white. Americans are so unlikely to see blacks, for instance, as heroic that when they are, it often goes unrecognized. As such, non-white gamers might feel discredited as heroes. Given the dearth of non-white gamers, I can only speculate about this. Future scholars need to seek out non-white participants to gain a better understanding of their gaming experiences.

Non-white and female gamers, then, might have a harder time finding believable heroes, within gaming and outside of it. Yet my analysis suggests that people need heroes they find reasonable. While individuals have different ideas of what seems reasonable, gamers sought to create characters they could pretend to be. Gamers regularly depicted themselves as more imaginative and creative than most adults. Still, they could not always stretch their imaginations to accept any fantasy.

The importance of believability in heroes has generally been neglected, though it has been noted that too much realism can ruin a hero’s image (Edelstein 1996; Klapp 1962; Pretzinger 1976; Rollin 1983). Attending to the details of day-to-day existence can reduce a

hero's heroic stature. Still, people do not necessarily want their heroes to be perfect. Perhaps Americans today expect their heroes to be more realistic than people did in the past.

Gamers strive for a balance between realistic and exciting heroes. Through the game, they often succeed at creating them. However, they use the game to do so precisely because they find other avenues for heroism and hero worship ineffective and/or irrelevant to them. People in general might not be as successful at striking that balance, making it seem like heroes have declined in America.

There are likely other situations in which people create heroes to fill the gaps left in the hero worship and heroism opportunities provided by modern society. For instance, people who participate in Second Life, an online environment in which people create avatars with virtual lives, can make their own heroes there. While no research has shown that Second Life participants make heroic avatars, scholars have demonstrated that participants have their avatars lead more exciting lives than they do (Gottschalk 2010). As with gamers, participants need to construct avatars that others accept as legitimate (Waskul 2003), but are also just a little better than their real-life creators.

While gamers and Second Life participants involve fictional heroes, mothers of Little League baseball players treat their sons as real-life heroes (Saltzman Chafetz and Kotarba 1995). Although Saltzman Chafetz and Kotarba's (1995) analysis highlights how mothers reproduce gender, their data also show that the women depict their male children as worthy of the attention heroes get. Rather than looking for distant, public heroes, the women construct their own personal heroes through the trappings of local fame they create for their boys. Much like gamers, the mothers vicariously experience heroism through their

participation in someone else's activities. Unlike gamers, however, the mothers attempt to control the heroism of a real person. As Saltzman Chafetz and Kotarba show, the mothers are successful at positioning the boys as heroes, and so bask in the reflected glory of their sons.

Heroes, then, are created collaboratively, whether those heroes are fictional or flesh and blood. Scholars, by contrast, focus on the psychological qualities associated with heroism or hero worship (e.g., Holub et al. 2008; Porpora 1996; Walker et al. 2010), or they analyze popular myths, the media, or large-scale social changes that create new heroes (e.g., Beatie 1983; Edelstein 1996; Mauldin 2004; Rollins 1983). Often neglected are the interactive processes through which heroes are created. My research suggests that heroes emerge out of cohesive subcultures. In these small worlds individuals can collectively construct heroes and selves that are larger than life.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion: Creating Identity through Imagination

Role-playing games are a leisure activity, yet gamers use the games they participate in to construct real-life identities. Many gamers found playing the game more “real,” enticing, and important than the rest of their lives. The game was so important partially because gamers crafted moral identities through their playing. As shown in chapter 2, they established norms for being a good gamer. Specifically, good gamers were dedicated, cooperative, selfless, creative, intelligent, and authentic. By displaying these qualities in the world of gaming, gamers could construct themselves as good people who had valued social qualities.

Gamers also used the game to make their lives more exciting. As shown in chapter 3, they engaged in edgework without the edge. The game allowed them to enjoy the thrill of dangerous activities without risk of bodily harm. They rarely suffered any out-of-game consequences, no matter how severely they failed at edgework within the game. Moreover, they could hide their participation from others, thereby making it unlikely that others would stigmatize them. Gamers, then, removed the edge and still managed to get most of the benefits of edgework.

Finally, gamers made themselves heroes within the game. As shown in chapter 4, they created heroic characters and felt like heroes themselves when they played those characters. Role-players portrayed heroes that displayed bravery, strength, intelligence, and so on, giving them an opportunity to feel good about themselves, while also allowing them to explore morality in a safe environment. They did not find heroes or chances for heroism in

religion, sports, or the media. Instead, gamers imaginarily became heroes who possessed culturally valued characteristics and had impressive deeds to their names. Gamers thus managed to fill the void of heroes and heroism left in modern American society.

Overall, gamers used the game to make their lives better. In this chapter, I will discuss the theoretical implications of their efforts. Specifically, I will show how the study of gamers enhances our understanding of how people build identities through leisure and other “non-serious” pursuits. I will also offer suggestions for how the idea of edgework without an edge enhances our understanding of risk-taking. Furthermore, I will show how examining fictive heroism can modify our understanding of how people construct possible selves and how they relate to heroism. Lastly, I will offer suggestions for future research and discuss the limitations of the study.

DEVELOPING MORAL IDENTITY THROUGH FANTASY

Scholars have long paid attention to identity work. While the term itself is not especially old, concern for self-construction goes back to the late-19th and early-20th century work of James, Dewey, Cooley, and Mead. While early theorists examined how society shaped people’s selves, more recent scholars have focused on how people create images of themselves. In other words, numerous sociologists have considered how people actively strive to craft themselves in a positive light in their own and others’ minds.

Identity work refers to any efforts people make to show others who and what they are (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). There are numerous ways to do identity work. People can attach significance to their behaviors, appearance, attitudes, emotions, and so on. In the

dramaturgical view of identity, people do this through social interaction, presenting themselves to others for their appraisal (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996).

Identity work, then, matters because clear communication and smooth interaction depend on it. Not only does effectively creating an identity mean that individuals know who they are, but also others know how to interact with them. For instance, if a gamer crafts him/herself as a good gamer, then others can depend on that person to enhance their game experience. Conversely, if a person does not care about being seen as a good gamer, others may dread playing with them. Moreover, people gain opportunities and resources, or lose them, on the basis of whether their identity claims are accepted or not. Gamers stood to gain social recognition, praise, opportunities to join multiple groups and play numerous games, and even invitations to GM, when they were perceived as good gamers. Their edgework and fictive heroism also depended on being seen as good gamers. Without that image, players would have been unable to participate, thereby losing the chance to take risks and create heroic possible selves.

People often engage in collective identity work, as gamers do, working together to create new identities or redefine old ones. Collective efforts are especially common when people want to rehabilitate discredited identities or create new ones. While it is easy to take a culturally valued identity and connect it to one's self, it is more difficult to view a devalued identity positively or come up with an entirely new identity on one's own. By participating in a group, however, people find ready-made support for an alternative way of seeing themselves and the world. Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock (1996) call this "subcultural identity work."

In some cases, collective identity work entails group members focusing on how group members are better than outsiders. For instance, Schwalbe's (1996) study of the mythopoetic men shows how they tried to return the identity of man to the glory they felt had been lost. The men he studied felt they were better men than those around them and better men than outsiders, including feminists, saw them as. Grigsby (2011) provides another case of trying to raise the moral value of the identity of "man." Men who participate in noodling (fishing by hand) claim they are living as men did for centuries, surviving through their own efforts and living off the land. He shows how they attempt to reconnect manhood and independent survival. Yet they also see themselves as better than other men because they are capable of living in a way most men cannot.

Frequently, then, people construct moral identities collectively by suggesting that group members are more competent or moral than outsiders. For example, Straight Edge subculture members depict themselves as more moral than teenagers and young adults who participate in premarital sex, drinking, and drug-taking (Williams and Copes 2005). Participants thus take an identity that is not valued by many youth and establish it as moral by creating a subculture centered around the ideal of avoiding peer pressure.

Gamers do the same when they turn their geeky interests, which often leave them devalued among other teenagers and young adults, into a moral identity. Like youth in the Straight Edge subculture, gamers sometimes suggested that non-gamers did not have the qualities necessary to do what they did. In the case of gamers, however, rather than refraining from negative behaviors (as those in the Straight Edge subculture felt they were doing), gamers participated in a creative communal activity. They felt, then, better than others

because they had the interest and the ability to work together imaginatively, unlike others whom they saw as too trapped in competition and conformity.

Even when outsiders might consider people as equally special (or un-special, as the case might be), those inside the group might not. Although people can claim the generic and positively valued identity “Christians,” *born-again* Christians position themselves as better than those who never had the experience of accepting Jesus as adults (Bielo 2005). Similarly, Wilkins (2008) shows that evangelical college students see themselves as different and better than both other Christians and their peers. Many of the people she studied also contrasted their identity as evangelical Christians to that of their parents, even when their parents were Christian. This process is similar to how outsiders often lump all geeks together, while geeks frequently distinguish among each other. The gamers I studied regularly positioned themselves as better than LARPer, video gamers, cosplayers (people who dress up as characters from Japanese anime/manga), and other geeks. In interviews and observations, gamers often talked and joked about the “geek hierarchy.”

Gamers did not just compare themselves to outsiders. Like others, their collective identity work meant that they worked together to create or re-value the identity, but then focused on internal comparisons. While she does not treat “goth” as a moral identity, Wilkins (2008) demonstrates this process when she discusses the subcultural identity of goth. She shows how people came together to create a new identity, establishing norms regarding clothes, music, and sexuality. Once the subculture was established, however, participants developed an internal hierarchy. People who only acted goth in clubs, or when around other goths, or who shopped at Hot Topic (a store in the mall that sold “goth” clothing), were seen

as less goth than those who always displayed their identity and made their own clothes (Wilkins 2008). While external comparisons did not become irrelevant, internal comparisons came to take on major significance.

Like goths, gamers began by establishing criteria for who counted as a gamer. Because the label “gamer” could refer to anyone who plays games, it was necessary to specify which games mattered. Playing mainstream board games, such as Monopoly or Scrabble, did not qualify one as a gamer within the subculture. They limited the term to geek games, including role-playing, collectible card games, miniatures, and geeky board games. They also established norms for how gamers acted, some of which I described in chapter two. But they did not stop there. Also like goths, they turned their focus inward, developing criteria for determining who was a good gamer. A person thus could count as a gamer, yet not be seen as a *good* gamer.

The use of in-group comparisons to bolster a moral identity seems to be a generic process. For instance, volunteers at homeless shelters relied on more experienced volunteers to help them see themselves as good people despite shelter regulations that positioned them more as watchdogs than as helpers (Holden 1997). A feeling that they were good people motivated their initial volunteering, yet the shelter’s policies hindered their efforts to feel good about themselves. To regain that feeling, volunteers compared themselves to others to depict themselves as more egalitarian and less authoritarian (Holden 1997). Creating a moral identity by comparing one’s self to others within a group is a common strategy, regardless of whether the people are invoking an established identity, revaluing an old one, or creating a new one.

Whether people compare themselves to fellow group members or outsiders, it is easier to affirm a moral identity if the individual possesses cultural valued qualities. For instance, Saltzman Chafetz and Kotarba (1995) show that mothers of Little League players make enormous sacrifices for their sons during baseball tournaments that demonstrate they are good mothers. The women compare themselves to other mothers who do not provide their sons with such rewarding experiences. But they also compare themselves to other mothers in the Little League, trying to outdo mothers with sons on the same team. In both cases, they craft themselves as moral by highlighting how they are dedicated, caring, and selfless. These are qualities that are valued in many arenas, not just motherhood.

The same applies to gamers. The qualities gamers value – dedication, cooperation, selflessness, intelligence, creativity, and authenticity – are valued in many other areas of adult life. The volunteers Holden (1997) studied, the mothers McMahon (1996) and Saltzman Chafetz and Kotarba (1995) studied, the Christians Bielo (2004) examined, the workers Cooper (2000) interviewed, and most of the other people noted above all value some of the same characteristics gamers do. These qualities are particularly valued among the middle class. Middle-class parents typically exalt these qualities as they try to socialize their children to achieve middle-class success (Kohn 1969; Lareau 2003).

Several gamers talked about leaving religion, sports, and other middle-class activities specifically because others demanded displays of dedication and/or authenticity they felt unable to provide. Instead of challenging the legitimacy of such expectations, gamers left the situations wherein they could not create moral identities effectively. When they found gaming, they found an activity in which they could more comfortably display qualities that

earned them moral credit. They did not develop new characteristics to value in their new activity. They imported those same characteristics they were expected to display elsewhere. In gaming, they could display these qualities and be rewarded for it, while feeling authentic and having fun. My study, then, shows how people can fashion moral identities out of activities that others often deem childish by valuing the same qualities adults are expected to display in more serious situations.

My study also shows that people use both their behavior and their imagination to construct a moral identity. Role-playing gamers display their creativity, intelligence, and authenticity by acting on their imaginations. As they play the game, gamers think about how knowledge they have from other games, history, books and other media, personal experience, school, and a variety of other sources relates to the fictional game world. In their imagination, they put ideas together. They then act on their imagination by verbally relaying those ideas to others. When fellow gamers accept their ideas as legitimate and interesting, the individuals appear to be smart, creative, and legitimate geeks – in short, good gamers.

Constructing a moral identity, then, is a process of imagination, communication, and affirmation. Studies of moral identity, however, tend to focus on behavior while ignoring the importance of imagination. But creating a moral identity necessarily entails imagination, behavior, and response. In every setting, participants can use their imagination to determine how they will present themselves. When people share what they imagine with others, they seek affirmation but risk rejection. Scholars examining moral identity thus need to keep in mind that the process occurs at least partly in mind. While gamers' use their imaginations to

create a fictional world, people use imagination all the time to create identities that might or might not become real.

Gamers created moral identities through shared fantasy by affirming the value of qualities valued in real (middle-class) life. They were affirming, in other words, the same values deemed important by adults in more serious situations. Moral identities, then, can be claimed through seemingly frivolous or imaginary activities as long as the participants treat the situation as important, even if outsiders do not. Defining as real situations that become real in their consequences often begins with real acts of imagination. Out of these acts, new selves and identities are formed.

IMAGINARY RISK-TAKING

Although edgework studies deal with risk regularly, they tend to focus on physical risks (Newmahr 2011). For instance, many studies of edgework deal with activities such as skydiving, BASE jumping, motorcycle racing, whitewater rafting, mountain climbing, and other extreme or adventure sports (Ferrell 2005; Holyfield, Jonas, Zajicek 2005; Laurendeau 2006; Lyng 1990; 2005; Simon 2005). Such activities involve at least some threat to a person's body and life, and most people see them as inherently risky. In fact, most edgework scholars find that edgeworkers see the specific activity they participate in as less risky than outsiders do, arguing that only those who do not know what they are doing are really at risk of death or serious injury (Laurendeau 2006; Lyng 1990; Wexler 2010).

When Lyng first proposed the edgework concept, he did not specifically limit it to physical risk. But both he and those following his initial work examined people who

voluntarily took physical risks. Yet even some physically risky activities entail more than just physical danger. For example, several researchers examined criminal activities that also entailed legal risks. The drug users Reith (2005) studied not only risked their bodies, but also their futures. Likewise, Miller (2005) found that adolescents often engaged in crime, despite the threat to their education, future careers, and freedom because they found it more exciting than the rest of their lives. There have now been numerous studies of different crimes using the edgework concept (Anderson and Brown 2010).

Risks, then, are in the eye of the risk-taker. Smith (2005) and Wexler (2010) examined financial risks, focusing on stock traders. These traders took career risks, as did the Victorian lawyers studied by Simon (2005). Academics and researchers also take career risks, as described by Hamm (2005) and Sjoberg (2005). All of these risks, however, potentially have concrete consequences: the loss of life or limb, career, money, or freedom. In some cases the risks might be slim, but the stakes are not imaginary.

More recently, scholars have started to pay attention to social, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual risks. For instance, Newmahr (2011) studied the emotional risks that sadomasochism (S/M) participants take in trusting each other. Jones (2010) examined the risk of social ostracism witches face when they participate in non-standard religious practices. Bromley (2007) looked at what he calls “spiritual edgework,” which is what firewalkers and serpent handlers do when they engage in risky behavior as part of religious ritual. Here again, these are activities that still entail some concrete risk of harm. Participants put their emotional stability, social acceptance, and/or spiritual well-being on the line. There is still an edge, beyond which damage can be incurred.

Gamers work together, collectively creating risk for each other within the imaginary world of the game. The entire game is premised on a GM coming up with a fictional scenario involving obstacles for the players' characters to overcome. By creating fictional challenges, the GM is setting up risk for the players. If they fail at edgework, their characters may die. The edge, such as it is, is a product of collective imagination. The enjoyment, however, is real.

The risks, then, are constructed through collaborative imagination of what the characters are experiencing. Players take imaginary risks when they have their characters act. Without other players and a GM, an individual gamer could not effectively engage in edgework without the edge. Furthermore, without participants sharing the inventive products of their imaginations, the game would be dull and not worth playing. Gamers, it could be said, create edges with each other and for each other. The more creative and cooperative the players, the more satisfying the edge.

Gamers and drug users are not the only people who struggle to find a satisfying balance between fantasy and reality. Gamers say "it's just a game," much like soap opera fans say "it's only a soap" to minimize negative emotions from story developments they do not like (Baym 1998:126). Similarly, parents frequently remind their children that the video games they play or the TV shows they watch are not real to calm them down when they get upset (Jones 2002). Gamers, on the other hand, want their collective imaginings to feel real. For gamers, what lies *beyond* the edge is not damage but a safe reawakening to everyday life. On the other hand, physical safety does not preclude self-change.

In imaginary risk-taking, it is not one's body, life, job, or money that is at stake. Rather, it is social acceptance and identity. Gamers who fail at edgework repeatedly can be ostracized, losing their connection to other subculture members. They can also suffer diminished self-efficacy if their characters die. There are real, if not physical, consequences, underscoring the point that imagination matters for the construction of selves.

As people's lives continue to move online, there will be more imaginary risk-taking of the kind that gamers do. The popularity of online games, such as World of Warcraft, combined with the large number of people using social media, such as Facebook, mean that many people take risks that have no physical reality. Instead of treading the boundaries of life and death, virtual environments involve emotional and mental boundaries, as well as the boundaries of sanity/insanity and order/disorder. In some cases there will be real-world consequences. Even virtual edges are not without their risks.

HEROISM AND POSSIBLE SELVES

As gamers engage in fictive heroism, they generate possible selves. Possible selves are the images of themselves that people get about their future, potential, and their past (Markus and Nurius 1986). Drawing from social life around them, people come up with projections of what they could be like, or were like, based on their experiences. For instance, a person who does poorly at a job interview might imagine herself as unemployed, while someone who gets a promotion might imagine herself as CEO. Because they are only imagined possibilities, people cannot confirm possible selves, yet they use them to assess

their current selves. By imagining themselves as heroes in the game, role-players generate heroic possible selves they use to help them feel better about their current lives.

Markus and Nurius (1986) further argued that people can have multiple possible selves in different parts of their lives, such as education, work, family, health, beauty, and so on. Having a positive experience may call forth a positive possible self, while a negative experience could activate a negative possible self. Previous research has examined the role of possible selves in fostering educational or work achievement (Brown and Diekmann 2010; Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry 2006; Pisarik and Shoffner 2009), self-esteem (Dunkel and Anthis 2001; Vignoles, Manzi, Regalia, Jemmolo, and Scabini 2008), and conformity to the law (Abrams and Aguilar 2005; Meek 2011; Oyserman and Markus 1990). These scholars, and most others using the concept, focus on possible future selves, even though Markus and Nurius imposed no such limitation in their initial conceptualization. Indeed, my study shows how people can create possible selves by projecting themselves into an alternate reality.

Gamers did not project themselves into the future. While many games are set in the future or the past, the worlds are still fictional and entail fantastical elements. In *Harnmaster*, for instance, the game is set in a fictional medieval world. While gamers could just imagine themselves living in the medieval past, *Harn* is not that. The world involves magic, priests that can heal people using divine power, and mythical creatures. Similarly, games like *Traveller* or *Eclipse Phase* are set in a fictional future where there are aliens, and people can be put into alternate bodies.

Moreover, gamers create characters that are not replicas of themselves. While gamers frequently try to replicate the qualities in themselves they value the most, their characters are

different from them in many ways, including physical characteristics, race (and sometimes species), sex, abilities, background, experiences, and so on. They are not merely imagining themselves in the alternative world. Instead, they are imagining a hypothetical person, a slightly better version of themselves, in a different world. They then collectively tell a story in which those characters are heroes.

The character is a possible self, and usually a positive possible self. Most often, players imagine themselves as successful at combat, saving lives, and achieving their goals despite serious opposition. What gamers learn from this imagining is that they can figure out how to do what's right and how to act like heroes. In this sense, they possess the *character* of heroes, if not the opportunity to be heroes in the real world. Inside them, nonetheless, is a possible heroic self.

Markus and Nurius (1986) also argued that one of the advantages of possible selves is that they exist only in imagination, which means that no one else can restrict a person's possible selves. Although culture, media, and peers will shape what a person considers possible, the imagination can always transcend the limits of the mundane (Markus and Nurius 1986). But how might this actually happen? How do individuals transcend the limits of their imaginations?

My study shows how possible selves are constructed through collaborative storytelling in which participants work together to create each individual's possible self. For gamers, everyone is involved in the construction of possible selves. Character creation and action involve group decisions. Not only do gamers help each other create characters, they also advise each other about actions to take during the game. Players also need GM approval

to play their characters, and everyone needs the others to create their individual character's story. Gamers thus do not generate possible selves in an alternative reality on their own. They tell an unfolding story together, creating possible selves that are not entirely predictable.

Advocates of using possible selves to help prevent crime or increase educational attainment or self-esteem note the importance of social interaction. But rather than see the very construction of possible selves as collaborative, they still consider the role of others to be secondary (Abrams and Aguilar 2005; Meek 2011; Oyserman and Markus 1990). My analysis of the cooperation necessary for gamers to create and confirm their possible selves within the game suggests that scholars need to pay more attention to the interactive construction of possible selves. What gamers do – and what might be done in other contexts where self-change is the explicit goal – is to narrate positive possible selves into existence, and then to affirm these selves for each other.

Finally, my research demonstrates that people can use possible selves to gain control over their personal narrative identities. Typically, people cannot dictate the environment, characters, or time frame of the stories of their lives (Loseke 2007). When people tell their stories, they are stuck with a particular place of birth and family of origin. Gamers, however, *choose* these matters when they create characters. In creating possible selves, gamers are thus freed from the constraints of history. The game world allows the creation of a narrative history that leads to possible selves that would otherwise be impossible.

Game world characters and stories are of course fictional. But affirmation of the plausibility of these characters and stories is real. Gamers create for each other and with each

other a process similar to what occurs when homeless people accept others' fictive storytelling (Snow and Anderson 1987). By telling other homeless people what they have done in the past or plan to do in the future, homeless individuals can verbally construct positive narrative identities – provided that they do not challenge the veracity of these stories. Gamers do much the same, the main difference being that gamers' stories are openly understood to be fiction, while the homeless men's stories are covertly understood to be fiction.

Fantasies and imaginary experiences are not the sole purview of gamers. Caughey (1984) demonstrated that people spend a great deal of time engaging in fantasy. Although people tend to act as if they do not live in their imaginations, most people imagine better futures, recall their past, rehearse potential actions, daydream while driving, and otherwise use their imagination throughout the day. Humans also regularly tell stories about the past to help them deal with the present or to explain why they act a certain way (Cohen 1985). Such stories are crafted and recrafted as perceptions change. This implies that understanding how identities are created and altered over time requires sociological attention to imagination.

As I have shown, people can imagine themselves in alternative realities and thereby construct possible selves that will never exist, yet still matter. When people collectively tell stories, they create novel and unpredictable possibilities for new selves. This process entails both greater control over the narrative construction of identity and an element of creativity that emerges out of interaction. Gamers create this kind of self-making process as they play. By taking imagination and collective fantasy more seriously, scholars might find other places where people do the same, making selves that might exist, exist.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study focused on role-playing gamers within a single community. While I took steps to locate as diverse a sample of interviewees as possible, and collected data at the national gaming convention, many participants were connected to each other (often to a much larger extent than I initially anticipated). The gaming community was small enough that most members tended to interact, at least occasionally, with most other members. As a result, most of my data came from observing and interviewing people in a single gaming network.

Future research needs to examine a wider variety of gamers. Not all gamers are equally able to obtain the benefits of participation. Just like women suffer from assumptions they are not intelligent, people often see non-whites as intellectually inferior. It seems possible, then, that a study including more non-whites would find that they experience many of the same difficulties in crafting themselves as good gamers that women face. They might even face more difficulties, as there are few non-whites in the gaming community.

The women in my study fell into two groups: those completely new to role-playing and those with long-term experience. This allowed me to see women who were “learning the ropes,” and some who were highly skilled, but not to see women at mid-levels of mastery. It is possible that women at this mid-level struggle more to establish themselves as good gamers. There is also some evidence to suggest that women at mid-levels of mastery are drawn to women-only gaming groups. Women with some experience or who have played for years, but never GMed, were left out of my sample. Further research should focus on women who do not game with men to examine whether there are differences in identity work

between women who game with men and those who do not. To my knowledge, there has been no study focusing exclusively on female gamers, despite the increasing popularity of gaming among women.

The study of edgework could also benefit from more attention to gender. As Newmahr (2011) argues, most studies of edgeworkers focus on men or masculine activities. Yet men are not the only ones who take risks. Women's edgework is often hidden because scholars privilege independent, physical edgework over collaborative emotional or psychological edgework (Newmahr 2011). Studying activities that do not require physical effort shifts our focus away from men. It can also help us understand men's risk-taking as well. As I have shown, not all men who take risks do so physically. Additionally, the increasing focus on physical safety (Roth 2005) suggests that more people will end up taking imaginary, emotional, and/or mental risks, just as gamers do. More research thus needs to examine nonconventional edgework settings if we are to understand how people, not just men, take risks.

Similarly, studies of heroism typically examine people who try to be heroes or who worship heroes. My study shows, however, that some people approach heroism quite differently. Gamers approached heroism as an opportunity to explore capacities within themselves and thereby explore possible selves. They did not want to be Superman/woman, or worship any super hero. They wanted to collectively imagine a world in which they could discover potentially heroic qualities in themselves. Future research should study other situations in which people explore, in fantasy or reality, their potentials to develop hero-like qualities.

Our understanding of moral identity could benefit from taking leisure more seriously. As my study shows, people do not have to be engaged in a serious activity to gain moral standing from it. Although much research has examined the importance of leisure in people's lives, most studies fail to consider the moral implications of such activities. When scholars do discuss the morality of leisure, they typically focus on the stigma attached to a particular form of leisure (Fine 1991; Olmstead 1998). But as my study shows, people can gain positive moral identities from seemingly frivolous or weird activities. This may be especially important when people do not have conventional avenues for crafting moral identities. Here again we stand to gain insight into how marginalized subcultures allow people to discover or create what they are denied by mainstream culture.

Participation in fantasy has bearing on real life and the construction of real selves. Gamers used their behaviors in a fictional world to construct themselves as good people, take risks, and feel like heroes. But gamers represent just one possibility. Future research needs to consider other places and other ways people use imagination to enhance their lives. Psychologists and literary theorists have long considered imagination an important topic. It seems well past time for sociologists to pay more attention to people's fantasy lives and collective imagining. Without studying the realm of fantasy, we cannot hope to understand what we take to be real.

REFERENCES

- Abrams, Laura S. and Jemel P. Aguilar. 2005. "Negative Trends, Possible Selves, and Behavior Change: A Qualitative Study of Juvenile Offenders in Residential Treatment." *Qualitative Social Work* 4(2):175-96.
- Adler, Patricia and Peter Adler. 1991. *Backboards and Blackboards: College Athletes and Role Engulfment*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Anderson, Leon. 2011. "Time is of the Essence: An Analytic Autoethnography of Family, Work, and Serious Leisure." *Symbolic Interaction* 34(2):133-57.
- Anderson, Leon and Michelle Brown. 2010. "Expanding Horizons of Risk in Criminology." *Sociology Compass* 4(8):544-54.
- Anderson, Leon and Jimmy Taylor. 2010. "Standing Out while Fitting In: Serious Leisure Identities and Aligning Actions among Skydivers and Gun Collectors." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 39(1):34-59.
- Armato, Michael and William Marsiglio. 2002. "Self-Structure, Identity, and Commitment: Promise Keepers' Godly Man Project." *Symbolic Interaction* 25:41-65.
- Baym, Nancy K. 1998. "Talking about Soaps: Communicative Practices in a Computer-Mediated Fan Culture." Pp. 111-129 in *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*, edited by C. Harris and Al. Alexander. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc.
- Beal, Becky. 1996. "Alternative Masculinity and its Effects on Gender Relations in the Subculture of Skateboarding." *Journal of Sport Behavior* 19(3):204-20.
- Beasley, Berrin and Tracy Collins Standley. 2002. "Shirts vs. Skins: Clothing as an Indicator

- of Gender Role Stereotyping in Video Games.” *Mass Communication & Society* 5(3):279-93.
- Beatie, Bruce A. 1983. “The Myth of the Hero: From *Mission: Impossible* to Magdalenian Caves.” Pp. 46-65 in *The Hero in Transition*, edited by R. B. Browne and M. W. Fishwick. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press.
- Belk, Russell and Janeen Arnold Costa. 1998. “The Mountain Man Myth: A Contemporary Consuming Fantasy.” *Journal of Consumer Research* 25:218-40.
- Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Bielo, James. 2004. “Walking in the Spirit of Blood: Moral Identity among Born-Again Christians.” *Ethnology* 43(3):271-89.
- Bogardus, Lisa M. 2012. “The Bolt Wars: A Social Worlds Perspective on Rock Climbing and Intragroup Conflict.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 41(3):283-308.
- Boon, Kevin Alexander. 2005. “Heroes, Metanarratives, and the Paradox of Masculinity in Contemporary Western Culture.” *The Journal of Men’s Studies* 13:301-12.
- Breivik, Gunnar. 2010. “Trends in Adventure Sports in a Post-Modern Society.” *Sport in Society* 13(2):260-73.
- Brenick, Alaina, Alexandra Henning, Melanie Killen, Alexander O’Connor, and Michael Collins. 2007. “Social Evaluations of Stereotypic Images in Video Games: Unfair, Legitimate, or ‘Just Entertainment’?” *Youth & Society* 38(4):395-419.
- Brignall, Thomas and Thomas Van Valey. 2008. “Online Gaming Communities and the Neo Tribalism Movement.” *Theory & Science* 10(1).

- Bromley, David G. 2007. "On Spiritual Edgework: The Logic of Extreme Ritual Performances." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46(3):287-303.
- Brown, Elizabeth R. and Amanda B. Diekman. 2010. "What Will I Be? Exploring Gender Differences in Near and Distant Possible Selves." *Sex Roles* 63(7/8):568-79.
- Burn, Andrew and Diane Carr. 2006. "Motivation and Online Gaming." Pp. 103-118 in *Computer Games: Text, Narrative, and Play*, edited by D. Carr, D. Buckingham, A. Burn, and G. Scott. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Canaan, Joyce. 1996. "'One Thing Leads to Another': Drinking, Fighting, and Working-Class Masculinities." Pp. 114-25 in *Understanding Masculinities: Social Relations and Cultural Arenas*, edited by M. Mac an Ghail. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Catalyst Game Labs. 2009. *Shadowrun: 20th Anniversary Core Rulebook*. Lake Stevens, WA: Catalyst Game Labs/Wizkids Games.
- Caughey, John L. 1984. *Imaginary Social Worlds: A Cultural Approach*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Chee, Florence, Marcelo Vieta, and Richard Smith. 2006. "Online Gaming and the Interactional Self." Pp. 154-174 in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by P. Williams, S. Hendricks, and W. K. Winkler. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- Chen, Mark G. 2009. "Communication, Coordination, and Camaraderie in World of Warcraft." *Games and Culture* 4(1):47-73.
- Cohen, Anthony. 1985. *The Symbolic Construction of Community*. London: Ellis Harwood

- Limited/Tavistock Publications Limited.
- Coleman, James. 1976. "Athletics in High School." Pp. 264-9 in *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role*, edited by D. David and R. Brannon. Reading, MS: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Collison, Mike. 1996. "In Search of the High Life: Drugs, Crime, Masculinities, and Consumption." *British Journal of Criminology* 36:428-44.
- Connor, James. 2009. "The Athlete as Widget: How Exploitation Explains Elite Sport." *Sport in Society* 12(10):1369-77.
- Cooper, Marianne. 2000. "Being the 'Go-To' Guy: Fatherhood, Masculinity, and the Organization of Work in Silicon Valley." *Qualitative Sociology* 23:379-405.
- Copes, Heith and Andy Hochstetter. 2003. "Situational Construction of Masculinity among Male Street Thieves." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 32:279-304.
- Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi. 1977. *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Decker, Stephanie. 2010. "Being Period: An Examination of Bridging Discourse in a Historical Reenactment Group." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 39:273-296.
- deLuse, Stephanie R. 2008. "Coping with Stress ... The Superhero Way." Pp. 187-200 in *The Psychology of Superheroes: An Unauthorized Exploration*, edited by R. S. Rosenberg and J. Canzoneri. Dallas, TX: BenBella Books.
- DeSousa, Bruna Campello, Leonardo Xavier de Lima Silva, and Antonio Roazzi. 2010. "MMORPGS and cognitive performance: A study with 1280 Brazilian high school students." *Computers in Human Behavior* 26(6):1564-73.
- Dotter, Daniel. 1987. "Growing Up is Hard to Do: Rock and Roll Performers as Cultural

- Heroes.” *Sociological Spectrum* 7(1):25-44.
- Dunkel, Curt S. and Kristine S. Anthis. 2001. “The Role of Possible Selves in Identity Formation: A Short-Term Longitudinal Study.” *Journal of Adolescence* 24:765-76.
- Edelstein, Alan. 1996. *Everybody is Sitting on the Curb: How and Why America’s Heroes Disappeared*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Fannon, Sean Patrick. 1999. *The Fantasy Roleplaying Gamer’s Bible*. 2nd ed. Jacksonville, FL: Obsidian Studios.
- Fannon, Sean Patrick. 2012. “Bring Dice & Chips.” DRIVETHRU RPG.Com e-mail newsletter. Retrieved April 19, 2012.
- Ferrell, Jeff. 2005. “The Only Possible Adventure: Edgework and Anarchy.” Pp. 75-88 in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by S. Lyng. New York: Routledge.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 1983. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 1991. “Justifying Fun: Why We Do Not Teach Exotic Dance in High School.” *Play and Culture* 4:87-99.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 1992. “The Depths of Deep Play: The Rhetoric and Resources of Morally Controversial Leisure.” *Play and Culture* 5(3):246-51.
- Fishwick, Marshall W. 1983. “The Hero in Transition.” Pp. 5-13 in *The Hero in Transition*, edited by R. B. Browne and M. W. Fishwick. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press.
- Fraser, Robbie. 2005. *Gamerz*. Tierra Entertainment.
- Fridman, Daniel. 2010. “From Rats to Riches: Game Playing and the Production of the

- Capitalist Self.” *Qualitative Sociology* 33:423-46.
- Gal, Reuven and Richard A. Gabriel. 1982. “Battlefield Heroism in the Israeli Defense Force.” *International Social Science Review* 57(4):232-35.
- Gibson, Gregory C., Richard Hogan, John Stahura, and Eugene Jackson. 2007. “The Making of Heroes: An Attributional Perspective.” *Sociological Focus* 40(1):72-97.
- Gilmore, Sean and Alicia Crissman. 1997. “Video Games: Analyzing Gender Identity and Violence in This New Virtual Reality.” *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 21:181-99.
- Goffman, Erving. 1997. “Social Life as Game.” Pp. 126-146 in *The Goffman Reader*, edited by Charles Lemert and Ann Branaman. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Gottschalk, Simon. 2010. “The Presentation of Avatars in Second Life: Self and Interaction in Social Virtual Spaces.” *Symbolic Interaction* 33:501-25.
- Graham, Melody A., Jennifer Border, Gwen DeCaluwe, Jennifer Foemmel, and Kelly McGraw. 2001. “Adolescents’ Hero Identification and Self-Perception.” *Perceptual and Motor Skills* 93:71-2.
- Green, B. Christine and Ian Jones. 2005. “Serious Leisure, Social Identity, and Sport Tourism.” *Sport in Society* 8(2):164-81.
- Grigsby, Mary. 2011. “Subcultural Masculine Moral Identity Work among Rural Mississippi Noodlers: ‘A Special Breed of Men.’” *Anthropologica* 53(1):159-71.
- Grouling Cover, Jennifer. 2010. *The Creation of Narrative in Tabletop Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

- Hakanen, Ernest A. 1989. "The (D)Evolution of Heroes: An Expanded Typology of Heroes for the Electronic Age." *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology* 17(2):153-8.
- Hamm, Mark S. 2005. "Doing Terrorism Research in the Dark Ages: Confessions of a Bottom Dog." Pp. 273-291 in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by S. Lyng. New York: Routledge.
- Harvey, Joan, George Erdos, and Lisa Turnbull. 2009. "How Do We Perceive Heroes?" *Journal of Risk Research* 12(3/4):313-27.
- Hendricks, Sean Q. 2006. "Incorporative Discourse Strategies in Tabletop Fantasy Role-Playing Gaming." Pp. 39-56 in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. P. Williams, S. Q. Hendricks, and W. K. Winkler. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- Herman, Nancy J. 1993. "Return to Sender: Reintegrative Stigma-Management Strategies of Ex-Psychiatric Patients." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22:295-330.
- Hollander, Paul. 2010. "Why the Celebrity Cult?" *Society* 47:388-91.
- Holden, Daphne. 1997. "'On Equal Ground': Sustaining Virtue among Volunteers in a Homeless Shelter." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 26(2):117-45.
- Holub, Shayla C., Marie S. Tisak, and David Mullins. 2008. "Gender Differences in Children's Hero Attributions: Personal Hero Choices and Evaluations of Typical Male and Female Heroes." *Sex Roles* 58(7/8):567-78.
- Holyfield, Lori and Gary Fine. 1997. "Adventure as Character Work: The Collective Taming of Fear." *Symbolic Interaction* 20:343-63.
- Holyfield, Lori, Lillian Jonas, and Anna Zajicek. 2005. "Adventure without Risk is Like

- Disneyland.” Pp. 173-186 in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by S. Lyng. New York: Routledge.
- Huffaker, Sandy. 2012. “In Virtual Play, Sex Harassment is All Too Real.” *The New York Times*, August 2. Retrieved August 2, 2012
(http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/02/us/sexual-harassment-in-online-gaming-stirs-anger.html?_r=1).
- Irvine, Leslie. 2000. “‘Even Better Than the Real Thing’: Narratives of the Self in Codependency.” *Qualitative Sociology* 23(1):9-28.
- Ivory, James D. 2006. “Still a Man’s Game: Gender Representation in Online Reviews of Video Games.” *Mass Communication & Society* 9(1):103-114.
- Jackall, Robert. 1988. *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, Allan. 2006. *Privilege, Power, and Difference*. 2nd ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill Book Company.
- Jones, Cris Calley. 2010. “Playing at the Queer Edges.” *Leisure Studies* 29(3):269-87.
- Jones, Gerard. 2002. *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kanter, Rosabeth. 1977. *Men and Women of the Corporation*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kendall, Lori. 2000. “‘Oh No! I’m a Nerd’: Hegemonic Masculinity in an Online Forum.” *Gender and Society* 14:256-74.
- Klapp, Orrin Edgar. 1969. *Collective Search for Identity*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

- Kleinman, Sherryl. 1996. *Opposing Ambitions: Gender and Identity in an Alternative Organization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Kobayashi, Tetsuro. 2010. "Bridging Social Capital in Online Communities: Heterogeneity and Social Tolerance of Online Game Players in Japan." *Human Communication Research* 36(4):546-69.
- Kohn, Melvin L. 1969. *Class and Conformity: A Study in Values*. Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press.
- Langer, Ellen J. 1975. "The Illusion of Control." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 32:311-28.
- Lareau, Annette. 2003. *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Layng, Anthony. 2010. "Women Remain Oppressed." Pp. 370-323 in *The Gendered Society Reader*, edited by M. Kimmel and A. Aronson. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Leonard, David. 2003. "Live in Your World, Play in Ours: Race, Video Games, and Consuming the Other." *Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education* 314.
- Leonard, David. 2004. "Unsettling the Military Entertainment Complex: Video Games and a Pedagogy of Peace." *Studies in Media and Information Literacy Education* 4(4).
- Lindholm, Charles. 1990. *Charisma*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Liss, Marsha B., Lauri C. Reinhardt, and Sandra Fredriksen. 1983. "TV Heroes: The Impact of Rhetoric and Deeds." *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 4:175-87.
- Lockwood, Penelope and Ziva Kunda. 1997. "Superstars and Me: Predicting the Impact of

- Role Models on the Self.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 73(1):91-103.
- Lois, Jennifer. 2005. “Gender and Emotion Management in the Stages of Edgework.” Pp. 117-152 in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by S. Lyng. New York: Routledge.
- Lyng, Stephen. 1990. “Edgework: A Social Psychological Analysis of Voluntary Risk Taking.” *American Journal of Sociology* 95:851-86.
- Lyng, Stephen. 2005. “Sociology at the Edge: Social Theory and Voluntary Risk Taking.” Pp. 17-49 in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by S. Lyng. New York: Routledge.
- Markus, Hazel and Paula Nurius. 1986. “Possible Selves.” *American Psychologist* 41(9):954-69.
- Mauldin, R. Kirk. 2004. “Perpetuating the Stereotypes: The Hidden Villainy of Female and Minority Heroes.” *Sociological Imagination* 40(1):3-14.
- McCutcheon, Lynn E., Diane D. Ashe, James Houran, and John Maltby. 2003. “A Cognitive Profile of Individuals Who Tend to Worship Celebrities.” *The Journal of Psychology* 137(4):309-22.
- McMahon, Martha. 1995. *Engendering Motherhood: Identity and Self-Transformation in Women’s Lives*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Meek, Rosie. 2011. “The Possible Selves of Young Fathers in Prison.” *Journal of Adolescence* 34(5):941-49.
- Mello, Heather L. 2006. “Invoking the Avatar: Gaming Skills and Cultural and Out-of-Game

- Capital.” Pp. 175-195 in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. P. Williams, S. Q. Hendricks, and W. K. Winkler. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- Messner, Michael. 1989. “Masculinities and Athletic Careers.” *Gender & Society* 3:71-88.
- Messner, Michael. 1990. “Boyhood, Organized Sports, and the Construction of Masculinities.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 18:416-44.
- Miller, William J. 2005. “Adolescents on the Edge: The Sensual Side of Delinquency.” Pp. 153-171 in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by S. Lyng. New York: Routledge.
- Moore, Christopher. 2005. “Commonising the Enclosure: Online Games and Reforming Intellectual Property Regimes.” *Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society* 3(2):100-14.
- Myers, David. 1992. “Simulating the Self.” *Play & Culture* 5:420-40.
- Newmahr, Staci. 2011. “Chaos, Order, and Collaboration: Toward a Feminist Conceptualization of Edgework.” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 40(6):682-712.
- Newman, Katherine. 1999. *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City*. New York: Knopf and the Russell Sage Foundation.
- Nephew, Michelle. 2006. “Playing with Identity: Unconscious Desire and Role-Playing

- Games.” Pp. 120-139 in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by P. Williams, S. Hendricks, and W. K. Winkler. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- North, Adrian C., Victoria Bland, and Nicky Ellis. 2005. “Distinguishing Heroes from Celebrities.” *British Journal of Psychology* 96:39-52.
- Olmstead, A. D. 1988. “Morally Controversial Leisure: The Social World of Gun Collectors.” *Symbolic Interaction* 11(2):277-87.
- Oyserman, Daphna, Deborah Bybee, and Kathy Terry. 2006. “Possible Selves and Academic Outcomes: How and When Possible Selves Impel Action.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 91(1):188-204.
- Oyserman, Daphna and Hazel Markus. 1990. “Possible Selves in Balance: Implications for Delinquency.” *The Journal of Social Issues* 46(2):141-57.
- Patterson, Ian and Shane Pegg. 2009. “Serious Leisure and People with Intellectual Disabilities: Benefits and Opportunities.” *Leisure Studies* 28(4):387-402.
- Pisarik, Christopher T. and Marie F. Shoffner. 2009. “The Relationship among Work Possible Selves, Socioeconomic Position, and the Psychological Well-Being of Individuals in Early Adulthood.” *Journal of Career Development* 35(3):306-25.
- Pomerantz, Shauna, Dawn H. Currie, and Deirdre M. Kelly. 2004. “Sk8er girls: Skateboarders, Girlhood and Feminism in Motion.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 27:547-57.
- Porpora, Douglas V. 1996. “Personal Heroes, Religion, and Transcendental Metanarratives.” *Sociological Forum* 11(2):209-29.

- Pretzinger, Katie. 1976. "The American Hero: Yesterday and Today." *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 4:36-40.
- Rankin, Lindsay E. and Alice H. Eagly. 2008. "Is His Heroism Hailed and Hers Hidden? Women, Men, and the Social Construction of Heroism." *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 32(4):414-22.
- Reith, Gerda. 2005. "On the Edge: Drugs and the Consumption of Risk in Late Modernity." Pp. 227-245 in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by S. Lyng. New York: Routledge.
- Riessman, Catherine Kohler. 2003. "Performing Identities in Illness Narrative: Masculinity and Multiple Sclerosis." *Qualitative Research* 3:5-33.
- Ridgeway, Celicia. 1993. "Gender Status and the Social Psychology of Expectations." Pp. 175-198 in *Theory on Gender/Feminism on Theory*, edited by P. England. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Rollin, Roger R. 1983. "The Lone Ranger and Lenny Skutnik: The Hero as Popular Culture." Pp. 14-45 in *The Hero in Transition*, edited by R. B. Browne and M. W. Fishwick. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press.
- Rosenberg, Robin S. and Jennifer Canzoneri, eds. 2008. *The Psychology of Superheroes: An Unauthorized Exploration*. Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, Inc.
- Roth, Leslie T. 2010. "The Moral Construction of Risk." Pp. 469-484 in *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality*, edited by S. Hitlin and S. Vaisey. New York: Springer.
- Sallaz, Jeffrey J. 2008. "Deep Plays: A Comparative Ethnography of Gambling Contests in Two Post-Colonies." *Ethnography* 9(1):5-33.

- Saltzman Chafetz, Janet and Joseph A. Kotarba. 1995. "Son Worshipers: The Role of Little League Mothers in Recreating Gender." *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 18:217-41.
- Sanford, Kathy and Leanna Madill. 2006. "Resistance through Video Game Play: It's a Boy Thing." *Canadian Journal of Education* 29:287-306.
- Schwalbe, Michael. 1996. *Unlocking the Iron Cage: The Men's Movement, Gender Politics, and American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Schwalbe, Michael and Douglas Mason-Schrock. 1996. "Identity Work as Group Process." *Advances in Group Processes* 13:113-47.
- Schwalbe, Michael, Sandra Godwin, Daphne Holden, Douglas Schrock, Shealy Thompson, and Michelle Wolkomir. 2000. "Generic Processes in the Reproduction of Inequality: An Interactionist Analysis." *Social Forces* 79: 419-52.
- Schwartz, Barry. 1985. "Emerson, Cooley, and the American Heroic Vision." *Symbolic Interaction* 103-20.
- Simon, Jonathan. 2005. "Edgework and Insurance in Risk Societies: Some Notes on Victorian Lawyers and Mountaineers." Pp. 203-226 in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by S. Lyng. New York: Routledge.
- Smith, Charles W. 2005. "Financial Edgework: Trading in Market Currents." Pp. 187-200 in *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking*, edited by S. Lyng. New York: Routledge.
- Snow, David and Leon Anderson. 1987. "Identity Work among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities." *American Journal of Sociology* 92:1336-71.
- Stallabrass, Julian. 1993. "Just Gaming: Allegory and Economy in Computer Games." *New*

- Left Review* 198: 83-106.
- Stebbins, Robert A. 1982. "Serious Leisure: A Conceptual Statement." *The Pacific Sociological Review* 25(2):251-72.
- Stebbins, Robert A. 2001. "Serious Leisure." *Society* 38(4):53-7.
- Thompson, Jenny. 2004. *War Games: Inside the World of 20th-Century War Reenactors*. Washington: Smithsonian Books.
- Turowetz, Jason J. and Douglas W. Maynard. 2010. "Morality in the Social Interactional and Discursive World of Everyday Life." Pp. 503-526 in *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality*, edited by S. Hitlin and S. Vaisey. New York: Springer.
- Tychsen, Anders, Michael Hitchens, Thea Brolund, and Manolya Kavakli. 2006. "Live Action Role-Playing Games: Control, Communication, Storytelling, and MMORPG Similarities." *Games and Culture* 1(3):252-75.
- Vancil, Matt. 2008. *The Gamers: Dorkness Rising*. Dead Gentlemen Productions.
- Vignoles, Vivian L., Claudia Manzi, Camillo Regalia, Simone Jemmolo, and Eugenia Scabini. 2008. "Identity Motives Underlying Desired and Feared Possible Future Selves." *Journal of Personality* 76(5):1165-1200.
- Walker, Lawrence J., Jeremy A. Frimer, and William L. Dunlop. 2010. "Varieties of Moral Personality: Beyond the Banality of Heroism." *Journal of Personality* 78(3):907-42.
- Ward Gailey, Christine. 1993. "Mediated Messages: Gender, Class, and Cosmos in Home Video Games." *Journal of Popular Culture* 27:81-97.
- Warshow, Robert. 1963. "The Gunfighter as Moral Hero." *Hibbert Journal* 61:172-6.
- Waskul, Dennis. 2003. *Self-Games and Body-Play: Personhood in Online Chat and*

- Cybersex*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc.
- Waskul, Dennis D. 2006. "The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing: The Ludic Self and Everyday Life." Pp. 19-38 in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. P. Williams, S. Q. Hendricks, and W. K. Winkler. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.
- Waskul, Dennis and Matt Lust. 2004. "Role-Playing and Playing Roles: The Person, Player, and Persona in Fantasy Role-Playing." *Symbolic Interaction* 27:333-56.
- Wexler, Mark N. 2010. "Financial Edgework and the Persistence of Rogue Traders." *Business and Society Review* 115(1):1-25.
- Wheaton, Belinda. 2000. "'Just Do It': Consumption, Commitment, and Identity in the Windsurfing Subculture." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 17:254-74.
- Wheaton, Belinda and Becky Beal. 2003. "'Keeping It Real': Subcultural Media and the Discourse of Authenticity in Alternative Sport." *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 38(2):155-76.
- White, Steven H. and Joseph E. O'Brien. 1999. "What is a Hero? An Exploratory Study of Students' Conceptions of Heroes." *Journal of Moral Education* 28(1):81-95.
- Wilkins, Amy. 2008. *Wannabes, Goths, and Christians: The Boundaries of Sex, Style, and Status*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Williams, J. Patrick, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler. 2006. "Introduction: Fantasy Games, Gaming Cultures, and Social Life." Pp. 1-18 in *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games*, edited by J. P. Williams, S. Q. Hendricks, and W. K. Winkler. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc.

- Williams, J. Patrick and David Kirschner. 2012. "Coordinated Action in the Massively Multiplayer Online Game World of Warcraft." *Symbolic Interaction* 35(3):340-67.
- Williams, Patrick and Heith Copes. 2005. "How Edge Are You? Constructing Authentic Identities and Subcultural Boundaries in a Straightedge Internet Forum." *Symbolic Interaction* 28:67-89.
- Willer, Robb, Matthew Feinberg, Kyle Irwin, Michael Schultz, and Brent Simpson. 2010. "The Trouble with Invisible Men: How Reputational Concerns Motivate Generosity." Pp. 315-330 in *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality*, edited by S. Hitlin and S. Vaisey. New York: Springer.
- Wilson, Robert. 1981. "The Courage to Be Leisured." *Social Forces* 60(2):282-303.
- Zurcher, Louis A. 1970. "The 'Friendly' Poker Game: A Study of an Ephemeral Role." *Social Forces* 49(2): 173-86.
- Zurcher, Louis A. 1985. "The War Game: Organizational Scripting and the Expression of Emotion." *Symbolic Interaction* 8(2):191-206.