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## Fantasy Escapism: Using Role-Playing Games to Explore Mental Health and Gender Identity

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Fantasy Escapism:

Using Role-Playing Games to Explore Mental Health and Gender Identity

By

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Escapism in some form is arguably the main goal in the consumption of fantasy literature in film and print media. While fantasy media at large has seemingly shed the stigma it once carried, it is only in recent years that interactive forms of fantasy escapism that incorporate role-play (such as Video Games and Tabletop Role-Playing games like Dungeons and Dragons) have started to gain greater acceptance and recognition. Open discussions about these topics have become significantly more commonplace in the last few decades. Using an ethnographic approach, which consisted of participating in D&D sessions and interviewing a small sample of 6 long-time players of both D&D and video games, I gathered that the role-play in both mediums can function as a useful outlet for those suffering from mental health issues and gender dysphoria, provided these activities are done in moderation and with open communication with a gamemaster if applicable.

This project was originally a significantly more vast undertaking. My plan initially was to read several of the most historically significant and highest selling pieces of fantasy literature between the 1950s and 2010s, starting with J.R.R Tolkien's *The Lord of The Rings* and ending with the works of Brandon Sanderson. I would then analyze the depictions of mental health and gender roles in each piece. This would then lead to a discussion of genre distinctions and an investigation into the reasoning for what I had perceived as a lack of respect for genre fiction (such as fantasy, sci-fi, and horror.) I would close with a look at how fantasy literature has shifted largely into the interactive realm, with tabletop role-playing games and video games, as well as how the shift from non-interactive to interactive affected the escapist aspects of fantasy. As my research on role-playing games became more involved, I began thinking about my own history with the use of gaming as a coping strategy for dealing with depression and gender dysphoria and the important role it played in my development. This resulted in me becoming more

enthusiastic about investigating its relevance in others who suffer/suffered with similar issues. I began to realize that the literary side of this equation deserved its own separate project just as the role-play side did, and decided against combining them. What follows is my effort to synthesize aspects of my past escapist experiences with ethnographic research.

My first experience with fantasy role-play and escapism was in 2012. I was 12 years old and my sibling and I were a few months into our joint effort of trying to convince our father to buy us *Skyrim*, the newest craze that had swept the video game world. *Skyrim* is a fantasy role-playing video game that features a relatively typical "chosen one fulfilling an ancient prophecy" storyline in which the player discovers that they have the abilities of dragons and must use them to turn the tide in the war against a newly resurrected dragon lord. I distinctly remember the day when my sibling and I tracked the UPS package online and saw that it was at the local post office waiting to be loaded onto the truck. Rather than waiting 4 or 5 hours for the package to be delivered, we persuaded our dad to drive us to the post office to pick it up early. The main draw of *Skyrim* is that the storyline acts primarily as set dressing. The game doesn't force the player to follow any particular path or plot. The main plotline can largely be ignored in favor of exploring the many activities and secondary plotlines that the game offers, all of which change based on choices the player makes in-game. These activities include but are not limited to: joining an assassin brotherhood, picking a side in the ongoing civil war, exploring the world, getting married, and building a house if the player chooses. *Skyrim* features a character creation system, as is commonplace with role-playing video games. The player can choose any race (in this case race meaning orc, elf, etc.), biological sex, and physical build for their protagonist at the beginning of the game. After waiting for our laptops to finish installing the game (the built-in fans sounding like jet engines due to the processing power required) we both planted ourselves in

front of the bathroom mirror, laptops perched precariously on the sink, and attempted to recreate our faces on our in-game avatars. We got to work altering nose shape, cheekbone height, skin tone, musculature, eye color and shape, lip fullness, and so on. This process was one of my first exposures to a riskier side of this type of virtual character creation. In my excitement to insert myself into this virtual fantasy realm, I was reminded that I didn't easily fit into what the game had determined to be a normal male physicality. None of *Skyrim's* nose presets quite matched mine: big on my otherwise small face, with a prominent bump in the middle. No eye customization options let me replicate my exotropia, better known as a "lazy eye." Perhaps most apparent to my 12 year old self, it was impossible to make a character of my build or height without selecting a female character model. Considering my sheltered upbringing spent gorging on mainstream media, bending a gender boundary was out of the question in my mind. But all of the male customization options were distinctly muscular and tall, with features that could have jumped out of a 1980s Conan the Barbarian paperback cover. I was small, even for my age. My head was too large for my thin body, causing my silhouette to look a bit like a tennis ball balanced on top of a pencil. I felt not only unseen, but directly inadequate in the shadow of what *Skyrim* was depicting as a normal male frame. When I revisit the game now I am more able to contextualize the game's reasoning for displaying this type of body, both because of the fantasy genre that it pays homage to, and the often outrageous physical strength displayed by the player character regardless of choices made in the character creation menu. There is an argument that the game would actually be less realistic if it allowed you to make a physically weaker looking character. But regardless of realism, the value of representation in role-play based media (and potential harm due to its neglect) is not to be ignored. I settled with making not myself, but myself as I thought I was supposed to be. Though not necessarily as I wanted to be. I salvaged as

many of my facial features as I could replicate and let the rest abide by the masculinity that the game seemingly preached. I didn't have the vocabulary at the time to explain why, but I felt uncomfortable. Almost dishonest.

My experience with *Skyrim* was important in my further considering the power of escapism. In my late teens I participated in several short Dungeons and Dragons Campaigns and was intrigued by how drastically the role-play was altered in a tabletop context. For those unaware, Dungeons and Dragons (referred to as D&D) is a tabletop fantasy role-playing game. It in essence functions as a combination of a board game and improv acting exercise. Players make their own characters from a list of classes (such as wizards and paladins) and races (such as elves and gnomes.) A Dungeon Master (or DM) acts as a guide and referee for the game, writing and preparing encounters before sessions, narrating the storyline, setting the scene, and role-playing as characters that the players meet on their journey. Players may attempt to do actions such as engaging in combat or investigating objects and situations. The level of success of the action is then determined by the roll of a 20 sided die. It is common practice for both DM and players to speak in-character when engaging with the story. This significantly increases immersion.

Before this project, D&D had never quite clicked for me. Even though I had plenty of experience as a player, and a little bit as a DM, I still found it difficult to enjoy at times. Despite this, there is no denying the impact that D&D has on the public perception of role-play gaming, and I felt that my research would greatly benefit from including both video game and D&D players. When deciding my primary method of data gathering I kept in mind the inherent subjectivity of role-play. Every individual gamer has a unique opinion that deserves its own time to be explained and considered. This point also applies to gender and mental health, for obvious reasons. I was uncomfortable making a survey because it felt too distant and wouldnt fulfill my

goal of hearing personal, lived experiences first-hand. I anticipated more honest and in-depth responses from a face to face conversation than an online survey. I also suspected that the latter would be more enjoyable for both parties and would more effectively improve my understanding of the topic. I proceeded by taking a qualitative and ethnographic approach. I conducted 6 interviews with individuals who volunteered to speak with me about their history with gaming, gender identity, and mental health. I later participated in D&D sessions with some of the people I interviewed. I was hoping to gain insight into the differences between video game and D&D based role-play, and was looking forward to hearing how escapism had positively or negatively affected their life and self concept.

It was important to me that I allowed the conversations to flow as organically as possible. Considering the sensitivity and subjectivity of the topic, I steered away from asking leading questions or sticking too closely to a strict template. My goal was to make the interview as relaxed and conversational as possible, with very few interview questions set beforehand. I initially worried that it was a less scientific approach than was optimal, but I quickly found that my method had the desired effect. My interview template consisted of 3 questions:

1. How long have you been playing D&D/Video Games
2. How have the types of characters you make changed since you started, if at all?
3. What do you think are the pro's and con's of engaging in role-play?

This loose template helped me tailor any further questions to the specific participant. Whether they had more experience with gender dysphoria or mental health struggles. Although my sample size was smaller than I would have liked, my relaxed approach resulted in significantly more fruitful interviews than those I have conducted in the past. They were often long (the longest interview clocking in at 3.5 hours) and I sometimes worried that they were getting off track, only

for me to then be taught incredibly important connections between gender, race, trauma, intimacy, and empathy by moments of off-topic conversation that may not have happened had I been more strict in my method. In hindsight, I'm relieved that I resisted the urge to over-direct the interviews. I was shown time and time again how many different variables affect the way that people interact with escapism, as well as the reasons they do it. My relaxed approach succeeded in avoiding overly specific, and possibly overly simplified data. When discussing the interview findings, I will use no names and refer to participants using They/Them pronouns. Though these are not the chosen pronouns of some participants, my goal is to ensure complete anonymity between all involved.

One of the first things I noticed as my number of finished interviews grew was the split in how participants viewed the purpose of escapism. The first perspective believed that escapism was meant as a way to use fiction to mirror one's own struggles in order to see them in different contexts. These participants preferred to directly tackle issues of gender and mental illness (and other related issues) in-game by acting out struggles similar to their own, or sometimes by having plot points or plot devices that acted as metaphors for their personal struggles, as well as larger sociopolitical issues. The second perspective saw escapism by a more literal definition: an escape from the problems listed above. These participants preferred to use role-play as a method of playing a character completely separate and unlike themselves, in a world equally unfamiliar. Participants in the second group often said things along the lines of "I don't want to finish a workday where I struggle with a lack of privilege, and then play a game where my character has to struggle with the same thing." For many years I was a strong proponent of the first perspective. I saw no point in fiction unless it delivered a concrete lesson on a moral or social issue. I now see immense value in both perspectives. I see how sometimes a piece of fiction that



is rehashing a problem that the participant struggles with can be needlessly upsetting or aggravating. In a D&D context it is incredibly important to voice the needs, expectations, and boundaries of players in what is referred to as a “Session Zero.” This is a meeting between players and DM that takes place before the start of a D&D campaign, and acts as a perfect time to express preferences for the kind of escapism that the player prefers, or more importantly, what is off limits. It became clear to me that I needed to pay special attention to which of the camps listed above a participant fell into during interviews as it added a lot of nuance to their responses.

The impact of gender on role-play was the most discussed topic during the interviews. This was another topic where I began seeing two primary perspectives: role-play to interact with social expectations of gender, and role-play to explore their own expression of gender. Firstly I will explain my findings regarding the first perspective. 5 participants shared their experiences using fantasy role-play to engage with their preconceived notions on gender role and expression. One of the main aspects of gender that was discussed was the lack of gender expectations and role in the fictional societies set by video games or by their DM. It is thankfully becoming less common in a fantasy role-play context for female-identifying characters to be unable (or not allowed) to find employment as a knight or mercenary. In fact only a single participant voiced that they consistently felt that their gender or that of their character negatively affected the way they were treated by the role-play scenario and fellow players. This concept was similarly applied by some participants to race. It was mentioned that because the races of D&D do not necessarily equate or compare easily to real-world races, racial issues became less of a pressing focal point. On a related note, one participant mentioned enjoying that D&D took away the privilege that their real-world race and gender afforded them. They told me that they felt frustrated with how they had not been held accountable for negative actions in their childhood

and adolescence due specifically to their gender, and that it was refreshing to feel in-game consequences. All of these factors are where the session zero comes in again. Proper discussion regarding whether the in-game society should have our real world issues of racial and gendered violence and discrimination, or lack these problems is essential. 5 participants voiced their relief to be able to interact with a world where their physical characteristics were largely irrelevant to gameplay and story and they would be taken seriously regardless of gender identity or race.

As I explained above, some participants factored gender into their role-play by exploring their gender identity and expression. Using interactive storytelling to experiment with gender is the concept that drew me to this topic. I spoke with 3 participants who were either in the process of transitioning, or planning to start the process soon. These participants told me that role-play (usually D&D, but not exclusively) was a greatly useful and comforting method of exploring their gender identity prior to coming out. One participant told me that character creation and role-play was something they used to workshop their gender expression and became an invaluable resource when coping with their gender dysphoria. They also said that in their younger years they felt invalidated by the intensely gender-normative way that some video games present character creation, and how they felt like selecting a character of a different biological sex than their own would be “Breaking the rules.” This brought my own memories of my initial *Skyrim* experience into sharp focus. The gender binary is so strictly enforced in popular culture, both directly and indirectly. I spoke at length with this participant on how dehumanized we both felt during experiences like these at times when we didn’t necessarily have the vocabulary to express it, and how deeply freeing it was to finally select a gender option that didn’t align with the one we were perceived as in the real world.

2 participants expressed that D&D played a key role in how they cope with trauma. They spoke similarly that role-play scenarios provided a level of distance and safety that allowed them to relive and recontextualize deeply traumatic past experiences in a productive way. One of them talked about how cathartic it was to use an in-game stand-in for their abuser to work on letting go of the desire for revenge. This helped them get closer to finding closure for their abuse in real life. Another participant talked about playing a character who was struggling more deeply with trauma than they were currently, and equated it to playing as themselves closer to the traumatic event. This helped them feel more secure in their healing process and approach themselves and their past experiences with more grace and empathy. Playing a character that experienced a traumatic event and managed to regain agency and autonomy afterwards helped these participants on their own journeys through coping with trauma. On a related note, one participant mentioned that they find it useful to play as characters that are extreme representations of negative traits that they possess in real life in order to better unpack and resolve the behaviors.

The effects of D&D (though video games had this effect as well in 3 participants) on the social lives of participants was more significant than I anticipated. I heard in several interviews that D&D was a major positive force for social interaction in their current lives. Participants spoke about how D&D groups have become a way to keep in touch and retain friendships that otherwise would have faded. This sentiment was especially pertinent when talking about D&D during the pandemic. Online Zoom D&D groups were an important asset to participants during the initial Covid-19 lockdowns. Many told me that their groups have continued to meet for their weekly session on zoom due to the convenience and to eliminate the commute. In 2 interviews this topic segued into the use of D&D to improve social skills. One participant had significant difficulty with bullying and maintaining friendships as a teenager due to being on the Autism

spectrum. They said that the D&D group they joined as a young adult provided a safe space to “unmask” and practice social situations that caused them anxiety. This benefit was compounded by the fact that others in the group had similar difficulties, which resulted in an accommodating and supportive environment for self expression. The other participant told me that D&D acted as a great icebreaker for meeting new people, and that seeing how someone reacts to extreme situations in a role-play context helps to break down social barriers and create a sense of comfort with new people quickly. This participant suggested that even though D&D is performative by definition, it revealed a personal authenticity that they struggled to feel able to express in work and family life due to the even more strict performative expectations of those circles. They also mentioned that D&D was instrumental in their practice of conflict resolution. This may occur when the players disagree about how to tackle an investigation or combat encounter, or about what plot hook to pursue first. Conflict resolution and communication skills are an important part of playing as a team in a D&D group.

Throughout the interview process I was somewhat dreading my participation in the D&D sessions. My history with playing D&D up to this point had been underwhelming and a bit aggravating for me at times. The campaigns I had participated in in the past suffered from a lack of session zero, which resulted in a lack of communication and resentment between players. One of my interview participants compared the relationship between players and the DM in a D&D group to a sexual relationship. They both require respect, consent, and consistent open communication. If these ingredients are missing, the relationship may very well continue, but it will be toxic and harmful to those involved. I let go of the idea that the campaign would be fun, instead opting to look at it as a purely academic endeavor. I procrastinated creating my character until the night before the first session. I was sleeping over at my partner’s apartment and was

struggling with insomnia so I decided to sneak over to the kitchen. Upon opening the cabinet I saw a box of Daelmans brand Stroopwafels. I had never in my life heard of this cookie, but before any other thought had time to form, I had decided that my character would be named Daelman Stroopwafel. The next day I used an online character sheet generator to create Daelman's attributes. Rolling dice to determine your character's ability scores (these govern their proficiency with different skills,) choosing starting equipment, backstory, and so on have always been my least favorite part of D&D character creation. It has always felt to me a little too much like a tax form, rather than the haven of creativity that it often is for other players. I was delighted to find a way to bypass the parts of the process that overwhelmed me by using the online generator. A half hour later the character sheet for Daelman Stroopwafel, Harengan (meaning humanoid rabbit) sorcerer was finished.

Despite my anxieties, the first session was an absolute pleasure. I remembered the interview where we discussed the ability to unmask in a session. Everyone in the session was an individual on the Autism or ADHD spectrum, myself and the DM included. As soon as everyone had gotten into character, the social anxiety at the table vanished. No one was fixating on how to appear or be perceived a certain way, they just existed as they were. In many ways they were expressing themselves more honestly than they often did in daily life, as an interview participant had noted to me the week before. I noticed this in myself as well. Daelman was less a character and more an opportunity for me to act on instinct both verbally and with in-game actions. 3 participants discussed with me that they felt frustrated with the stereotype that role-play scenarios that lack real-world consequences result in amoral and violent role-played actions. None of my participants have found this to be the case, and neither have I. My first instinct as Daelman was to be kind, curious, and helpful. He always strove to leave a place better than he

found it, and tried to make people laugh along the way with his infectious and childlike enthusiasm. As predicted by my interviews, role-play resulted in me actually becoming a better person in these scenarios. In real life I often think about the normal thing to do. Daelman thinks about the right thing to do. He is happier and more secure and comfortable in his identity than I am. In many ways I have a lot to learn from him.. even though I am him. I remembered something a participant had told me regarding self actualization through their D&D character. They said that often they play as characters with traits that they wish they had, even when those traits may have harmed them in the past. Traits like trust and optimism were specifically brought up during this interview. They told me that role-playing these positive yet often emotionally risky traits helped them see that positivity was helpful to them even when, or maybe especially when they were difficult. Role-play may be viewed as an acting exercise and inherently distant from the self, by definition, but my interview participants once again think otherwise. Role-play teaches you to put on a mask so that you may better learn to take it off.

During this project I analyzed my own habits with character creation and role-play. I remembered my most recent *Skyrim* character, Simone. I'm unclear on how I decided on her name or characteristics. Created sometime in my late teens, Simone marked the first time that I gave up on trying to either make a character nothing like myself, or one identical to myself. She represented a nice middleground: a character that is unlike me, but perhaps is more accurate to myself than what I feel able to emulate in the real world. In my initial use of Simone, I felt immense fear of judgment and would make sure to dress her in the heaviest and least revealing armor I could find in the game so that any distinguishing features would be hidden to someone who saw my screen. This embarrassment triggered my thinking more deeply about my personal ideas about gender identity. Why was I embarrassed? But also, why did playing as a biologically

female character feel more honest to myself than playing as a biologically male one? These are questions I'm only beginning to truly unpack, but it speaks volumes that Simone has become my default character in video games since. I realize now how significant it was to my gender evolution to allow myself to feel comfort in my identity and self actualization playing female characters. It was a step to me realizing the amount of discomfort I have with masculine ideals and presentation. My male identity is not something I outright reject, but it is not something I feel any connection to either.

For a final bit of context, I'd like to add another anecdote on my personal history with fantasy escapism. By early 2021 I had reached a breaking point. My compromised immune system meant that I was unable and unwilling to leave the house due to the risk that Covid-19 presented to me before the first wave of vaccines. I was approaching a full year indoors. I had started limiting my food intake due to depression and panic attacks. During this time I lost a significant amount of weight. The fear of getting sick morphed into more of a fear of going outside, bordering on agoraphobia. The months preceding the first lockdown were some of the happiest and most socially and academically fulfilling of my life up to that point. My difficulty with online school signaled the loss of both my academic success and my social life. One morning I remembered that I had a copy of *Dark Souls*. *Dark Souls* is a fantasy role-playing video game truly unique in presentation. Most video games strive to provide a simple yet fulfilling gameplay loop with a clearly communicated story. *Dark Souls* has a story told mainly in subtle, almost riddle-like dialogue and intensely difficult and precise gameplay demands. Much of the storyline and role-playing elements rely on inference from context and creative thinking to travel the labyrinthine world design and survive the punishing combat encounters. From a metaphorical standpoint, where most video games try to take the player on a guided

amusement park ride, *Dark Souls* drops the player on an isolated island, armed with a single tool of their choice, and says “You have everything you need to survive. Good luck! I believe in you.” The game has a reputation for immense difficulty and punishing design. I had attempted to play the game several times up to this point but had never gotten far. It had always presented situations too obtuse and seemingly insurmountable for my taste. I don’t know what compelled me to pick it up again, but I’m glad I did. I recreated Simone in the character creation menu at the beginning of the game and was off. On this new attempt I realized that the difficulty was in no way the main event. The desolate and decrepit kingdom full of hollowed enemies (hollow meaning lacking a soul, merely a husk acting on base instinct) seemed newly meaningful to me. The game has a rich storyline about a society turned to ruin that is told exclusively through environmental design. Every in-game death was a learning experience that granted me useful data in progressing. At this point in my life I had developed a strict fixed-mindset. I had no true belief that my efforts would amount to anything worthwhile. My time with *Dark Souls* taught me that the effort can be as validating as the success, with the right mindset. *Dark Souls* demonstrates the cliché but still timeless message of “it doesn’t matter how much you fail, as long as you never give up” in a way that resonated with me for the first time. Partway through the game the player can encounter Laurentius, one of the handful remaining individuals in the game who is still capable of thought and speech; he is not hollowed. After saving him and engaging him in conversation, he bids you farewell with “Be safe, friend. Don’t you dare go hollow.” This single line of dialogue broke me immediately and without warning. I had a long overdue cry as I realized that I had been hollow since a few weeks into May of 2020. I lived on only the bare minimum sustenance and stimulation required. I hadn’t exercised, contacted a friend, or engaged in any extensive self-care in almost a year. Maybe this was why I suddenly



felt so comforted by the gray and broken down landscape of the game's first half, full of long abandoned structures and a storyline that tells of a once bright and warm fire going out. While I fought through the game, I had been fighting through my depressive episode as well. *Dark Souls*, through Laurentius, was telling me that my struggle was valid. That the only wrong option right now is to give up. The game isn't punishing, apathetic, or unfair. It has faith in the intelligence and perseverance of the player, and aims to get the player to have the same faith in themselves. I continued the game, seeing that the second half provided landscapes with deeper color saturation and more challenging enemies. But I sped ahead, armed with the skills the game had taught me up to this point. I began eating more. I reached out to a friend. I watched the credits roll at 3am several days later, feeling a renewed sense of wellbeing. My life hadn't gotten any easier, but I felt comforted and validated. I had just beaten *Dark Souls*. If I can do that, I can go for a walk too.

I played through *Dark Souls* several more times in the years since. In fact I have realized that I look to the game for comfort when I need to be reminded not to give in to despair, that effort is worth it regardless of the outcome, and that I am capable of difficult change and improvement despite the invisible weight of mental illness. During large portions of this project I felt myself slipping back into depressive mindsets and feeling like this project was childish or a waste of time. I once again loaded up *Dark Souls* at the beginning of my research in order to remind myself why and how escapism and role-play are important and worthy of study. Afterwards I decided to finally try *Elden Ring*, the newly released spiritual successor created by the same director. Within minutes the character creation menu allowed me to make asymmetrical eye alterations, finally allowing me to feel representation 11 years after my first *skyrim* playthrough. The comfort and security from playing *Elden Ring* was a driving force in my ability

to finish this project despite my consistent battle with physical and mental illness. Retreating into the world of *Elden Ring* continually reminded me of the importance of addressing the value of escapism. The message of that experience is what propelled me across the finish line.

The 6 interviews that I conducted, along with the D&D sessions that I participated in, point heavily toward fantasy role-play being a beneficial method of exploring gender identity, mental health, and a host of other topics through escapism. I hesitate to provide a deeper conclusion as it is clear to me that the topic deserves a significantly larger sample size. In the future I plan to continue this research by both continuing my interviews and making a short answer survey for a wider audience. I also consider this to be the first leg of a much larger piece concerning the history of escapism in fantasy fiction and the genre's depictions of gender and mental health.

### A Note on Sources

This project began as a very broad and multidisciplinary study that resulted in wide reading for inspiration. As my topic narrowed to role-play and escapism, my source of data also narrowed to exclusively the interviews and the video games referenced. I did not to my knowledge make reference in this paper to any data or finding from outside sources. For the sake of transparency, as well as to provide a list of interesting further reading, on the next page I have included a bibliography of the articles that I read that influenced my thinking prior to writing this paper, as well as the 3 video games that I discuss.

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