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SOCIOLOGY AND ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

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What is sociology, what do sociologists study, and how do they study it? One of the largest professional organizations in the world, the American Sociological Association (n.d.), describes sociology as

a social science involving the study of the social lives of people, groups, and societies; the study of our behavior as social beings, covering everything from the analysis of short contacts between anonymous individuals on the street to the study of global social processes; [and] the scientific study of social aggregations, the entities through which humans move throughout their lives.

Sociology is concerned with most aspects of human social life. Sociologists study a range of phenomena, from small-scale structures and processes, such as individuals and how they think, feel, and act, to mid-level structures and processes, such as local communities or the cultures of organizations or groups, to large-scale patterns of stratification that affect entire societies, such as class, gender, and race. As you can tell, sociologists are interested in the *structures* surrounding social life as well as in its *processes*. Both are readily found in role-playing games (RPGs): Rules and game mechanics are important structures, while the performance of roles and the cooperative actions of players are important processes.

Sociology covers not just a breadth of topics but a diversity of perspectives as well. Through major perspectives such as *interpretivism* and *social constructionism*, scholars study social life in terms of how people make sense of the world. Another perspective, called *realism*, assumes that social life can be studied without considering individuals' understanding of it. Such perspectives fundamentally shape the study of RPGs (Stenros 2015, 29–34). Assume two scholars are studying RPGs and time. Scholar 1 is interested in the amount of time people spend playing a given RPG, while scholar 2 is interested in how they experience the passage of time when playing that RPG. Scholar 1 can treat time as a natural or *real* phenomenon and players' experiences as irrelevant. They might ask players to keep a diary of when they play or track players through observations to create an objective measure. Meanwhile, scholar 2's research question assumes that players might *construct different* understandings of time and gameplay. Scholar 2

could also track the amount of time played but would want to ask players about their play experiences. Scholar 1 might theorize connections between number of hours played per week and other objective measures of those players, such as how well they do in school. Scholar 2 might focus on players' understandings of what constitutes "playing too long." The key difference is that scholar 1 studies time in objective terms (minutes and hours), while scholar 2 studies it in subjective terms (feelings and experiences). Each approach is valid so long as it helps answer the research questions being asked.

This chapter on the sociology of RPGs will take this variety of perspectives into account. The next two sections look at interpretivist and constructionist approaches to RPGs, focusing first on important concepts such as interaction, identity, role, and frames to then broaden focus to culture as we discuss player relations, collaborative action, and rationality. After that, we will review social stratification research that highlights noteworthy trends related to class, education, religion, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity in RPGs from a realist perspective.

Experience and Interaction

Sociologists often study players' experiences and behaviors in and around RPGs. This has to do with what many see as inherently attractive about RPGs – the interactive environments within which groups can collaboratively construct an imagined world and then act in it. In this section, we look at several sociological concepts that help provide insight into players' experiences and interactions.

Box 12.1 Shared Fantasy

Gary Alan Fine's (1983) book *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds* is among the earliest detailed studies of RPGs and deeply influenced RPG studies across disciplines in its questions, concepts, and methods. Fine used qualitative research methods, such as participant observation and interviews, to gain an insider's perspective on TRPG gameplay. He retraced how RPG players formed a subculture of their own and how, in play, players collectively create, maintain, and navigate a shared set of meanings, set apart and frame a "shared fantasy," and manage roles inside and outside of play. And he studied how the meanings and behaviors of play related to behaviors, meanings, and social structures outside, such as depictions of sexual violence and the male-dominated TRPG subculture he observed. These themes are as relevant to researchers today as they were then.

Situations, Identities, and Roles

If two friends are playing an RPG, and one steals a coveted item from the other in the game world, will this become a problem? The answer lies in how the friends make sense of the situation and their identities and roles within it. Although these terms may be defined in multiple ways by sociologists, here, we'll say that *situation* refers to the physical and social environment surrounding the event or action we are studying, *identity* refers to the names or labels players attach to themselves and others in the situation, and *role* refers to the expected and performed behaviors of players with certain situational identities (Dolch 2003; Vryan, Adler, and Adler 2003).

Role In everyday life, a pattern of behaviors and attitudes expected from a person occupying a given social position, such as mother, salesclerk, guest, etc. In RPGs, typically the character enacted by a player or the game-functional role of that character, e.g. a “damage-dealer” in an multiplayer online RPG (MORPG) raid.

Identity The meanings attached to the roles an individual occupies, the groups they identify with, and the ways in which they see themselves.

Self The thoughts, emotions, identities, and motives we attribute to ourselves as what constitutes us.

Here, there are at least two situations:

- 1 A Friday night in a family dining room or local gaming store where players are collectively immersed in a fantasy world.
- 2 A dark and smoky corner in the parlor of an inn where a group of thieves are showing off their latest acquisitions (in the fantasy world).

There are also at least two identities operating, each corresponding to a situation:

- 1 Friend—the label one gives to a person, including themselves, that establishes their relation(s) in the situation.
- 2 Thief—a person who takes something from another person, typically using stealth, without their consent.

Finally, there are at least two roles operating, each corresponding to an identity:

- 1 Friends are supposed to be trustworthy and supportive; they are expected not to steal from each other.
- 2 Thieves are expected to try and steal things from people who are unsuspecting or unaware. Thieves may go about stealing a variety of different ways and for a variety of reasons.

If *friend* were the only identity at work in this example, it would be likely that the victim of the theft would no longer consider the other person a friend because theft breaches the role expectations of a friend. But if the friends are role-playing as *thieves* who subscribe to a code in which they may steal from anyone, including other thieves, then the theft takes on new meaning. What is important for RPGs is how situations, identities, and roles are tied together. It is the meanings that players attach to their and others’ actions as friends and thieves, for example, that shape the reality of gameplay. From a sociological point of view, the identity and role of a thief is just as important as the identity of a friend within gameplay situations.

J. Patrick Williams (2016) mentions a similar example of two players, a husband and wife, playing *Munchkin* with a larger set of friends. In *Munchkin*, players shift back and forth between helping and backstabbing each other in an attempt to win. His description of the situation in terms of (a) two players and (b) a husband and wife is important for interpreting players’ behaviors. In the reported case, the husband betrayed the wife, causing her to lose a couple of levels

and quite a bit of gear. She became furious, going so far as to quit the game and leave the room. Some other players were surprised by this, and the husband himself expressed regret about his actions. The man had evidently defined the situation in terms of a *Munchkin* game and defined the woman as a rival player, while the woman was apparently operating under the assumption that her husband would never do something like that to his wife. To be sure, stabbing another player in the back is very different than stabbing your spouse in the back. Had the woman experienced another player doing this to her instead of her husband, there likely would have been much less drama because the identities of husband and wife would not have been overlapping and clashing with the identities of rival players.

Situations, identities, and roles provide guides for how to relate to other players or characters, how to make use of game-related knowledge, and how to manage feelings in and around play (Williams, Kirschner, and Suhaimi-Broder 2014). Recognizing that there may be multiple sets of identities active at the same time is an important part of how sociologists make sense of player actions (Carter, Gibbs, and Arnold 2012): Where the psychological notion of personality assumes that people have stable tendencies to behave in certain ways regardless of the situation they are in, the sociological notions of identity and roles assume that different situations will often expect and prompt the same person to enact different identities and roles.

Frames and Frame Analysis

These examples not only illustrate identities and roles but also *frames*. Developed by Erving Goffman (1986) as a general theory of the social “organization of experience,” frame analysis is a dominant sociological approach in current game research as it was applied early to RPGs by Fine (1983) and speaks to a core concern of game scholars: the “magic circle” or bounded “pocket reality” of special meanings, norms, and experiences created by gameplay (Stenros 2014). In any situation, humans face the question of what other people’s actions *mean*: Was that elbow bump an accidental oversight, an intentional attack, or an ironic come-on? Goffman (1986) argued that most people solve this question with a shared repertoire of common types of situations: frames. Frames comprise shared norms, expectations, and understandings of what things, events, and roles to find in a given situation; how to behave in those situations and for what purposes; what to attend and disattend to; and how deeply to get involved in those situations (Deterding 2014). As a form of culture, frames differ from group to group and change over time. Frame analysis argues that people will experience and respond to an action very differently depending on how they frame it and unpacks the processes by which people agree on (or deceive each other about) the “correct” framing of a given situation. This makes frame analysis useful for understanding a variety of key RPG studies questions, such as: Why is it safer to insult someone in an RPG than in “real life”? Why is playing Nazis “just a game” in some countries but taboo in others? How do we tell whether a player said something “in character” or not, and why does it matter?

Frame Types of social situations, like “play” or “grocery shopping,” made of shared norms, expectations, and understandings of what things mean and how to behave in the given situation. Framing is the often implicit and taken for granted process by which participants negotiate and maintain a shared understanding of what type of situation they are currently in.

Goffman (1986) distinguished *basic frames*, like “going to the doctor” or “wedding,” from secondary *keyings* of such basic frames, like “irony” or “rehearsal.” Keyings modulate action little

but meaning very much – compare a serious “I love you” to an ironic one. In a given situation, multiple frames can co-occur, and frames and their keyings can be nested in “laminations” (Goffman 1986, 156): Fine (1983, 186, 194), for instance, saw TRPG encounters organized into three laminations:

- the “primary framework” of the “real world” where participants are “people”;
- the “game context” or the “world of game rules” where participants act as “players [...] in light of the conventions of the game”; and
- the “gaming world” or “fantasy world” where participants enact “characters.”

In each lamination, individuals enact different role-identities as they define reality in terms of the relevant frame. The idea that these frames overlap as laminations demonstrates the complexity of role-play. Not only must “real world” friends be careful how they treat their “fantasy world” enemies, but a player who plays an adventure for a second time may need to ignore what they know is coming for the sake of their character or other party members. In actual play, players frequently switch among roles and frames, creating intentional and unintentional comic confusion about whether something was said “in character” or not. For instance, an MORPG party member may suddenly exclaim “OMG!” in a text chat, leading the others to search for something in-game that would justify the exclamation only to be told, “Sorry, watching TV and saw something unexpected!”

Frame analysis evolved from Goffman’s own studies of games (Goffman 1967, 1969, 1972). Following Gregory Bateson (2000), Goffman saw animal play as the first evolutionary keying and viewed gaming as a basic frame that institutionalizes a playful keying of contests, decoupling them from physical and social consequence. Gaming is socio-materially organized with norms, rules, and props to enhance and focus participants’ shared attention and engrossment in an activity. Thus, the gaming frame enables players to feel excitement without having to risk their lives (Shay 2016) or to engage in behaviors that would otherwise be labelled as deviant (Brown 2015, Chapman and Linderoth 2015, → *Chapters 24 and 25*).

However, establishing and maintaining a gaming frame requires (often invisible) framing work. Players often use “brackets” (Goffman 1986, 252) or metacommunications to signal the frame status of an action, object, or event or to indicate a shift in frame. Examples are entry and exit rituals, dedicated words like “cut,” or the layout of the physical environment in live-action role-playing (larp) (Brenne 2005). Along similar lines, Jaakko Stenros (2008) observed how larp players use costumes, props, and rituals to “get into character,” while Regine Herbrik (2011) showed how materials like maps help anchor and settle disputes over shared imaginations in TRPGs.

People can hide, play with, or project false frames, which can generate intense experiences of multiple, ambiguous, or breaking frames, particularly in pervasive and alternate reality RPGs that aim for a “this is not a game” aesthetic (Mäyrä and Lankoski 2009; Stenros, Waern, and Montola 2011). And, finally, gaming itself can be keyed, such as in serious RPGs or gold farming in MORPGs (Glas et al. 2011). Where other theoretical approaches struggle with such cases that cross perceived dichotomies like serious/fun or work/play, frame analysis can arguably help unpack how people make sense of and orient themselves in these situations.

Social and Cultural Dimensions

Beyond the experiences and interactions of players, RPGs are embedded in larger social and cultural processes and structures that enable and constrain play, be that face-to-face in a

tabletop RPG (TRPG) or sitting alone in front of a computer RPG (CRPG). *Social* refers to the organization of relations among games, designers, producers, players, and others, while *cultural* has to do with the organization of meanings, which both enables those relations and derives from them.

Social Processes and Structures: Player Relations

RPGs facilitate many different player configurations and types of social interaction. A game's design (→ Chapter 18) locates players in specific relationships, from the human-computer interaction foregrounded in CRPGs to the small groups found in TRPGs to larger groupings that genres such as MORPGs and larps afford. Yet players also develop their own relations and patterns of interaction within (and sometimes despite) the design (Simon, Boudreau, and Silverman 2009). Most TRPGs, for example, are designed to suit a small group of players that regularly meets face-to-face over months or even years to play together. Rules for character development and extended campaigns help ensure long-term commitment to the gaming group but also require such commitment to come into play. MORPGs, in contrast, technically enable physically separate players to get together in virtual space at any time and, in their quest design, allow players to adventure alone, hang out with friends or guild mates, and also form temporary pick-up groups (PUGs) with strangers for a short quest (Linderoth, Björk, and Olsson 2014). The MORPG *World of Warcraft*, for instance, offered a "Dungeon Finder" feature that matched solo players with each other for quests or raids. Yet such PUG interactions became predominantly instrumental. Players regularly completed scenarios with little interpersonal communication or respect for informal rules of play. The relative anonymity of PUGs removed the physical co-presence and shared pasts (or imagined futures) found in e.g. TRPGs, and so players reoriented their play to take advantage of the opportunity for quick rewards (Eklund and Johansson 2013; Williams, Kirschner, and Suhaimi-Broder 2014).

One of the most attractive aspects of RPG play is its long-lasting gaming groups (Rossi 2008). As MORPGs popularized fantasy role-playing, sociologists have for some time been studying their social groupings, such as clans and guilds. Guilds differ by goals, size, cohesion, and membership (Williams et al. 2006a) and may be oriented toward casual sociality (Albrechtslund 2010), competitive player vs player (PVP) play (Jørgensen 2008), collaborative raiding (Chen 2012), or fantasy role-playing (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler 2008). Due in part to their relative stability, guilds can develop idiocultures: cultural elements, like shared knowledge, skills, and behaviors that inform group life. Some guilds recruit openly, while others may require extensive application processes and interviews. Some become revolving-door third places where informal sociality reigns, while others become regimented and work-like as members become mutually reliant on one another to accomplish difficult objectives. Some groups strictly represent existing on- or off-line social networks, while others seek members that enhance the group's social capital (Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell 2007; Eklund and Ask 2013; Williams, Kirschner, and Suhaimi-Broder 2014).

Box 12.2 Social relations and power

While there are many competing definitions of power in sociology, it is generally agreed that power has to do with the capacity or ability to shape people's actions. Power may be seen both as a structure and as a process and can be found in many different sets of relationships.

Structure Power structures gameplay, both formally and informally. Formal power structures include rules: Handbooks and rule books, dice, maps, and other materials support the designers' definitions of what constitutes "proper" play. In MORPGs, terms of service, player codes of conduct, and computer algorithms all structure gameplay. Roles, such as dungeon masters and guild leaders, formalize which members of the community have power, but power is also often facilitated informally through status hierarchies and norms within gaming groups. Younger or newer players, for example, may be sanctioned differently than more advanced players for breaking rules.

Process Power is a practice in which players engage as they interpret and apply or negotiate rules and norms, make decisions on how to divide resources or loot, and treat players in various ways based on their perceived values or statuses. Individuals are given authority or leadership roles, but power can also be revoked or modified. Over time, players can gain or lose status either in-game or out-of-game; in fact, the two may be connected.

Outside the game, social relations among players include fan and para-academic conventions (Intercon, Knudepunkt, Gen Con, Dragon★Con), game-specific events (BlizzCon, EVE Fanfest), and local tournaments (→ *Chapters 10 and 21*). Conventions serve as "public spheres of the imagination" where attendees circulate new ideas and techniques and find like-minded individuals to play and commune with as well sites of commemoration and nostalgia for the attendees' own gaming lives and the "old days" of "the hobby" (Mello 2006; Mizer 2015). Most recently, online and social media have afforded new types of transient and durable sociality. Identity-based networks, such as Gamergate, have formed to preserve dominant (i.e. white heterosexual male) gaming culture, while others formed in response, including female-only gaming clans; LGBTQ and gaymer communities; reddit groups, such as /r/blackgirlgamers; or the AbleGamers Foundation for disabled gamers (Kafai, Heeter, Denner, and Sun 2008; Daniels and LaLone 2012; Sunden 2012).

Culture: Gaming Identity and Collaborative Action

Culture can be understood as an abstract and yet coherent web of meanings (see Geertz 1973) that people use to define themselves, their relations to each other, and the social actions that take place in and around games. Social player relations and cultures of play are intertwined: Many of the organizations and social groupings just mentioned also provide a sense of purpose and identity to players – very much a cultural phenomenon. Most gamers would agree that the identity of "being a gamer" involves specific interests and likes, caring about or valuing things in unique ways, and perhaps even talking and acting differently. Prominent larp designer Eirik Fatland eloquently described the collaborative project of culture creation in all forms of RPGs:

When we design larps, we play with the building blocks of culture... But asking people to act **As If** is not enough to make a larp. As larpers we need to act **As If** together... this is what we do, as larp designers, which is to describe and communicate the minimum requirements needed to direct human creativity towards a shared purpose.

(Fatland 2014, emphasis added)

This is not to say that designers alone create RPG culture. Gaming cultures are created through a multitude of interactions among designers, players, and others (Fine 2012). On the one hand, players become enculturated into RPG culture by interacting with and within games and gaming communities (Bainbridge 2010, 83). On the other, players acting together create gaming culture, which, in turn, influences their thoughts, emotions, and actions (Fine 2012). These processes become most directly visible in the *collaboration* required to start and keep joint RPG play going (Kirschner 2014). To coordinate their play and achieve both personal and group goals (like shared enjoyment), players learn and shape the meanings associated with play, whether those meanings are specific to a game (such as what “rolling a 1” means), a local group of gamers (e.g. the referee is always right), or popular culture more broadly (e.g. conflict can be reduced to good versus evil).

In MORPGs, players must learn what deserves their immediate or deferred attention on the screen, how they should respond to certain enemies’ or allies’ actions, and what identity/ies to foreground or bracket at any given time (Williams and Kirschner 2012). Likewise, players may need to learn new ways of negotiating social relations within and beyond a game. Whether culture is internalized through interaction with the game, mediated by game masters, or learned from collaborative action with fellow players, we typically take it for granted. Only when players’ motivations, understandings of social norms, or actions diverge does it reassert itself.

Culture and Disenchanted Enchantment

In a famous 1917 lecture, sociologist Max Weber (2009) argued that modernity is characterized by a “disenchantment” of the world.

Disenchantment A process of modernity in which secularization, rationalization, and bureaucratization replace beliefs in magic and religion with beliefs in science, and people experience less mystery, wonder, awe, and “deeper meaning.” As part of disenchantment, rationalization describes how rational motivators of behavior like formal rules, calculations, and an instrumental means-end logic replace tradition, values, emotions, or individual charisma.

Since then, sociologists have traced disenchantment and rationalization in a wide variety of settings – including RPGs. We see it in MORPG phenomena like virtual economies, real-money trading (→ *Chapter 16*), or so-called gold farming where play is turned into rational, gainful labor to produce and sell in-game gold and items (Dibbell 2006). Another example is theorycrafting: playing in a quasi-scientific fashion to reverse engineer the rules of a game and identify maximally efficient gameplay (→ *Chapter 10*). This is common among so-called power gamers who “play in ways we typically do not associate with notions of fun and leisure” (Taylor 2006, 72). Their intense commitment to the game can turn it into an obligation to the extent that “It became a chore to play” (quoted in Yee 2006, 69). Even a game’s design can show rationalization: The fourth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, for instance, replaced the rough, more open to interpretation guidelines of earlier editions with calculated formulas and experience point “budgets.” (Mizer 2014)

Disenchanted enchantment A cultural response to disenchantment, beginning with late 19th- and early 20th-century fiction authors like E.A. Poe, J.R.R. Tolkien, and H.P. Lovecraft and manifest in contemporary RPG and science fiction and fantasy fandom. Grounded in a secular, rational lifeworld, people delight in imaginary worlds filled with wonder, awe, magic, and gods, thanks to an ironic consciousness of their “as if” status.

However, rationalization does not necessarily clash with enchantment. Michael Saler (2012) views “disenchanted enchantment” as a characteristic modern practice that uses rational means for a re-enchantment of our secular world (see also Ritzer 2005). Authors like Lovecraft and Tolkien used modernist trappings, such as detailed, quasi-scientific maps, glossaries, and appendices or the genre form of “found footage,” to make their imaginary worlds more believable, all the while remaining conscious of their fictional statuses. RPGs similarly use modern statistics and quantitative techniques to buttress free-form imagination, prompting one commentator to call *D&D* “fantasy fiction through actuarial science” (Macris 2011). And Fine (1983) early on noted that ironic awareness of and play with the laminations of RPG play – fictional game world and real table – is part and parcel of its appeal.

Different social groups re-enchant the world in different ways, which can lead to conflict. In the 1980s, TRPGs became the target of a moral panic (→ *Chapter 19*). Particularly Christian organizations in the US accused RPG players of engaging in occultism. However, as Daniel Martin and Gary Alan Fine (1991, 121) argued, “in framing fantasy role-playing games as occultist activities, crusading groups share with *Dungeons & Dragons* players a sense of ‘the world re-enchanted.’” Many RPGs indeed include religious practices and beliefs that are even integrated into the games’ mechanics and core narratives of their fictional worlds (Gregory 2014). In *D&D*, for example, player characters may choose to follow one or more of a pantheon of deities, who may open or restrict the characters’ moral alignment. Followers of Bahamut, the lawful good god of justice, protection, and nobility, would be appalled at the beliefs and behaviors of a follower of Lolth, chaotic evil goddess of shadow and lies. However, conservative religious groups either fail or refuse to acknowledge the fictional, “as if” status of such in-game spiritual practice (Laycock 2015, 52). They insist that players whose characters believe in pagan deities in-game must also believe in these deities outside of the game. To them, invoking a god in play is not different from invoking their god in their own everyday life, within a religious frame that guides their beliefs and actions in that moment (Bainbridge 2013; Waltemathe 2014). RPG players, in contrast, are aware of and point to the “as if” frame of play when engaging in in-game spiritual practice and, like fictional literature, use this “as if” space to reflect on spirituality (Schaap and Aupers 2016). The CRPG *Dragon Age II*, for instance, presents a story of destruction wrought by monotheistic factions, inviting the player to question religious extremism (Bezio 2014). The CRPG trilogy *Mass Effect* can be read as is a story of conflict over religious authority where players are compelled to wrestle with their own religious perspectives (Irizarry and Irizarry 2014).

Social Stratification

Stratification refers to classifying people into categories or strata based on income, religion, education, age, gender, sex, race, or other characteristics (Andersen and Collins 2016; Hurst, Gibbon, and Nurse 2017). People tend to assume that stratification research inevitably focuses on minority groups or “low” strata – for example, that talking about gender means talking about women. However, stratification research deals with all categories: men and women, rich and poor, etc. And as people occupy multiple social categories or strata simultaneously, sociologists often apply an intersectional lens, looking at how multiple social categories intersect in shaping people’s experiences and situations (Collins 1990) (→ *Chapters 26 and 27*). Here, we will review studies that have analyzed player populations in terms of adoption of RPGs, education, gender and sexuality, and race and ethnicity.

Adoption and Education

Demographic data on role-playing gamers is sparse, chiefly stemming from industry reports. A 1999 study by *D&D* publishers Wizards of the Coast (WotC) found 5.5 million US Americans that played or have played TRPGs and 7.3 million that played or have played CRPGs. One in five was female. The overlap between CRPG and TRPG players was somewhat unidirectional: 46% of TRPG players also played CRPGs monthly, while only 21% of CRPG players also played TRPGs (Dancey 2000). Working with Sony Online Entertainment, Dmitri Williams, Nick Yee, and Scott Caplan (2008) surveyed over 7,000 players of the MORPG *EverQuest II* and found that players were wealthier and more educated than the average American. 23% had a high school diploma or less (compared to 50% of the general population), while nearly 13% had at least some graduate training (8% in the general population). This seems to confirm a more positive dimension of the “nerdy gamer,” who is intelligent and educated with specialist knowledge of niche topics and hobbies (Fine 1983).

Different forms of RPGs show different penetration and social status in different cultures. The Nordic countries, for instance, are known to be welcoming to larp. One analysis of data from the Danish Society for Nature Conservation suggested that a full 8% of Danish children aged 10–14 participated in some larp event during a single month (Gade 2005). While TRPGs (called *tēburu-tōku* or “table-talk” RPGs) have a significant following in Japan, spawning popular transmedia franchises like *Record of Lodoss War*, larp has been much slower to develop in the country due to lack of knowledge about how to organize larps as well as concerns about public perception and police opposition (Kamm 2011). Larping evokes negative popular imagery of *otakus* – roughly meaning “nerds.” In a different local idioculture, a given RPG form, genre, or game is often stratified differently. Anecdotal evidence suggests, for example, that German TRPG is male-dominated by highly educated players, while Norwegian larp is female-dominated and embraces exploring alternative way of being (such as alternate sexualities).

Gender and Sexuality

Despite such current local diversities, historically, RPG culture has been predominantly male and heterosexual, shaped in many ways by the genre’s emergence from war gaming. Surveys in the late 1970s reported that only between 0.4% and 2.3% of TRPG players were female (Fine 1983, 41). Since, the number of self-reported female gamers in many RPG forms has been on the rise. Women now represent at least 20% of players in TRPGs (Dancey 2000) and a slight majority of the CRPG player base. In MORPGs, the proportion of female players has risen in the past decade from 15%–20% (Yee 2006; Williams et al. 2009b) to 34% (Chalk 2014), although the variation between games is huge. For example, 96% of players in the science fiction MORPG *EVE Online* are male (Leray 2013). An international larp census in 2014 found that 61.8% of larpers identify as male and 35.5% as female, with proportions varying by country. In Finland, for instance, women outnumber men (Vanek 2014).

This data appears to point toward increasing gender equality but doesn’t fully reflect deeper issues of gender and sexuality in gaming culture and its study – including allegations that Fine specifically excluded women role-players from his 1983 study (Kutalik 2010). As gaming has become more popular among women, those inside and outside of RPG cultures have highlighted endemic misogyny and sexism (Trammell 2014). This has prompted some

to question and study the heteronormativity pervasive in TRPGs (Stenros and Sihvonen 2015), and RPGs have increasingly become a site of struggle for feminist players (Jenson and de Castell 2013).

In-game disparities in gender behavior and representation are also prevalent. In a review of the literature on motivations for play, Danae Romrell (2013) found that men were more motivated by achievement and women by social factors to play MORPGs, echoing earlier findings across a spectrum of digital games (Hartmann and Klimmt 2006; Williams et al. 2009a). Natasha Veltri et al. (2014) found that males were generally more motivated to play and spend more time playing. Additionally, males were more competitive, whereas women were more likely to seek collaborative relationships. Women and men equally enjoyed the fantastical aspect of games and the ability to role-play and step outside the bounds of daily life into a game space (*ibid.*). Such differences in play styles are entangled in everyday life. In digital RPGs, for example, player and character gender disparities map closely onto virtual economic disparities where competitive and achievement-oriented activities typically pursued by males yield higher returns on virtual wealth, while stereotypically feminine activities, such as socializing, so-called “pink collar” activities, yield lower returns (Lehdonvirta et al. 2014).

A content analysis of characters in 150 digital games (including but not limited to RPGs) revealed systematic over-representation of males and white people and an underrepresentation of females, Native Americans, and Hispanic people (Williams et al. 2009b). Partially in response to such studies, some developers are consciously creating more inclusive games, leading to further discussion among players and developers over norms regarding the intersection of gender and sexuality with other minority strata in RPGs. BioWare is an example of a games company that has been actively seeking to diversify its games. Its flagship CRPG series *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* allow the player to create characters of various genders and sexualities and to pursue a variety of relationships with non-player characters in the narratives (Greer 2013; Kelly 2015). Although these are progressive steps forward, there is still room to improve (Condis 2015).

Race and Ethnicity

Racial demographics of RPG players have been studied less than gender and sexuality. Anecdotal evidence from studies of local scenes suggest that some RPG player groups are relatively white-dominated, while others are more ethnically and racially diverse. This likely reflects the racial diversity and multiracial interactions of the larger communities within which the RPG scenes exist.

Box 12.3 Race in RPGs

In sociology, “race” refers to dividing humans by observable physical characteristics like skin color, while “ethnicity” refers to dividing humans by culture. Contemporary sociology views race as the outcome of *racialization*: There are no stable biologically identifiable races. Rather, people construct race categories based on physiological properties and count individuals into them, thereby marking them for unequal treatment by counting them into these categories.

(Continued)

Particularly fantasy RPGs are full of “races” like elves, dwarves, or humans. These are typically depicted and rule-modelled as biologically distinct species with different inherited traits, including unobservable ones: An elf might start the game with, say, a +2 value in intelligence or eyesight. These biological differences go hand in hand with different ethnic backgrounds, like language, culture, history, or geographic origin and even moral character and cosmic destiny. In a sense, the races in RPGs embody the outmoded racial thought of the 19th century and earlier that assumes “race” to be a biologically or even cosmically determined unity of physiological species, ethnic culture, and geographic place.

More work has been done on representations of race in RPGs, although more often focusing on fictional *racialized* categories of RPG characters (orc, troll, elf, etc.) than on everyday racial and ethnic categories. On the surface, RPGs seem racially (or species) diverse, but some scholars have argued that, in reality, they are domains of “blackless fantasy.” Blackness, here, not only refers to a lack of people of color but to the appropriation of ethnic cultures (Higgin 2009). Tanner Higgin argued that the well-known Leeroy Jenkins video in *World of Warcraft* performs Leeroy as a stereotypical black character of the old minstrel show variety, who is funny because he is stupid. In the absence of authentic blackness, such misrepresentations flourish. This

devalues the potential of [RPGs] to provide productive racial experiences because they reinforce dominant notions of Blacks as incapable of being functional members of society. These games [...] function as hegemonic fantasy by filtering the racial imagery that threatens the safety and political coherence of White dominance.

(Higgin 2009)

Indeed, the relative absence of blackness in RPGs limits narratives in which people of color can be notable or heroic. This reflects minority stereotyping and diversity issues present in other media (Khanna and Harris 2015).

Looking at fantasy races in fictional worlds, Allen Kwan (2007) and Melissa Monson (2012) suggested three ways in which they are grounded in real-world stereotypes and ideologies. First, many RPGs essentialize race. In TRPGs, game rules regularly claim that there are objective, immutable, and strong differences between races: Orcs may have the racial trait “berserk,” while dwarves get +2 to perception after consuming alcohol. Second, “fictional races [are given] recognizable cultural traits associated with real-world race [and ethnic] groups” (Monson 2012, 54). In *World of Warcraft*, the Tauren race, with their totems, teepees, and shamans, are clearly representative of Native Americans, while the Troll race are a hybrid of familiar African cultural stereotypes, with witch doctors, spears, and a Caribbean accent (“greetings mon!”). Third, across races, light-skinned, Western European appearances are associated with good, while dark-skinned appearances are often associated with evil – effectively expressing notions of white supremacy. Jessica Langer (2008) finds a more nuanced picture of racial representations in *World of Warcraft*. For her, the hard-coded racial differences are not intended to represent certain races as superior to others as each race has its own set of attractive game mechanical features. Rather, based on whichever race a player chooses, subsequent

narratives and design will support a player's understanding that other races are "foreign" to his or her own character's race. In summary, while RPG player demographics appear to move towards an equitable, post-racialized, post-gendered vision of 21st-century pluralist societies, the fictional worlds of RPGs are still often highly stratified.

Summary

Sociology studies the structures and processes of social life (and how they interact) from a variety of perspectives. While there has been some *realist* work on RPGs – collecting observational data, like demographics or play time – *interpretivist* and *constructionist* studies concerned with people's experiences and understandings dominate as RPGs showcase and involve fundamental micro-social meaning-making processes and constructs, like situation, identity, role, frame, or lamination. In order for players to successfully get a game going, they must develop a shared understanding of what is going on (the situation), who they and the other players are (identities), and what kind of behavior is expected of them (role), all of which is guided by cultural knowledge and norms about different types of situations (frames), including layers of meaning (laminations), such as a player's speaking "in character" versus "out of character." RPGs also show a rich variety of social relations shaped by and shaping game design and content: TRPG face-to-face groups; MORPG guilds, clans, and pick-up groups; and gaming subcultures meeting online and at conventions. These social relations are interwoven with the web of meanings called culture: RPG play and community rely on shared and contested gamer identities and unspoken norms and understandings of how to play, and they are part of modern disenchanting enchantment, filling a secular, rational lifeworld with imaginary worlds of wonder and magic, thanks to an ironic consciousness of their "as if" status. Finally, we reviewed the stratification of RPGs and RPG players along strata like education, gender and sex, and race and ethnicity. Although RPG content and players seem to move towards an equitable, post-racialized, post-gendered, pluralist society, their fictional worlds are still often highly stratified.

As can be seen, sociology is a remarkably broad discipline. This chapter focused on the general perspectives through which sociologists study RPGs and "core" social phenomena. That said, other chapters in this book deal with sociological topics in much more detail (signposted in this chapter), and we hope you will read those for more insights.

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