Roll An Investigation Check: The Construction of Gender in Dungeons & Dragons

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The Construction of Gender in Dungeons & Dragons

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Introduction

Two humans, an elf, a half-elf, and a dragonborn gather around a grave. An eclectic bunch, they are about to embark on an adventure that will make heroes out of them, fighting dragons in a war that will tear their continent apart.

This is how my friends and I begin our Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) campaign, following the adventures of *Dragonlance: The Shadow of the Dragon Queen*. But this is also the starting point for this thesis in which I explore the construction of gender through and within the Tabletop Role-Playing game (TTRPG) of Dungeons & Dragons.

It all started around October 2020 when I was invited to join a D&D group and create my first character. The experience was incredibly exciting for many reasons. At the time, I was in the process of questioning my sexuality and gender identity and suddenly I had the chance to create a character that would give me the opportunity to explore my identity. And so my first character was born: Lyrana, a tiefling sorcerer of sometimes ambiguous gender.

With the benefit of hindsight, there are many things I would now change about the way I built Lyrana ranging from her personality to some of her abilities. But it is rare to have your first D&D character be perfect. When you first make a character, the possibilities seem endless, and the range of choices can be quite overwhelming. Thus, I do no regret Lyrana as a character and she will always hold a special place in my heart because she was the beginning of one of the best experiences I have had.

After Lyrana most of the characters I have played have been female. It has only been recently that I started creating male characters, two to be specific: Orsik Goldbasher, a dwarf paladin; and Brick, an earth genasi barbarian. It was while crafting a personality and appearance for these two characters that the idea for this thesis started brewing. I started to think about the process of creating a character and questioning all the choices involved. I was particularly curious about the choice of gender because when I talked to my D&D friends each of them seemed to have a different reason for deciding on one gender or another. These conversations were the starting point for what today is this text. Thus, after a theoretical introduction to the

literature and a mechanical introduction to D&D, this thesis departs from my own D&D experiences to explore the construction of gender in the game.

Although I only started playing D&D in 2020, TTRPGs and gaming have been popular hobbies for decades. Further, the emergence of game studies as an academic discipline suggests that the interest in these hobbies has not escaped the academic world. In fact, Dungeons & Dragons has already been studied by scholars like Gary Alan Fine who published his book *Shared Fantasy* in 1983.

Yet, while reading his book and other works focused on TTRPGs I noticed there was a lack of focus on gender and whether or not gender is constructed differently in these games than the real world. Much of the older literature like Fine (1983) focuses on TTRPGs and games as a new element within academia and thus their observations remain on a surface level in many aspects. As more recent studies highlight, much of the research and focus on TTRPGs has been devoted to the white, straight, male gamer (Nielsen 2015; Sundén 2010). However, these studies also reveal that this focus has created a misrepresentation of the gaming population.

While it is true that the stereotypical gamer is pictured as male, and more specifically white and straight, there are many people who self-identify as gamers who do not fit that profile. As a result, recent studies have diverged from traditional game study research and have instead focused on issues of gender, race, affect, and emotions such as Sundén (2010) or Alexander (2022). Yet, while the more recent literature touches upon the topic of gender in relation to the players, it has been difficult to find literature that analyses gender within the game, in relation to the characters.

Thus, this thesis explores how gender is constructed within Dungeons & Dragons. As will be outlined in the literature review, some scholars have attempted to carry out somewhat similar research, however, their efforts have been focused mostly on video games. This thesis differentiates itself from previous studies by focusing on TTRPGs such as Dungeons & Dragons. This allows the research to focus not only on gender within the game but also to

explore the interactions between disembodied performance and gender. As a result, the main research question of this thesis is as follows:

Does the disembodied nature of Dungeons & Dragons inherently affect the construction of gender within the game?

Due to the lack of research on this topic, this thesis will include different kinds of case studies within Dungeons & Dragons to provide a variety of analyses and possible answers to the research question. Thus, different methods of playing D&D will be included in this paper. Additionally, this will serve to identify whether the game mode affects the construction of gender within the game in different ways.

In order to answer the research question, this thesis will begin with a literature review and methodology to explore what has already been said on similar topics as well as devise a strategy to approach the case studies. Subsequently, the first chapter will focus on Dungeons & Dragons in general to provide a broad understanding of the game. This will be followed by three other chapters each focusing on one of the case studies.

First, this thesis will explore my own Dungeons & Dragons game based on the *Dragonlance* sourcebook created by Wizards of the Coast (Arman et al. 2023). This is a game played online between six friends, it employs video through Discord as the main mode of communication and it is not streamed or recorded in any way. The main goal of this game is the pure entertainment of its members, and this has been the case since it was first created in October 2020.

This chapter will identify the elements involved in the process of character creation as well as reflect on how gender is constructed in the game based on personal experiences and anecdotes. Emphasis will be placed on the disembodied nature of D&D, especially for a group of friends who play online, and how that affects the construction and performance of gender. This chapter relies heavily on my personal experience but also that of other players who help me answer the question of how gender is constructed in D&D.

Second, the text will introduce the case of Queer Arcana, a Utrecht-based "theatre/game collective" (Queer Arcana 2023a). This group organises their own D&D games in Utrecht while also performing games in front of an audience while in drag. Their main goal is to "enhance the visibility of queer gamers" and they are interested in the overlap that occurs when you mix games, queerness, art, etc. (Queer Arcana 2023a).

Given the performative nature of the Queer Arcana games, this section provides an opposite case study to the one in the previous chapter. The text will explore the differences between embodied and disembodied D&D, the power and importance of drag, as well as how all of that affects gender within and outside of the game.

Third, the final analytical chapter focuses on *The Adventure Zone* a podcast in which brothers Justin, Travis, and Griffin McElroy and their dad, Clint McElroy, play Dungeons & Dragons as well as other TTRPG systems. Here once again the question of embodiment vs. disembodiment will be crucial given that the podcast format of the show created a striking contrast with the Queer Arcana case study and even with the *Dragonlance* case study. This chapter will discuss how voice affects the construction of gender in D&D at length, specifically focusing on the importance of how we use our voice in a disembodied performance such as role-playing. Additionally, the chapter analyses the differences between gender in the real world and gender in the fantasy world and discusses the consequences of such differences.

Finally, the conclusion will revisit all the important points and key contributions of the thesis, specifically focusing on which elements of D&D affect the construction of gender in the game. Further, the conclusion proposes future avenues of research and discusses current events that showcase the importance of conducting additional research on TTRPGs as a way to study human identity.

Literature Review

As mentioned, there is little research on the specific field of this thesis. Yet, it is possible to construct a substantial argument based on a body of literature that stems from similar disciplines. To that end, this literature will be divided into the following sections: gender, performance, and drag; video games, and voice and podcasts. This division will allow for an understanding of the state of the field regarding each of the components of the research question and case studies.

Before developing each of the sub-sections it is necessary to provide some general commentary on the literature. Much has been written so far on gender and performance which is why this thesis does not intend to produce an exhaustive literature review on the topic. Instead, a selection of core texts has been made which provide a general understanding of the topic which serves as the foundation of this thesis.

As previously outlined, the more observable gap has been appreciated when it comes to TTRPGs and their relationship with gender, which is what this thesis explores. While there are some articles that touch on this topic, most of the literature that has been found deals with video games rather than TTRPGs which is why the selection of texts includes recently published articles and Ph.D. dissertations. In summary, the proposed breakdown of the literature into different categories allows for a complete understanding of the current state of research since it engages with foundational texts within performance and gender studies such as Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (2011) or Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), while at the same time diving into the literature that refers to gender within (video)games which is a more recent field of studies.

Gender, Performance, & Drag:

Out of the three categories into which this literature review has been divided, gender, performance, and drag might be the broadest. As a result, it is not possible to include every book and article written on the subject without losing focus on the aim of this thesis. Instead, this section includes a selection of texts mostly dealing with performance and queer studies.

This selection has been made keeping in mind the case studies and the overall goal of the thesis. To that end, there is less focus on the specifics of gender history and performance studies. Rather, the focus has been placed on how to study something ephemeral, something fleeting like gender performance within a game such as D&D.

Four authors have been consulted to evaluate the state of the research on gender, performance, and drag: Judith Butler, Diana Taylor, Peggy Phelan, and José Esteban Muñoz. Beginning with Judith Butler, their text *Bodies That Matter* (2011) has been employed as the foundation for this section. The book is a foundational text within gender and performance studies from which the other authors have moved away but at the same time built upon. Thus, looking at Butler's work allows us to see what Phelan, Taylor, and Muñoz are reacting against.

In *Bodies That Matter* (2011), Butler emphasises the link between performance, and discourse and power. The chapters that specifically discuss performance highlight the link that exists between these three concepts. As Butler puts it, "the performative is one domain in which power acts as discourse" (2011, 171). To understand this, it is important to summarise Butler's definitions of gender, performance, and performativity. According to Butler (1988, 519), gender is a "stylized repetition of acts", it is not something natural but rather constructed by society through a series of norms or acts. The analysis chapters will further delve into these concepts but with this definition, it is necessary to distinguish between 'performance' and 'performativity'.

Performativity is the enacting of these repetitive acts that Butler says constitute gender. On the other hand, performance implies a conscious choice to play with the conventions set up within the gender discourse. This can either be through drag, or at an individual level by making choices on how to behave and present to the world.

In their work on performance, Butler also discusses drag by analysing Jennie Livingston's documentary *Paris Is Burning* (1990). They use the film documentary to discuss wider aspects of drag and gender performance such as the potential subversive power that drag holds. According to Butler, drag is not inherently subversive, but it holds the potential to be.

For example, if drag perpetuates gender norms and fails to break with the hegemonic culture, it is not possible to call it subversive (Butler 2011, 84). However, if drag highlights the systematic and repetitive structures of the gender discourse then it is possible to achieve subversion.

Nevertheless, the concept of 'performance' which Butler relates specifically to gender in *Bodies That Matter* (2011) has a different meaning for authors such as Diana Taylor. Taylor (2003, xvi) emphasises the need to think about performance not only as an object but as a way of knowing. In her book *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), she discusses the differences between what she calls the archive and the repertoire each corresponding to a different way of knowing.

Historically, written knowledge (i.e. the archive) has been favoured over other forms of knowing such as performance (i.e. the repertoire) (Taylor 2003). Thus, Taylor urges the reader to consider the knowledge that can be derived from studying the repertoire, something that is ephemeral and mostly based on embodied practices (2003, 16). However, she also recognises the fact that perhaps performance does not always necessarily rely on embodiment (2003, 3), which is a point that will be further explored in this thesis when discussing gender within D&D. Ultimately, Taylor critiques the Western-centric discourse that privileges written knowledge and has historically erased and disregarded performance as a potential source of knowledge.

Further delving into the scholars who discuss performance, Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (2005) is also mentioned in Taylor's (2003) book. Phelan shares Taylor's emphasis on performance as a way of knowing but she studies it differently. Phelan describes performance as a live event that disappears without a trace, something that cannot be repeated without this repetition becoming something fundamentally different (2005, 146). On the other hand, Taylor disagrees with this view on the ephemerality of performance and the impossibility to study it.

While it is true that that performance happens in an instant or instance and reproduction of it is only possible through the archive, there is something about performance that remains. This is what Taylor (2003, 142) calls the "hauntology of performance". However, José Esteban

Muñoz (2019) has a different name for it, 'ephemera'. 'Ephemera' or the 'hauntology of performance' is what remains after a performance or act is finished.

In his book *Cruising Utopia* (2019), Muñoz argues in favour of a "hermeneutics of residue" within performance studies. This is in opposition to the more common trend within the field which argues that performance only exists within the time that it lasts, and nothing remains afterwards (2019, 71). Phelan's (2005) approach to performance belongs to this trend.

Within *Cruising Utopia* (2019) Muñoz also discusses drag, specifically the figure of Kevin Aviance a (drag) performer based in New York City. Muñoz's focus within the chapter is on the dance floor as a place where queerness can be performed, but specifically, he aims to analyse gesture. Gestures are crucial to Muñoz to study and analyse queerness and performance. According to him, small movements can tell us stories about queerness and reveal things that go unseen otherwise. Examples he provides are a specific ankle tilt while in high heels, or dancing while pretending to apply makeup. These can seem like unimportant things, but closely analysed, specifically as part of a bigger story, they can reveal "lost queer histories" (2019, 67), that is what the study of 'ephemera' can offer.

(Video)games:

The second section of this literature focuses on what scholars have already said about Dungeons & Dragons. However, it has been necessary to broaden the scope of the literature and include other kinds of games due to the limited availability of sources on D&D. Thus, this section mixes literature on D&D and other TTRPGs with literature on video games. This allows us to draw parallels between the different types of media. Three main points are discussed in this section: who plays games, what is involved in avatar or character creation, and the subculture of gaming.

First, the average player of video games and TTRPGs has changed over the last few decades. Describing the game scene of the 1980s, Fine (1983, 47) characterises the typical gamer as a young, educated male who has an avid interest in science fiction, fantasy, and history. This stereotype of the young, straight, male as the typical gamer continues even today. However,

surveys and interviews conducted over the last two decades highlight possible flaws in that rationale (Nielsen 2015).

The "gaymer survey" conducted in 2006 by a student from the University of Illinois received more than 10.000 responses. The survey asked gamers to state their sexuality and 40% of the respondents replied by stating they self-identified as bisexual (Nielsen 2015, 46). Sundén's (2010) research also points out the increasing presence of queer gamers in the scene despite their lack of visibility within the community.

Furthermore, women also have gained an important presence in the gamer demographics despite facing continuous marginalisation (Alexander 2022). A report by the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) stated that "42% of all gamers are women" (Nielsen 2015, 46). Still, the idea that gaming is a community of men persists (Alexander 2022; Nielsen 2015).

The second element of this section is avatar and character creation which is one of the main differences between TTRPGs and video games. In role-playing video games, players create an avatar which is the representation of the player within the game. On the other hand, TTRPGs like D&D do not have avatars but characters. The difference between the two is that characters are not meant to represent the player within the game. Players need to have some degree of identification with the character they are playing (Fine 1983, 214), but this is not meant to be a direct representation. There is a multiplicity of elements involved in character creation which the analysis chapters will explore more at length.

Finally, the overall consensus in the literature is that the gaming community constitutes a subculture. Already in 1983, Fine stipulated that fantasy role-playing games were their own subculture, meaning that this group constituted a "distinctive segment of society" (25). He based his analysis on four criteria: a common set of activities and culture, the existence of a network of communication, the self-identification of gamers as a group, and the identification of the group by outsiders.

Currently, D&D and other TTRPGs continue to meet these criteria. However, as Alexander (2022, 105) points out, the subculture has become bigger in the last few decades, and now it is possible to identify different groups within the gamer community. This is mostly related to the change in the player demographic highlighted above.

As a result, while D&D still constitutes a subculture, it is important to be aware that the players' experiences of the game will depend on the space one inhabits within the subculture. For example, Alexander (2022, 105) uses the concepts of 'Kitchen Table', 'Porch', and 'Yard' to refer to three different spheres in which one can play D&D. The first one is the smallest and most familiar where players know each other well and have a close bond. The Porch and Yard are bigger spheres where the bond between players grows weaker the further one is from the Kitchen Table. Through the use of these locatives, Alexander (2022) illustrates the size of the gaming community and highlights the multiplicity of experiences players can have within one same subculture.

Voice & Podcasts:

The final section of this review explores previous research on the topic of voice and sound, which is abundant, and also on the newer phenomenon of podcasts, on which there is less relevant literature available. The consensus in the literature is that voice, alongside language, is a crucial component of meaning-making (Butler 1997; Dolar 2012; Kanngieser 2012). There is more to voice than just being a part of information transmission, voice is connected and dependent on class, race, education, culture, social value, and sexuality among other things (Kanngieser 2012, 337). Therefore, not only is voice important to convey information and meaning but it is also tied to identity (338).

Some aspects of voice that can have an impact on the process of meaning-making and identity are accent, enunciation, and intonation (Kanngieser 2012, 342). Multiple scholars draw attention to the impact these factors can have on voice and the consequences this can have for the listener (Kanngieser 2012; Rae 2023; Chion 2012). As Rae (2023, 2) mentions, it is not only a question of "who is being heard, but what is being heard." The reason why these factors can

alter how we perceive voices, and which inferences we make as a result has to do with the mode of listening people employ at that moment. Chion (2012) distinguishes three modes of listening: causal, semantic, and reduced. Causal listening entails "listening to a sound in order to gather information about its cause (or source)" (Chion 2012, 48). As a result, variations created by accents, for example, will act as clues to the listener to gather more information on the speaker. Chapter 4 about *The Adventure Zone* will return to the importance of this.

The listener also has an important role in communication, not just as a passive receiver of the information but as an active component of meaning-making (Chion 2012; Kanngieser 2012). This idea is supported by Hilmes (2012, 351) when she discusses the role of the radio in creating an 'imagined community' through the simultaneous tuning of thousands of people to the same program. Not only does this shared experience generate a sense of unity, but it is also an effective way to convey information to large groups of people.

However, does this sense of 'imagined community' extend from the radio to the newer medium of podcasts? Rae (2023) introduces the debate amongst scholars on whether there are more differences than similarities between podcasts and the radio. Her conclusion is that while there are some features that are the same, the characteristic elements of a podcast are very different from those of the radio (Rae 2023, 3). Some of the differences she highlights are the fact that podcasts are intimate, meaning that their format often makes the listener feel part of the conversation, participatory, mobile, and selective, given the number of possibilities that are available nowadays.

Finally, research on podcasts is scarce as they are a relatively new phenomenon. It is only during the late 2010s and early 2020s that the academic community has started to pay attention to this new medium. As a result, the literature available to analyse the voice of podcast speakers such as in *The Adventure Zone* case study is not abundant. Therefore, the analysis will strongly rely on the literature available on voice as a crucial element in the meaning-making process.

Methodology

Careful study of the literature and the methods employed within it has revealed that there is a multitude of ways in which to study performance and its ephemerality. It is not necessarily that the authors outlined above disagree on their approaches but rather they seem to agree that the best way to study performance is to do it from a personal perspective. Thus, this thesis will employ a methodology created for the purpose of studying these case studies specifically.

This methodology will combine some of the approaches identified in the literature to provide a complete understanding of each selected case study. Ultimately, this will allow this thesis to answer the research question of whether the disembodied nature of D&D inherently affects the construction of gender within the game. There are three pillars to this methodology: scenario, a concept borrowed from Diana Taylor (2003); low theory, which is taken from Jack Halberstam and Stuart Hall (2011); and finally affect theory and close playing, which are mostly adopted from Jenny Sundén's (2010) and Sedgwick's (1997) texts.

Scenario:

Diana Taylor (2003) takes the dictionary definition of scenario, "a sketch or outline of the plot of a play, giving particulars of the scenes, situations, etc." as the starting point for her proposed methods of analysis, the scenario (2003, 28). Scenario is created as a way to study performance, to analyse and understand it despite its ephemerality. Taylor (2003, 28) compares it to Barthes' mythical speech and emphasises how scenario is "material that has already been worked on", something that is repeated.

This feature of repetition is what allows 'scenarios' to reveal what other methods cannot, such as stereotypes (Taylor 2003, 28). Scenarios repeat themselves and create a shared frame or understanding for their audiences on what to expect. This characteristic will be crucial for the analysis of *Dragonlance,* Queer Arcana, and *The Adventure Zone* to understand how each mode of playing D&D affects the construction of gender within the game.

Scenario as a "meaning-making paradigm" allows us to draw not only from the archive but also from the repertoire (2003, 29). There are several ways in which it achieves that. First,

a scenario requires the viewer to imagine a physical location, it is intrinsically tied to the notion of a scene or stage. This evokes the idea of performance rather than written knowledge (2003, 29). In other words, scenario forces the introduction not only of the archive but also of the repertoire by encouraging the viewer to engage with non-written forms of knowledge.

A second feature of scenario is that it allows the audience to simultaneously view the actors and the characters they play as two different entities (Taylor 2003, 30). Taylor uses the example of the mock battles between the Moors and Christians played in Mexico in which oftentimes none of the performers were neither Moors, Christians, Spanish, or Turks. Instead, they were usually all indigenous performers (30). Thus, by dressing up as the characters of the scenario they were playing, they were able to simultaneously enact other narratives relevant to their social context such as those of colonisation by the Spanish. Instead of being a representation of Moors and Christians, it also became a re-enactment of indigenous people and colonisers.

Without perceiving the characters and actors separately through an analysis based on scenario this double re-enactment would be missed. This feature is particularly relevant to D&D where characters and players are two different entities and yet, studying one can reveal much about the other.

Third, scenarios are formulaic paradigms, which means that they are repetitive but also that, once there is a paradigm shift, they are suitable for parody and a reversing of the previous scenario (2003, 31). Fourth, scenarios can be transmitted in a multiplicity of ways, most of which do not involve writing. Thus, the multiple ways in which a scenario can be transmitted reminds the audience of all the different systems involved in the making of a scenario, not just the written ones but also embodied practices (32).

A fifth element is that scenarios prevent the viewers from distancing themselves from their content. In order for a scenario to exist the viewer needs to somehow situate themselves in relation to said scenario. Finally, while scenarios are repetitive, they are not mimetic. This means that they are not a perfect copy of one another but rather repeat and build over previous

manifestations of a scenario (32). Therefore, in order to notice the differences it is necessary to look at embodied and performative elements of scenarios such as descriptive features of the characters rather than just the script or narrative.

Employing scenario to analyse D&D provides a suitable method to bypass the problems of studying performance. Given that D&D is a role-playing game this means that its main features are play and performance. Thus, many aspects of the game are ephemeral. Scenario provides the necessary tools to analyse these ephemeral aspects of the game in a reliable way.

Additionally, like many other games, D&D has a formulaic structure which makes it suitable to apply the concept of scenario. Fine (1983, 78) does not use 'scenario' in the same way as Taylor (2003) but he also talks about the importance of 'scenarios' in order to have the game function properly. According to him, scenarios are not only the setting of the game but also the motivation of the characters to follow a story. Scenarios set up the basic structure for the game which gives players the possibility to develop it further through their own exploration (79).

Thus, due to its formulaic structure, I have identified five elements that repeat themselves in all the games and are necessary for the game to function. These include not just the setting and story, but also the Dungeon Master (DM), the players and their characters, and the dice. These are elements that are also identified by Fine (1983) and that since the beginning of the game have been considered part of its structure.

These elements will be further explained in the first chapter but their existence in multiple D&D games proves that despite the multiplicity of stories and characters, there is a formula that repeats itself across D&D games. Thus, the formulaic structure of the game and its performance aspects make D&D an ideal candidate for using scenario as a methodological approach.

Low theory:

The second pillar of this methodology rests on Halberstam's (2011) "low theory". This is a concept he employs in his book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011) which he borrows from Stuart

Hall. The idea of low theory is to employ an array of sources traditionally considered low culture such as animated movies, TV shows, pop culture references, etc. to construct an argument for an academic topic or theory.

The intention behind Halberstam's (2011) low theory is similar to Muñoz's (2019) when he uses gesture and ephemera as methods to study queerness. Muñoz (2019) focuses on the gestures of Kevin Aviance to study what these can tell us about broader queer theories. Thus, low theory and ephemera use unconventional sources or methods to study queerness. Both authors seem to agree on the fact that gender, queerness, performance, or all of them combined, are not possible to properly study through already-existing theories.

The reasoning behind employing 'low theory' in this thesis is two-fold. First, the research question focuses on the construction of gender within D&D and whether this is affected by the disembodied performance that takes place during the game. Thus, the main topics of this thesis fall under the umbrella of gender, performance, and tangentially queerness. As mentioned above, these are the topics that Halberstam (2011) and Muñoz (2019) suggest analysing through unconventional sources. Second, as a role-playing game, D&D is a prime example of a 'low theory' source.

Affect theory and close playing:

Finally, the third pillar of this methodology comprises both affect theory and close playing. Close playing is a spin on the practice of close reading but adapted to the medium of games. It is applied by Jenny Sundén (2010) in her analysis of World of Warcraft.

Traditionally, close playing is understood to be "rational, critical, and 'in control'" (Sundén 2010, 46). However, Sundén's (2010) interpretation emphasises "the critical potential of emotion, sensation, and the perhaps out-of-control element of game play" (46). The idea behind close playing is to incorporate players' experiences into the research (47). Usually, the personal involvement of researchers in their work has been deemed to result in less critical texts and theories. Sundén (2010, 48) questions this and wonders whether instead of making research less critical it makes analysis richer and more interesting.

Additionally, Sundén's (2010) text works closely with affect. Affect is a word that comes from the Latin *affectus* which means passion or emotion, affects are the result of interacting with "objects, an environment, or other people" (Alphen 2008, 23). Therefore, affects are social and culturally mediated, meaning that affective responses vary depending on one's social context. Sundén (2010) discusses affect in relation to close playing exploring what affect theories can tell us about the body (both player and character) within the games.

Sedgwick's (1997) approach to affect theory is also of interest. In her text, Sedgwick discusses paranoid reading, a way of looking at the world through the hermeneutics of suspicion. In other words, paranoid reading involves questioning everything while also assuming the worse in each scenario to avoid surprise (Sedgqick 1997, 14). Paranoia is a negative affect theory meaning that its main goal is to reduce undesired or negative affects to the minimum, sometimes at the cost of positive affects (14).

Paranoia is just one of the different approaches that can be taken to analyse reality, however, the hermeneutics of suspicion seem to be held in high regard within queer studies (5). While Sedgwick does not intend to eliminate paranoid reading from critical theory, she criticises its prevalence and proposes alternative modes of reading, most importantly, reparative modes of reading. These allow for surprises, even if negative at times (22).

The idea behind reparative modes of reading is to allow the reader to approach texts without already expecting to find issues such as sexual difference or homophobia. One of the problems with paranoid reading is that due to its constant questioning of reality, it makes it difficult to identify the relationship between reality and what knowledge means for people (3). Thus, reparative modes of reading allow for this relationship to be explored and understood from different angles, welcoming new perspectives into queer studies and critical theory.

The combination of close playing and affect theory form the third pillar of this methodology. Their inclusion is necessary given the auto-ethnographic components of the second chapter and the overall analysis based on affective responses to the case studies. As

Sundén (2010, 48) observes, there is no reason why personal involvement by the researcher should make analysis less critical.

In summary, this thesis employs a methodology informed by the concepts of scenario, to make sense of the events that take place in D&D; low theory, to justify the use of a TTRPG as a way to explore gender construction; and affect theory and close playing to understand what personal experiences with the game can add to research. The analysis that takes place in the following chapters is based on a combination of these three pillars each building on the other to answer the research question.

Chapter 1: The Adventure Begins

As any self-respecting adventurer will know, if one intends to embark on a Dungeons & Dragons adventure at least two and a half hours need to be put aside, drinks and snacks need to be gathered, and a comfortable spot at the table needs to be secured. D&D sessions, which is what each of the D&D game 'episodes' are called, can range in length and intensity depending on the events that are unfolding. However, it is not uncommon for sessions to stretch over several hours.

These individual sessions are often all connected through a thread that is the story told by the Dungeon Master (DM) and make up what is known as a campaign. Campaigns, like sessions, can vary in length with some of them going just over a few sessions and others spanning months or even years. Moreover, the themes and topics involved in sessions and campaigns also cover a wide range of variety going from heavily focused on combat, exploration, or a combination. Therefore, it is possible to assert one constant in D&D: change.

Yet, in order to facilitate the analysis of D&D games, five elements have been identified as constant and present in most games: (1) the Dungeon Master (DM), (2) the players and their characters, (3) the dice, (4) the story, (5) and the setting. Singling out these elements amongst all the others that make up D&D games makes it easier to focus the analysis on specific aspects of each of the case studies.

However, it would be unwise to proceed with this adventure without giving a proper explanation of what each of these elements entails. Thus, this chapter will act as a bridge: between the introduction and the case studies, but also between non-players and the world of TTRPGs. In order to do so, the following explanations will borrow from Alexander (2022), Fine (1983), my own experience with gaming, and the content created by Wizards of the Coast.

The first step in introducing people to D&D is not just explaining these five elements but also providing a general explanation of how the game works. Many experienced players believe in learning by playing as there are thousands of rules and concepts in D&D and it is impossible to cover them all just by describing them. While this may work when the purpose is

to learn how to play D&D, alternative methods need to be used when the goal is to teach someone about D&D.

As a result, this section does not aim to explain all the rules and features of the game. Rather it provides an understanding of some commonly used concepts in the game. Besides the five previously identified elements, these common concepts include ability checks, attack roles, and saving throws. All of these have to do with the mechanics of the game and are determined by the roll of the dice.

Ability checks are performed by players when their characters attempt something like climbing a tree (i.e. Athletics or Acrobatics), tracking things in the woods (i.e. Survival), or dancing or performing a song (i.e. Performance). Whether the character succeeds or not depends on their proficiency with these skills and how difficult the task is (this difficulty is called a DC). On the other hand, saving throws are necessary when something happens to a character. They are an attempt by the players to prevent something such as resisting the effects of a potion or charm. Finally, an attack roll is what determines the success of characters when they try to hit their enemies in combat.

The five elements:

Having concluded this "brief" introduction to D&D terminology it is possible to proceed with the five common elements across all D&D games. Beginning with the DM, this is the person in charge of the game. They are the ones who set up the story and the setting for the players and craft all the different adventures they can follow. Fine (1983, 72) compares them to God or a god in the sense that they have total control of the world within the game. However, some players and DMs prefer the comparison with storytellers or playwrights (Fine 1983, 73).

In a D&D session, the DM will be behind a screen that covers their notes and plans for the session as well as any other information they want to keep secret from the players. They craft the story but also improvise based on the players' reactions to the game. An important fact to note about DMs and DMing in general, which is what the act of being a DM is called, is that despite having control of the games and essentially the fate of the players and their characters,

they are not the players' enemy. D&D is not meant to be a game of players vs. DM, in fact, many players complain when that is the case, and they feel like the DM is enjoying damaging and punishing the characters too much (Fine 1983). D&D is meant to be a collaborative game in which DM and players work together to craft the best story for all those involved.

Therefore, the players and their characters are also an integral element of the game. While they are two separate entities, they are grouped together here because one cannot exist without the other in the context of D&D sessions. The term 'player' refers to the people involved in the game who are not the DM, and each of them is required to design a playable character (PC) to join the game.

The consensus among the literature on (video)games, and specifically TTRPGs, is that despite common belief, the stereotypical straight, white, male player is no longer the only audience for these games. A clear evolution can be seen between the average player that Fine described in 1983 and Alexander's description of the same player in 2022. Women and minorities are increasingly becoming players in TTRPGs, but there is still a long way to go (Alexander 2022).

Players can gain access to the 'game world' from many different places and play in a variety of spheres (Fine 1983). As explained, Alexander (2022) names these different spheres of gaming as 'Kitchen Table', 'Porch', and 'Yard' referring to the degree of familiarity between the players and the number of people who inhabit that sphere. These concepts will also be employed to classify the different case studies of this thesis.

Regarding characters, their creation is completely up to the players and the DM. As opposed to avatar creation, characters for a D&D game are not necessarily representations of oneself. However, as Fine (1983, 214) mentions, a certain degree of identification is needed between players and characters for the game to work in the first place. The following chapter will delve deeper into the process of character creation.

The third identified element is the dice. In D&D dice are crucial to determine the outcome of actions during the game. Concepts such as ability check, saving throw, or attack

roll are an integral part of the gameplay, and they all depend on the roll of a die. There are several kinds of dice depending on the number of faces a die has, and each of them is used for different things. For example, ability checks, attack rolls, and saving throws are all done with a D20 which is the main die in D&D.

Another element in the game is the setting, the world in which the game takes place. As previously mentioned, this world is under the control of the DM but that does not necessarily mean that it has been designed by them. There are companies like Wizards of the Coast that provide players with already-made settings for their games to take place. While it is possible for DMs to design their own settings, these are called homebrew worlds, most DMs will opt for either a setting already created, or a slight modification of one. As a result, a lot of D&D campaigns take place in the continent of Faêrun, specifically on the Sword Coast which is where Wizards of the Coast has developed the most adventures.

Finally, an element all D&D games need to include is a story. In a similar way to the setting, the story for a D&D campaign can be crafted by the DM but it does not need to. Multiple stories are available on websites like D&D Beyond (2023a) which partner with Wizards of the Coast to make their content available online. These online books are known as Adventure Books whereas those that provide ready-made settings and additional character customisation options are called Source Books. Stories follow adventurers through their quests and provide the DM with a general structure on how to organise the campaign and guidelines on the timeline of events within the campaign. While there are DMs who prefer to homebrew their own stories and others who like to follow adventure books to detail, most DMs fall somewhere in the middle, preferring their own stories but taking elements of existing ones, or rather taking existing stories and adding their own twists.

Overall, a regular D&D game will include more than these five elements but given the diversity across different games, it is challenging to find common ground beyond these five. This chapter provided a general introduction to the game to make the analysis of the three case

studies easier to understand. Any reader unfamiliar with the game should now be able to follow the arguments brought up about D&D and the construction of gender within the game.

Chapter 2: Meeting the Party: Character Creation

This chapter explores the process of character creation through the use of my own D&D game and experiences. The chapter begins with an introduction to the case study, followed by an explanation of the process of character creation. Then, through Butler's concepts of gender performance and performativity, the chapter explores how gender is constructed in a disembodied game such as D&D. Finally, the chapter uses comments and experiences of other players to analyse the construction of gender in D&D.

Dragonlance: Shadow of the Dragon Queen:

Currently, my D&D group is playing the *Dragonlance: Shadow of the Dragon Queen* campaign provided by Wizards of the Coast (Arman et al. 2023). However, since I have been playing for over two years, some of the anecdotes and experiences come from other campaigns as well.

I first learned about D&D during my teenage years, but it was not until October 2020 that I finally was able to find a group to play with. It was the middle of the pandemic and regularly meeting in person to play was not possible. Additionally, some of the people in the D&D group were not in the same country. Therefore, we started playing online, via Discord, with a group of about 7 people, 6 players and a DM.

Through the years the group has evolved and grown, and it currently has over 10 people. As a result, it is no longer possible for all of us to play together. According to most DMs and players, the idea number of players is anything between 3 and 6. More than that makes the game unmanageable for the DM, it makes it difficult for the players to feel included and engaged and it makes some elements of the game like combat feel really long. Thus, when my group grew, we had to come up with alternatives.

However, the number of players is not the only thing that has changed. As the members of the group gained experience, more of us felt confident to try out being a DM. Admittedly, most of the time it is our original DM, Oliver Bredbeck, who continues to DM most of our campaigns. But other players have also DMed their own and most of us have attempted at least short stories for the other members of the group to play in.

This is of course a summary of my experiences with the game over the course of almost three years since it would be almost impossible to try to include every event that has happened. However, a brief introduction to how my own D&D group came to be is necessary to better understand the examples and anecdotes that will follow. The use of my own experiences with gender within D&D has allowed me to better understand how the disembodied nature of the game affects the construction of gender.

Making your character:

Creating a new character for a D&D game is a thrilling experience many players look forward to. From choosing a race and class for your character, designing their build, and coming up with a backstory, it is not a process that should be taken lightly. Each player has a personal preference on which step they enjoy the most but the whole process in general is a favourite amongst D&D players. In fact, there are many who create characters even before they have a campaign to play in.

Oftentimes players will build their character with the help of the DM to make sure that their ideas fit the wider story for the campaign. A common thing in my D&D games is to have something called a 'session zero' in which players meet up with the DM to discuss expectations about the general theme of the game as well as introduce their characters to get an idea of how everyone's personality is like. This is done to make sure that the game will be an enjoyable and comfortable experience for all players. Thus, many players wait until this session zero to finish up their character builds.

One element of the character-building process is choosing the gender for your character. Two things are at play here: the rules and the players' preferences. First, it is important to consider the specific rules that apply to your character's race. For example, goliaths, a race of giants, traditionally do not distinguish between female or male as their societies are rarely divided by gender (D&D Beyond 2023b). Therefore, although most races allow for choice, it is also necessary to check the specific characteristics of each race.

This is an issue chapter four, on *The Adventure Zone*, will return to, to discuss how certain terms we use to describe people outside of the game such as 'person' or 'man' might not have the same meaning in the game. When analysing gender in the context of D&D it is important to keep in mind that the rules may differ from those of the real world.

However, it is possible to bend the rules a little bit. At the end of the day, creating your character should be an enjoyable process with an exciting end result since you have to play your character for multiple hours across multiple sessions. Therefore, it is more than just a matter of following the rules, but also must take into account what the players enjoy and what their preferences are. Thus, although goliaths do not usually have gendered societies, if a player wanted to gender their goliath in a different way than is traditional, this would be possible. In summary, to the extent that the story and the DM allow it, players can choose the gender of their own characters based on their personal preference.

Choosing your gender:

Judith Butler (1988, 519) talks about gender as something that is not natural but rather a kind of language that is constructed through the "stylized repetition of acts". It is a system of norms and regulations that shape how we perceive and experience the world around us as a result of being born into it. In other words, there is a discourse on gender that applies to bodies, and because as human beings we are embodied beings, we are inevitably part of that discourse from the moment we are born. Additionally, we are constantly unconsciously referring to these acts that create the discourse on gender in the first place. This is what Butler refers to as performativity (Butler 1988).

However, performativity does not mean that we are free to choose our own gender. Instead, the concept refers to the constant repetition of these acts that constitute the discourse on gender. These rules, acts, and structures make up the gender scenario and determine what is allowed or not within it.

Despite being unable to choose our own gender, it is possible for us to make conscious choices within the discourse. This is what Butler refers to as 'performance'. Performance

implies a conscious decision to play with the conventions set up within the gender discourse. This can either be through drag, as will be observed in the next chapter, or at an individual level by making choices that will present us as more or less feminine/masculine based on the discourse. For example, the conscious choice to put on makeup to be perceived as more feminine, or to wear high heels. These are acts that purposefully play with the gender discourse because regardless of your assigned gender at birth, they will make others perceive you as more or less feminine due to those specific acts and their connotation within the discourse.

D&D and disembodied gender performance:

However, Butler (1988) writes their gender performance and performativity theory in relation to the body and how it is constructed within the discourse. Yet, this thesis argues that D&D is a disembodied gender performance thus using Butler's concepts in a different context. Therefore, before analysing how performance and performativity take place in the game it is necessary to understand what is meant by saying that Dungeons & Dragons is a disembodied gender performance.

For that we must go back to one of the main features Taylor (2003) highlights about 'scenario': its ability to discern between actor and character and perceive the two as separate entities. D&D as a game takes place on two different ontological levels: the referential world where the players and DM are; and the shared fantasy world where the characters and the story take place. The referential world is thus embodied by the players while the fantasy world is disembodied, the characters do not have an embodied representation in the referential world.

The voice is a crucial element both in creating the link between the two levels and in creating the distinction between the two. Chapter four goes further in-depth on the role of voice and the space of the shared fantasy world. However, it is important to understand that while the character and the player are not the same, the voice is the element that unites them and as a result, it is the only thing that is present in both ontological levels.

The fact that the character and the player are two separate entities is exemplified by the possibility of playing a character that is completely different from the player. Yet, this is a

feature that is not unique to Dungeons & Dragons but rather is also found in video games and animated movies. Characters in these mediums can have a completely different appearance from their respective voice actors, especially in movies where talking animals are the protagonists.

However, the disembodiedness of the characters in conjunction with the embodiedness of the players raises some serious questions especially when it comes to representation. Although the two are separate entities, they are still connected by the voice which in turn is attached to a body. That means that even in the shared fantasy space where the source of the voice should become irrelevant, the link with the referential world poses some problems. This is for example discussed by Kim and Brunn-Bevel (2023) when they talk about representation in terms of race in animated films, and Baird (2021) who looks at the voice acting and sound effect choices behind non-binary video game characters.

Thus, while D&D players themselves are embodied beings, D&D characters are not, they exist in the shared fantasy world and therefore are an example of a disembodied gender performance. The analysis in the following chapters will delve deeper into the implications of this difference but the remainder of this chapter will focus on the players themselves and how they construct their characters' gender. The following section focuses on gender performance and performativity in the game while the final section is based on players' opinions behind the choice of gender for their characters.

Gender performance and performativity in D&D:

To an extent, the choice of one's character's gender is a deliberate one. Players have the freedom to choose the race, class (i.e. what their character is good at), and the gender of their character. Yet, that does not necessarily mean that their gender choice is conscious.

While the choice of race and class can affect the mechanics of the game, gender has no impact on how your character performs in D&D (Fine 1983). Thus, many players might not realise the impact of their choice when it comes to gender, and they might not even be aware

that it is a choice in the first place. Therefore, it is possible that by default many players design a character whose gender matches theirs.

However, that does not inherently imply an act of gender performativity as understood by Butler. Instead, most, if not all, gender expression in D&D is a gender performance. The reason for that has to do with the nature of the game as a disembodied experience. Since there is no body to represent the character, players must rely on their descriptions of their characters to convey the intended gender. This means that besides expressing whether someone is male or female, players also describe their hair, height, and other attributes in a way that matches their idea of that specific gender and their intentions for the character's appearance. Thus, it is a deliberate choice to follow (or not) the gender scenario to create the intended gender illusion.

This performance might be unconscious but deliberate as in the case of players who do not give their character's gender much thought, or conscious and deliberate for those players who carefully consider their character's gender. The latter includes those players whose character's gender is the same as theirs and also those whose character's gender does not match their own. In those cases, the players carefully design their characters and give them features and characteristics that will associate the character with the intended gender in a more exaggerated way than other players.

For example, in my own D&D group there is a player, Alex, who self-identifies as a man but almost always plays female characters. According to him, there is not much reason behind the choice other than personal preference. As mentioned, this choice does not impact his gameplay mechanically, but it does have an influence on how his character behaves and relates with the other characters and the world itself. There are several ways in which this manifests.

First, the voice. One of the strategies Alex employs when he plays a female character is to elevate the pitch of his voice and make it as soft as possible. This is a strategy that other male D&D players use when playing female characters such as Sam Riegel in campaign 2 of the *Critical Role* show. Additionally, the literature on video games and voice acting suggests that voice modulation to better fit a character is a widespread strategy in the industry (Baird 2021).

When there is no body to perform gender, voice becomes one of the main vehicles to convey that information.

Second, the description of physical appearance. Although my group plays D&D online therefore it is a fully disembodied experience, we do provide descriptions of our characters as well as reference pictures. Thus, when playing a character with a different gender to the player's this is an easy strategy to ensure all the players are on the same page when it comes to who the players are. Visuals are an important element to understand the game for many players.

Finally, the socialisation with the world and other characters. Most players do not design characters whose personality is an exact match of theirs. This means that oftentimes players change their personality to perform their characters. However, this strategy is especially used by those who are more extensively playing with gender. When the character's and player's gender is not the same, the way their characters socialise with the world is regularly very different from their own way of interacting with those around them.

For example, during one of our recent games our group was at a tavern playing some drinking games. There was a heated discussion between my character and Alex's character after which myself and another member of the group left the establishment leaving four members inside. Alex, who is playing a female character in our current campaign, wanted to leave after that but two of the characters had other plans. While Alex's character was comfortable going home on her own, the other two insisted she get the remaining person to walk her there since it would not be safe for her to roam at night on her own.

This is not an experience that Alex would go through in real life. Whether he is aware of the danger women might face walking alone at night or not, he has not experienced this before other than through the game. Further, the only reason he got to experience that in the game is because he is playing a female character. Therefore, although mechanically gender does not affect how your character performs in D&D it can have an impact on your experience.

This example in particular took place while I was already in the process of writing this thesis. Interestingly, I do not think I would have given that event much thought otherwise, I

would have just focused on the emotional role-playing that took place during the fight and forgotten about everything else. However, because I was willing to include personal experiences in my thesis I was drawn to this particular anecdote when thinking back to my D&D sessions.

I decided to include this example because it adequately illustrates the point I am trying to make which is how I realised the importance of Sundén's (2010) approach to close playing. Relying on personal experience and anecdotes in one's research can make the exemplification of arguments stronger because it is not just based on the objective analysis of facts. I look at this event as both a player and researcher and I am able to identify different things which strengthens my overall point. This realisation encouraged me to push the inclusion of my personal experiences in this thesis even further which is why I decided to question my friends on their personal perspectives on gender within D&D.

The player's perspective on gender:

In my experience with D&D, I have come across players who exclusively play as their own gender, players who exclusively play as another gender, and players who enjoy mixing it up every game. Their reasons behind that choice are as varied as the players themselves. To gain a better understanding of their reasons I asked them the following question: *Do you have a reason behind the choice of gender for your character? If so, what?* The sample of players is small, and I cannot claim it is representative of the gaming community as a whole. However, there is a great degree of variety in the type of play and answers that I got from my friends which provides an interesting perspective on how players consider gender in D&D.

The biggest consensus across the answers I got was from players who almost exclusively play as their own gender. There were two main reasons stated for that: comfort and ease to relate to the character. Given that the fantasy world is different from the real world in many aspects, and that characters' personalities are often very different from those of the players, sharing a gender provides a point of contact for relatability.

The emphasis in these answers was placed on enjoying the D&D experience more by being able to easily act as the character. Creating a character with the same gender as the player

in a fantasy world where everything is different creates an anchoring point for many players who might otherwise have a hard time roleplaying. Interestingly, many of the less experienced players seem to gravitate toward a character with the same gender while at the same time expressing a desire to explore different possibilities once they are more familiarised with the game.

For these players, the distance between the referential world and the shared fantasy world is considerable. The leap required to shift from an embodied gender performance in real life to the disembodied gender performance of the characters in the game is challenging for many, especially for new players. As a result, creating a character of their same gender helps cover part of that distance. The answers highlight how some players like to remain grounded in their embodiment as much as possible in the shared fantasy world even if it is a disembodied experience.

When it comes to players who mix it up or almost exclusively play as a different gender than their own, there was some overlap in their answers. From the answers of players who mix up their character's gender, there are five things that were mentioned more than once. First, players expressed indifference to gender both in real life and in-game. This was an opinion shared by some players who almost exclusively play as a different gender.

The second common element is something that many players referred to as "the vibe of the character". Essentially, a lot of players seem to first settle on other aspects of the character build such as the class, the race, and the backstory, and then decide on which gender to give the character based on these other elements. However, it must be noted that the process is the complete opposite for some players who take gender as their starting point.

Third, some players indicated that they create their characters based on existing concepts from movies and shows and therefore often choose the gender of the character based on their inspiration. Fourth, some players seem to choose gender on the basis of avoiding boredom. Not much explanation was provided on this point but some players hold the opinion that always

playing the same gender can become tedious or repetitive and there is a challenging element involved in changing it up.

Finally, a few players observed that playing a different gender than their own enabled them to enhance their acting and roleplaying experience. Interestingly, this is the case as well for those who play a character of their own gender. For some comfort is needed to get the most out of the roleplay whereas, for some other players, it seems as if pushing themselves out of their comfort zone or coming out of their shell as one player put it, is what makes the experience better.

Thus, it seems that while some people remain rooted in the embodiment of the referential world, some players are much more comfortable inhabiting the disembodied space of the shared fantasy world. The norms of the gender scenario in the real world set up parameters on how gender should be performed and embodied. However, these constraints disappear in the fantasy world. Nevertheless, it seems as if some players have a harder time deviating from the gender scenario in the fantasy world than others. This is mostly because gender provides an anchoring point between the two ontological realities in a similar way that voice does.

Overall, studying players' answers reveals that the disembodied nature of D&D does have an impact on how people approach their character's gender. Depending on how rooted players are in the referential world and its embodiment, they will be more or less likely to experiment with gender in the shared fantasy world. Nevertheless, due to the absence of a body to limit gender expression, in general most players agree that there is an elevated degree of freedom to experiment and explore gender identity.

Gender in D&D exists in a disembodied state in the shared fantasy world which allows some players to disregard the fact that they are embodied in the referential world. However, this chapter has operated under the assumption that all D&D games have a disembodied shared fantasy world. Yet, that is not always the case. The following chapter explores the differences between embodied and disembodied gender performance in D&D.

Chapter 3: The First Combat: Embodied D&D Performances

The previous chapter discussed how gender performance and performativity manifest in an informal 'Kitchen Table' game in which character performance is disembodied. However, as mentioned, not all D&D games are disembodied. Queer Arcana is a gaming and performing group based in Utrecht that plays D&D games in drag in front of an audience. Thus, their shared fantasy space is embodied. Therefore, this chapter identifies the differences embodied and disembodied performance has on the process of gender construction in the game.

In order to discuss these differences it is necessary to first introduce the case study of Queer Arcana. Then, the chapter will compare and analyse the differences between embodied and disembodied gender performances in D&D. The rest of the chapter analyses the case of Queer Arcana specifically by looking at how the concept of scenario applies to this case study, the use of drag in their performances, and the importance of setting in constructing gender.

Queer Arcana:

Queer Arcana, originally Dungeons & Drag Queens, is a project started by Derk Over with the intention of bridging the gap between drag performances and the gamer and TTRPG community. The Utrecht-based group labels itself as a "theatre/game collective" and performs live and recorded shows which they post on their YouTube channel (Queer Arcana 2023b). Additionally, they offer games for other people to play at their locale in Utrecht.

In an interview with Vice, Over explained the reasons behind the decision to start a project such as Queer Arcana (Fraanje 2021). In a way, it was about combining their two hobbies (i.e. gaming and drag) but it was also more than that. Having studied design and game art, and being a drag performer for several years, Over realised the potential a project like Queer Arcana could have for the queer gamer community.

Both drag and Dungeons & Dragons have an impact on identity. Over explains how through a game of D&D someone realised they were bisexual by playing a character who identified in that way (Fraanje 2021). Further, given the freedom of choice within D&D and the gender play and performance involved in drag, both of them offer a great platform to explore

gender and sexual identity. When Over realised this, they became aware of the potential for expression and exploration of identity that drag and D&D could offer people in a way that was safe for them.

Thus, the need for a project such as Queer Arcana was clear because, as they said in the interview, "they [drag and Dungeons & Dragons] are transformative processes where you learn more things about yourself" (Fraanje 2021), and they wanted to extend this opportunity to other queer gamers. Ultimately, Queer Arcana's goal is to "enhance the visibility of queer gamers" (Queer Arcana 2023a). It is a project that is meant to show how closely related drag and D&D can be if given the opportunity.

As a whole, the Queer Arcana project has an important role as educators in the queer and games community besides their live and recorded performances. However, this thesis will specifically focus on the performance aspect of their work. The first live show took place in early 2020 and was uploaded to YouTube in April 2020. These shows are organised as an improvisation theatre performance where the players are on a stage and the audience sits in front of them.

As other improvisation shows, there is a high degree of interaction between the audience and the cast members. In this particular case, the interaction mainly takes place through the roll of the die. When the situation the players are experiencing requires a dice roll, for an attack, a save, or an ability check, the performers request a member of the audience to roll the die for them, for which they use a giant Styrofoam die. Unfortunately, this had to be adapted during the Covid-19 pandemic as audiences were not allowed during the live performances. As a result, some of the episodes of the YouTube show were recorded as podcasts while the performers were at home, and some others were performed onstage but with much smaller audiences (Queer Arcana 2023b). The format depended on the Covid-19 regulations at the time.

Disembodied performance vs. embodied performance:

Due to the nature of their performance, gender is constructed differently in the *Dragonlance* case study and in the Queer Arcana shows. In the *Dragonlance* chapter, players expressed how

the disembodied nature of D&D was a great way for them to explore and experiment with gender. The disembodiedness of the shared fantasy world made it possible to deviate from the gender scenario of the referential world in ways that might not be possible otherwise. In Queer Arcana, D&D takes place as an embodied gender performance. However, this does not take away from the gender play involved in D&D as described by players in the previous chapter.

While for the players that were questioned in chapter two it was the disembodiedness of D&D that allowed them to experiment with gender, in Queer Arcana it is the opposite. The fact that their shows are live performances allows them to experiment with gender in a way that a disembodied game might not. Drag is paramount in achieving that effect. The following sections will expand on this issue but gender in Queer Arcana is performed in a way that showcases the rules involved in the gender scenario and deviates from them by playing with gender in the fantasy world.

Therefore, on the one hand, in Kitchen Table games gender is constructed around the disembodied performance of gender. Attributes such as voice or socialisation with the world are emphasised over physical appearance or mannerisms. On the other hand, in Queer Arcana where D&D is an embodied performance gender is constructed around the body like in the real world, thus mostly focusing on physical appearance.

In a Kitchen Table game, players project their voices onto the shared fantasy level and the voice serves different functions in the referential level where it is attached to the player, and in the shared fantasy level, where it is attached to the character. This is a simultaneous process but it is still possible to separate the two because one is an embodied level and the other is disembodied. However, this is not the case in Queer Arcana where both levels are simultaneous and embodied.

In fact, Queer Arcana would perhaps be more closely adjacent to Life-Action Role-Playing (LARP) because the embodiment of the shared fantasy level changes the relationship between the two ontological realities. In LARP in general there are fewer gender transgressions than in D&D because the embodiment of the character limits the possible deviations from the

gender scenario. Yet, in Queer Arcana this is solved by the introduction of drag which is what the following sections will explore.

Ultimately, the embodied performance of Queer Arcana changes the relationship between the referential world and the shared fantasy world established in the previous chapter. This in turn affects how gender is constructed in their performances. Nevertheless, gender in Queer Arcana does not seem to be constrained by the gender discourse of the real world. Thus, there is another element besides disembodiedness that can aid in the construction of gender in D&D: drag. In order to understand this relationship, the rest of the chapter will analyse Queer Arcana in-depth beginning with the application of 'scenario' to the case study.

Scenario and Queer Arcana:

When applying the concept of 'scenario' to the case of Queer Arcana there are two specific characteristics of the ones mentioned by Taylor (2003) that are most relevant. First, in a scenario, the viewers are confronted with the "embodiment of social actors" (2003, 29), this means that besides visualising the role that is being played, the audience can simultaneously perceive the social actor. Thus, the character and the performer are both identified and studied by the audience at the same time. In order to achieve this, it is important to accurately describe the characters and emphasise their external attributes so as to capture both the social actor and the role (2003, 29).

In a case study such as Queer Arcana where the boundaries of character disembodiedness become blurry, this separation between character and performer becomes even more important. Oftentimes, in 'Kitchen Table' games, character embodiment is not as important as in the case of Queer Arcana. Here, embodiment and performance are at the centre of Queer Arcana shows which bears the question of how this affects gender performance in their games. In other words, the aim of this analysis is to study gender regarding the characters and how the performers construct their roles within the game, keeping both as distinct entities. Thus, the application of 'scenario' here enables me, as the audience and the researcher, to perceive the actors and their characters separately.

Second, a scenario forces the audience to introduce themselves within the frame. It compels viewers to determine their relationship to the situation as spectators (2003, 32). For the scenario to take place, the audience needs to be there, to somehow be a part of it. When thinking of Queer Arcana, the involvement of the audience is a crucial element of their performances. Therefore, considering the relationship between the viewers and the performers in the analysis becomes relevant to understand all the elements at play.

Tensions in the D&D scenario of Queer Arcana:

The methodology identified five elements that repeat themselves in most, if not all D&D games: the DM, players & characters, the dice, the story, and the setting. Queer Arcana has all of these elements. Yet, when viewing their performances I observe a disconnect between this example of D&D and others such as *The Adventure Zone*, further discussed in the following chapter, and famous D&D game streamers such as Critical Role and Dimension 20. In my research on Queer Arcana, I have identified two elements that act as potential sources of this dissonance.

First, while Queer Arcana includes the abovementioned five elements, there are other features common in other D&D games which are not part of their performances. An example is the use of modifiers which determine a character's ability in a certain area and make it more or less likely to succeed in their ability checks. While this has not been deemed a necessary element to identify a case study as a D&D game, it is true that it is a feature that can be found in other D&D games. Therefore, the lack of this element could explain my negative affective response to the show since I am used to viewing different D&D content.

Second, Queer Arcana's games are live performances. Once more, this is an element that can be identified in other D&D games, such as Critical Role or Dimension 20 before the Covid-19 pandemic, however, none of these examples included a strong interaction with a live audience and a theatre component to their games. There is then a disconnect between other D&D case studies and Queer Arcana, some sort of tension.

This tension arises from the involvement of the audience in the Queer Arcana games and the lack of the elements outlined above. These differences create a divide between 'Kitchen

Table' games and Queer Arcana's live performances. I do not argue that Queer Arcana games are not complex, however, when it comes to game mechanics some of the elements that can add a higher degree of complexity to D&D are missing. In some way, the scenario of D&D is distorted in the Queer Arcana games.

Having viewed and played in many D&D games, I am used to a specific structure within D&D. The scenario has repeated itself constantly for me. The way scenarios work is that they set up a shared interpretative frame, a narrative, an expectation within the scenario that is unfolding. The elements that make up the scenario remain constant, they repeat themselves and become familiar to the audiences. This repetition sets up an expectation of what the scenario must look like. Therefore, when something disrupts the scenario, or when the scenario deviates from what is known or familiar, there is an affective reaction to the change, a tension. This is the case with Queer Arcana and their performances.

Drag as a parody of gender norms:

Taylor (2003, 29) argues that identifying these tensions within a scenario can create a foundation for noteworthy parodies or resistance performances. I disagree to an extent. The source or foundation for this parodic or resistance performance does not come from the tensions themselves but is instead embedded in the repetition of the scenario. The elements that make up a scenario and repeat themselves over and over again are the ones that lend themselves to parody or resistance. Through the slight modification of these elements it is possible to create these tensions Taylor (2003) mentions, but it is the repetitive elements themselves that are the source.

The importance of element repetition as a potential source of parody or resistance is something that Butler (1988) points out when discussing performative acts. Their text examines gender specifically and defines it as a "stylized repetition of acts" (1988, 519). In a way, Butler's conceptualisation is a scenario of gender. There are expected elements and patterns, therefore, deviations are bound to cause tension.

One such deviation in the case of gender is drag. Butler (2011, 85) points to drag as a parody of dominant (gender) norms, drag aims to emphasise the subjectivity and construction of gender. It is a gender performance. As a result, drag opens the door to parody and resistance by modifying some aspects of the norm or by consciously and deliberately following the norm to highlight it.

A similar thing can be observed in the case of Queer Arcana. The source of the tension I notice when watching their performances comes from their use of drag and interaction with the audience. These decisions not only break with the scenario of D&D, but they also deviate from the gender scenario mentioned above. There is a double tension, one related to the game as a whole and another related to gender specifically.

The game-related tension has already been briefly addressed by comparing Queer Arcana performances to those of other D&D games and the following chapter will return to this topic again. However, it is also necessary to understand the role of drag in creating this double tension. Therefore, it is necessary to review the use of drag within the games as well as analyse the characters and their performances.

The use of drag in Queer Arcana:

In the show all characters, regardless of their gender or the gender of their players, are referred to as 'girls' as a generic (Queer Arcana 2023b). Nevertheless, there are barely any references to the individual gender identities of each character, instead, they are mostly called by their names when addressed by other players or the DM. Therefore it is not always possible to know their genders.

This is something that was striking to me as a viewer, and I felt the need to point it out in my analysis. Yet, it was only later that I realised the reason it was noteworthy to me in the first place. The use of 'girls' as a generic way of addressing a group is in itself a breach of a scenario. We are used to using the collective 'guys' in similar situations which means that when something or someone deviates from that, we take notice.

This uncanny feeling of hearing the collective 'girls' over and over is combined with how Queer Arcana uses drag during their performances. Queer Arcana performances involve their players playing D&D in drag on a stage in front of an audience. However, the kind of drag they employ is not an imitation of the ideal of a 'woman' as it exists in the real world. For example, Eli, a cleric played by Billy Cain, has a beard which is not usually a feature associated with women. Additionally, the clothes and accessories the performers use are also not traditionally or necessarily "feminine".

All in all, Queer Arcana's performers are in drag, but not in an attempt to "be women" but rather to play with gender, to show the triviality of gender norms, and challenge the stylised repetition of acts. Theirs is a gender performance in which certain elements are consciously employed to emphasise femininity/masculinity while at the same time showcasing the performance aspect of these elements. Therefore, Queer Arcana's drag is not based on a mere repetition of the dominant gender norms but rather on a modification of them. In their disruption of the scenario of gender, they not only show the performative nature of gender but also the ease with which this performance can be modified.

This is what Butler (2011) would call the subversive power of drag. Their book *Bodies That Matter* (2011, 85) argues that drag possesses no inherent power for subversion, this power is only acquired when drag "reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced and disputes heterosexuality's claim on naturalness and originality". Thus, a mere reiteration of norms fails to achieve this subversion. However, as observed, Queer Arcana's drag is not based on mere repetition but on gender play.

The importance of setting:

As observed in the previous sections, there are multiple scenarios involved in the performances of Queer Arcana. Two of these scenarios (i.e. gender and D&D) are breached in some way. This is responsible for the tension identified when watching their performances. But how do the two interact within the wider context of the D&D drag performances of Queer Arcana?

In order to establish that it is important to consider the setting of their D&D games, the shared fantasy world that in this case is embodied. Queer Arcana's games are set in a world of fantasy where magic and fantastic creatures such as goblins, dragons, or tieflings (children of demons and humans) are common. These do not exist outside of fantasy worlds so most of them do not have an equivalent in the real world. This is something to consider when looking at gender within the fantasy world. In other words, if the previous section identified how Queer Arcana's drag deviates from the scenario of gender in the real world, now it is necessary to consider whether this is different when applying it to a fantasy world.

For example, returning to the case of Eli, the cleric with a beard. As highlighted, in the real world beards are not traditional features of women which is why using them in drag implies a deviation from the gender scenario. However, in the fantasy world, there are other features of characters that may be more striking than someone with a beard. An instance of that is Maru, the tiefling bard played by Iris Degrauw.

Maru has blueish skin and horns on her head which are not features that happen naturally in the real world. Thus, it is difficult to classify them using traditional gender norms, it is not possible to say which aspect of the gender performance they are trying to deliberately emphasise because there are no norms for them. However, in the fantasy world, those features are normal, or at least normal for someone like Maru, a tiefling. As a result, Eli's beard, regardless of Eli's gender, is perhaps not as "out of place" as it would be in the real world, and although it is part of Billy's drag, in the fantasy world it might not have the same effect as it does for us in the audience. Some races in the fantasy world like dwarves have a beard irrespective of their gender identity.

With that, I do not imply that drag in the Queer Arcana performances ceases to be subversive. Simply, I point out that there is a difference between the scenario of gender in the real world and in the fantasy world. What may be seen as a deviation in one (i.e. the real world) may be normal or at least not extraordinary in the other (i.e. the fantasy world).

Additionally, the fact that certain features might be more normal or acceptable in the fantasy world means that the audience is more willing to accept the breach of other scenarios. If the audience is aware that certain elements are normal within the setting of the performance they are watching, they will be more willing to accept the deviation of the scenario. Being prepared to accept a certain degree of fantasy makes it easier to welcome other potential scenario deviations.

However, that is not always the case. Just because a performance takes place in a fantasy world does not automatically mean the audience will be willing to make allowances on how much said performance can deviate from certain scenarios or norms. A recent example of this is the new *The Rings of Power* TV show based on Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* world. In all previous shows and movies that take place in Middle-Earth, elves have been played by Caucasian people. But, in this most recent one, one of the elves is black which has caused outrage and controversy on the internet with fans protesting that elves cannot be black (Kain 2022). To many, it does not matter that elves do not exist in the real world, they are not willing to allow their scenario of how elves are supposed to look like be breached.

This distinction between the fantasy world and the real world, between the gender scenario and the game scenario is necessary to understand the construction of gender within D&D and Queer Arcana specifically. However, the reason it is possible to appreciate this difference in the first place and subject it to analysis is scenario since it allows the viewer to keep the two realities separate. In this case, the use of scenario facilitates the analysis of the multiple layers that are involved in the Queer Arcana performances: the gender scenario and the D&D scenario, but also the real world and the fantasy world.

Ultimately, the embodied or disembodied gender performance of one's D&D character does not seem to have a definitive effect on how gender is constructed in the game as similar results can be achieved through multiple strategies. What seems to affect the construction of gender in D&D is the differences that exist between the real world and the fantasy world, and also between the referential level of reality and the shared fantasy level. In the fantasy world,

the gender scenario that applies in the real world becomes looser allowing for certain deviations and a different approach to gender performance.

The disembodiedness of *Dragonlance* and other D&D games is not a requirement to achieve these effects as the case of Queer Arcana showcases, but it does make the transition from the referential level to the shared fantasy level easier. Queer Arcana demonstrates that drag is another strategy that can achieve a similar effect despite the embodiedness of gender performance. The final chapter focuses on *The Adventure Zone* another example of a disembodied D&D game, in this case, a podcast. The chapter explores how voice contributes to gender performance in the game as well as the implications of having different gender scenarios in the fantasy world.

Chapter 4: Levelling Up. Voice and Reimagining Gender in the Fantasy World

This final chapter returns to the issue of voice to explore the differences between fully disembodied performance (i.e. podcasts) and the embodied example of Queer Arcana. So far, the voice has been mentioned as an important element of disembodied gender performances and as one of the links between the two ontological realities (i.e. referential and shared fantasy). This chapter provides examples of the role of voice in navigating the differences between the fantasy world and the real world and further explores the implications of having different gender scenarios for each of the races in the fantasy world. However, before exploring those differences it is first necessary to introduce the case study of *The Adventure Zone* and provide an analysis on how voice is used in the podcast and its importance for meaning making.

The Adventure Zone:

In 2014, as a special episode of their podcast *My Brother, My Brother and Me*, Justin, Travis, and Griffin recorded themselves playing Dungeons & Dragons with their dad Clint. It was an experimental episode in which they were trying new things and different from their usual content due to Justin's paternity leave (McElroy, McElroy, and McElroy 2014). However, the feedback they received from their fans was highly positive, and eventually, the McElroys released *The Adventure Zone* as its own podcast starting in December 2014 (McElroy et al. 2014a). The show continues today and has over 200 episodes.

Initially *The Adventure Zone* used the at the time newly released 5th edition rule set for Dungeons & Dragons. Since then, the podcast has grown and experimented with multiple gaming and TTRPG systems that branch out from the original D&D game. Still, their first campaign in which they used D&D continues to be their longest one to date with 69 released episodes.

This first season featured Griffin as the Dungeon Master and Justin, Travis, and Clint as the players. The majority of them were significantly inexperienced with the exception of Griffin who had played before (McElroy et al. 2014a). As a result, when planning the episode it was decided that he would be the Dungeon Master for the campaign. As the show progressed and

all the players gained more experience more of them would eventually take a shot at being the Dungeon Master.

During their first episode, "Here There Be Gerblins: Chapter One", Justing, Travis, and Clint introduce their characters Taako, Magnus Burnsides, and Merle Highchurch respectively. Taako is a high-elf wizard, Magnus is a human fighter, and Merle is a dwarf cleric (McElroy et al. 2014a). The three of them begin their adventure by following the story of the Lost Mine of Phandalver, a pre-made story that was released with the 5th edition of Dungeons & Dragons.

D&D, podcast, and voice:

The Adventure Zone is a D&D podcast which makes it the most disembodied case study of this thesis. From the audience's perspective, the characters in *The Adventure Zone* are only available through the descriptions of the McElroys and their voices. While the players are recording together and thus can see each other, the only way the audience has access to the game is through voice.

Therefore, in this case study, even greater attention must be paid to what voices can tell us. Some of the voice elements that can greatly affect meaning are accent, enunciation, and intonation (Kanngieser 2012, 342). In the case of *The Adventure Zone* accent is the most significant element for the analysis due to the importance of voice-changing and voice modulation used in the show. The McElroy brothers are from West Virginia in the U.S. However, for the purpose of the campaign, each of them tried to adopt different voices for their characters and change the way they speak.

Nevertheless, the practice of performing different voices by changing one's accent is not without problems. A specific example comes up early in the show. During the first episode, Justin's character Taako has a characteristic voice noticeably different from Justin's real-life voice (McElroy et al. 2014a). Yet, in the second episode, the first time Taako intervenes the voice has significantly changed. When asked about this, Justin reveals that after the first episode fans of the show complained about Taako's voice being racist (McElroy et al. 2014b).

What is striking about this example is that during the characters' description in the first episode, at no point was Taako's race mentioned, he was only introduced as a wizard half-elf. Still, people made assumptions about his race based on the voice that Justin gave his character in the episode. Even some of the other McElroys agreed with these comments during the episode saying that the voice was pretty racist (McElroy et al. 2014b). This example showcases the crucial importance of voice in meaning-making and information transmission that Dolar (2012) and Kanngieser (2012) emphasise.

As established, in D&D the voice exists in two ontological realities simultaneously: the referential level, when we talk to each other in the real world and the shared fantasy level where the voice is used to set up the collective fantasy of the game. The voice is what allows us to perform different genders, classes, and races within the shared fantasy space. However, even in a disembodied performance like a podcast the voice still exists at a referential level which means that when we hear a voice, that immediately conjures up a body in the referential world.

Because the voice acts on both levels simultaneously it becomes impossible to separate them. It is possible to create a distinction between the two but since one happens in a disembodied reality and the other is embodied it is not possible to fully disconnect voice and body. Even in a podcast, where it could be assumed that the voice only exists in relation to the character, because the audience is aware that there is a player in the real world behind that voice it can become problematic to use certain voice modulations and accents.

This is what happens in Taako's case. At the shared fantasy level, Taako's voice is not a problem, it is simply a characteristic of the character. Yet, at the referential level, Taako's voice conjures an image of a racialised body to the audience which is problematic when the player behind the character is not part of that race and using a voice that is considered a racial stereotype. Although the two levels exist separately, they influence each other because they are simultaneous, and thus a disembodied performance taking place at the shared fantasy level can have real-life consequences and real-world attachments.

Interestingly, the players themselves are aware of these two ontological levels at which the voice is acting. The easiest strategy to distinguish when the voice is being employed at a referential level or at a shared fantasy level is by whether the character's voice is 'on' or 'off'. In other words, if the players give their character a specific voice, one way to discern whether they are talking as their character or as themselves is by the voice they are using at that moment.

Justin emphasises the use of that strategy when the group is discussing Taako's voice (McElroy et al. 2014b). During the discussion on whether Taako's voice is racist or not, Justin mentions that regardless of that, in that specific moment when his family asked why he was not using the voice anymore, he was talking to the DM as Justin, not Taako. His Taako voice was 'off' at that moment because he was directly talking to the DM as a player, not as a character. Therefore, even if the players do not directly refer to the two ontological levels and regard them in their game, most players are aware of this difference and the role of voice in creating this division.

Gender in *The Adventure Zone*:

The previous chapter analysed how drag performances affect the construction of gender within D&D and outside of it. This section aims to examine whether the podcast format of *The Adventure Zone* results in a different construction of gender in D&D. However, an analysis of gender in the podcast very quickly runs into the problem of lack of variety when compared to the previous two case studies. All three players and their characters are male. Therefore, in contrast to the Queer Arcana and the *Dragonlance* case study, the gender of the players matches the gender of their characters.

Still, it is possible to examine the lack of variety itself by comparing *The Adventure Zone* to Queer Arcana. There are two main differences between these case studies: the format (i.e. drag performance vs. podcast) and the sphere of play. While it is difficult to classify Queer Arcana in Alexander's (2022) terms of 'Kitchen Table', 'Porch', and 'Yard', the format of the game makes it quite different from 'Kitchen Table' games like the *Dragonlance* case study. Yet, *The Adventure Zone* fits that definition quite well.

The lack of variety when it comes to the gender of the characters in *The Adventure Zone* is a consequence of these differences. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the drag performances of Queer Arcana deviate from two kinds of scenarios, the D&D one, and the gender one. Conversely, the podcast format of *The Adventure Zone* breaches neither of these scenarios a priori. The fact that Queer Arcana already deviates from these scenarios through the use of drag makes it easier for it to breach those scenarios further in terms of gender. However, since *The Adventure Zone*'s format does not create those deviations, breaching the gender scenario in a similar way to Queer Arcana becomes more difficult.

It is a similar situation to the previously mentioned example of the *Lord of the Rings* new TV show. The *Rings of Power* is a fantasy show based on Middle-Earth which as a setting shares a lot of similarities to *The Adventure Zone* in the sense that at first glance it does not deviate from any scenarios other than the real-world setting. Thus, the above observation serves to explain why there is a lack of gender variety in *The Adventure Zone* and why there was so much criticism about *The Rings of Power* including a black elf.

Additionally, the role of the audience involved in each of these cases is worthy of consideration. While the people who watch the Queer Arcana games presumably are already aware of the content of the games and how they will almost definitely deviate from the gender scenario, this is not necessarily the case for the other two examples. Queer Arcana is a drag show; therefore the audience can expect performers in drag when they watch their games. But *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Adventure Zone* are not marketed in that way to their public which results in a narrower margin for deviation.

Ultimately, all three cases are trying to gather an audience which means that there is marketing involved in trying to gather attention from the public. Each of these shows has a specific audience they are targeting which sets boundaries to the extent to which each show can break certain scenarios. For example, if Queer Arcana added transphobic or homophobic elements to their games this would probably spark criticism because they brand themselves as a safe space for queer gamers. Therefore, the target audience of a show and their preferences

have a great influence on the extent to which shows can break the gender scenario in their games or performances.

However, when it comes to gender within *The Adventure Zone* there is more to it than just appealing to a certain audience. Two main things must be discussed: one has to do with the setting the other has to do with the role of voice. Thus, first, we return to the idea introduced during chapter three on the differences between the fantasy world and the real world. Then, the chapter will finish with another section on voice looking at the relationship between the voice's ontological levels and gender.

The fantasy world and gender:

In one episode, Taako is placed under the influence of the Zone of Truth spell, which makes affected creatures unable to lie. Several other people are affected by this spell since the party is trying to interrogate someone. In the conversation that ensues one of the party members says that the three of them are good men, to which Taako replies that he is not a man (McElroy et al. 2015).

The literal meaning of the sentence implies that Taako is not a man and therefore is something else. On the one hand, this could mean that he does not identify as a man but rather as a woman or as a nonbinary person. On the other hand, given the multiplicity of races in D&D Taako could be implying that he is not a human, but an elf. This seems to be the more likely explanation since in that same episode Taako also claims to not be a person (McElroy et al. 2015).

Taako refusing or disagreeing with the label 'man' or 'person' has different implications and interpretations in the real world and in the fantasy world. In the former, a refusal of gender labels such as 'man' indicates a disagreement with the gendered word 'man', thus pointing towards a different gender. In the fantasy world, the implications are not limited to just gender but also include race which differentiates between human, elf, orc, etc. Taako does not consider himself a man or a person because those are terms that we use for humans and therefore he believes different terms should apply to elves. He does not give examples of what such terms

could be, but it seems to be his point that gendered words for humans and elves should not be the same.

Taako's opposition to these labels opens the door to a more diverse and experimental gender play in D&D if we consider the possibility that all the different races in the game might have different ideas about how gender is organised among them. As observed, D&D offers freedom to players to experiment and explore their characters' gender. However, this is a controlled freedom. Despite all the monsters and races that are part of the game, the gender options in D&D rules continue to be very binary and based around the human concept of gender. Although the shared fantasy level is disembodied and thus distanced from the embodied referential world, the gender scenario continues to issue some constraints on the gender performance of D&D.

Taako's perspective on the gender of elves is reminiscent of the opinions of scholars like María Lugones (2007) and Oyéronké Oyewùmí (2020) on the coloniality of gender. This concept refers to the imposition of binary gender structures which are created by European settlers on indigenous colonised communities (Lugones 2007). For example, Oyewùmí (2020, 31) discusses gender amongst Yorùbá society and argues that prior to Western colonisation the gender binary of 'men' and 'women' did not exist. Her argument is that if gender is a social construct, it is unreasonable to expect that prior to colonisation these communities had no gender system whatsoever (Oyewùmí 2020, 32). Therefore, the idea that the gender binary of the West is a universal understanding of gender erases the history and culture of other communities and is yet another example of colonial power and Western domination (Lugones 2007, 196; Oyewùmí 2020, 32).

A similar process takes place within the fantasy world of D&D. Although there are more than twenty races available to play, the gender system in the game is still structured around the human gender binary. Taako's opposition to being called a man shines light on the possibility that other races might have different gender systems than humans and that assuming the gender

binary works for all of them is a reduction of the infinite possibilities each race could have to structure gender.

The problem Taako has with language and labels is an issue that scholars working on the coloniality of gender have also identified. The enforcement of the gender binary onto indigenous communities disregards the fact that these communities already had systems in place, some even more complex than western languages have the capacity to express (Lugones 2007; Oyewùmí 2020). There is a disconnect between the gender system and language imposed by colonialism and the identities of many people within these communities. Driskill (2004, 52) expresses this conflict as a Cherokee person:

> "I find myself using both the words "Queer" and "Trans" to try to translate
>
> my gendered and sexual realities for those not familiar with Native traditions,
>
> but at heart, if there is a term that could possibly describe me in English, I
>
> simply consider myself a Two-Spirit person."

Although at a different level, the impossibility of properly expressing their identity in English is similar to the frustration Taako feels with the labels 'man' and 'person'.

Taako only briefly voices his opinion during the episode and yet he opens the door for a change in how gender is conceptualised in Dungeons & Dragons. It is not only a matter of considering the similarity with the coloniality of gender and thus contemplating the possibility of other gender systems, but also about considering the coexistence of all of these. In other words, if each race in D&D has its own gender system, this brings up questions on how these systems interact with each other and how the different races exist in common spaces with these differences.

Thus, gender in *The Adventure Zone* but also in D&D as a whole is inherently affected by the differences between the concept of gender in the fantasy world and the real world, but also by the constraints that the real world imposes on the fantasy world. These differences and constraints determine the freedom players have when constructing the gender of their characters. Still, as observed in the case of *The Adventure Zone* voice also has an effect on the

construction of gender and how it is performed. Thus, the last section returns to the issue of voice to conclude the analysis of the final case study.

Voice and Gender:

This chapter has analysed gender in *The Adventure Zone* by looking at the absence of diversity when it comes to the gender performance of the characters. However, this ignores the fact that cisgender men playing cisgender male characters is still a kind of gender performance. Thus, this final section returns to some of the themes mentioned in chapters two and three before reaching a conclusion on how voice affects the construction of gender in D&D.

As mentioned, a gender performance implies a conscious decision, an awareness of the gender discourse and the norms that it sets up. This means that most D&D characters end up being a gender performance rather than an example of gender performativity. Their personality, physical appearance, and voice are all influenced by the gender discourse that exists in the real world. Thus, even the characters in *The Adventure Zone* are an example of a gender performance.

In chapter two we discussed three strategies that players who have characters of different gender than them employ to perform their character's gender. These were voice, the use of reference pictures to describe physical appearance, and the socialisation with the world. However, these strategies are not limited to one specific group of players but rather are employed naturally by all. In the case of *The Adventure Zone* voice is the most important element but that is also the case in other D&D examples like *Dragonlance*.

Whether a player has a character with a different gender to them or not, the possibilities involved in character creation are endless. The possible combinations of race, gender, class, background, and abilities are above the thousands which means each character is going to be unique and distinct from the others in more than one way. Nevertheless, voice is still crucial in this whole process because when there is not a body, the voice is the main element that carries all the information about the character. In other words, the voice implies all the aspects of our body, especially those associated with gender, in the disembodied world of the shared fantasy.

This is why Taako, even though he is not described as being a specific race other than high-elf, was criticised for having a racist voice. When the audience does not have anything except the voice to conceptualise the character, they use the voice as the main indicator for clues on what the character looks like. Therefore, when it comes to the construction of gender in a case study like *The Adventure Zone*, voice is the most crucial element of the process.

Additionally, the interaction between the fantasy world and the character also has an impact. Taako's example of 'not a man' and 'not a person' highlight how the concept of gender differs between the fantasy world and the real world and brings up the possibility that despite the freedom of gender expression in D&D, the construction of gender continues to be based around the human binary. Thus, although in the real world players do not need to consider their gender in relation to whether they are humans or elves, this becomes relevant in the fantasy world. In summary, both voice and the concept of gender in the fantasy world seem to have an impact on how gender is constructed in *The Adventure Zone*.

Conclusion

Several months ago I embarked on this thesis because I wanted to understand what drove D&D players to choose one gender or another when designing their characters. When I created my first male characters, I was unsure on how to communicate their masculinity as a female presenting person and that made me curious about the different strategies involved in gender construction in D&D. Thus, I started this thesis with the idea of exploring whether the disembodied nature of D&D inherently affected how gender was constructed in the game. Yet, in the process, I have rediscovered my passion for the game as well as identified several avenues of research that would be interesting to continue in the future.

There are two main points that capture the argument of this thesis. First, the two ontological realities: the referential world and the shared fantasy world. Identifying these two levels that are involved in all D&D games has been crucial to understand how gender is constructed and performed in the game. The three analytical chapters highlighted two elements within these two realities that affected the construction and performance of gender: body and voice.

Initially, my hypothesis was that the disembodied nature of D&D was the main reason why gender was constructed differently within the game. Chapter two explored this idea by studying the process of character creation and asking players their reasons behind choosing a gender for their characters. Here it seemed that depending on how rooted a player was in the referential world the more difficult it was for them to explore different genders with their characters. The disembodiedness of the shared fantasy world is accessible to all players but only some are comfortable to embrace the freedom this gives them in terms of gender.

However, although the disembodiedness of D&D affects gender, the case of an embodied D&D game such as Queer Arcana proved that there are other ways to achieve similar results. In an embodied game, drag makes it easier to deviate from the gender scenario of the referential world even if the shared fantasy world is still embodied. Thus, multiple strategies and elements affect the construction of gender in D&D, not just its disembodied nature.

For example, there is an element I had not given much thought to prior to beginning this thesis: voice. Yet, voice is a crucial aspect of how gender is performed and constructed in D&D. Especially when the game is disembodied like in the case of *The Adventure Zone*, the voice is crucial in transmitting information about the characters and also allowing the players to perform their desired genders.

Additionally, the voice is an element that exists in both ontological realities simultaneously thus is part of both the character and the player. Chapter four analysed the problematics that can be involved with this, with the example of Taako's racist accent, but also the advantages of the voice being present in the referential world and the shared fantasy world. The voice is a very versatile element that allows the shared fantasy world, when disembodied, to come into existence and allows players to perform their characters, and thus their genders, even when they are not conducting an embodied performance.

The second point that captures the main argument of this thesis is the distinction between the fantasy world and the real world. This is related to the two ontological levels but not the same. The differentiation of these two worlds implies understanding that the gender scenario in each of them is different and that what might be out of the ordinary in one, is perfectly normal in the other. Appreciating this distinction helps understand why gender can be constructed differently in D&D than in the real world in the first place. The two exist in different worlds and thus have different gender discourses.

Additionally, chapter four identified how this idea can be extended to imply that each race within D&D should have its own understanding of gender given that they do not exist in the real world. Expecting that all beings will function according to the human gender binary system is similar to assuming all indigenous communities in the real world had the same system prior to colonisation.

This particular argument highlights one aspect about gender in D&D that I had not previously considered. D&D affords players with an increased freedom to explore and experiment gender when comparing it to the real world. However, given the extraordinary

number of creatures and fantastic elements that exist in the fantasy world, the concept of gender in D&D is still quite restrictive. D&D allows a certain controlled freedom in gender performance and construction, but this freedom is nevertheless mediated by the real world and the referential level of gender performance.

Ultimately, answering the research question, the disembodied nature of D&D does inherently affect how gender is constructed in the game. A disembodied gender performance allows more freedom to players than an embodied one. However, other elements such as drag and voice can also modify gender construction in a similar way. Thus, the difference between gender scenarios in the fantasy world and the real world, and the existence of the two ontological realities seem to be the two most important aspects when it comes to understanding how gender is constructed in D&D.

Furthermore, this thesis provides two additional contributions to the general academic field of game studies and gender besides the answer to the research question. First, the outlining of these two ontological realities and their functioning as a system to understand and study TTRPGs. Second, the comparison between gender in D&D with the coloniality of gender which opens the possibility to an even freer understanding of gender in D&D in the future.

Additionally, this thesis opens the door for future research to focus on the game and its relationship to other research avenues such as race, disability, or class. Interestingly, in the next edition of Dungeons & Dragons, One D&D, Wizards of the Coast is planning to move away from the term 'race' and instead start using the term 'species' to refer to the different creatures in the game. This change highlights two things:

First, there is already an awareness amongst the gaming community on the problematics of using the term race in the fantasy world to refer to a different concept than in the real world. Thus, future research would benefit from carrying out similar studies to this thesis exploring the relationship between race in the real world and race in the fantasy world. Second, if race in D&D become species, their coexistence in the fantasy world would be interesting to study in comparison to how humans in the real world interact with the world around them and other

species. It is not only a matter of the differences in the gender system highlighted in chapter four, but there is also much to be learnt from how the different beings in D&D interact with each other.

Finally, since I started this thesis in January 2023, I have seen increasing content related to gender and D&D appear. While there is the possibility that I only started noticing because of my thesis; it is still apparent that questions of gender, race, class, etc. within TTRPGs are becoming increasingly popular not only amongst researchers but players and DMs as well. For example, Brennan Lee Mulligan, the main DM of *Dimension 20*, is releasing a campaign or short game with famous drag queens from *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The link between the gamer and queer communities is becoming gradually more visible which results in more content exploring the intersection of the two. Players and researchers alike are increasingly thinking about topics such as this thesis and this is an opportunity to take a step back and identify how different aspects of human identity can be explored through games.

Ultimately, using TTRPGs and other games to study human identity offers the possibility to consider how these concepts are constructed not only in the fantasy world but also in the real world. In terms of gender, more research can be conducted on the implications of applying the coloniality of gender to the fantasy world, or the different strategies that can be used to construct gender differently in D&D. However, this thesis fills an important gap in the literature on gender construction and performance in TTRPGs. Thus, I encourage future research to focus on the intersection between class, gender, disability, etc. in the fantasy world and in the real world which is currently an under researched field.

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