A stylized illustration of Medusa with green snakes for hair, wearing glasses and holding dice. The background is a gradient of yellow, orange, and pink. The text is in a bold, orange, outlined font.

MEDUSA'S GUIDE FOR GAMER GIRLS

FEMINISM AND GAMING

Medusa’s Guide for Gamer Girls: Feminism and Gaming

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Medusa's Guide for Gamer Girls: Feminism and Games is one section of a forthcoming larger book that will be released as individual PDFs before being compiled into the larger work. While, as the title denotes, the book is aimed at a female audience, it is by no means anti-male or against individuals of a diverse gender. Even though I am *The Feminist Conspiracy*, I firmly believe the world needs us all, that we are all equal, and I do hope that others will read and find value in the book.

Additionally, to feminists who detest being called "girl," note that I chose the title both because of its alliteration and because I personally have no issue with the word; likewise, I often call adult men "boys." It was good enough for *The Golden Girls*, one of my favorite TV shows of the day, so it's good enough for me. Also "girl" appropriately harkens to the child's playful nature that—hopefully—we've not all lost. So, if you despise the word, I ask that you please forgive this girl for using it and not let its use hinder you from reading and enjoying the important thoughts the authors herein have to share.

Lastly, I thank those who supported this project. I will ensure everyone is named in the final book. I greatly appreciate your help in making this a reality. I also want to thank Janet Bell for author and contract wrangling, Emily Mottesheard for layout and design, Jacob Blackmon for the cool medusa on the cover, and Melissa Gilbert for editing assistance. They have been invaluable partners in this enterprise.

Christina Stiles
August 2017





Introduction

One of the first times I ran games at a local gaming convention, a group of four teenage guys show up at my table. When they saw that a woman would be running the game, they all quickly made excuses to leave. Now, it had already taken a considerable bit of courage on my part—a true introvert—to break out of my shell to run a game in public...with people I didn't know, so this snub because of my gender sent my fake bravery into a tailspin that weekend. Luckily, this only happened once, and I would go on to run many a game at various conventions over the years.

Still, the situation hurt. I had grown up gaming with guys and playing sports with them, even. I had never been singled out for being a girl in that time and denied the opportunity to play. To go to a place where people gathered to share a love of gaming and be rejected because of my gender was something entirely new to me.

Over the years, I've witnessed, if not experienced myself, other gender slights (or perks, in one instance) at cons or game stores when ladies join a table. For instance:

- *The guys assume the girl needs help playing her character. No one asks if she knows how to play; they just assume she doesn't.*
- *The guys will ignore her comments when it comes to rules discussions.*
- *The guys assume the girl's character, which is most often female, as well, is one they can and should hit on.*
- *If the girl is attractive, the guys begin flirting with her at the table, making her uncomfortable.*
- *The girl is the Game Master's girlfriend, and she gets special treatment because of this—to the annoyance of the other players.*

There are many more scenarios, of course. These are just a few that come to mind as I'm writing this.

My advice to gamer girls who experience such groups is to avoid gaming with people who do not treat them as legitimate gamers at the table. (I also advise them not to be the girlfriend getting special treatment. Not cool.) I assure them that groups exist where this behavior does not take place, and they can find welcoming folks to join with a little effort. I have been a part of such accepting groups, and I've often been the only woman at the table. I'm currently in such a group, in fact! The guys I game with are some of the best at making anyone and everyone welcome at the table.

My desire to combat these issues for women in gaming led me to producing this book. I hope you pass it along to your daughters and sons.

Christina Stiles
August 2017



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LIFE IS ART ... ART IS LIFE

DOES IT MATTER?

By Janet Bell

I admit it: titles like this article's, about and aimed at women and girls in gaming, make me vaguely uncomfortable. I'm not a feminist in an activist kind way. I'm a selfish feminist. I want to do what I want without regard to my gender, in areas where gender doesn't matter. For the most part, life has worked out that way. I studied math and science, worked in the computer industry since *mumble mumble*, started playing RPGs in college in the AD&D era, and have spent way too many hours in front of a console or keyboard at Durandal's beck and call or snagging archeological treasures from under the noses of The Bad Guys—all traditionally men's domains. Other people either haven't pressured me or my near-autistic obliviousness to social cues provided shelter from the subtler efforts. To be quite honest, other women have been the source of far more discomfort and hurt feelings than male colleagues. So, I see books like this and think, "Does it matter? If you want to game, go out and game. No big deal. What's the problem?"

I've also seen the occasional backlash against men to placate women. Why advertisers think that portraying men as incompetent idiots who can't use a stove or make a sandwich makes up for discrimination against women baffles me. Commercials showing men unable to change a diaper or run a dishwasher only to be rescued by Competent Mom infuriate me. I like men. Many of my friends are men. I've dated men. Heck, my beloved father was a man. Making yourself feel better by dragging others down is the bully's road. Discrimination reversed is still discrimination. I didn't want to be part of any project that waved a finger in the face of my male friends and chastised them for their gender, so Christina's assurance that this work would be constructive and helpful has been a relief. Still, why is it needed?

This book has spurred me to examine my life to spot what bothered me and how to help other women through such situations. Some women have real horror stories from the gaming table—anywhere from being handed characters because the men at the table assumed creation mechanics were beyond them, to being forced into hideous stereotypes of women's roles from played-out movies of the 1940s and 50s. Not me. I've played with friends, and though I do feel out of place in a gaming store full of men, nobody there has bothered me. I felt the same way at technology conferences where I was the only women among more than two hundred attendees,

or the only woman in a physics class of thirty. I've seen no effort to exclude me. What am I missing? How do I relate? Furthermore, if I as a woman can't relate, how can men? I struggled for a handle.

My mother was a sweater-and-pearls kind of lady, but she was raised to be self-sufficient in an era when many young women were expected to marry and become housewives. She worked through college and earned a BA in English and an MS in library science. She was delighted when her first child was an adorable little girl who could be dressed up in frills and bows and dismayed when those frills and bows came home torn by brambles and muddied from the neighbor's horseshoe pit. Her daughter spurned Barbie for GI Joe and played army and baseball with the boys in the neighborhood. Mom absolutely drew the line at my jumping from my best friend's garage roof into their swimming pool. So, when I was five and suddenly announced that I *wanted* a doll, Mom dropped everything to take me to the toy store and get a doll before the wind changed. As we walked into the toy store, I announced my one condition: I wanted a doll that looked like me.

I am not a woman of color nor do I have unusual features in any way. Mother led me to the doll aisle, and we inspected the rows and rows of baby dolls. Every single one had blue eyes and blonde hair. Not one had my black hair and brown eyes. After we had exhaustively searched the place and stood baffled, I asked, "Mommy, why doesn't anybody want a little girl that looks like me?" Her hurried words of reassurance bounced off that wall of glassy blue eyes and shining blonde curls and lay flopping on the floor, dying. She knew it. Even at five, I knew it. I clearly wasn't wanted. The evidence was right there. That little girl's hurt remains with me today, despite all the progress, personal and social, of the subsequent decades. Nobody set out to hurt me. I don't for one moment believe a Star Chamber of wicked capitalists decided to crush the feelings of all the little brunettes in the world. But there it was, blonde and blue. And it hurt. That memory opened the door into understanding this book.

There is a perception among some women that gaming is a man's domain. They may have tried to take a seat at a table and been rebuffed. They may have browsed the gaming or fantasy books and seen those awful covers, with an over-muscled hero brandishing an over-compensatory great sword while a barely-clad woman clings to his leg. Maybe they tried to find a mini that represented their female character, only to find they all looked like *Sports Illustrated* cover models wielding daggers. Whatever the reason, some women have been hurt by either the lack of inclusion or outright exclusion,

and it's kept them from enjoying one of the most fun, creative, and challenging pastimes in the world. [The same may be said about people of color, but that's a topic for another book, a book I dearly hope is written.] Can it be fixed? I certainly hope so. I hope this book goes beyond the con circuit and into general circulation, so girls and women browsing through gaming material see a book that mentions *them*, not a wall of Men Doing Heroic Things. Once they see that we're here, maybe they will notice the woman with the daggers sneaking across the cover of a gaming book. Maybe they'll look inside and see female icons and the word "she" everywhere. Maybe they'll realize they are wanted.

On my fifteenth birthday, my mother caught me alone and handed me a beautifully wrapped present. Within was a baby doll who looked back at me with dark eyes from under dark bangs. Puzzled, I looked to my mother. "A doll? I'm in high school." She nodded. "I know. But I swore since you were five that I would get you that dolly that looked like you. I've been looking ever since." She choked up slightly. "I finally found her." My hurt had become my mother's, her triumph my vindication. I named the doll Linda and put her on a high shelf in my room, where my little sister couldn't get to her, and treasured her for years. As a doll, she was unimportant. But as a symbol, she mattered.

In that same way, I hope this book matters to somebody out there. We're not trying to change the whole world. We don't want exclude others to make room for ourselves. We're people who love gaming reaching out to those girls and women who have felt pushed away. No more. Read, enjoy, learn. Then come to the table. Come play with us. Because you matter

Janet Bell was a nerd before nerding was cool, mostly because she was too oblivious to realize that, as a woman, she wasn't supposed to like math and science and computers and gaming! She started gaming at Northwestern University in 1978, mostly to avoid homework and parties. Her group of classmates (male AND female, even back then) played the still-developing *AD&D* and *Traveller*. After a long hiatus among the Muggles doing IT work and playing video games, she returned to RPGs in 2005 with 3.5 and *Pathfinder*. Today, she lives in Colorado among the elk and bears and hipsters, mentally recording everything she sees to use in the next game.

AMAZONS AT THE GATES

By Pat Bellavance

It is a curious fact that we all take things for granted, regardless of how diligent we might try to be. I have been playing tabletop roleplaying games for the past thirty years, and I have been very fortunate to have a good mix of men and women at my gaming table for the past ten to fifteen years. Looking back now, I realize how lucky I have been.

Society and our collective upbringing have a lot to answer for, and there is still a lot of work to be done. There are numerous possible reasons why the tabletop RPG hobby is predominantly male oriented, and some of the artwork showcasing female warriors in impractical and revealing armor does little to help this perception. Even Gary Gygax, the co-creator of *Dungeons & Dragons*, thought that the reason there were not more women interested in gaming had to do with the different thinking processes of men and women. But, I distinctly remember a time when none of this was something I was even remotely aware of.

When I first was introduced to *D&D* game, I was twelve, going on thirteen. Up to that point, I didn't even know what *D&D* was, aside of some cartoon I remembered seeing when I was younger. This was largely because of where I grew up as opposed to any particular circumstance of upbringing. I was a military brat, and I grew up in Quebec, a very French province located in Canada. So, while I had access to television in both English and French, including a variety of American broadcasts resulting in a lot of Saturday morning cartoons, I don't recall ever seeing anything resembling a roleplaying game in French bookstores. My worldview shifted considerably when my father received a posting in Germany and our family relocated. As I had just started high school, I made new friends, and it didn't take long before I started playing, and then running, my own *D&D* games.

As some of you can imagine, our gaming group was made up exclusively of young, teenaged boys. We had a blast, and none of us ever had tremendous difficulties in school or our schoolwork. As



such, we would game more often, which would mean two or three times a week and typically on the weekends starting Friday evening. We also did what others do at that age, but it was the roleplaying games that forged the bonds of friendship. Our weekly rituals lasted about five years, and during this time, we had other people come and go from our group, and this was largely dictated by people our age who would move to where our families were stationed or got transferred elsewhere.

However, being teenagers, it didn't take long for us to be fortunate enough to attract the attention of (or be distracted by) a girl. It followed that, when one of us began spending time with a girl, it didn't take long before the girl showed up at a game. This was, by no means, a frequent occurrence, and our priorities still somehow meant that the game was important. When I think about it now, it's clear to me that not every girl was interested beyond the fact she wanted to share an interest that her boyfriend happened to have. But this wasn't true in every situation. In our last couple of years of high school, we had two gamer girls who relished the games they played in—they were sisters. One of them was close friends with one of the guys, and when she joined, she got her sister to play as well. While I didn't realize it back then, our games had been changing and probably for the better.

While our games always had elements of adventure, be it the quest, the monsters, the traps, and victory of good versus evil, it was short in depth and richness of development. When the average gamer of the group back when we started was a thirteen-year-old male, a lot of the games focused on the rolls of the dice, the strategies to overcome obstacles, and the completion of a given challenge or task rather than perhaps the experience of the story itself. Part of that could easily be explained away by the virtue of age, but one thing was certain: the inclusion of women in our games changed the way we played.

The differences started off small enough... instead of describing what their characters were communicating, they were actually acting out and "roleplaying" their characters. It was just a few words here and a few sentences there, but it was enough to get others to do the same and respond in kind. The game evolved little by little. In hindsight, it probably gave the shyest members of the group even more confidence to play the part of their characters as opposed to



focusing on the numbers on a character sheet and the rolls of the dice.

Those high school years, in many ways, were a golden age of gaming for me, and many great memories were made, along with a lot of enjoyment and laughter. My graduation from high school also coincided with my return to Canada from that military base I'd called home for five years, and as that chapter came to a close, a new one was about to begin: college. My college years saw a fair bit of gaming, though it would take about a year or two before that would happen again. Time and scheduling became a bit more complicated, and the work wasn't quite a breeze as it had been in high school. Despite challenges, friendships were made and a game somehow got started up. Again, it was a bunch of guys bouncing dice at a gaming table and the focus was on the game, but instead of fantasy and an exploration of imaginary dungeons, our new game of choice was a darker, near-dystopian future with cyber technology and... well, magic, elves, and dwarves. It was a world governed by corporations. It was Seattle, 2050, and the game was called *Shadowrun*.

Those games were certainly entertaining, at least for a while, but it ultimately become too familiar of a routine. Get hired for a mission, go in, and end up having to improvise and escape, guns a-blazing. The game involved more carnage and destruction than actual plot. We rolled a lot of dice, as a single task could require many for a single roll! That was fun... but there was no roleplaying. There was, on the other hand, a lot of kidding around. If it wasn't for some of our collective active imaginations, the game would have likely collapsed sooner than it did. Ultimately, the games and stories lacked substance. As entertaining as they were, they acted more as a divertissement than anything else. It didn't take long before some of the pressures of our studies took precedence, and if it wasn't that, the growing list of responsibilities did.

It was also at this point in my life that I set roleplaying games aside. I socialized in other ways and hung out with different crowds. I moved on from college to my first fulltime job. During the next few years, there were few opportunities for me to get involved in a game. The job I had was during all odd hours and could range from regular day shifts to those starting in the afternoon or even nights. However, I did manage to play the odd game, and this was



my first experience with *Vampire: The Masquerade*. The game was very story/plot heavy, and my experiences with the game involved players who were heavily into roleplaying their characters. It was a definite change of pace from my experiences with *D&D* and other games I had played up to then. Perhaps the focus of this game, which was the first in a series of games built on the “Storyteller System,” is what also drew a greater diversity of players to the game. There was a tremendous backstory to the game, and players were threads in the greater tapestry that made up the campaign. My limited experiences with *Vampire* had me see an equal number of women and men participating in the game to tell a shared story. That didn’t mean there wasn’t any action or combat with some dice rolling, but with this game, it was sometimes better to avoid a such a brutish confrontation. Given the nature of the game, it is probably little wonder that a live-action roleplaying game variant also became immensely popular. The rules system itself was also very accessible to someone who hadn’t played before.

The style of play I experienced was one I also enjoyed. For me, it was always about a bunch of friends getting together to have fun, but it was also readily apparent that the diversity in people and who these active participants were helped shape the game. How the game was presented to the newcomer and how easy it was to join in and participate were also clearly important.

By the time that the third edition of *D&D* was released, I was truly excited for this new vision and direction for the venerable roleplaying game. It had already been several years since I last looked at anything connected to *D&D* and, up to then, I had had no strong interest to run a campaign. That changed with the new edition, and I knew that the only way I could actually get to play the game would be if I assumed the mantle of Dungeon Master, as I once did back in high school. As luck would have it, two of my oldest friends had moved to the city I was residing in, and with nostalgia on our side, we dusted off our dice and got together once again to play.

This time, things were a bit different. Some of the rules certainly took a step toward a system that was a bit more tactical in feel and granular in character creation. But we didn’t care. Instead of using something that was published, I started to create a setting from scratch. Background and story become important factors for

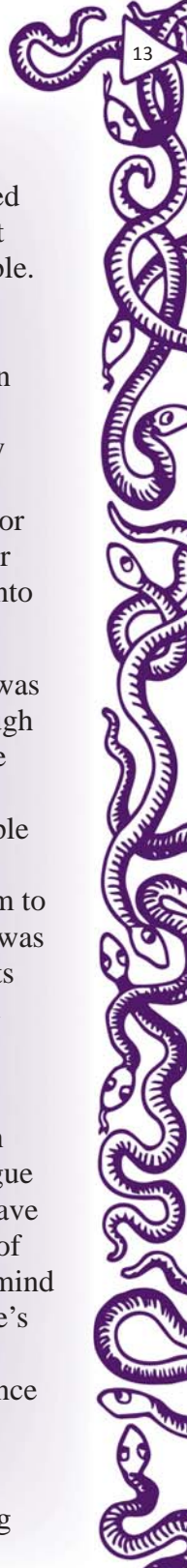


my gaming experience, and despite the tendency to use dice to resolve every little thing, we also all became more involved in the collaborative story that unfolded. While that campaign was not meant to last, other gaming opportunities arose, and each time they did, there was one common element: it wasn't just a bunch of guys around the gaming table. Some of the gamers were sisters, wives or girlfriends, or other close acquaintances.

As time went on, priorities and preferences often shifted. This latest edition of *D&D* we had been playing and enjoyed began to take its toll. With the demands of my job and other responsibilities, it became harder to get a game going. When I did, the prep work needed for the game became too much of a chore given the nature of the ruleset. However, I did find a simpler and rules-lite variant called *Castles & Crusades*, which really made a difference.

This new game offered everything I wanted from *D&D* but was easier and more streamlined. It wasn't difficult for a new player to pick up or a veteran player to learn and adapt to. By the time I found *C&C*, I had met the person who would, one day, become my wife. She was by no means a gamer, even though she had plenty of "geek cred" to her name. She had also been left with a terrible impression of *D&D* in her youth, thanks to playing in a game with her two older siblings. Suffice to say that it turned her off from any sort of roleplaying games well into her adulthood, but she was very supportive of my hobbies and interests. Finally, given time and my enthusiasm about this new game, and perhaps to humor me a little, she decided to give *C&C* a shot. She had fun and so much so that when the topic of gaming came up in conversation, she described this game as "like *D&D* but it doesn't suck." It's a comment that I still find amusing when I think about it.

The truth of the matter was that, though an earlier, negative experience helped form the ideas and opinions she had about gaming at the time, she ended up having fun because the new experience proved to be vastly different. It helped dispel certain notions she had held, and she has continued to game with my friends and me in the past decade as a result. With her participation, it also didn't take very long before we routinely had an even mix of men and women sitting around the gaming table collaborating on the current adventure. Since she started, my wife has grown as a player and roleplays her



characters more with confidence.

When my wife started gaming regularly, it was then that I realized how my games had changed over the years. This was likely what made her successful re-introduction to role playing games possible. I love the mechanics of games, but it was the increasing role of the story in the games that most people are drawn to. The focus on the personas of these adventurers beyond a list of attributes on a character sheet and the interaction of people roleplaying these characters really solidifies the experience for all who are actively participating. And, since we are talking about games that are governed by a set of rules, making sure that they are accessible for all simply means that they are easier to learn and enjoy. An easier rule system also means that these details can more readily fade into the background giving the adventure itself center stage.

When I first started gaming in high school with some friends, it was a magical experience. It was new for me, and I couldn't get enough of it. Had it not been for the two sisters who joined our game, we would not have started to give serious effort to roleplaying our characters. The adventures we played would have remained simple enough with a few quest objectives but little more than that. Our imaginations tended to flesh out our adventures and allowed them to be put on a grander scale in our own minds. The problem is this was something we kept to ourselves. New people with different points of view help us better express ourselves to contribute to a shared storytelling experience.

If it wasn't for a game like *Vampire: The Masquerade* and the women I gamed with, it might have been a few more years down the line before I focused on plots that involved politics and intrigue as opposed to a romp of imaginary hack and slash. Both styles have their place, and both can be a lot of fun. However, though some of us may prefer a certain type of style and story, keeping an open mind and expanding your gaming experience will ensure that everyone's preferences are met. Better yet, a balancing act incorporating all these elements in an adventure might be a more positive experience all around.

Finally, ease of access, both in terms of rules as well as the gaming environment, will allow a greater chance of people trying



a game out and enjoying themselves. A great game doesn't have to have a complicated ruleset to be fun, but a friendly and inviting environment does. Ultimately, this is the biggest challenge as diverse personalities will often clash. If everyone is committed to having fun and essentially wants everyone else at the gaming table to share in this experience and remain respectful and considerate, it shouldn't be an issue. I have been blessed by the fact that most of the people I have gamed with over the years were great, open-minded individuals, and when you have that sort of environment at the gaming table, it will potentially draw in others who are similarly interested. An accessible game system and the exceptional group of people I brought together are what prompted my wife to play then and continue to play now.

My gaming has certainly been affected in a positive way without me even really being aware of it, and it's also nice to see that my gaming table isn't the only one where this has happened or is happening. Diversity in backgrounds and ideas in a positive and supporting environment can allow good things to happen and everyone can have a good time. In my case, the participation of women certainly increased the quality of the games I played, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

When the demands and responsibilities of life permit, **Pat Bellavance** is a part-time writer and occasional blogger. He is the founder of Arcana Creations, a tabletop Role-Playing Game developer and publisher. More recently, the Arcana Elements imprint was launched to publish fiction and nonfiction literature.

If he isn't writing, you might find him painting miniatures, doing research, or simply enjoying a good game. All in all, a love of history, mythology, and strategy are common threads in the variety of hobbies he enjoys. Above that, nothing is better than a good story that embodies these elements and to stir the imagination.

Keeping things interesting, his wife and two Siamese cats are always around to shake things up as well as support the odd creative bout of insanity.



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FEMINISM IN GAMING: A TEEN'S POINT OF VIEW

By Trinity Black

As the daughter of game-industry parents (Jodi and Clint Black), I grew up in a gaming world, surrounded by games and gamers for as long as I can remember. It's an integral part of my life and who I am. But for everything I love about it, there's many more things I think need to be fixed. Women make up a significant percentage of gamers, and have for years, but representation is still lacking wherever you look. Even in the games where you can find good female representation, you'll still find few characters of color or LGBTQ characters, let alone mentally or physically disabled characters. Outside of playing the games, you run into problems, as well. No matter how you game, if you are a marginalized person, then you'll face the issues of stereotyping and harassment from other gamers.

For example, if you look at the character options in a video game, you'll generally find the white-guy characters, the guy who isn't white, and the girl. In some games, you won't even find that. When games take this sort of token character route, you're sure to find characters that are at best vaguely offensive stereotypes and at worst just extremely racist and sexist. When I was a kid, I'd always played and liked the white-guy characters, mostly because they existed beyond a stereotype and had a personality that wasn't dependent on their gender or race. The same issues arise from lack of LGBTQ characters and the stereotyping that happens when they're included in games—and they are portrayed so badly when they are there. I didn't even encounter games with side characters that weren't straight until I was in high school. Going back to when I was a kid and playing as guys, I could romance or like girls, and it wasn't seen as too weird, because of who I was



playing. I see now that some things would've been a lot clearer if it LGBTQ characters had appeared regularly then.

When I was creating my own games, or helping my parents create characters for running games, we never created characters with a gender or race already in our head. We would create characters from archetypes maybe, but the focus was always on, "What would be a cool character to play?" We made them so anyone could sit down at the table, have varied and awesome character to play, and not feel obligated to choose a character based on shared, unchangeable characteristics. Sure, all gaming isn't as customizable as that, but the point of roleplaying is still to put yourself in somebody else's shoes. After a while, it gets boring when the only shoes you can find are from white straight guys. Diversity sells, people! The most diverse games, with the best representation, are usually hits. People want to be represented, especially when some have never seen themselves perfectly represented, ever. Even white straight guys benefit from representation because now they get to step into someone else's shoes. Games can teach empathy and understanding, so being exposed to another culture and type of person helps individuals treat others like human beings.

After all, another problem that's found within the gaming community is the harassment. Conventions, chatting online, and all the other ways gamers communicate are opportunities for marginalized people to be harassed. Girls get sexually harassed and demeaned; people of color, disabled people, and LGBTQ people face slurs and hate speech. For this reason, many people turn to smaller communities to avoid the hate, and some quit altogether. I'm very lucky in this regard, and I know it. My parents already have tight-knit groups at cons and have found their friends, so I grew up facing practically nothing I couldn't handle. However, many people I've met have had to deal with harassment in many forms, and some friends have even faced threats and extremely scary situations. Catcalls, slurs. physical threats,



and death threats—I'm sure we all know someone who's been subjected to harassment in its many forms. It seems the larger the space is, the harder it is to avoid the harassment. So, we see people split off, form their own groups, and separate themselves. That's a solution, but it's only a temporary one, a band-aid on an open wound. We really need to make the larger spaces safe for everyone by working to stop the harassment at its source. It seems like such a large, impossible task. It is a large, extremely tough task, but it is a possible one. It'll take time and effort, but I hope it'll happen.

I've always been perplexed by the large and small injustices of this world. A lot of people think the small stuff isn't worth worrying about when there are larger and supposedly worse problems elsewhere. But issues are issues no matter their comparative size, and even the tiny things can add up over time, becoming a huge problem for someone. Fixing the gaming community can seem like both a major and minor problem, depending on how you see it. I know personally the difference it would make for friends to see changes take place. After all, gaming has always supposedly been for the outsiders, so let's work to make it a culture where you don't have to be a specific type of outsider to join the fun.

Trinity Black is a rising star and legacy in the roleplaying game industry as a 11th grader. She ran her first convention game at MACE in 2009 when she was 9 and continues to offer *Savage Worlds* games at all the conventions her parents attend to promote getting kids into gaming. She had an early start in publishing as an author for *RPGirl Zine 2010*, where she interviewed Christina Stiles, a game designer for the *Faery's Tale RPG*. Now she also has an essay in *Medusa's Guide for Gamer Girls*. In addition to becoming a budding gaming celebrity, she is a Duke Talent Identification Program member and Honor student, has been in films, on stage, and in a commercial, and plays the mellophone and French horn.

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Table Top: 48" x 48"



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Under Table Clearance: 25"
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Table Top: 4'x6' (48"x72")



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Four Words

By Steve Darlington

In politics, they say there's a cliché for every situation.

If you're only talking to your base, you're simply *preaching to the converted* and thus usually *wasting your breath*. If you're speaking to anyone but your base, you'll surely be *falling on deaf ears* and thus *casting pearls before swine*.

If you're reading this book, you're likely one of the converted. You're someone who is aware that women who participate in the gaming hobby and industry face challenges and issues, the like of which men might never even conceive, let alone experience. You also know that a lot of women leave the hobby or never get into it because of these challenges. If you didn't know these things, I'm sure leafing through this book, even a little, has quickly made you aware of them.

You may even have experienced these issues firsthand, being a woman yourself

If any of this applies, you certainly fall into the category of the converted. I find most reasonable men, when given the evidence, are quick to agree that we have a problem. It's something that's becoming harder and harder to ignore as the evidence continues to pile up, to be collected and displayed by folks on the Internet.

We all know there's a problem. Then there's the thing that happens next. We agree there's a problem, and then most men do what I used to do: shake our heads, know we're not *that kind of men* and wonder how things might ever get better.

In November of 2012, I decided doing that wasn't good enough, especially when I saw so many women out there who refused to just shake their heads, who were collating the attitudes they suffered, naming and shaming their attackers, and demanding a better standard in the gaming community and the gaming industry to boot. If they could do it, I could and should. It was time to do something to clean up what was, in fact, my gender's problem.

The question then became how to do that, and it's that question I want to talk about here. Not just what I did, but what you can do. What we all can do.



One thing I did was form an activism group we eventually decided to call Men Ending Slurs and Sexist Attitudes in the Gaming Environment, to produce the acronym the MESSAGE. You can find out more about us at www.gamermesssage.com. We have only just begun our work, but we have an international presence and a membership of hundreds. Our goal is to encourage solidarity and support between men who are members of the converted, but also to encourage them to do more than just shake their heads, too.

The simplest way we can do that is through showing our colours. Those who wear our logo—on their t-shirts, their bag badges, the wall of their game store, wherever—are sending word to other men that making some kind of stand, some kind of protest, some kind of effort to change things will have support. They are not alone, which is so important.

But still, the question remains: what are these efforts? Most of the time, we don't really encounter a great deal of obvious prejudice because it learns very well how to hide. If it were easy to see, it would be easier to erase. So, the bold protest rarely comes up. Instead, we look to find smaller moments where we can find better directions to take, where we can allow more space for women to inhabit, where we can teach each other about the invisible problems. But finding these moments isn't easy or simple.

Although I know I'm preaching to the converted here, it's important to remember that the converted are not, on their own, the answer. Not while men agree there's a problem but don't do anything about it. Not while men don't know how to take the next steps. Not while we don't help educate each other and not while we keep missing opportunities to help. Especially not while I see men who believe they are among the converted, not only failing to seek out ways to find a better way but making big mistakes and actively getting in the way of making things better.

I am speaking here solely to men. I won't try to speak to women about the path to make things better for women. That's what the rest of this book is about, by women far more qualified than I am to talk about such things. They also are more qualified to speak to men, too, on what men need to do. Women know better than men about the problems for women, and as such, they know best how to lead us in making things better. Thus, the first step in knowing how to make things better is to ask them.

The second step is knowing that a lot of men don't listen to women—on anything, but especially when it comes to talking about



women's issues. Even the best, the most enlightened of us, have trouble listening.

This leads me to the key point of my essay, the one single thing men can do, the simplest step they can take that can make a huge difference, and it can be summed up in four simple words: shut up and listen.

Technically that's two things, but it rolls off the tongue nicely as one. Let's take them separately though, starting with the last part.

Listen to women. Listen to them talk, and read what they write. About gaming, about any part of gaming, about their passion for it, about the challenges they face and the joys they treasure. Read all the essays in this book and then read them again to get to the heart of them. Pass the book to your friends and fellow gamers, with your recommendations, because "listening" can be a group activity. Discuss them afterwards. You can listen, and they can listen with you.

Listen and believe when women tell you something happened as they describe it. Listen and understand when women tell you something is a problem. Listen and empathize when they tell you how difficult things can be. Listen and ask to hear more. Listen and encourage the speaker with signs verbal and non-verbal. Listen and make sure everyone in the back can hear, too. Listen and share. Listen and amplify. Listen and react. Listen and get mad, get so mad you can barely see. Listen without co-opting, listen without patronising.

Listen without feeling the need to correct or undermine or diminish or discredit. Listen without then trying to top that story or play misery poker. Listen without being asked. Listen without being sought out. Listen patiently, attentively. Gratefully.

Just listen.

The most important part of listening is to shut up. You can't listen when you're talking or when you're thinking about talking. But it goes deeper than that.

Men are loud. We have larger chest cavities than women relative to our size. Our voices are naturally deeper, and from birth, our culture tells us to associate deep, loud voices with strength and importance. We're also physically bigger, too, and encouraged to be demonstrative and physical, all factors that add massively to the strength of our message. Then there's the cultural lesson we're



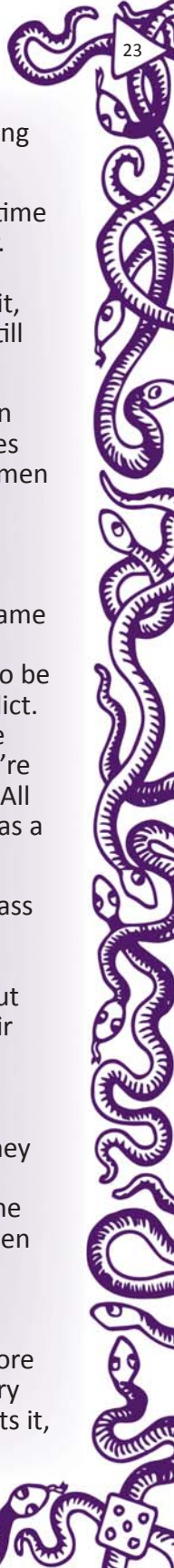
also taught from birth: men speaking are important and are saying important things. When men speak, the world pays attention.

None of this—none of it—is true for women. This means every time you speak, you're not joining a conversation as an equal partner. You're actively sucking attention away from the women in the conversation and directing it towards yourself. You don't notice it, and it'll be highly reduced around your closest friends, but it's still there.

Men talk more as well. We're encouraged to do so, while women are encouraged to not talk and are decried when they do. Studies show that we've completely internalised this false standard: women who talk anywhere near their fair share in a mixed conversation are described by witnesses as being demanding, forward, and dominating the conversation, of being shrill or whining.

It happens online, too. It's not as potent, but just a male login name or a male avatar can produce the same kind of reaction and the same tendencies to (metaphoric) volume. Men are also taught to be more forceful when they make arguments and to thrive on conflict. Our social relationships with other men, particularly when we're young, are more founded on competition and aggression, so we're just naturally more combative in our speech and our reasoning. All too often what we see as casual chat comes across to a woman as a silencing attack.

There are familiar dialogues of privilege, too. When any underclass demands attention, there are classic avenues the powerful use to shut them down: the under-class want too much, too quickly, too unreasonably, and they are too quick to point to evils without recognizing the good, too quick to paint all the privileged as their enemy, too subsumed in a black and white paradigm when the real world is shades of grey. This encompasses what is often called "tone policing." Women asking for better treatment constantly have their arguments ignored or derailed by policing the tone they use: this article is too dramatic, that argument too forceful, the use of humour is misplaced, the use of emotion unwarranted, the lack of emotion seeming too cold to human experience. Strawmen have surely been attacked, hyperbole engaged in, exaggeration employed. All these things will come out men's mouths (or their fingers) to ensure the substance of the issue is never even considered, and it comes out louder and harsher and is given more standing and more import because men give voice to them. Every single one of these things tears down a woman's voice, undercuts it,



overrides it, debilitates it, diminishes it, and eventually, after enough blows, silences it.

That's why the first and simplest thing to do is just shut up.

This isn't just about arguments, essays, and panel discussions. This is about socialising and sharing space and playing these games of ours, which are fundamentally grounded in social interaction. It matters far more to do the right thing by the women you see every day and interact with on a close personal level than it does to amplify the voices of those making speeches and taking a stand. At the game table, at gaming stores, at gaming clubs and gaming conventions, at the pub or coffee shop afterwards—how you behave around and interact with women is the primary effect you place on women in this hobby and the biggest influence on the experiences they have.

In those situations, it's not enough just to not be the bad guy. It's not enough just to avoid sexual material or risky areas. It's not enough to be less scatological, less sexist, less flirtatious in your content. All that does is keep things from getting worse. You must apply this same rule at the table and at the store and at the con.

Shut up and listen.

Remember, you speak twice as much as women and twice as loud, just to begin with. Remember, you probably feel more comfortable at the table (and the store and the club and the con...) than most women, more welcome, and see far more faces that look just like yours. Remember you've never had a bad experience that might put you on edge and nervous about the people around you. This doesn't mean you should treat women with kid gloves or as if they are weaklings. It means toning yourself down to allow them space. It means shutting up. It means every second or third time you open your mouth, close it instead. It means leave the *Monty Python* reference or the *Game of Thrones* joke for someone else to make—and give props when it comes from those without your gift for bombast. It means not correcting everyone over the tiniest mistakes, be they in rules or setting or geek minutiae. It means less of the battle roaring and the blood chants, at least until the ladies have had their turn. You might be comfortable jumping on the table and screaming about the lamentations of the women, but the point is to make sure they are as well. Once they have done so, you can rest assured you've left sufficient space for them to do it—and can then follow suit without fear. You won't miss out. Your silence, meanwhile, can speak volumes.



You can also use your words in small measure, along with non-verbal communication and body language, to encourage and amplify the voices you are listening to. You can listen actively and attentively, and then amplify and echo. I don't mean repeat things so the GM can hear them now that they're coming from a loud male voice; I mean telling everyone else to shut up and listen so a female player can take the floor. That's what your big male voice is for: to help as many people as possible shut up and listen.

It's hard work, especially at first. We come to gaming to relax, to be ourselves, so often the last thing we want to do is work hard or think about how we present. But if we don't ever think, nothing ever gets better. This is a very simple rule. Just those simple four words, and if you hold them in your mind, you can remember to take that step back, and that can make all the difference.

With that, we can start to do a lot more than just shake our heads. We can change things for the better. We can make gaming more fun, more open, more inclusive for women, and that will make gaming better for everyone. All it takes are four little words.

Shut up and listen.

Say them with me. Learn them well. Then go out and find a woman and apply them. Just four little words.

Shut up.

And listen.

Steve Dee is a twenty-year veteran of game design, working on board games like *Betrayal at House on the Hill* and roleplaying games like *Vampire: The Requiem* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. He's won four ENnie awards for his work on *Warhammer* and produces his own games under his small press imprint Tin*Star Games. He is also the editor of the online gaming magazine *Places to Go, People to Be* and works as an advocate against sexism and racism in the gaming hobby. He lives in Sydney, Australia, where he trains dogs and runs game events when he can get away from the keyboard. In his spare time, he definitely does not fight crime dressed as a giant platypus, that is a complete fabrication. You can find his gaming blog at <http://www.dconstructions.wordpress.com>



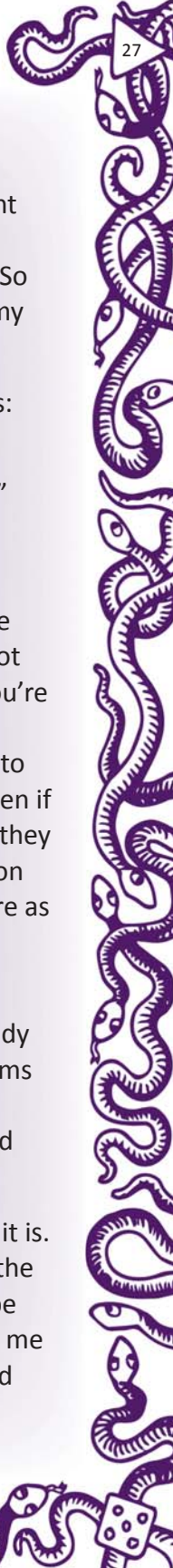
Don't be the Princess. Be the Rebel.

By Venus De Coy

You know who my favorite woman is in nerd culture? It has been and always will be Princess Leia. And I can hear the collective groans now, “ugh it’s because she’s a Princess.” But it isn’t because she is a Princess. In fact, if anything, I HATE the fact that she’s royalty. No, the reason I love Princess Leia, is that from birth, she never followed the traditional status quo for a woman in her position. As a Princess and heir to a *freaking planet*, she decided to align herself with the notions of freedom from oppression by others who wish to gain power through force. This belief, not only took her away from her home to fight for a greater cause, but it eventually leads to the destruction of the same planet that she was the heir of. But did that stop her? Absolutely not. If anything, it only fueled her desire to seek out justice for her people. She continues to do that even onto this day, as the General of the Resistance. She married a “scruffy looking nerf-herder”, when there are men who would have done LITERALLY ANYTHING to be her husband. She, in every act, word and deed, changes the status quo of the galaxy she resides in. Will her fight ever end? I don’t know. (*As we don’t have an answer to that yet*) But I do know, that her mission in life is to change the status quo and not rest until what is right, is not a rarity that varies from planet to planet. But equal to all on all planets.

And that’s a belief I can always get behind.

So let’s apply this to our real world lives for a moment: While we as a society are coming around to the notion of stay-at-home dads and career-empowered mothers, there are still a few realms where we women are not only the minority, but still get weird looks from men. The looks easily range from “Oh, hey it’s a woman in the wild” to my favorite: “And you are here why?” Gaming is one of the realms where women have not always been treated fairly.



I absolutely hate it.

As such, I am a woman on a mission to be the rebellious woman to change the status quo. Now yes, women are gaining significant traction in gaming communities. But not without having to overcome stigmatization and in some cases, just bad behaviors. So the fight is far over, and that is why I am sharing this essay and my experiences with you.

But first, let us start at the beginning. Let's define what a rebel is:

Miriam-Webster defines it as: "a person who rises in opposition or armed resistance against an established government or ruler." (Merriam-Webster, 2004)

But Urban Dictionary goes further to state: "A rebel is a person who stands for their own personal opinions despite what anyone else says. A true rebel stands up for what they believe is right, not against what's right. It's not about smoking crack, drinking till you're rendered unconscious, or beating the crap out of anyone that crosses your path. It's all about being an individual and refusing to follow a crowd that forces you to think the same way they do even if it means becoming an outcast to society. True rebels know who they are and do not compromise their individuality or personal opinion for anyone. They're straightforward and honest and they will sure as hell tell it like it is." (Assorted, Urban Dictionary, 2003)

So based on these two definitions, we can easily deduce that women who are in our gaming communities by default are already considered "rebels". This is based by the many standards, customs and traditions of men and even fellow women in our general society. So why do women become fearful of standing strong and being a rebel in a world that does not treat us as equals?

Well there are many psychological reasons that make it the way it is. I am only going to give one main example for this essay, but it's the most poignant. For those of you who are all like: "OMG facts", be advised stuff like this is why I have over 10k in student loans. Do me a favor, let me put those loan payments to work for a minute and indulge me.



In the early 1950's American Sociologist, Talcott Parsons (No relation of Jim Parsons of Big Bang Theory fame) came up with a theory for gender roles, and it was used then to define a "Nuclear Family". It was defined later by American anthropologist George Murdock as: "a social group characterized by common residence, economic cooperation and reproduction. It contains adults of both sexes, at least two of whom maintain a socially approved sexual relationship, and one or more children, own or adopted, of the sexually cohabiting adult." (Assorted, Nuclear Family , 2014)

Now the Parsons model, had two main types, the "Model A – Total role segregation" and the "Model B-Total integration of roles." Model A, worked around the assumption that matters of the family order should be delegated by sex responsible such as childrearing be done by the mother as she is the one who conceives and gives birth to them. While the father of the household, is responsible to work and provide the resources necessary to take care of his family. Model B, worked more on the theory, that the roles of a household should be shared and be equal regardless of gender. Women and men were required to take part and develop the household and development of children evenly. (Assorted, Wikipedia: Gender Roles, 2014)

America, being a country bound by many emotional and traditional convictions, easily gravitated to Model A. As that was already considered the "status quo" in the framework of many religions. This for many generations was the way women, as well as men were defined as "complete and productive members of society". If you are not married with children as a woman, there was something wrong with you. Career women, for years in the past and most likely for years to come, have to make the tough decision between being a successful business woman, and being a mother. To be damned no matter what their decision was.

So at the end of the day, what does this mean for women in our gaming communities? The Parson's Model of the nuclear family can be integrated smoothly into our gaming personal culture. There is the Type A group, where gaming responsibilities, like being a

lead developer/publisher, organizing the raids online, or being the game runner at a pen and paper tabletop game are primarily male centralized. So when women show up, the men in the population are amazed and stand in awe, or they feel emasculated and threatened by the presence of a woman in a leadership position.

This type brings out the ugly in our gaming culture. The “Type A” gamers are often the ones who troll the internet and state that gamer women in our community are a nuisance, and that they should go “somewhere else.” There are also extremist views to the point of serious theories of grandeur. Such as all gamer women should be a size 2 and participate in cosplay. Otherwise, they are just fat and lonely women with cats.

Then there is the Type B groups, who believes and encourages, the shared duties of the gaming responsibilities to be divided evenly amongst people regardless of sex. While the men in this type of social setting are open to allowing women to help make the big decisions that can affect entire areas. These groups are more prominent in locations where there is already a social environment that is accepting not only women taking leadership roles, but also other types of people such as those with mental and physical disabilities, and those of different gender roles such as those in the LGBTQ communities. While there are many places that are shifting this way, we aren't there yet. So it's an ongoing battle. (*Assorted, Why Cities Are Courting the Gay and Lesbian Community, 2003*)

A long time ago, someone once called me a “fake gamer girl”. Despite the fact that I was at the time an avid participator in my local gaming groups, and in a few spots, was the primary organizer of conventions, charity events and special events amongst multiple areas. These groups were attended primarily by men mind you and sought to the welfare and joy of all gamers within my group. On an advocate's level, I did my best to instill openness regardless of all issues physical, social, and even in a few cases psychological. I pulled out swords and stood my ground concerning others who tried to call me things that they themselves knew nothing about. I challenged superiors and even in a few cases, changed their ways of

thinking to see a new viewpoint that they would have missed. I was a warrior, and they had the nerve to call me fake?

At first I was pissed, because it was said by someone who was a big part of our community. They personally saw all the work I did and inclusiveness that I brought into the otherwise exclusive populations surrounding us. However, after time I realized, that this incident was teaching me, that no matter what one says, I was always going to be minority in my community. I am female. Not only am I female, I am a bi-racial woman that is in many cases 10+ years younger of many members of my social circle. Furthermore, I am a young, female, bi-racial woman that is educated, has a happy career and does not need a man to make my own decisions or depend on financially to buy my own gaming books and supplies. I was the rebel who was not afraid to challenge the status quo.

The person, who said what they said, could not handle these truths. So they decided instead to hit me where it hurt, and replace me with one, whose philosophy better fit their own. They were not ready to grow, and it shows now more than ever. The community in question, regressed and women in the area, if not following the traditional status quo of being married or with another male member of the community, were either shunned or worse, rudely discriminated against without provocation or a chance to defend themselves.

What makes it worse is that some of the women in my former community choose to accept this treatment of their fellow sex; stating that they are “different” or “not like us”. When in honesty, they don’t want to stir the pot and become another “Rebel” because it would have profound detrimental consequences for their male partner in the organization. Will things evolve and change there? I don’t know. But I stand firm, knowing that I stood as the rebel, unafraid to do and say what I needed to say and do. I know that although I am not welcome there, there was another group that took me in, and has since given me the proper home and happiness that I rightfully deserve.

We cannot save every gaming group. But what we as women can do

is not be afraid to stand our ground when things happen to us that are neither right nor fair. I have always believed that indifference is the greatest disease of humankind. It is indifference, that allows us to turn a blind eye to the poor, sick, hungry and even those whom are close to us because we don't care or enough, or "want to stir the pot".

Being a rebel, also comes with responsibility as well. For me, I used to fight when I should have been diplomatic and work things out rationally by speaking out and sharing my burdens with others. Being empathetic is a social, emotional, and personal response that most women are good at having. Showing this empathy to males and others alike, shows that we do give a damn about more than being the constant warrior, or even those "crazy hippie feminists" which I have also been called in gaming. You must exercise caution, and don't jump right away to the sword. Sometimes, one can do more damage with a decorative fan and a wise temperament, versus a sword.

Ladies, we must be rebellious with a cause to better the conditions of the gaming societies, we reside in. We must not afraid to stand up to that jerk player that uses derogatory language towards women in and out of character. We must be matrons, who do not shy away from those on the internet, who call us "nuisances". If we choose to have children, we must be mothers who will teach their children how to not only read and write; but how to make character sheets, roll polyhedral dice, and why dragon slaying is the best thing in the world. We must show our children, and other gaming children that throwing video controllers and calling others losers over headsets is NEVER OK. We must be the queens of our neighborhoods, by not being afraid to take responsibilities and help carry the load for all members for in doing this we show love. And yes in some cases, baking cookies and bringing them to games. We being who we are already make us rebels; let's make the most of it not by hiding, due to fear or prejudice. Instead, let us do so by building the kinships we want to see in our world.

Don't be a Princess. Be a Rebel.

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Venus De Coy is a lover, fighter, RPG Writer, Resident Witch/ Cleric, Yoga Jedi Knight, and Amateur Pokémon Trainer. Venus's normal life includes working with teens and young adults with ADD/ADHD as a Peer Support Specialist while studying to become a Social Worker. She advocates for the impoverished and marginalized through the Society of St. Vincent de Paul and also manages a children's bounce-house. And yet somewhere in there, she finds time to go to the movies, attend game nights, hunt for Pokémon with friends, and sleep in as much as possible. (All of which she attributes to her Passion Planner and her addiction to coffee.)

Venus lives in Sacramento California, the greatest gaming society in the world. She is surrounded by her friends, family, Snorlaxes and Vulpixes in lieu of children and cats.



More Than a Trope

By J Gray

As I type this, my wife, Stephanie, is being prepped for surgery. Today is the next stage in her struggle with breast cancer, and I can't be there with her. Instead, I'm sitting out here in a moderately comfortable chair in a pleasant, but somewhat chilly, hospital waiting room, and I'm thinking about her and our over twenty years together.

Stephanie's a gamer. We've sat down at the table to roll dice together almost as many times as we've sat to break bread. We both play to our strengths. I'm usually on the GM's side of the shield, spinning plots and building worlds. She's usually got a character sheet in front of her.

Now my wife's in surgery. I'm back in the waiting room. While I could be thinking about the weeks of chemo leading up to this moment or the weeks of radiation which will follow, I'm thinking about the characters she played.

No one designs characters as well as Stephanie. The thought she puts into their backstories is unparalleled. The depth with which she drills into their motivations and their needs is unmatched. It is a process that never stops. While others are content to play their characters and leave them on the character sheet, Stephanie writes and refines off-camera scenes to help explain who her characters were, who they are, and who they are becoming.

Her shotgun-loving private detective fighting with just what it means to be a shaman in a transhuman age.

The gender-fluid swordfighter who feels the constant pressure of their family's expectations, dreading the day when they order them to kill their adventuring companions.

The samurai cargo freighter captain who just wants to finish the next job and keep her ship flying.

Each of them amazing, real people who she brought to life through hard work, intensity, and roleplaying. And thanks to her example, I've learned how to make better NPCs, and that's made me a better GM.

Let me try to explain.



Tropes are valuable tools. Game masters rely on them as shortcuts, which impart a great deal of information, quickly, to the players. A few words, a specific turn of phrase, a short description, or an accent can provide players a near-instant understanding of just who or what an NPC is without slowing down gameplay. We only have so many hours to spend around the table, after all.

The thing is, tropes change when gender changes. Though there are thousands of tropes that apply to characters of all (or no) gender, the tropes that apply to female characters all too often define them in the context of how they relate to men or how much they appeal, or don't appeal, to a straight male gaze.

The love interest who is a prize to be won or rescued.

The prostitute with a heart of gold.

The buxom shopkeeper's daughter whose lascivious lies lead characters into a comical confrontation with her father.

The young beauty who is slut-shamed and abused into insane villainy.

The attractive woman who has her will drained until she's literally nothing more than a sexualized, violent doll guarding her master's property.

The evil sorceress in the form-fitting dress, manipulating men with her sexuality and her magic.

The overbearing, controlling mother who pushes her sons into a life of cannibalistic violence.

The sexy succubus who rules a fortress of lust with the help of her equally sexy daughters, all torturing any poor man who enters their clutches until sanity snaps.

All of the above examples come from a single, best-selling, well-regarded adventure series from a major company. It measures over 450 pages long. Even the professionals fall back on tropes in their adventures. If they do it, with hundreds of pages and weeks of writing, and editors proofing their work, why shouldn't GMs who plan for next week's session in the few scant hours they have between a full-time job and family obligations and who knows what else?

Because the professionals can do better. And so can the GMs at home.

I leaned on tropes just as much as any GM. Quite possibly more. Stephanie changed all that by showing me a better way, how to make better

characters. She taught me, by example, to think about each character. The amazingly detailed, loving way she crafts her characters taught me to stop and take a minute with each NPC, to ask four specific questions. Consider it a checklist if you want, a quick way to elevate even the most background NPC into something more than their gender.

1. Why does she do what she does?
2. Where does she want to be this time next year?
3. Do any of the first three descriptors you think of for her relate to her appearance or her relationship with a man?
4. Do those words need to?

Ask the questions enough times and you won't even need to do it consciously. Eventually, it will become second nature and built right into how you create your NPCs. You'll be a better GM and your campaign will be a better adventure.

One of the nurses just came out to tell me Stephanie's surgery's going well. There's still at least an hour to go before they finish. Right now, I could be thinking about the physical recovery, which will take weeks, or the emotional recovery, which could last a lifetime. Instead, I'm going to work on my next adventure. I'm looking forward to seeing her shine as a player, and I'm hoping everything I've learned from her over the years makes me shine as a Game Master.

J Gray has been a camp instructor, a factory worker, a janitor, a bookseller, a waiter, a graphic designer, a printing press operator, a data entry specialist, a professional gamer, and a community college instructor. More importantly, he's also a lucky husband and the father of two beautiful and geeky children. His webcomic, *Mysteries of the Arcana* (<http://mysteriesofthearcana.com>), tells the story of two young women's explorations of a tarot-inspired multiverse. As a game designer and writer, J is line developer for the revival of the Origin-award winning *Castle Falkenstein* for Fat Goblin Games. He's also the developer for the *Letters from the Flaming Crab* series from Flaming Crab Games and the official Professor of Puzzles for Playground Adventures. For anyone interested, he's active on [Facebook](#) and often talks about gaming there.

Smashing the Pedestal: Rolling Criticals Against Sexism in Gaming

By Amanda Hamon Kunz

They're insidious and almost painfully easy to ignore, but like a handful of tacks littering a dark room's floor, they're there: depictions of women in tabletop gaming material that range from mildly offensive to outright sexist. If you're reading this book, odds are you know exactly what I mean.

They're the pouty, buxom NPCs who are little more than titillating cover art. They're the nameless mothers, sisters, and wives whose murder, or even rape, motivates all-male casts. They're the princesses and noble daughters who are simply footballs, to be captured and "saved" for riches, fame, or worse—sexual conquest.

All these devices are not nearly as pervasive as they once were, but they do send a simple message to women who participate in the RPG hobby: you're different. Certain products in which your gender is represented are not meant for you. And if you don't like it, too bad. Ignore it, deal with it, or leave.

That's the message I hear every time I pass a shelf full of books whose covers sport women of cartoonish proportions in back-breaking poses, or when I read the backstories of heroes in which the only women involved are nameless, suffering plot devices. To make matters worse, such content enables and contributes to a culture of sexism that's bad for the entire hobby.

Simply put, negative portrayals of women in game material cause intangible harm to all the hobby's female participants. For some women, it might even put up a barrier into entering the hobby at all.

As a woman who has played tabletop games for the past fifteen years, and as a female game designer, editor, and developer, I'm



here to say one thing: our hobby can do better.

The volume of negative, harmful depictions and stereotypes of women in RPGs has decreased in recent years, to be sure, but it must do more than that. It must stop altogether, for the sake of female players, GMs, game makers, and hobby participants of all genders.

There are myriad ways to help end negative depictions of women in gaming content. For example, GMs can refuse to use this material, and players can protest when they encounter it. Perhaps one of the best ways, though, involves stopping harmful material from being published at all.

This certainly can be achieved numerous ways. The solution, I think, involves vigilance on the part of all publishers. It also involves growing the number of women involved in game creation.

After all, no one is better at pinpointing problematic depictions of women in gaming than, well, women. Because harm is often not intentional during the creation of such distressing material, it's important for women designers, editors, and developers to have a seat at the game-creation table—and to feel empowered to speak up—when they encounter troublesome content in progress.

Building a Gilded Cage

When confronted with varying degrees of problematic material, it can be all too easy for any gamer to simply brush off his or her bruised feelings—or ignore the fact that the content might be making other individuals at the table uncomfortable. After all, gaming is supposed to be fun, right? Why ruin a session brooding over material that shows women in a negative light?

The answer lies in the basic assumption at the heart of that mentality: gaming *is* supposed to be fun. It's supposed to be fun for everyone involved—not just for the members at the table who belong to groups that possess, actively or passively, societal privilege of any kind.



If one gamer at a table feels marginalized due to her gender or any other identity, then the community has failed that person. When gaming ceases to be fun for someone, in my mind, everyone fails. That's why it's so necessary to keep problematic content out of publications in the first place.

However, even if problematic content can be successfully ignored in an isolated incident, it's important to realize one key fact: negative depictions of women create harm that radiates beyond a single gamer or gaming table. It's not the kind of harm that inflicts physical wounds. It's the kind that affirms and compounds a culture in which half the population is often under- or unrepresented, marginalized, silenced, and worse.

To elaborate, consider an example that I've generated randomly but that exists, in some form, as a rather common trope: a tabletop adventure whose only two female NPCs, out of a large cast, are villainesses. They're not villainesses with complex backstories and motivations; rather, they're two-dimensional, interchangeable, beautiful-but-evil sorceresses in a world where all the male NPCs are rich, detailed actors. Further, these women are claimed to be even more dangerous because they convince men, through seduction, to commit terrible acts in their name.

On the surface, this example might not seem very sexist at all. Hey, there are women in the adventure, right? And they're *powerful*, if manipulating men to obtain the agency they lack fits that bill, yes? This adventure must be progressive!

Wrong.

These are stereotypes, and they're creating implications that are harmful to everyone.

First, these characters are not individuals. If complex backstories motivated their actions—one might, say, be seeking revenge for a murdered sibling, while the other may be prompted by misanthropy borne of a shattered childhood—they wouldn't be interchangeable. They'd find their own distinct places in the adventure, just like the male NPCs.



Further, since they are the only women in the adventure, it sends the negative message that women in that world exist only as evil sorceresses. It also has the insidious effect of implanting the notion in gamers' minds that women, fictional or not, always fulfill a certain binary expectation.

This brings me to the thornier issue: this hypothetical adventure's women are not only cookie-cutter villainesses; they're *sexually deviant* villainesses who control men using their bodies. What this implies is a very common, very harmful trope: women who exercise control over their sexuality are to be simultaneously desired, feared, and scorned.

Going further down the rabbit hole, use of the female sexual deviant stereotype leads to the common binary that chaste women are "good," while sexual women are "bad." This assumption, which is purely a social construct—and a double standard, as it remains roundly unapplied to men—reinforces a societal paradigm that has been used for centuries to control and oppress women.

This stereotype conjures language to this effect, too. "Whores"—women with any control of their own sexuality, by many truly abhorrent definitions—are evil beings to be used, mocked, and discarded, while virginal women are to be praised, if not offered a place of equality next to men.

Each stereotype, either of promiscuity or chastity, is harmful in that it urges women into a no-win situation; they're encouraged to see their self-worth as a function of societal policing of their behavior, not as a sum of all their personal merits. And it's harmful to men because it encourages them to view women through this binary, negatively affecting their relationships with women who, quite rightly, refuse to buy into ridiculous double standards.

Pretty heavy stuff, am I right?

Smashing the Pedestal

Now, I realize that the hypothetical adventure I described would not single-handedly perpetuate gender-based discrimination on a



grand scale. I *am* saying, though, that the existence of content that stereotypes or negatively depicts women adds legitimacy to a brand of sexism that is so ingrained in our culture it can be difficult to recognize.

If gamers experience adventure after adventure where the female characters are stereotypes—whores, virgins, victims, possessions, sexual objects, and the like—they might begin to regard sexism of that sort as the accepted norm in the hobby. I'm not just talking about stereotypes about sexuality. I'm talking about *any* stereotypes of women.

A stereotype that paints all women as beautiful flowers might claim to be positive, for instance. It might claim to be placing women on a pedestal, but even if it's perched above the horizon, a pedestal is still just a gilded cage. It still sends the message that women must tailor themselves and their actions to a certain set of arbitrary norms to find acceptance. And that's nothing more than plain old sexism with a pretty paint job.

Perpetuation of sexism becomes even more sinister coupled with the fact that, although the gaming environment for women has improved by leaps and bounds in recent years, female gamers still report sexist behavior at the table and elsewhere. I know firsthand because I've been on the receiving end a few times myself.

As a designer, I often mingle with other freelancers at conventions large and small, but I find myself confronted with questions from my peers that I know a male designer would never receive. Questions such as, "So, is your husband a freelancer?" and, when I travel alone to conventions, "You came by yourself? Really?" I don't think I need to explain the irritating implications they questions belie.

As a female convention gamer, I've had GMs assume that I don't know even the basic rules of the system, and I've had players change their entire demeanor the moment I sit down, all simply because of my gender. These experiences certainly haven't been the norm, but they do stick out as things that shouldn't happen.

I will say that I have fallen into gaming communities that are

wonderfully inclusive—groups and spaces where my gender never makes me feel ill at ease. However, it's not enough for players to treat their female gamer friends like equals. All players need to treat all other players with respect and like equals regardless of whether they're personal friends because that's the mark of a healthy environment for everyone.

To be sure, the bad behavior I've experienced has always come at events or conventions where I know few people personally—where I'm not Amanda the Player/GM/Freelancer, but rather an anonymous female hobbyist. When other players feel empowered to treat an unknown female gamer badly, or when they don't realize that their behavior is belittling or offensive, it means there's still work to be done to stamp out sexism in the hobby in general.

This is one of the reasons why it's important that harmful depictions of women never see the light of day in tabletop gaming material in the first place; we need to eliminate the material that normalizes or promotes sexism, however subtly. That's where the notion of increasing the number of women game creators comes into play.

The female game creators I know are vigilant against potential harmful depictions and insinuations involving women in their content. They have to be because they've got skin in the game—both as creators responsible for content and as players who must inhabit the hobby that content exists within. Increase female creators' numbers and you've got a powerful vanguard against material that, even accidentally, might harm the hobby. Plus, the more female creators there are, the more women interested in design will feel represented when they decide to pursue freelancing. That's a win for everyone.

Don't get me wrong, tabletop gaming—like many other entertainment niches—has made great strides in the equity of female representation in content. Paizo Inc., for instance, boasts an equal number of male and female iconic characters, and it continually provides deep, fleshed-out motivations and backstories for its female characters, including healthy and varied portrayals of female sexuality. (Full disclosure: I've freelanced for Paizo

since 2012, so I have an up-close look at the company's culture of inclusiveness.) There are a lot of other publishers doing wonderful, progressive, boundary-pushing things related to expressing feminist ideals in gaming content, too. Plus, the number of women game creators is growing at a steady clip, and that's progress to be celebrated.

But there's always more that can be done to eradicate sexism in the hobby. Even individual gamers can help by, for example, disallowing objectionable material at the table and speaking up when negative behavior happens. Specifically, male players can support women when difficult situations occur, listen to their experiences and learn from them, and generally make the environment as welcoming as possible for all gamers.

For game creators' parts, they can continue to keep women's issues at the forefront of their minds while producing content, and they can cultivate a culture in which women are welcome and comfortable pursuing their interest in freelancing.

The more these things happen, the closer we'll continue to move to a tabletop world in which fantasy—one where a person's gender never causes him or her to feel less than welcome and accepted—is reality. If we work together to smash those pedestals, it'll be that much easier to look into each other's eyes and enthusiastically say, "Let's game!"

Amanda Hamon Kunz is a tabletop game writer, designer, developer, and editor. She works on the Starfinder and Pathfinder RPGs as a developer at Paizo Inc., and her freelance work has found homes through Paizo, Kobold Press, Hammerdog Games, Zombie Sky Press, and other publishers. In 2016, Amanda was chosen and served as a featured presenter for Gen Con's Insider Industry program, which saw her speak about a variety of timely industry topics. Amanda lives in the Seattle area with her husband their many nonmagical pets.



Thank You, Feminism, Signed A Man

Philip Minchin

I'm a little astounded (and more than a little honoured) to be writing a piece for inclusion in this Gargantuan Book of Awesome. After all, with so many talented women contributing, what could one random Aussie bloke add?

So, I wanted to write something that could *only* come from a bloke—and that's a heartfelt Thank You, Feminism.

After all, much as feminism has given (and continues to give) women, that's to be expected. It's right there in the name, after all! Feminism's not doing women *favours* when it improves their working conditions, their wages, their standing in society, their freedom, their control over their own bodies and destinies—it's just doing its *job*.

(Good on it anyway, mind you. And more importantly, good on the actual people who are doing the work. Those folks deserve *everyone's* gratitude.)

But as a group, as a whole, we men (whether or not we're of the peniferous variety) have benefited from feminism, too. And that's *not* to be expected. Well, unless you take a moment to think about it with more than half a brain cell. My point is, there's nothing in the name that promises benefits for anyone other than women. And yet...

Well, let's start with the obvious: the vast majority of men have at least one woman relative and/or friend and/or partner. Assuming we're not complete narcissistic shitheads,¹ we presumably care about their interests and want them to have a good life. So by improving the lot of the women we care about, feminism improves our lives, too.

But there are more direct benefits than that, and it's worth cataloguing a few.

1 No offense meant to those using polymorph effects to protect against mind flayer attack.



For starters, assuming we believe in the scientific method,² we believe that any idea—whether a political system, a theory on how the world works, or a design for a product—is more likely to be correct if tested against a range of criticism. It follows logically, therefore, that the pre-feminist world, where decisions were largely made by a scarily homogenous group of wealthy white chaps, was a breeding ground for dumb ideas. Indeed, this can be shown to be the case—especially where those ideas were about people other than wealthy white chaps.

One story ought to do the job: influential male anatomists John & William Hunter decided that the placenta completely protects a foetus against substances in the mother's bloodstream, an assumption with massive implications for the healthcare of pregnant women and, therefore, of every human ever gestated (including us blokes), on the basis of injecting a dying pregnant woman with molten wax and then dissecting the uterus and foetus after they both died. It wasn't until women had started to get a voice in the medical professions that we overcame that piece of arrant idiocy-piled-on-atrocity.

On a less grotesque level, the same principle applies to any product, any argument, any workforce, any game, and any game group. If it's included a mix of gender perspectives, odds are that its ideas will be less ignorant, more interesting, more accessible to more people, and fuller of that awesome imaginative brain-juice that gives us such a high when we game.

(Of course, gender isn't a special case; this applies to all the myriad dimensions of human experience.)

But even that's still just a shift in context—a direct benefit, but not a huge one. Let's look at how feminism³ has actually made *men* freer.

2 And whatever faults you see in modern industrial society, odds are that they arose from a selective or overly narrow application of the scientific method, and it's at least partly thanks to science that we know about them.

3 Strictly, "feminisms" since there are a number of perspectives which don't all agree on everything—which as we've seen above is actually pretty useful.

This one's actually pretty obvious. By challenging tightly proscriptive gender roles, feminism not only empowers women who want to do traditionally masculine work to do it, it empowers men who want to do traditionally feminine work. The increase in men playing a more active role in parenting from birth onwards suggests that this is something a good number of men enjoy. (I'd also suggest that it's good for our children, male and female.)

Those gender essentialists who hold forth how historical precedent and scans of men's brains show that men aren't suited for nurturing should consider two things. First, there is historical evidence that shows that men have been deeply emotional and connected to their children in the past—for instance, Elizabethan men write about openly weeping when their children are injured without the slightest sense of self-consciousness about “un-masculine” behaviour. Contrariwise, noblewomen who in feudal society spent relatively little time with their own children (because childrearing is a distraction from pumping out the maximum number of heirs) could be astonishingly cold towards their own offspring. Second, recent studies that show that men who take on a nurturing role actually change the patterns of activity in their brain to those more “nurturing” ones to which women are supposedly predisposed. Yes, men can nurture! Neuroplasticity—it's a wonderful thing.

As we begin to be aware of and develop those capacities, we get smarter. Nurturing places a premium on theory of mind, on the ability to model what's going on in someone else's head. Not only does that kind of mindfulness require incredibly sophisticated modelling, more than any other form of high-level cognition, it pushes us to come to terms with the limits and glitches in our *own* thinking—after all, most cognitive biases are universal to some degree. (Though, mind you, one of the most universal of cognitive biases is the one that lets us see everyone else's fallibilities but our own!)

In fact, I'd actually propose that a “nurturing” brain is a particularly good one for roleplaying gamers. After all, it's only a short step from “modelling someone else's mind” to “character development” and “roleplaying”!

Yet another benefit of feminism has been its role in opening up

systemic oppression in general to analysis, critique, and ultimately abolishment. Feminism has hardly been unique in this—the revolutions of the Enlightenment began these struggles regarding class and universal civic inclusion, and the abolitionist movement against the slave trade saw the beginnings of the fight for racial equality. But it's notable how often the groups that drove these changes for the better were supported and empowered, and often led, by the feminists of their day. (It's also notable how rarely this notable fact is actually noted.)

Feminism also added a dimension that was new to these critiques: it enabled people to talk about oppression in the domestic context, and even the sexual context. The fight against exploitative political and economic systems necessarily starts by focusing on obvious, overt, public facts. But as all too many of us geeks—of us *humans*—know, oppression and cruelty can be inflicted in private, hidden, domestic, or humdrum forms, in the most intimate and the most mundane of contexts, and the most deeply personal ways. Although those fighting against slavery were indubitably intervening in what was framed at the time as a private arrangement—the relationship between a master and his “property”—the relationship was fundamentally conceived of as economic and was created and enforced by legal structures, which were ultimately the product of publicly-controlled political processes. Feminism was arguably the first major social movement that successfully asserted the right to contest such private abuse *as such*, to publicly discuss the political dimensions of the private, and to analyse the wider patterns and systems at work, and for that, it deserves the thanks of every person alive.

Feminism's early groundwork in challenging the idea of gender as essentially binary and biologically determined also laid the foundations for broader challenges to preconceptions about sexuality and gender identity. That certain feminists attempted to resist the logical consequences of their own premise does not diminish the overall role of the movement in making those questions possible in the first place.

Thus, both the cause of a more just, fairer, happier world and the cause of human self-knowledge have been immeasurably advanced



by feminists' fearless insistence on speaking what was, at the time, unspeakable.

Let's not focus on the negative: that self-knowledge we've gained isn't only about confronting what we do wrong—it's also about *improving* what we do and celebrating what we do *right*. One of the most important advances feminism made was in validating women's discussion of their own experiences and pleasures.

Forget for a moment that first point about blokes presumably loving the women in their lives: I speak with 100% self-interest as a man who deals with women in a range of contexts—including the romantic and sexual—when I say that women being franker about what they want is an unambiguously Good Thing. I have a clearer idea both of what specific things the women in my life like, and of how well I'm providing them, which gives me the feedback I need (and, being a gamer, love) so I can do even better—and gives me more leverage to trade off against what *I* want.

When you *stop* forgetting that first point, you can add in my considerable altruistic happiness and pride that the women I love are happy about their lives, and I'm part of that. At that point, women being free to speak their minds becomes a good thing for men directly *and* indirectly.

After all, happiness, relationships, fun, pleasure, joy—none of these things are zero-sum games. On the contrary, all are improved the more selflessly they are shared: if we're enjoying ourselves together, your enjoyment adds to mine. (This is why I laugh when people talk about gamers being antisocial: gaming conventions are a place where people go to have fun in the company of other people who are also having fun, and both parts of that formula are equally important to us.) The same goes for any relationship or community, whether personal, professional, or vocational.

Sure, there are some people (of any gender) who don't use that freedom in good faith. Learning to spot those people and either help them get their heads right or avoid them is just part of life. But removing systemic disincentives that stop people who otherwise would be honest and straightforward can only be good.

One of the most important consequences of ensuring that women



specifically have those freedoms is that “women’s issues” include a great many that are in fact foundational *human* issues. The particular so-called women’s issues I have in mind are pregnancy,⁴ childbirth, lactation, and even childrearing.⁵ Not all, and not only, women can or want to experience these things, but the fact that they are predominantly experienced by women has indubitably led to them being treated somehow as “special interest” issues. Because that “special interest” is a subordinate social group, i.e. women, they are being short-changed.

But this is mind-bogglingly short-sighted. Admittedly, the majority of people who *become* pregnant will be women. But everyone has experienced at least one pregnancy—the one where *we* were gestated.⁶ Everyone has experienced some sort of birth, and everyone has had some sort of relationship to lactation, even if it ended early and we were mostly fed industrial substitutes. Now, no question: there is a great deal more that goes into the people we become! But there is abundant research to show that these experiences are literally foundational: they define the starting points on which we build.

Again, there is no good reason to ignore the adults’ side of it either. Estimating very roughly, around one-third of the planet will

4 While I haven’t included menstruation in this list, as it’s something that is only indirectly universal—very few people who have borne children have not menstruated, but more or less by definition those menstruations were *not* part of our gestations!—it’s worth pointing out that (a) this is another experience that half the planet can relate to; (b) menstruation and the menses have tremendous power throughout world myth; and (c) that same mythic force still lingers—folks who don’t flinch at standard blood, faeces, or even splattered brain matter or vitreous gel will cringe from a little endometrium. Menarche and menopause are astonishingly potent and emotive symbols of shifts between life phases... as such, I refuse to believe that they have no place in fantastic fictioneering.

5 Though as we’ve seen, this is not locked in as women’s work; I’d also argue that it’s not a one-person job—though kudos to those who do manage it alone!

6 Yes, Reg. Unless it was in a box. Thanks for that.

experience these profound, transformative experiences directly, another third or so will have at least the opportunity for powerful personal connections to them at one remove (by dint of being the other parent), and most of the rest will, at least, care about someone in the first two-thirds. There is no good reason why these experiences shouldn't be common parlance—part of the stories we tell, whether mundane or mythic.

But where these “women’s issues”—pregnancy, birth, and lactation in particular—are represented, all too often it’s as somehow monstrous or horrific. I put it to my fellow geeks that there is, instead, something inherently *heroic* about the whole thing.

First, a body transforms itself in the process of creating an original human pretty much from nothing. Then there’s the extraordinary process of giving birth—labour is an epic athletic feat, with all the attendant striving and risk of serious injury. (In fact, despite the lack of competition, it is usually *more* demanding than any athletic code would ever ask its competitors to attempt.) Then, finally, the body continues to transform itself to nourish the newborn—modern breast-sexualization and anxieties about lactation aside, this process has been recognised in almost every culture throughout human history as a quasi-magical form of nurture and care, with excess breastmilk frequently used to heal and nourish the infirm or elderly.⁷ Other more talented writers will talk elsewhere in this book about how to use these stories in more women-friendly ways than our genre usually has, but there is definitely room for us to mythologize these foundational events in better ways. Once again, doing so will lead to more interesting stories that help us better understand a wider range of human experience.

7 One of the most startling moments in my travels around Italy was encountering, in a church, a mural of the Virgin Mary leaning out from Heaven with her breasts exposed, spraying the sinners below in Purgatory with her milk. I’ve since learned that this is a known piece of religious iconography – *Maria lactans*. Even in the Western mind a few hundred years ago, a woman could expose her breasts for purely functional purposes and be not only pure but, in fact, the archetype of purity. This tradition of breasts symbolising nourishment and comfort rather than sex continued into early modernity (for instance, Liberty’s bare-breastedness in Delacroix’s painting *Liberty Leading the People*).

So, yeah. We fellas owe feminism a *lot*: better-off women in our lives; ideas about reality that are better-tested against more perspectives; more freedom to do a wider range of work, inhabit a wider range of roles, and develop more of our brains; a greater awareness of the many ways that unjust power can operate outside the overtly political sphere, which has bolstered other challenges to unfair social patterns; a truer understanding of the social context in which we individually operate; better support for and understanding of so-called “women’s issues” that are actually universal human issues; better stories and wider spaces for our imaginations to explore... the only question left, really, is: how best to show our gratitude?

The first thing, obviously, is to learn more. The best gratitude you can show any teacher is to apply your brain. And then, of course, you have to apply your learning:

- challenge gender stereotypes (and other forms of oppression: as mentioned earlier, feminists have always been present in the other struggles for justice);
- resist the idea that feminism has “gone too far” when women still do a majority of unpaid domestic work, still only receive something like 70% of men’s pay for the same hours doing the same work, are still the overwhelming majority of rape victims, and are the ones reduced to things in 90+% of public sexually-objectifying imagery;
- learn about the ways in which small groups of cowardly men actively conspire to manipulate and exploit women and be ready to call that out or warn against it when you see it;
- stand up against bullying language and behaviours that seek to diminish people’s freedom;
- refuse to accept the rationalizations and mocking dismissals of those who seek to exploit, abuse or disrespect anyone, especially more vulnerable groups, unjustly;
- listen to and accept women’s experience as they tell it themselves, not as interpreted by blokes (including me!);



- don't confuse one woman for all women (any more than one man speaks for all men, or all men perfectly embody every generalisation about men as a group!).

Finally, in addition to acting in our own lives, look at the big-picture context-setting issues like the victim-blaming culture around rape, the lack of support for people to combine family life and work, unjust pay, women doing more than their share of domestic labour, control of their own bodies, and so on—and recognise that if women are ever going to be able to make decisions with equal freedom as men, those big societal issues need fixing.

Now, while women obviously have to be in leadership positions in that work, we have to remember that women already have the extra load of having to deal with the consequences of those injustices. Adding the entire burden of fixing a broken system to that extra load is pretty unfair, which is where we grateful blokes come in. It seems to me that the least we can do is pitch in to shifting the world to make everyone—including us!—more free.

Philip Minchin (philipminchin.com) has written freelance Pathfinder RPG content for Paizo Publishing and Kobold Press, and a free cartomancy system for Green Ronin's Freeport setting using the cards of their *Walk the Plank* pirate-themed card game (available at v.gd/fptarot). He is an international advocate for games and play, having played key roles in getting games into libraries via such initiatives as International Games Week (games.ala.org) and the Global Gossip Game (globalgossipgame.com), as well as offering training for non-gamer librarians, teachers, and arts sector folks wanting to understand the significance and benefits of the current Renaissance of play. He also helps schools, libraries, and other cultural institutions with collections advice and access to affordable collections of tabletop and electronic games.

If you are interested in another, less-gamer-centric take on how feminism has improved the lives of men, a year or so after this piece was submitted I came across a similar piece you can read at v.gd/CyRfD.



The Radical Letter 'S'

Amber E. Scott

If you'd been at my panel, "Writing for RPGs," at Geek Girl Con 2013, you'd have heard me speak about my experiences as a woman and a writer. For the last ten years, I've worked as a freelance writer in the roleplaying game industry, for companies from Wizards of the Coast to White Wolf to Paizo Publishing. I'm a pretty big feminist (as evidenced by my participation in Geek Girl Con and numerous other women-centric panels and projects), so after I'd given the audience tips on breaking into the game industry, I opened up the floor to questions.

I talked for some time about my experience as a woman writer and how, in general, I'd been welcomed into a male-dominated industry. I shared a few amusing anecdotes about projects I'd worked on and people I'd met. At some point, an audience member asked, "Have you ever had to use gender-neutral pronouns?"

"You mean like 're' or 'ze' instead of he?" I replied. "No, never." The room chuckled. I chuckled, too. As big a feminist as I was, the idea of using what I saw as made-up words in place of tried and true pronouns was, well, pretty silly.

When you think about it, though, pronouns are no laughing matter. Consider the exhaustive fight transgender people face simply to be addressed by the pronouns they prefer. The fact that the audience member's question was raised at all shows the presence that language has in our minds. In a discussion about women and inclusiveness in gender, pronouns were on at least one person's mind. And when the audience member (whose name I wish I knew) brought up the question, I knew exactly what they meant. Pronouns have often been on my mind, too.

In July of 2013, I attended another conference and sat in another conference room and gave another presentation on being a woman writer. This was PaizoCon, and I presented alongside Christina Stiles and Amanda Hamon (Kunz) on the panel "Gamer Girls Unite & Write!" We started off talking about our background as writers,



and when we moved into talking about gender issues in gaming, pronouns was the first thing that came to my mind. When Wizards of the Coast released *Dungeons & Dragons* third edition in 2000, the company made the choice to alternate between male and female pronouns—a first for the game. Gamers everywhere cracked open their brand-new rulebooks, saw that a bunch of the “he’s” within had the letter “s” in front of them, and promptly lost their ever-loving minds.

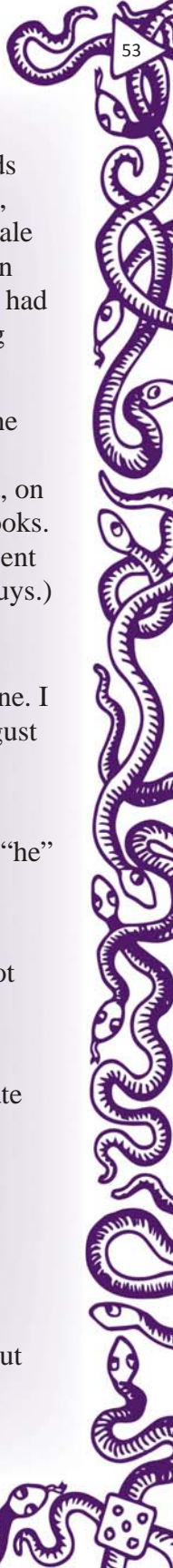
On message boards across the Internet, debates sprang up over the new pronoun style. Even now, a Google search of “third edition female pronouns” brings up archived threads arguing about what, on the surface, seems to be the addition of the letter ‘s’ to a lot of books. (Dismayingly, the search I just did also brought up threads as recent as 2011. Because female pronouns are a Really Big Deal, You Guys.)

I recall arguments such as:

- Alternating pronouns is confusing. (This is my favorite one. I always picture a gamer tossing the rulebook down in disgust and exclaiming, “Is it ‘he’ or is it ‘she’? I can’t make any sense of this!”)
- Alternating pronouns is grammatically incorrect because “he” is gender neutral.
- Alternating pronouns might be okay, but WotC isn’t consistent about their usage, so alternating pronouns is not okay.
- Alternating pronouns is politically-correct pandering and offensive and soon we’ll all be living in a Big Brother state and using newspeak.
- Alternating pronouns is pointless because women don’t game.

Ha.

Beneath the surface, of course, the decision to use alternating pronouns wasn’t about grammar or clarity. The decision was about inclusiveness.



After all, the use of female pronouns in game books wasn't a new phenomenon. White Wolf had been doing it for years. The change WotC implemented, though, showed a change in their attitude toward gamers. The popular concept of *Dungeons & Dragons* was that it was a game boys and men played. Women don't game, after all, and any who do are fake or trying to impress the boys or something something sandwiches. These shiny new rulebooks with their radical additional 's's implied that *D&D* was now a game for everyone.

What a concept! At the PaizoCon panel last year, I'd discussed my reaction to the use of female pronouns in third edition—a pretty resounding “meh” to be honest. Using female pronouns just seemed *obvious*, like something that would inevitably have happened sooner or later, so what was the big deal? I didn't understand the controversy I saw on message boards. Part of me was annoyed that posters who had never had to feel unrepresented in gaming books were now upset over being only 50% represented. But I didn't spend too much time or energy thinking about the pronoun issue.

Then, sometime after the new edition came out, I picked up a third-party rulebook. As I read through the first chapter, I noticed the publisher only used male pronouns. By then, it had been over a year that I'd been playing third edition, and the switch in writing styles jarred me. I wondered if there were perhaps rules for male and female characters that gave them different abilities. I read through the character creation section very carefully and found nothing. The pronouns had changed and, in a weird way, I'd changed. I wasn't willing to allow the game to exclude me anymore.

Not only was I unwilling to be excluded, but I saw myself as an active participant. It would be facile to imply the addition of female pronouns launched my writing career, but the change to third edition marked the beginning of my serious efforts to become a writer. I'd always wanted to be a writer, and I'd always loved gaming ever since I was a child, but now I saw the potential to contribute to the game. By 2002, I had my first article published, and by 2005, I was a regular contributor to *Dragon Magazine*.

Back at Geek Girl Con, I searched for something with which to follow up the pronoun question. After all, it's not very fun if the presenter answers a question with “no” and then moves right on.



After clarifying that I'd only ever used conventional pronouns, I started to talk about my personal preference for "they" as a singular pronoun but how I didn't use the singular they in my paid projects because so many readers consider it incorrect. (Though I did use a singular they in this essay, as you may have noticed.)

As I rambled on, I cut myself off in the middle of a sentence with, "Oh! But of course I use second person a lot. And 'you' is a gender-neutral pronoun."

This (frankly obvious) realization stunned me for a minute. I think I might have actually said, "Wow, that's deep. I should write that down," which got another laugh from the room. It was deep, though, and I'm glad that I now have the opportunity to write it down.

Very few books are written in second person. Roleplaying games, of course. Instruction manuals. Some fiction, but not much. Choose-Your-Own-Adventure books. Overall, though, we use second person most often in conversation, rarely in writing.

It makes sense that roleplaying games would use second person. The writer can't tell who will read the book, and a book will have thousands, maybe millions, of readers over the world. In game books, the writer faces the added challenge that the reader is also presumably creating a character. I'd wager that most characters are substantially different from their players, and a writer has to somehow speak to them both. Second person works for the instructional parts of a game book, where it addresses the player, as well as for the read-aloud text in modules, which addresses the character.

"You" can be the most inclusive pronoun there is because it addresses whoever is reading in his or her (or their, or hers) entirety. Using second person doesn't automatically make a piece inclusive, though. Consider the following read-aloud text:

You stride into the room, looking warily in each corner for trouble. When you see the orc, you draw your sword, your muscles flexing as you heft the weighty blade. "I shall slay you, fiend," you growl, your low voice echoing against the stone walls.



Text like this is one reason modules have moved away from using second person in read-aloud text. The frankly terrible passage I made up above makes more assumptions than seems possible in 44 words, such as:

- The character owns a sword.
- The character is some sort of fightery class that would draw a sword at the sight of an orc.
- The character has some reason to attack orcs on sight.
- The character can see.
- The character has two arms and legs.
- The character can speak and has a relatively deep voice.
- The character would just totally stride into a dark room and has apparently never heard of searching for traps.

Some items on this list might seem silly, such as assuming a character has two arms. As language becomes more inclusive, though, we start to see all the ways in which we make such assumptions. Gamers can choose to play characters of different races, ages, and genders as well as characters with different physical and mental abilities.

Initially, I believe moving away from using “you” in read-aloud text was a decision made to avoid assuming player actions. No one likes to be told their character strode brazenly into an orc-saturated room. Like alternating pronouns, however, the change to read-aloud text had unintended repercussions. As we avoided making assumptions about what characters *did*, we started to re-evaluate our assumptions about who the characters *were*.

They could be anyone.

They might not be white, might not be straight, might not be without disabilities, might not be neurotypical.

Might not be male.

Now, fourteen years after the release of third edition and its fateful extra ‘s’s, we have game books featuring transgender NPCs. We



have game books with women of color on the cover. We have game books that treat gay and lesbian relationships as normal and natural.

We have panels called “Gamer Girls Unite & Write!” and books called *The Medusa’s Guide for Gamer Girls* and enough women writers to present on those panels and fill those books with essays.

This isn’t to say women gamers are walking on easy street. Pushback against inclusivity still exists. Charges surface regularly of pandering, of “forcing” inclusive content into games, of political correctness, and of pushing an agenda. I hear these arguments on message boards and at convention panels. I’m not sure the arguments will ever truly die down, but in the meantime, inclusivity continues to grow, and more and more people have a chance to find their ways to the hobby so many of us love.

If you’re a writer and want to create products that include women, among others, consider the power of your pronouns. Remember the radical ‘s’. Turning some he’s into she’s energized the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* and showed that the game welcomed women gamers. If you don’t like alternating between he and she, use gender neutral language in your writing. Second person is one option, but you can also write sentences with plural subjects: “A player rolls a d20 to determine his initiative” becomes “All players roll d20s to determine their initiatives.” Or you can omit pronouns entirely: “Roll a d20 to determine initiative.”

As a GM or a player, you can consider the effect your language and, by extension, your assumptions have on your group. Expect that some players will play characters of the opposite gender. Shut down any gender-based negative talk or teasing at the table. GMs have to play a multitude of character types over the course of a campaign, and it shouldn’t be surprising when a player wants to take on a completely different role as well.

When NPCs arrive on the scene, are they male by default? Are women NPCs relegated to the position of barmaid, sex worker, or damsel in distress? Consider rolling randomly for NPC gender to shake up your preconceived notions. Women make up half of our population, and it shouldn’t be surprising that many NPCs are women as well.



Including women characters in games sometimes leads to charges of unrealism. The idea is that our own world has strictly defined gender roles and opportunities for women were curtailed in the “Middle Ages” (or whatever period the challenger feels is most equivalent to the game world) and so having women adventurers and women in positions of power breaks the believability of the game in a way that magic, living gods, dragons, and ancient curses don’t.

You can probably guess how I feel about this argument.

The problem with saying “powerful women break the realism of the game” is that *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons & Dragons* are *not* medieval Earth. Even if medieval (presumably Western European), Earth was that oppressive and subjugating towards women, our history only provides inspiration for campaign settings, not a factually accurate social structure. Including more women in a game might undermine the historical accuracy of a game that’s trying really really hard to be historically accurate, but I don’t believe those games make up a large portion of active campaigns.

What including women in games does do is increase potential revenues, increase the pool of potential party members, and increase the amount of diversity and creativity within the gaming community. Women writers and artists are becoming more common in the industry, and I look forward to a future where there’s more upward movement and women take a place among the developers, editors, and publishers of gaming products. Someday, perhaps, we might even make it to 50%.

Not a bad legacy for the letter ‘s’.

Amber E. Scott began her career contributing articles to *Dragon* and *Dungeon* Magazines. She soon expanded her author credits to include work for Wizards of the Coast, White Wolf, and Sword & Sorcery. She now contributes regularly to her favorite game system, Paizo Publishing’s Pathfinder line. Her most recent books include “Chronicle of the Righteous” and “Trail of the Hunted,” both by Paizo Publishing. Amber posts writing news, thoughts on the roleplaying industry, and pictures of her cats on her professional “Amber E. Scott” Facebook page.

Attitudes Toward Girl Gamers: A Teenage Girl's Perspective

Remy Welham

It was a dark and stormy game night when my older brother befriended a land shark, adopted it as a companion, and, as any twelve-year-old kid would, named it Bulbasaur. I was ten at the time, and my brother's actions made *D&D* seem like the most exciting game in the world.

I didn't start out playing games until I was eleven, mostly little board games, 3.5 *D&D* and *GURPS*. I later moved to the *Pathfinder RPG* when my dad got interested in it, and I waited for the day I turned thirteen because my dad promised to take me to DragonCon like my brother. The year before I turned thirteen, however, my dad decided he would no longer attend DragonCon. My dad eventually kept to the spirit of his promise by taking me to GenCon, where I discovered Pathfinder Society, which became my main gaming interest. Since then, I've mostly played and run Pathfinder Society, and I have had tremendous fun expressing my creativity in Paizo Publishing's world of Golarion.

Playing *Pathfinder* and *D&D*, in general, have been good experiences for me. I enjoy gaming because it provides a way for me to express my imagination, but gaming is a pretty good stress reliever, too. (I had a bad day? Well, having my 9th-level sorcerer fireball a group of goblins took care of that.)

The part I like most about roleplaying is the fact that I can make my own character. Even if I make the exact same race and class and take the same equipment as someone else's character, I will always play that character a little differently. Creating a back story for the character and giving it a life of its own is incredibly rewarding. Another really fun part of roleplaying, particularly in organized play, is that you get to meet all kinds of interesting people—especially when playing games at conventions. I like finding out what brought these other individuals to gaming.

Of course, being a high-school girl (at the time of writing this essay) and playing a male-dominated game is also interesting in itself. I've met guys who think it's great that a girl plays *Pathfinder*, but I've also met others who seem to dislike the idea. I encounter both types frequently at conventions, and while dealing with the latter can occasionally be offensive, I most often find them fairly funny. In

fact, I think laughing off mean people's comments and reactions is one of the best ways to deal with them.

Some of the males I've met at the games have given me funny looks or tried to control my character during the game. I've also experienced the guys accepting rule challenges from each other during playing but outright refusing to believe me on a rule when I have the book in my hand with my finger on the page to prove my dispute. At one point, I began to think it was funny. I am fully capable of playing my own character and knowing the rules, but people seem to think that I'm not capable because of my gender. I've learned that if a guy is annoying in a convention setting because he sits there trying to tell me that I am wrong, it's best to just laugh it off and tell him that I know how to play the game, especially when I've been playing it for six years.

Like all things, there are some bad examples, but I've had a positive experience overall. A lot of people at conventions and other gaming events are actually really nice. They enjoy playing with other people at the game and like sharing it with others. I've had people who are genuinely excited to have me playing with them, and my dad (freelancer Mike Welham) often gets asked where I am if I can't make it with him to a convention.

Still, the view on teenage girls gaming seems fairly negative. Most people, men in particular, view roleplaying and video games as a "guy thing," in accordance with society's stereotypes. As a teenage girl, I am judged poorly, not only by people who know nothing about the game, but also those playing the exact same game. Women, teenage girls especially, are discouraged from doing things and playing games that are considered "guy things." That needs to change. Playing games and expressing your ideas and creativity shouldn't be discouraged by anyone. People should be allowed to play the games they want and not be judged for it. Society's dictation that girls must do "girl things" is wrong, and I hope that attitude will change in the future.

Remy Welham is currently a 20-year-old college student in Asheville, North Carolina. She's studying German, French, and Spanish in college in hopes to become a translator upon graduation. She has been playing role-playing games as long as she can remember and was introduced to the wonderful world of *D&D* when she was ten. She still plays various RPGs today. She wrote this article when she was a high-school student.

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