

Playing House in a World of Night: Discursive Trajectories of Masculinity in a Tabletop Role-Playing Game

Popular Abstract - This study uses excerpts from the transcript of a tabletop role-playing game (RPG) session to examine how male players enact ideas about masculinity. The game is a non-traditional, small-press “indie” game called *Ganakagok* designed by the author; in the game, the characters are men and women from a quasi-Inuit culture living on an island of ice in a world lit only by starlight. As the game begins, the imminent arrival of the Sun is announced, and game-play is about how the people of this culture deal with the approaching dawn. In one such game, the players of three male characters went through interesting character arcs in their interactions with each other and with female players; those arcs seemed to depict movement among different models of masculine identity. One implication of the study is that RPGs afford a fruitful site for reflecting upon ideas in discourse, and so it is possible for role-playing to serve as an aesthetic as well as an expressive medium—as art as well as play, in other words.

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ABSTRACT

The study of table-top role-playing games (RPGs) can serve as a useful adjunct to game studies more broadly in that it allows the constitution of games as performance (rather than as text, rules, or medium) to be acknowledged. This domain of inquiry may thus provide a way of connecting games in general to the study of active-audience participatory culture. To that end, the place of gender in table-top role-playing is considered, and the extent to which broader cultural changes may be reflected in how people play these games. Noting that fantasy RPGs have been identified as fundamentally misogynistic, this study explores the gender ideologies enacted by male players as male characters in a small-press “indie” tabletop RPG designed by the author. The transcript produced by play was examined in order to extract moments that seemed to illustrate the enactment of gender ideologies. Interestingly, the gender ideologies enacted in play seemed to describe “trajectories” of movement between ideal-type semantic poles that served as models of masculinity. In one instance, that movement amounted to self-conscious rejection of a persona adopted for parodic reasons. The study concludes

with the observation that the reflexive distance between player and character may be sufficient to allow role-playing games to serve an aesthetic or artistic as well as expressive or playful function.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of game studies, *role-playing* is an undertheorized concept. Game studies scholars sometimes find themselves tolerantly bemused when they discover that their conceptual definitions of *digital gaming* encompass the tabletop role-playing game or RPG (e.g., Aarseth 2006) as well as the digital fictions, video games, and other technologically mediated forms of play in which they are more interested, even as they nod to *Dungeons & Dragons* as historical precursor or progenitor of many of those forms (see, e.g., Steinkuehler and Williams 2006). Conceptually, role-playing encompasses activities related to game-play as performance: adopting a fictional persona and acting discursively in response to diegetic events (Montola 2008).

The game-studies idea that comes closest to seeing game-play as performance is perhaps the concept of *ergodic text* (Aarseth 1997), characterized as it is

by the requirement that the reader *work through* the text in some way (e.g., by the casting the yarrow stalks of the *I Ching* and consulting the resulting oracle) in order to fully experience it, although this tends to bracket off the activity of the reader in favor of the algorithmic processuality of the ergodic text itself. Similarly, the notion of digital games as *procedural rhetoric* (Bogost 2007) offers a possible point of entry to game-as-performance, but to a certain degree it remains focused on the expressive agency of a game's creator rather than of its players.

But role-playing *per se* is not often the topic of digital gaming investigations—perhaps because, despite *rapprochement* between the narratological and ludological approaches to the field (Frasca 2003), there is still a tendency to theorize the object of study as being either *constituted in text, like a story* (e.g., Atkins 2003, Jones 2008) or *constituted in rules, like a game* (e.g., Juul 2005, Wardrip-Fruin 2009). Role-playing games—constituted as they are in enactment, like a play—fall into the gap between those two perspectives. And because of their reliance on face-to-face interaction, they are typically regarded as outside the purview of mass communication-based research, which investigates digital games as a technological medium (Vorderer 2009).

The conception of role-playing adopted herein emphasizes its performative character, which can be overlooked if the textuality of games is overemphasized. For example, Mackay's (2001) definition sees RPGs as systems for turning spontaneous in-game interactions into stories—the role-playing is the spontaneous interaction, rather than the story-creation *per se*. And when Hammer (2007) refers to role-players as “tertiary authors” of RPG texts, it is important to recognize that it is the exercise of agency rather than the production of a textual artifact that is the sense in which we want to read her notion of authorship. See Montola's (2008) description of role-playing as a social activity involving an imaginary setting and imaginary characters manipulated via structures of power as well as White's (2009c) discussion of the interaction of social and diegetic frames for more detailed conceptual accounts of the activity of role-playing.

But it may be the case role-playing in the strictest sense is only part of a larger suite or repertoire of activities involved in digital gaming and may seem to be least among them, even within its eponymous type, regardless of medium. The mere

instrumentality of one's avatar in massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) play (Taylor 2006) is prefigured by Fine's (1983) participant observation of a tabletop RPG session, in which he noted a “strain between role-playing and game-playing” (p. 212), at one point even being told by an informant, “The one person who ever [played his character as a character rather than as an extension of self] was you in the first few games [you played with us]” (p. 264, n. 3). The tabletop RPG design theorists of the Forge (Edwards and Baker 1999) have discussed how different “stances” (relations between player and character) and “creative agenda” (orientations toward the play experience) affect the expectations that players bring to the game and their behavior at the table (for a summary of “Forge theory,” see Boss 2008). “Being in character” in an immersive kind of way may be the central or fundamental element of role-playing only in certain live action or larp games (Jarl 2009).

Nonetheless, accounts of what it is like to play a character in a tabletop game (Mackay 2001) or larp (Brenne 2005), inhabit an avatar in online play (Bessiere et al. 2007, Taylor 2006), or author a persona in a shared fictional world (Jenkins 2008) point to their essential similarity within the broader framework of “participatory culture,” in which the role of the audience rises to the level of epitextual co-production (Jenkins 1992). This being the case, it is clear that examining role-playing as an activity can provide insight into the character of participatory culture as a whole.

However, before the investigation of role-playing can contribute to a more general account of participatory culture, the way in which gender is enacted in RPGs requires some attention. This is because the generally male-oriented character of gaming culture makes it different from some other forms of fandom (e.g., “media fan writing,” in which women predominate—see Jenkins 2006), and because this gender orientation is a matter of interest and concern to scholars, activists, and game manufacturers (Carr 2007, Cassell and Jenkins 1998, Schott and Horrell 2000). This study contributes to the understanding of gender in RPGs by looking at the enactment of masculinity in a tabletop game.

2. TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING AS A GENDERED SPACE

Beginning with Fine's (1983) seminal ethnography, the literature on RPGs has noted the extent to

which it is a gendered—i.e., male-dominated—activity. Fine suggests that this partly due to (a) the emergence of role-playing from the overwhelmingly male hobby of tabletop miniatures wargaming and (b) the differences in male and female play preferences, such that RPGs represent a “male-type” hobby by virtue of their longer duration, larger group size, and age-heterogeneity of participants (p. 63). However, Fine also describes the reactions of male gamers to female players and female characters, and while he doesn’t actually use the word “misogynistic” there is no doubt that this is the thrust of his depiction. “While it is not inevitable that the games will express male sexual fears and fantasies,” Fine concludes, “they are structured so that these expressions are legitimate” (p. 70).

More recently, Nephew (2006) has described the role-playing sub-culture as “pre-dominantly white, well-educated, middle-class males in their late teens to early twenties” (p. 127). And while the “dominant culture” in the U.S. feminizes and desexualizes this group, presenting them as “awkward, aging boys with *Dungeons & Dragons* t-shirts stretched taut against their bellies, holding up their prized custom-painted fantasy miniatures for the camera” (p. 128), its male-oriented settings “are in direct contrast to the impotency that society forces on male gamers” (p. 128). Nephew asserts that “by drawing on fantasy tropes, pseudo-historical background, and the work of biased writers like H.P. Lovecraft,” RPGs “disempower women either by masculinizing them or by positioning them in the roles of devalued and extraneous non-player characters (NPCs),” such that the “dominance of the male adventurers is consistently foregrounded... and an outlet for the male players’ erotic desires is provided by the misogyny common to role-playing” (p. 132).

Novitz (1996) similarly recognizes the way in which RPGs serve a specifically masculine function, although he is less scornful of that function than Nephew is. In what almost seems to be a father’s belated apology to his role-playing gamer son, he situates the development of role-playing games within the broader social context of the 1970s.

The rise of second-wave feminism[...] while timely and important, posed particular difficulties for young middle-class boys. Many

were exposed to a highly rhetorical debate in the home and elsewhere about male inadequacies. Males were explicitly associated with almost everything that was wrong with society, and the determination of well-meaning parents not to replicate those tendencies in their sons led to an adult intrusion into boys’ lives that, if we except the proscription on Barbie dolls, found no direct parallel in the lives of girls. While new opportunities were being opened for girls[...] boys were at times made to assume the psychological burden of responsibility for states of affairs that were not of their making. One effect of all of this [...] was to encourage boys to look elsewhere not just for their play and entertainment, but also for the freedom, support, and approval that were not always available to them in the classroom, at home, or in the media. What they developed was a space beyond the reach of adult condemnation; a space in which the growing adolescent desire for freedom and control would in some measure be met. (pp. 158-9)

If role-playing gaming is a site of male identity expression, then we might imagine that it is responsive to broader cultural shifts in masculinity, as Novitz implies. To imagine this, we must rely on a notion of gender that sees it as a discursive performance that positions individuals as men or women. “Manhood[...] is a continual, dynamic process” which “creates ‘men’ by linking male genital anatomy to a male identity” and then links “both anatomy and identity to particular arrangements of authority and power” (Bederman

1995, pp. 7-8). This process is one of “constant contradiction, change, and renegotiation” (Bederman 1995, p. 11) the effects of which may include alterations to cultural meanings of manhood, manliness, and masculinity in the face of changing historical circumstances. Further, conceptions of masculinity are tied to particular social settings and enacted discursively (Philipsen 1975).

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Given the fluidity of gender ideologies over time and space, it is possible that (*pace* Nephew) the gendered discourse enacted in RPGs has changed since the days of Fine’s pioneering study. Certainly gaming itself has changed. Today, women role-players represent about 20% of those who play at least monthly (Dancey 2000) versus the 5-10% described by Fine (1983), and are an increasingly vocal segment of the hobby (Boss 2009).

Additionally, male gender ideologies in the broader culture have shifted as well, at least among the population of young men who represent the bulk of gamers. Siegel (2000) describes the “glass-slipper boys and ruby-slipper girls” she encountered as part of her project to understand the gender ideologies of the millenials (i.e., the generation born in the late 70s and early to mid-80s). This generation rejects assumptions about male-female relations advanced by “majoritist academic feminism,” according to Siegel. Women are assumed to be both sexually adventurous and justifiably angry (requiring placating by men) while men are assumed to be moved by romantic impulses. “Almost all the young people with whom I spoke believed that misogyny was outdated and unhip,” Siegel (2000, p. 103) says.

To explore this further, it will be helpful to look at the “text” of an RPG; that is, the transcript of a role-playing game session. Much of the scholarship of table-top play relies on sociologist Erving Goffman’s (1974) notion of the “frame,” or the definition of the social situation that shapes and gives sense to people’s interactions within them. Noting that Goffman stipulates the possibility of multiple frames pertaining in any given situation, role-playing scholarship seeks to describe how role-

players shift among those frames to accomplish their in-game ends (see, e.g., Brenne 2005, Hendricks 2003, Hendricks 2006, Waskul and Lust 2004, White 2009c). In other words, what role-players do when they play is not so much *take on a role* but rather orient themselves toward the diegetic and ludic frames—an imaginary world and the rules for articulating it, in other words—in which they are participants.

3. FOREVER HAVE THE PEOPLE LIVED IN STARLIGHT COLD...

Ganakagok (White 2009a) is a pen-and-paper fantasy role-playing game designed by the author. It was originally written for a game design competition (Holmes 2004) and later printed as a small-press publication, making it one of a number of games similarly developed by an Internet-enabled “indie game design” community (Costikyan 2007).

“*Ganakagok*” is the name of the eponymous game setting, a gigantic island of ice floating in a starlit sea upon which the sun has never risen: in this world of ice, it has always been night! The player-characters (PCs) belong to the tribe of hunter-gatherers who live upon *Ganakagok*. Every game begins with the same situation: the people have begun to realize that, after centuries of night, the sun will soon rise. There is no pre-scripted plot, however; instead, the actions and reactions of the players in response to the given circumstances develop the on-going situation. Dealing with the approach of this inexorable change is the point of play, which tends to produce accounts that read like myths, fables, or just-so stories.

A recent game of *Ganakagok*, run and recorded in the summer of 2009 at a gaming convention in central New Jersey, had a more mundane or practical tone, however (White 2009b). With two women and three men as players (plus a male Game Master, or GM, who was also the game’s designer), in-game events revolved around details of domestic life within the village. The “metaplot” of the rising of the sun remained in the background as characters dealt with relationship issues and family troubles in their day-to-day lives. After briefly describing the initial situation and the characters involved in that situation, this analysis focuses on one moment within the game that seemed particularly interesting as an instance of reflection of and reflection upon gender.

3.1 The Situation of the World and the People

A game of *Ganakagok* begins with a short introduction of the setting by the GM: an island of

ice in eternal darkness inhabited by a tribal people to which intimations of sunrise have come. A tarot-like deck of playing cards is used to prompt descriptions of diegetic situations and to guide narrations of in-game consequences of character action. Each card has a label, a motif, and a meaning that can be drawn upon to inform player interpretations. For example, after the GM's setting description, he facilitates the group's determination of the overall "Situation of the World" by drawing two cards from the deck—in this case, the Ancient of Stars (*Beluga Whale*, "to celebrate; to feel joy and express it without reserve"; see Figure 1) and the Three of Storms (*Hole in the Ice*, "to have one's efforts produce results")—and inviting the players to interpret them. Keying in on the cards' *meanings* rather than their more concrete *motifs*, the players agree that those cards signify "increased bounty from the sea," perhaps as a result of the approach of the dawn. From that point, a second pair of cards produces the agreement that the people in general have grown "corpulent and lazy and selfish" as well as materialistic, desiring things of which they once had no need. At the same time, some among the people want a return to the purity of traditional ways.

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3.2 Player and Character in Role-Playing

Having made these determinations, the players are ready to create their characters; to begin, in other words, their engagement with the diegetic frame through the instrument of role-playing. Ganakagok cards are used to prompt each player to come up with a "truth-vision," "change-hope," and "change-fear"—that is, a small narrative about how the character came to believe that change is coming, and what the character hopes and fears the outcome of that change will be. The following paragraphs summarize the players' self-generated character identities and pre-play backstories. In all cases, the gender of the character is the same as the gender of the player.

The Traditionalist Loremaster. Hokmuish has seen the younger generations fall into fads and fashions,

and hopes that he can lead them to return to the traditional ways. He fears that, instead, the adaptability of the young to the changing conditions of Ganakagok will make him and those of his age group dependent upon them.

The Noble Male. The survival of Kibaka's paraplegic twin sister made him realize that the Ancestors will always provide for the people, but he is afraid that this solicitude will make the people weak, like women. "This guy's a complete ass," said the player of his own character.

The Tormented Ice-Fisher. Karatoq realized that something had changed in the world when he was so weak-willed and greedy that he stole something. Uncaught and unwilling to confess, he nonetheless hopes that he will be found out and punished for his crime. His deep fear is that he will not be punished but instead will be called upon to serve as a leader of the people.

The Caring Flamekeeper. Telakrak dreamed that she married a mysterious figure, but read that dream as a sign that she should bring peace back to the people. She is afraid that her good intentions will alienate her from the tribe.

The Skilled Crafter. Nakelniq had a vision of an approaching time of upheaval. She hopes that the people will prove worthy throughout this trial, but fears that they will destroy themselves or the world instead.

The players thus begin the game with a sense of who their characters are and what motivates them to act. Additional game-mechanical procedures are employed to connect the characters in relationships with each other and with non-player characters (NPCs) as well as to give the characters "gifts" and "burdens" that are invoked in play to move the narration along different lines.

Interestingly, the three male characters seem to occupy diegetic positions that can be equated with three of the four common normative ideal types of masculinity typically encountered in discourses of gender (Schut 2006; see Figure 2). Hokmuish the traditional loremaster is practically a neolithic Puritan, his adherence to tradition underscored by his distaste for the faddishness and fashions of the younger generation; in this sense, his player has positioned him as an example of "respectable manliness": sober, serious-minded, and self-controlled. Kibaka the noble male, conversely, seems located within a paradigm of "rough

masculinity.” Although similarly suspicious of the new, in contrast to the traditional loremaster, he is constructed around an ideal of virile machismo, to the point that the player identified as one of Kibaka’s “gifts” or possessions a preserved bear-penis totem. Finally, Karatoq the tormented ice-fisher is defined by his desire to evade the patriarchal responsibilities of respectable manliness, a desire that initially might seem to position the character within “eternal boyhood,” but when coupled with Karatoq’s guilty regret over his youthful peccadillo signify instead the sort of sensitive introspection and self-appraisal characteristic of “liberated manhood,” self-consciously seeking a new model of masculinity that avoids the odious elements of the other three: inflexibility, insensitivity, and fecklessness, respectively.

These initial character descriptions may be regarded as proffering suggestions as to the stories their players would find interesting to explore. The nature of the game is such that it invites players to interrogate their conception of their characters: will they stay true to their initial conception, or will they change in some way as a result of the narrative co-constructed by the players? It is clear, by the way, that at this stage of the game, the players are *authoring* their characters, and in so doing striving for a kind of authorial detachment or ironic distance from the character (Bakhtin 1990). Kibaka’s player, for instance, issues a kind of authorial judgment upon the character by burdening him with sexual impotence as an in-game weakness—this is a move that invites the GM to invoke that burden in play as *something that matters* to the story; more importantly, it severely undercuts the line of macho virility that the player anticipates Kibaka presenting in the fiction.

Once character creation is complete, play begins. *Ganakagok* is structured such that each player has a “spotlight turn” in which the narrative revolves around his or her character’s choices, decisions, and reactions, regardless of the broader diegetic context. The player’s turn begins with the draw of a Ganakagok card that is interpreted by the GM as the character’s “initial situation.” The player then

describes or acts out the character’s response to that situation until a crucial point is reached; this “crux” is recognizable as the character’s commitment to a particular course of action:

Learning to identify the crux is an important skill for Ganakagok GMs, but one way of thinking about it is that when you reach a point in the narration when you don’t know what’s going to happen next, and it’s important that you don’t just pick one or the other, you’re probably at the crux. For example, suppose it’s been established that a character is out on the ice, hunting. That’s all we know. The situation card is thrown: *Child of Stars* (Reflected Image: to meditate or think introspectively). “You realize,” says the GM, “that as you have been stalking a small herd of reindeer, something has been stalking you.” Now suppose the player says, “I try to lose ‘em.” For some GMs (and some players), that will be enough, and play can progress to the next step (White 2009a, p. 44).

This next step involves rolling a handful of six-sided dice and sorting them according to their value, with the results tentatively indicating (a) which of the GM or player will get to narrate the outcome of the character’s action, (b) the distribution of immediate consequences of that action in the form of “gifts” and “burdens” to those characters involved in the scene, and (c) the impact on the longer-term fortunes of the world, the people, and the individual characters in the form of a game-mechanical currency called Medicine (more Good Medicine than Bad results in a happy ending; otherwise, a tragic one).

However, these initial results can be modified by the reactions of the characters on the scene, as their



Figure 1.
A *Ganakagok* card.

players describe those reactions as narrative justifications for the invocation of gifts, burdens, and other pre-established situational factors that could plausibly affect the final outcome. Thus, play includes both a *tactical* element and a *narrative* one. Players are concerned with manipulating the distribution of gifts and burdens and the distribution of Good and Bad Medicine as well as enacting and reacting to the on-going story in a satisfying way.

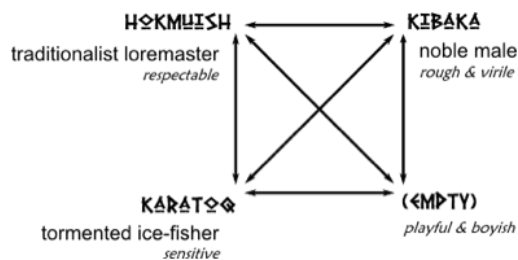


Figure 2. Modes of masculinity among three male characters.

3.4 Narratives of Masculinity

The story that has been collaboratively produced in play by the participants in this particular game can be seen as a set of trajectories within the discursive space of masculine identity—a space of contradiction, change, and renegotiation, to be sure. For example, in one scene, Hokmuish the traditional loremaster found himself faced with having to take charge of caring for his newborn daughter while his (NPC) wife recuperated from delivery. At the end of his turn, having won the right to narrate the outcome along with sufficient gifts to give that narration game-mechanical weight, Hokmuish's player changed his identity to "loving father" from "traditional loremaster," thus moving the character from the *respectable* pole toward the *sensitive* one; later, he would invoke that changed identity in play to justify his character's acquiescence to changes in the village occasioned by the dawn, on the grounds that he would want his daughter to live in the world as it will be rather than as it was. Conversely, on his turn, Karatoq the tormented ice-fisher abandons his introspective stance to call the people together and advocate a new cultural order; his player at one point stipulating that he was *lecturing at* rather than *debating with* the other villagers—a course of action more redolent of the patriarchal sensibilities of respectable manliness than consonant with the self-scrutiny of liberated and sensitive manhood.

3.5 The Tale of Kibaka and Telakrak

These summaries of the narrative have been kept brief in order to leave room for the story of Kibaka

the noble male and his interaction with his fiance Telakrak the caring flamekeeper, because of the pointedness with which issues of gender appeared in play during their turns. It is worth recounting the specific discursive moves used to articulate this story in order to more fully appreciate how role-playing achieves it affects. As Kibaka's turn opens, the GM asks his player (Frank) what Kibaka is doing at the start of the scene.

(1) FRANK (Kibaka): I think he's proselytizing the people. We must stick to our traditional ways. I think every man should go on a hunt today.

Notice the use of "free indirect style" of narration, in which no clear distinction is made between the voice of the narrator and that of the character: this is a tool that enables irony (Wood 2008). The GM (Bill) throws and interprets a Ganakagok card (Path: to look back fondly, without regret) as indicating that there is some reluctance on the part of young hunters to undertake the rigors of the hunt, but that they by and large accede to his blandishments.

(2) BILL (GM): Do you want to give us a little bit of what you're doing, what you're saying as you muster them to get ready, just to give us a little sense as we head into the consequence phase?

(3) FRANK (Kibaka): "Of course the sea has been plentiful, and we've been fortunate, but we've also become fat, like a seal on all this. We must be strong, like the bear. We must go out and hunt our food even if it's willing to throw itself into our mouths." [Others laugh]

(4) ANDREW (Karatoq): Uh, wow. That was a Gandalf moment, clearly—

Andrew's popular culture reference could be taken as an *incorporative discourse strategy* of that type (Hendricks 2006) were it not manifest sarcasm—but Andrew is indeed signaling his appreciation of Frank's straight-faced self-parody. Frank's enactment of Kibaka serves as a mocking self-deprecation of his own character, in other words. The crux of the scene occurs when some young

hunters grow discouraged and want to go back. Kibaka, brandishing the bear-penis, urges them to emulate his manliness. In the end, some of those young hunters return to the village, but a die-hard cadre remains out on the ice. The rules allow Frank to describe some positive consequences eventuating from this outcome.

(5) BILL (GM): Three points worth of Gifts.

(6) FRANK (Kibaka): Alright, uh, Gifts.

(7) ANDREW (Karatoq): Obviously a token of the hunt, like the skull of the great beast you killed or something, or the fangs of the beast or something.

(8) FRANK (Kibaka): Mm hm... Who am I going to lay this gift on? We manage to—so little predators out here.

(9) ANDREW (Karatoq): Bears, sea lions, cannibal ghouls, wolves—

(10) FRANK (Kibaka): Wolves! Thank you! We bring the skull of the arctic wolf—one of the least useful animals for us to have killed—and give it to our chief, our...

(11) BILL (GM): ... loremaster?

(12) FRANK (Kibaka): —because why would we give trophies to a priestess? [Others laugh]

(13) FRANK (Kibaka): That's one. Two, I want a *name* for our *group*—the hunters.

(14) ANDREW (Karatoq): So you can put it on the map you mean?

(15) FRANK (Kibaka): The True—What's the name of our tribe?

(16) BILL (GM): The Nitu.

(17) FRANK (Kibaka): The True Nitu.

(18) ANDREW (Karatoq): Oh, I hate you so much [Others laugh].

(19) FRANK (Kibaka): I will make some—[to Krista, as Telakrak, who has been identified as Kibaka's fiance; the players are acquaintances only] Here's some fat, cook it for dinner.

The preceding segment, which ended Kibaka's turn, opened in a straightforward way. Andrew and Bill in lines (5) through (11) are trying to help Frank introduce new in-game elements that are thematically consistent with the ice-world setting and with what has previously been established. Frank accepts their help, but his contribution ultimately continues his sardonic portrayal of Kibaka: he undercuts the character's self-importance by mocking the fruits of the hunt in lines (10) and (19), and he uses free indirect narration in line (12) to signal Kibaka's unself-conscious misogyny. In lines (13) through (17), Frank devises a way to show us Kibaka's exclusionary intolerance of those who have adopted or advocate change—a device that elicits a ruefully appreciative response from Andrew in line (18) in recognition of how it handicaps his designs for his own character.

Krista's turn follows immediately. Her situation card is called *Hunting Camp*, and the GM begins by offering a candidate interpretation that draws upon this imagery in line (20); this is immediately accepted in line (21).

(20) BILL (GM): Do you pay a visit to the hunting camp, is that what that means?

(21) KRISTA (Telakrak): Yeah! I'm visiting my honey. [Others laugh]

(22) ANDREW (Karatoq): Oh, it's so *great* that you have these guys out here; I'm going to *come in*, and I'm going to *take care of you*.

(23) KRISTA (Telakrak): "I think it's so great that we're going back to the old ways, I think that's really what we need, and I'm just so proud of you..."

(24) KARIN (Nakelniq):

We're having male bonding here; get outta here!

(25) BILL (GM): So tell me what happens in the hunting camp. [Others laugh]

(26) FRANK (Kibaka): Loo—Lucy... [Others laugh]

(27) KRISTA (Telakrak): I think—I think we get into an argument because I'm butting in to the ways of the men.

The turns of talk show between lines (21) and (27) show the players working to underscore the somewhat comedic or even farcical aspect of the interaction between Kibaka and Telakrak. Krista draws upon a light-hearted register in agreeing that her situation involves a visit to her “honey,” and Andrew follows up in line (22) by modeling what a breezy Telakrak sweeping in to the hunting camp might say; Krista's in-character speech in line (23) takes Andrew's line as its sub-text. Karin in line (24) and Frank in line (26) model Kibaka's likely response to Telakrak's arrival—Frank with an allusion to *I Love Lucy*, the American situation comedy of the 1950s in which the husband would often find himself bemused and exasperated by his wife's little schemes. Krista in line (27) again accepts the sense of other players' offerings. Following the GM's prompt in line (28) below, Frank and Krista engage in an *in-character exchange* that affirms and enacts the previously established communal sense of what is happening.

(28) BILL (GM): All right, a little bit of the argument, and then we'll go to the consequence of the argument. Like, what's the fight about?

(29) FRANK (Kibaka): “What are you doing here?”

(30) KRISTA (Telakrak): “I figured I'd just come and give you support!”

(31) FRANK (Kibaka): “This is for *men*. This is for the men of our tribe, to save our tribe from becoming—”

(32) ANDREW (Karatoq): Weak.

(33) FRANK (Kibaka): “—weak.”

(34) KRISTA (Telakrak): “And who was the one who gave you advice on how to get those men rallied to even *become* hunters?”

(35) FRANK (Kibaka): “I knew what I was doing.” [Others laugh]

(36) BILL (GM): Good. Let's throw the consequence card and we'll continue this fight.

The turn proceeds to the reaction phase, wherein each player is able to bring in previously established narrative elements to affect the outcome of the turn. Krista describes how Telakrak brings up that she was the one who helped get the hunt started, and that without her help Kibaka wouldn't even have this gotten “this measly wolf fat” to give her. Soon it is Frank's turn to react, but he wonders if he should merely hold his peace.

(37) BILL (GM): Frank?

(38) FRANK (Kibaka): So, realistically, could I stay out of this and just take it?

(39) ANDREW (Karatoq): Yeah.

(40) BILL (GM): You can just take it. You can pass if you want. Just be a man—man up and take what's coming to you. [Others laugh]

(41) FRANK (Kibaka): Really.

(42) ANDREW (Karatoq): Used your in-game stuff as out-of-game smack talk: that was great.

(43) FRANK (Kibaka): I'm going to be uh—I'm going to take the first stage of this being “women just need to take—blow off steam”; I'm not going to fight that—

(44) BILL (GM): So you're passing?

(45) FRANK (Kibaka): —I understand. I'm passing.

Ironically, Frank seems to lack the courage of Kibaka's convictions; that is, he is unwilling to engage in the fight with Talakrak. This could be a tactical decision—since opposing her would mean working against the group as a whole in the larger game—or a character-driven one: it is clear that Frank thinks Kibaka is a hypocrite. He provides an in-character rationalization for his reticence in line (43). Krista, on the other hand, does not hesitate to assert her character. In what is rather a *tour de force*, she enumerates the in-game elements that justify her influence upon the situation (lines 47 through 51).

(46) BILL (GM): Krista, back to you—anything?

(47) KRISTA (Telakrak): Yep. I've got plenty. So I didn't bring in my change-hope, so I did, just arguing "I just wanted to come here and give my support because I thought that what you were doing was great for our tribe," and things like that. My presence: I'm there—

(48) BILL (GM): Because you've been arguing, sure.

(49) KRISTA (Telakrak): And then you know I have my *caring* flamekeeper and this is a part of me caring—

(50) BILL (GM): You're caring for the whole tribe, absolutely.

(51) KRISTA (Telakrak): You know what? "I just came here because *I love you* and I wanted to give my support," so that's four.

(52) FRANK (Kibaka): I feel so bad.

(53) ANDREW (Karatoq): It's so like a real argument.

(54) FRANK (Kibaka): It really is. I'm completely whipped in every possible way.

(55) ANDREW (Karatoq): No wonder you're so like, "Ah, let's be men, arr-ahh, because *I really just want to know how to be a man...*"

Frank and Andrew respond playfully, but their playfulness evinces a modicum of discomfort that acknowledges the power of Krista's discursive move and at the same time fully articulates the hypocrisy of Kibaka's machismo, which is revealed in the interaction to be a mere pose: Kibaka is a hollow man who, despite his bluster, "just wants to know how to be a man." Later, when Krista is awarding gifts, Frank suggests that she use one to remove Kibaka's erectile dysfunction; she is unconvinced.

(56) KRISTA (Telakrak): I was thinking about getting rid of my pride.

(57) FRANK (Kibaka): To be perfectly honest, that would make a nice little—That means she had the *world's best argument*. She came in yelling at me, and I'm like, "Yee-ah, all right, I'm liking this. Not only don't I hate you anymore, but I think I may love you."

(58) KRISTA (Telakrak): Unfortunately for your poor guy, I'm taking away my pride.

When the GM adds insult to injury by giving Kibaka the additional burden of being "cowed by Telakrak," Frank is non-plussed, but the female players are delighted at the character's comeuppance.

(59) FRANK (Kibaka): My God, this guy is never coming back from the brink.

(60) KRISTA (Telakrak): That's why your ED didn't go away.

(61) FRANK (Kibaka): Yes.

(62) KARIN (Nakelniq): You were too humiliated, that you were put in your place by a *woman*.

(63) FRANK (Kibaka): I deserve that so much, for bowing out twice in a row in something I really should have been screaming, [waving the] bear penis, "You don't control me when I'm hanging out with my

friends"—sorry—"when I'm hanging out with my friends!"

3.6 Dawn Comes to the Island of Ice

This extended recounting of a segment of play of a game of *Ganakagok* shows the extent to which role-playing as a discourse is highly *metacommunicative*—it is a *strategic dialogue* (White 2008; see also Calvino 1974) characterized by discursive modeling (often exaggerated for humorous effect), intertextual allusivity, and self-consciously ironical free indirect narration, all of which has the effect of enabling players to articulate and contest their shared diegesis. Furthermore, in this specific instance, it demonstrates the discursive processuality of manhood (Bederman 1995). It is not the case, in other words, that the masculine ideologies displayed by the players via their characters were adopted at the time of character creation and then merely applied prescriptively to shape character action in play; rather, they were enacted in play dynamically, in response to the exigencies of the fiction and in a recursive or reflexive fashion such that the character was the medium as well as the instrument of that enactment, changing in response to each player's play. To a certain extent, the semantic structuring of masculinity served as a discursive resource, enabling players to play with different forms of masculine identity and their transformations—Hokmuish the traditionalist loremaster was able to move from respectability to sensitivity, while Karatoq the tormented ice-fisher moved in the opposite direction. Interestingly, Frank-as-Kibaka the noble male was willing neither to articulate an alternative to the rough virility he had set up for mocking deconstruction nor to fully inhabit the "taboo self" (Bowman 2010) towards which his play was leading, as his final rueful comment suggests. The effect was to reveal the unsustainability of a "macho" gender ideology when faced with a genuine female presence at the table and in the fiction—quite a difference from the "reaction of male gamers" described by Fine (1983) almost thirty years ago.

This analysis is only partial, of course; it gives only short shrift to the experience of the female players at the table, but it should be clear that some kind of gender identity enactment was also taking place for them as well, with its own successes and failures, consistencies and contradictions. An extension of this analysis would examine how the discursive deployment of male and female gender ideologies interacted in play to create real-world

and diegetic *modi vivendi* for negotiating gender and other sorts of conflict.

4. THE ART OF ROLE-PLAYING

Bakhtin (1990) asserts that "what radically distinguishes play from art is the absence in principle of spectator and author" (p. 74). Play, in other words, is unself-conscious; and so stepping inside the "magic circle" (Huizinga 1950) of play involves less the adoption of an alternative persona and rather more the expression of a contingent identity—a felt, longed-for, or "trialable" aspect of self, that is to say—that may be as fleeting as the experience of play itself (see Bowman 2010, for a discussion of the approaches to identity enacted in RPGs). But as we have seen, players of role-playing games at least in some cases both author and witness their own play, moving it into the domain of *aesthetic* rather than purely *expressive* activity. In other words, in the gap between player and character may lie the difference between art and play.

(51) KRISTA (Telakrak): You know what? "I just came here because I love you and I wanted to give my support," so that's four.

(52) FRANK (Kibaka): I feel so bad.

(53) ANDREW (Karatoq): It's so like a real argument.

Mackay (2001) wants to understand fantasy role-playing gaming as a performance art, but it can sustain that classification only insofar as it is *available for reflection*—to the extent, that is to say, that it permits itself to be read as text. To be sure, there are some who are willing to allow RPGs to be called art by those who perceive its humanizing value for themselves (see Novitz 1996), but such allowances serve only to ascribe to role-players particular expressive needs, rather than to enable role-playing as a form to aspire to greater aesthetic aims. Nonetheless, the idea that role-players are "tertiary authors" (Hammer 2007) may be taken to imply that they are also "primary readers" of their own play. For this implication to be taken seriously, we must imagine that players are capable of engaging in the self-reflective examination of their own play, and that such self-reflections can be made available to secondary and tertiary readers within the gaming community. The existence of discussion sites like the Forge (Edwards

and Baker 1999), with its emphasis on “actual play” as the *lingua franca* of gaming talk, arguably gives substance to these suppositions.

The masculine ideologies displayed by the players via their characters were... enacted in play dynamically, in response to the exigencies of the fiction and in a recursive or reflexive fashion such that the character was the medium as well as the instrument of that enactment, changing in response to each player’s play.

The possibility thus exists that “participatory culture” of the sort that includes role-playing gaming may be able to *act on itself*—to serve as a discursive space in which dialogic action can change people’s understandings in addition to celebrating pop cultural tropes, motifs, and icons in an uncritical fashion or bemoaning them in an apocalyptic one (see Eco 1994).

These results also suggest that the most appropriate site for achieving an understanding of role-playing gaming is *not* the game-text but rather the “text” of play itself, even though the game-text is usually far more accessible for analysis. It should be noted that the increasing availability of recordings of “actual play” via Internet-enabled podcasting and transcripts of online gaming on “virtual tabletops” may affect the degree to which RPGs may achieve at least a kind of second-hand textuality, and thus be available for reflective examination in that sense (much as in the case of the current essay).

In the gap between player and character may lie the difference between art and play.

In that regard, the complicated position of the current study deserves notice, written as it was by a participant in the game (tertiary author) who also ran the session (secondary author) and designed the game being run (primary author) as well as observing the play of others (primary reader), creating a transcript of play (secondary reader), and analyzing that transcript (tertiary reader). Still, this is perhaps only slightly more complicated than most role-playing scholarship, involving as it does in many cases an examination of the investigator’s

own role-playing experience, either as player (Bowman 2010, Waskul and Lust 2004) or as GM (Hendricks 2003, Hendricks 2006, Mackay 2001). Moving among multiple “frames” of authorship and readership may be in and of itself a kind of role-playing; certainly that idea deserves closer examination.

But the possibility of *thoughtful* role-playing gaming, that may be both *experienced* and *reflected upon* as a thought-provoking exercise, is an intriguing possibility for further research, design, and play.

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