

Misogyny, fear, or boundary maintenance? Responses to brand activism on gender diversity amongst players of Magic: The Gathering

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Introduction

The trading card game Magic: The Gathering is now over twenty-five years-old and played by at least thirty-five million people worldwide; in its ‘paper’ form, and as an e-sport. Most visible players, including the vast majority of competitive pro players are cisgender men, but the player-base is becoming more diverse, and more women play the game at home with friends or online, even if this is not reflected in attendance at public competitive events.¹ The company that makes Magic, Wizards of the Coast (WotC), has an understandable commercial interest in increasing player diversity, and thus, their market. In recent years, they have made efforts to promote diversity in the lore, characters and artwork of the game, by expressly including autistic, trans, non-binary and non-white² characters, whilst also altering the representation of many women characters: a shift from the kinds of gendered tropes often seen in video and fantasy games, e.g. ‘the sexy sidekick’, ‘the harlot’, or the ‘damsel in distress’ (Sarkeesian 2012, cf. Shaw 2015; Trammell 2018) – to strong practically-dressed women, coded as agents rather than subjects. Head Designer at WotC, Mark Rosewater, has described this design choice as a mechanism to enable resonant reactions in a wider customer base (Rosewater 2019a). Concurrently, efforts have been made to include more women and non-binary players in the coverage of competitive play.

Based on participant observation in online and offline Magic-player community discussions and playing spaces between 2016-2020, as well as my reading of online texts produced by WotC staff, I discuss some of the effects of these top-down³ efforts to promote gender diversity.⁴ My offline participant observation is necessarily shaped by my experiences as a competitively-orientated Magic-player, and as a white cisgender woman, playing primarily in the south-east of the UK, and some events further afield (e.g. in Europe); whilst my online participant observation has been on English-medium social media (Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, Twitch and YouTube). Whilst many Magic-players have welcomed WotC’s top-down actions on diversity, and many claim to not care as long as the mechanics of the game remain, I have also observed a discursive backlash (from within and

¹ A precise gender breakdown is not available, at least partly because of the variety of different ways Magic is played. Head Designer of Magic, Mark Rosewater, claims their market research indicates between 25-38% of players are women (<https://markrosewater.tumblr.com/post/122446948628/38> and <https://markrosewater.tumblr.com/post/162137383148/i-think-one-of-the-reasons-the-community-argues>, accessed 25/2/2021).

² Magic has always included non-white characters, but those characters are increasingly being given more prominent roles. For example, the way the African-American coded Kaya is placed at the forefront of marketing material for the 2021 Magic set release *Kaldheim* (<https://youtu.be/DmSpD4VINNs>, accessed 25/2/2021).

³ There have also been multiple ‘bottom-up’ efforts to encourage a broader range of people to play Magic (e.g. the player-led initiatives Planeswalkers for Diversity and The Lady Planeswalker Society) but here my focus is on efforts from WotC in relation to game design and international organized competitive play.

⁴ I focus on women as a minority group of Magic players, because as a woman player, that is the minority experience I am most familiar with. Much of what I say about wider community responses to women players and content creators could potentially be extrapolated to any Magic players who are not cis heterosexual able-bodied white men; likely with even more extreme effects when intersectionality is taken into account.

outside the subculture) by those who perceive this as unnecessary ‘virtue signalling’, or worse, as ‘Social Justice Warriors’ pushing (gender) politics into ‘their’ game and ‘their’ spaces.

Whilst Magic is a social game with its own associated material objects and opportunities for consumption, creating its own ‘manufactured subculture’ (after Dayan 1986), it exists alongside, and interacts with, a range of related online and offline communities. As a result, my analysis will inevitably engage with intersecting areas of academic literature – on gaming more generally, online communities, fandoms or ‘geek culture(s)’, ‘trolling’, the ‘manosphere’, and of course, feminism, masculinities and patriarchal hierarchies. I build on existing work that identifies ‘geek masculinities’ as an alternative to hegemonic masculinities (Connell 2001; Redman and Mac an Ghail 1996; N. Taylor and Voorhees 2018), and e-sports as an alternative form of masculine sporting competition (T. L. Taylor 2012). I also draw on literature from marketing about ‘brand activism’, as well as potential backlash against such efforts, in order to place WotC’s actions in a wider consumer capitalism context.

I start by outlining the growing demand for brands to comment and act upon sociopolitical issues, then discuss a subset of the masculinities literature: focusing on ‘geek masculinities’. I discuss the cultural significance of Magic and explore the brand activism of WotC in relation to gender diversity and explore some of the community response to those top-down efforts to create cultural change. I conclude by arguing that responses from players to a real (or perceived) increase in gender diversity is a form of ‘boundary maintenance’ (Graham 2019) or ‘territory protection’, informed by fear and misogyny (Manne 2017) held by those shaped by a key aspect of geek hegemonic masculinity: a gendered perception of intellectual/technological superiority, juxtaposed with a sense of social marginality and exclusion.

Brand activism

We increasingly see ‘brand activism’ or ‘corporate sociopolitical activism’ in response to political events, even those unrelated to corporations’ core business (Eilert and Nappier Cherup 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). General consumer awareness, as well as specific movements, e.g. ‘Taking a Knee’ by American Football players, the increased visibility of the #MeToo movement from 2017, and the Black Lives Matter protests in response to the killing of George Floyd in 2020, can trigger increased demands for companies to ‘take a stand’ (*ibid*). It is a delicate path for companies to tread, as consumers demand a response (FleishmanHillard 2018; Vredenburg et al. 2020) even whilst shareholders and investors may be less enthusiastic (Bhagwat et al. 2020). Consumer surveys suggest that whilst customers want brands to respond to political events, they will stop using a company if the company’s response does not align with their own views (FleishmanHillard 2018). Surveys also show that a majority of consumers think that brands take advantage of political issues for commercial benefit, suggesting substantial cynicism towards company’s motivations (*ibid*).

Qualitative studies also indicate cynicism around brand activism, as well as highlighting the difficulties of balancing progressive social ideas such as feminism and diversity with capitalism (see Sobande 2019; J. Taylor, Johnston, and Whitehead 2016). Such studies use terms such as ‘woke-washing’, ‘femvertising’ and ‘fauxminist marketing’ to highlight the potential contradictions in combining socially ‘progressive’ messages with consumerism, particularly in relation to fashion and beauty products. Critical analysis of brand activism has demonstrated that whilst positive advertising messages about, for example, diverse body sizes and skin colour, might be seen by some politically-engaged consumers as ‘better than nothing’ (J. Taylor, Johnston, and Whitehead 2016), the diversity portrayed is still within narrow confines of what is assumed to be normatively acceptable to target markets. What were once political movements, such as ‘body positivity’, can become mainstreamed, sanitised, and lose touch with their radical roots (Peters 2021).

The constraint of ‘acceptable diversity’ has been more widely-discussed in relation to the portrayal of homosexuality in advertising and branding, whereby scholars have acknowledged the

increased visibility of gay men (and to a lesser extent lesbians) over the last decade, whilst also highlighting that representations of homosexuality only exist within a very narrow heteronormative framework of what a relationship should look like. As Nölke (2018, 247) writes, advertising narratives with 'LGBT' characters reassure consumers by maintaining "a neoliberal homonormativity that upholds a strict hierarchy of accepted queerness under the veil of acceptance of the politically correct slogan 'love is love'". Whilst brand activism might be seen as pushing boundaries to a limited extent, it remains firmly constrained by a specific set of commercially-minded concerns.

Whilst using narratives and aesthetics from progressive social movements, and co-opting and commodifying dissent to sell products is not new (Klein 2000; McGuigan 2009), consumer demands that corporations 'take a stand' on current affairs is a relatively new phenomena (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Eilert and Nappier Cherup 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020), as is the growth of commodity activism (Repo 2020). Perhaps the increasing role of brands in public life (see Klein 2000) also leads to consumers expecting more of them in terms of a visible moral stance? Brands and corporations are also staffed by employees and managers who may have their own personal and political motivations for promoting brand activism; something that has not been the subject of extensive analysis. Nevertheless, even in this brief overview, ambivalence about the motivations of brands, as well as concerns over commodification, or dilution, of political movements and the reification of particular, but constrained, types of diversity are apparent.

WotC's efforts to increase gender diversity will be considered in the context of this brand activism. However, before discussing WotC and Magic specifically, I explore the notion of 'geek masculinities', as a variant of masculinity most often associated with gamers, and how that shapes the cultural and political context of Magic players, and thus, WotC's current and future consumers.

'Geek' masculinities

There are multiple masculinities, and expressions of masculinity, shaped by issues such as class and culture (Connell 2001). Whilst Connell (ibid) indicates we should recognize certain masculinities as being hegemonic, she highlights that no particular form of masculinity is intrinsically *fixed* as hegemonic (or subordinate), but rather should be considered a form of relational identity and thus changeable in relation to cultural norms or contexts. Key to Connell's (ibid) discussion is how hegemonic masculinity exists in relation to patriarchal hierarchies of male dominance and female subordination; she argues that masculinities that 'protect' (or are assumed to protect) this hierarchy are hegemonic. The maintenance of particular hegemonic masculinities is therefore enacted through interactions with femininity and other forms of masculinity (ibid.; T. L. Taylor 2012).

The concept of relational masculinities and no fixed category of what is hegemonic is important to the case of Magic players (and others commonly labelled 'geeks'), because stereotypically they do not conform to a common image of hegemonic masculinity – often based around strength, competitive sports success and (hetero)sexuality (Redman and Mac an Ghaill 1996; T. L. Taylor 2012; Ward 2018). There is no one definition of geek, but they are often portrayed as being 'bookish' rather than sporty, with intense, niche, interests in media such as computer software, games, comics and films (Lane 2017; Massanari 2017; Salter and Blodgett 2017; Ward 2018). Whilst it is not the case that all geeks are male, 'geek culture' is predominantly masculine (and white) (Lockhart 2015; Salter and Blodgett 2017). As Massanari (2017, 332) puts it, "to discuss geek and nerd culture is to discuss masculinity – in particular, white male masculinity". She continues by highlighting how geek masculinity exists in relation to hegemonic masculinity, by rejecting some signifiers (sportiness, sexuality) but reifying others (knowledge and intellect), and valuing those over emotional intelligence or social interaction (Massanari 2017; see also Reagle 2016; T. L. Taylor 2012).

Whilst the term 'geek' was once a pejorative label, it has become more of a positive self-identification, partly echoing the growing importance of computers and smart technology expertise

in mainstream society (Salter and Blodgett 2017). It is clear that despite the marginality some geeks feel, their knowledge and expertise also represent a form of privilege (Mendick and Francis 2012). Nevertheless, for many geeks the idea that they could be seen as relatively privileged “may create a sense of cognitive dissonance for these individuals, who likely view themselves as perpetual outsiders” (Massanari 2017, 332). Arguably, their feeling of marginality, may well be related to the differences between geek masculinities and perceived hegemonic masculinity, shaped by school experiences in particular.⁵ The overlaps between geek-orientated communities and ‘the manosphere’ suggests that relative difficulty/ease of social interactions with women might also be a self-perceived distinction between the two (Massanari 2017; Salter and Blodgett 2017).

Examining ‘nerd/geek masculinity’, Lockhart (2015, 22) draws out the juxtaposition between a self (and exterior) perceived intellectual superiority existing alongside a feeling of unfairness that this superiority does not result in greater social or sexual success; she describes geek masculinity as “a discourse that grows from a perception of sexual and even economic alienation, but also affirms the positive (and often framed as superior) qualities of those who practice it”. Lockhart argues geek masculinity – whilst expressed differently – shares many similarities with stereotypical hegemonic masculinity, including the reification of knowledge, career success, heterosexuality, and male superiority over women; “nerd hegemonic masculinity is hegemonic masculinity with an inferiority complex” (Lockhart 2015, 140). As such, and particularly in her discussion of misogyny and transmisogyny in relation to #GamerGate, she makes a convincing case for why wider society should be concerned with the toxic elements of geek masculinity, and the angry (mostly white) young men who exhibit it (Lockhart 2015, after Nealon, 1998). The combination of a sense of victimisation combined with privilege has also been cited in discussions of masculinities in the alt-right (Boehme and Scott 2020).

Playing Magic: The Gathering, and its cultural significance

Magic was launched in the USA in 1993. It was initially envisioned as a quick-to-play portable game that would appeal to those who had time between rounds of Dungeons and Dragons at gaming conventions (Chalk 2017). It was the first-to-market of a now well-established sector of the tabletop games industry: trading card games. As well as the ‘paper’ game played face-to-face, there are online versions, *Magic Online* and *Arena*. The material component of Magic is constantly evolving as new ‘sets’ of cards are released multiple times a year, adding to the card pool available to players as they build their decks. The lore of the game positions the player as a ‘Planeswalker’, casting spells and engaging in battles whilst inhabiting fictional ‘planes’, inspired by science fiction, fantasy and ‘other’ (i.e. non-American) cultures.

Organized competitions, from tournaments at local games stores, and international ‘MagicFests’ (large official competitions that operate somewhat like Magic fan conventions), to the professional level, including the international ‘pro tour’, which has operated in various guises since 1996, are the focus of competitive players. From 2018, alongside the launch of *Arena*, WotC has reinvigorated Magic’s profile as an e-sport as well as a card game, and they created a Magic Pro League (MPL) of 24 players who receive an annual income alongside prize winnings. Nevertheless, WotC’s market research suggests most Magic games are played outside of formal competition settings (Wizards Play Network 2015).

Exact player numbers and company value are not in the public domain, but an estimated 35 million people play worldwide, as well as over 3 million users on *Arena*, predominantly in the USA, Japan and Europe, but also Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region (Forster 2019; Jarvis 2020). In 1999, Hasbro bought WotC for US\$325 million (Ewalt 2021), and more recently, an e-sports news

⁵ The vast majority of English-language literature on geek culture and geek masculinities is written about North American contexts where the high school tropes of ‘jock’ versus ‘geek’ have particular implications in terms of perceptions of youth development (Lane 2017), even if the separation is overstated (Muniowski 2018; T. L. Taylor 2012).

website estimated that Magic made Hasbro US\$500million between January and July 2019 (Forster 2019); it is not a small endeavour. Alongside the official WotC products and web resources, Magic has generated a huge variety of associated media, both official and unofficial, creating content in the form of articles, YouTube videos, Twitch streams, and podcasts, as well as a secondary market (on eBay and sites established specifically for buying and selling Magic cards) ranging from 1 cent to just over \$500,000 for a mint-condition *Alpha Black Lotus* – a card from the first set (Beer 2021). Alongside these media, there are countless Magic-specific Facebook groups, Discord servers and subreddits.

As with all ‘fandoms’, insider knowledge, in-jokes, and the distinction between a ‘newbie’ and expert, shapes interactions between players. Magic-related considerations such as what level of competition you play at, style of deck you prefer, format you play, and whether you ‘brew’ your own deck list or ‘net deck’ (use pre-existing lists shared online), all further influence interactions between players including the creation of sub-groups within the wider magic-playing community, implicitly creating (contested) hierarchies, which also relate to the prioritisation of knowledge and intellect that forms part of the expression of geek masculinities (Graham 2019; Lockhart 2015; Miltner 2014; Reagle 2016).

Part of Magic’s wider cultural significance that may not be immediately apparent, is its role in the development of the internet. Launching in 1993, Magic grew as a game and a gaming community alongside the shift from Usenet discussion boards (a precursor to web forums, based on the sharing of messages and files amongst a network) to ‘websites’ as we recognize them today, and Magic players were integral to that shift. The overlap between Magic players and early adopters of the internet for ‘home’ use was significant, and internet discussion boards provided an opportunity for geographically-dispersed players to find each other and discuss deck choice and strategy; such that in the mid-1990s Magic-related traffic on Usenet was third only to pornography and weather (Chalk 2017)! Some of the first html-based websites were developed in response to the limitations of Usenet for sharing Magic strategy and articles, and Chalk (ibid) makes a convincing case for the links between the needs of Magic-playing consumers and the development of a number of online ideas we now take for granted, such as eBay, bitcoin, and even Tinder. Magic is heavily intertwined with online culture, and its lengthy history and status in ‘geek culture’ means its influence goes beyond just current players, and overlaps and ties into the kind of online communities that see newer users as ‘newbies’ at best, and worse, as ‘interlopers or spoilers’ of the supposed freedoms of the early days of the internet (see Miltner 2014 for a similar discussion, related to memes).

The art of Magic

Another aspect of Magic’s cultural significance is its role in the evolution of ‘fantasy’ genre art. From the start, unlike contemporaneous fantasy games, WotC used *new* colour art works for each card, which in early years they bought from local artists (mainly students). Artists received limited art direction but the then WotC vice-president, Lisa Stevens, and art director Jesper Myrfors, did specify no female nudity and no “scantily clad maidens being rescued by beefcake barbarians” clichés (Chalk 2017, 43), which Chalk suggests demonstrates WotC’s hope that the game would be ‘female-friendly’. By the 2000s however, WotC saw a culture shift both in terms of the departure of key women employees like Stevens, and the decreasing use of women artists. Some see this as an effect of the commercialism Hasbro brought to WotC, alongside attempts to develop Magic as a competitive ‘mind sport’ with the development of the international pro tour, which in turn gave it a more ‘masculine’ image (Chalk 2017; Jameson and Roman 2016). By the mid-2000s whilst the WotC art style guide reminded artists of the no nudity rule, and said “feel free to paint beautiful women, as long as they’re shown kicking ass. No damsels in distress. No ridiculously exaggerated breasts”, it also said “Remember, your audience is BOYS 14 and up” (their emphasis) (Cavotta 2005). Regarding this, Matt Cavotta, creative lead at WotC, wrote,

“I hope this is not offensive to the female Magic fans out there. Mostly, this is just to give the artists a barometer on what the majority of their audience is like. [...] we are definitely

sensitive to women and how *they* may feel as players and how they are represented on cards.” (Cavotta 2005, my emphasis).

His wording implicitly implies the separation of the ‘we’ at WotC (the creators who emphasize the male audience) ‘to’ women.

The focus on an audience of ‘boys’ was reflected in the card art, particularly in relation to key narrative characters. In 2012, Mark Rosewater explained that planeswalkers were 2:1 male to female because “planeswalkers are designed as player analogues” and the game was predominantly played by men.⁶ He continued, “If the game ever got to a 50/50 male/female mix we’d have a 50/50 mix of male and female planeswalkers”. This is interesting because WotC *currently* say they have an explicit policy of having an even gender split in card art, which they credit with increasing the number of female players (Rosewater 2019b), illustrating how issues such as gender representation can be instrumentalized in relation to changing times.

WotC’s brand activism on gender diversity

In recent years, particularly since public discussions around #GamerGate, Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, WotC have made a concerted effort to (re)adjust their portrayal of gender, sexuality and ethnicity in the aesthetics and narratives of the game (e.g. in card-art, marketing visuals and storyline). This has been particularly apparent in relation to gender, where a design decision was made to have a roughly even split of men and women in card-art, as well as including some non-binary characters (Rosewater 2019b). Whilst this may in part be because of the politics of WotC personnel, they are also a commercial company, and decisions about aesthetic direction must be taken with commercial considerations in mind; for example, some suggest new expansions referencing non-American cultures are timed to attract new geographical audiences (Jameson and Roman 2016).⁷ An interpretation is that either they want to increase diversity because they are reflecting increasing diversity in their customer base, or they want to increase their customer base by appealing to a more diverse range of people – or most likely, a combination of both.

On the official Magic website, Mark Rosewater, addresses the issue indirectly whilst writing about ‘resonance’ in game design, which he describes as “when you build a game component on top of information the audience is already familiar with” (Rosewater 2019a). Rosewater suggests that in order to create a positive experience for the player you have to resonate with them by tapping into their emotions and creativity, and by creating familiarity between the in-game world and the real world by including elements that are evocative of the players lives (*ibid*). He goes on to say, “[this] is one of the reasons we’ve made such a push for diversity in Magic because when players see people like themselves in the game, it increases their ability to connect and bond” (*ibid*). This is a related – but reverse – reasoning to his 2012 comments about the gender split of planeswalkers as analogous to the player base (see above), suggesting a shift in attitudes towards a model of portraying diversity to encourage diversity, rather than portraying a level of diversity similar to the existing player base.

This makes good commercial sense in relation to attracting new players, which from Hasbro’s point of view may be more significant than representing those already committed, and points towards the potential changeability of brand activism, according to commercial priorities. Rosewater (2019) points out that learning a complex new game is a commitment of time and energy on the part of the player (customer), so it is up to game designers to ensure that those trying a new game have a positive experience and want to keep playing (*ibid*); and relatedly, to buy the associated product(s). In another article later the same year, Rosewater writes more explicitly about

⁶ <https://markrosewater.tumblr.com/post/21270120918/re-your-latest-answer-about-female-planeswalkers> (accessed 25/2/2021).

⁷ e.g. The set *Ravnica* having an Eastern European ‘flavour’, just as WotC started publishing cards in Russian, and *Kaladesh* referencing Indian aesthetics after Hasbro identified India as an emerging market for the company.

“why diversity matters in game design” (Rosewater 2019b). He reiterates the points about the player personally connecting and bonding with the game and highlights how that connection brings comfort too. He writes, “as a game designer, you want to make sure that every player has the potential to see themselves in your game”, and that seeing themselves in the game will increase “their ability to form emotional bonds which makes them more likely to start playing and more likely to keep playing” (ibid). Again, we can see the commercial sense in this approach.

What is particularly interesting about this “why diversity matters” article (Rosewater 2019b) is its structure. Rosewater makes a general comment about diversity in the leader, but in the main body of the text diversity, as it might be understood by a more general audience – in terms of social identity categorisations – is not mentioned until over 1,000 words in. Before that, Rosewater instead uses the analogy of designing the game for different types of Magic consumer (e.g. those who are more or less competitive, those who play different formats) as a rhetorical device to build the overall message that diversity is good for the game. He then uses a similar analogy-based technique to justify why although some people might be scared of change, it is actually good for the game; he does this by comparing increased diversity in the game aesthetics and player base to innovative developments in the design of the game itself (e.g. new in-game mechanics). The method of persuasion he uses suggests that he is fully aware that not all readers will be inherently in favour of increased diversity.

Next, I provide further examples of efforts made by WotC to promote visible gender diversity through art and language, and examples of community responses, some of which might explain the carefulness of Rosewater’s approach.

‘Spike, Tournament Grinder’

In 2017, WotC released a new card called *Spike, Tournament Grinder* (Figure 1). It was the third card produced representing the main player psychographic profiles: Timmy, Johnny and Spike. WotC use the profiles to represent the different types of Magic players: “Spike is the competitive player (...) to Spike, the thrill of Magic is the adrenaline rush of competition” (Rosewater 2013), whilst Johnny and Timmy are focussed on other aspects of the game. Significantly, the card art for this new card – the first visual representation of competitive ‘Spike’, showed a player coded as female.



Figure 1: The card art for *Spike, Tournament Grinder*, released 2017.

Spike not only symbolizes competitive-ness, but understanding the significance of the card mechanics and aesthetic, from the ‘nope’ t-shirt to the reference to the ‘banned and restricted’ list, requires a good deal of insider knowledge (Phillips 2018), a key component of geek masculinities.

The card was an immediate hit with competitive women players, some changed their social media avatars to *Spike*, and pro-player Emma Handy wore a ‘nope’ t-shirt on her Twitch stream. As a competitive player myself, local magic-playing friends shared the picture with me, and I even cut my hair like *Spike* for an international tournament I went to shortly afterwards. *Spike* also coincided with an obvious effort by WotC to increase the representation of women on competitive event coverage (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Melissa DeTora and Maria Bartholdi commentating at the Minneapolis Grand Prix, 2017. This was the first time I had seen two women ‘in the booth’ and it was very important to me as a competitive player to feel this representation.

Spike excited intense discussion, both positive and negative, in Magic’s online communities. The representation of agentic women in card art had been discussed before,⁸ but it was clear that *Spike* was particularly dissonant to some, particularly the use of a woman to represent the most competitive psychography. Commentors posted that, if so few competitive players were women, why was *Spike* female (see Phillips 2018; Stein 2017; for a discussion of how such comments can also be a form of ‘dog whistle’ recruitment to the alt-right). *Spike* continues to be a discussion point and is used as an ‘in-joke’ representing WotC’s ‘woke’ values on subreddits such as /r/FreeMagic (an ‘alternative’ subreddit created after commentor-bannings on mainstream Magic-community subreddits).

Changing pronouns

In 2018, the release notes for a new set included the following: “Magic has adopted ‘they’ as the preferred third-person-singular pronoun for a player, replacing ‘he or she’” (Shiffrin 2018, 7). Since 1994, Magic cards had used ‘he or she’, to specifically acknowledge the inclusion of female players,⁹ but by 2018, the term ‘they’ was seen as more inclusive of all genders, with WotC Developer Lee Sharpe tweeting, “...I’m really glad we are changing ‘he or she’ to ‘they’. Hopefully nonbinary players feel more welcome in the game”.¹⁰ This change was discussed widely amongst magic players. Some stated concerns that the changed wording might affect understandings of older cards, or were worried about grammatical correctness, whilst many welcomed the change. There were also those who were strongly against it, asserting that non-binary gender identity did not exist, or that WotC was enforcing unwanted political correctness on their players, as one response to Sharpe’s tweet

⁸ e.g. the proportion of female to male pirates in the *Ixalan* set, https://www.reddit.com/r/magicTCG/comments/6zsh8b/female_pirates_galore/ (accessed 25/2/2021).

⁹ See <https://markrosewater.tumblr.com/post/134345644573/i-know-youre-not-a-developer-but-this-is-a> (accessed 25/2/2021).

¹⁰ Lee Sharpe, Twitter post. March 9, 2018, 02:26 a.m. http://twitter.com/mtg_lee.

said, “Booo! This is a game, not a social justice platform”.¹¹ Sharpe commented that he had blocked many people in response to his tweet, sharing a screenshot of one of the people he blocked (Figure 3), whose wording shows how close the intersections are between these discussions and those seen in ‘the manosphere’ and the ‘alt-right’, as suggested by references to “getting laid” (i.e. the perception that ‘liberal’ men only express feminist ideas in order to attract women) and “[cultural] Marxist garbage”.¹²

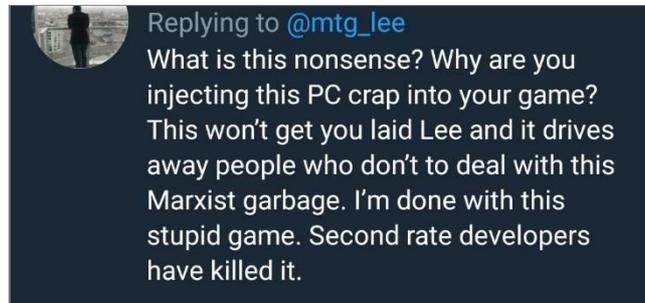


Figure 3: A screenshot of a reply to @mtg_lee regarding change of pronouns on Magic cards.

Women ‘taking up space’ and misogynistic responses

As a player and participant observer, what struck me about the response to *Spike* and the pronoun change was the sheer volume of comment. I was not surprised, however, as I had witnessed similar before; for example, when women are featured on tournament coverage. Because visible women players are such a minority, their presence can be ‘a spectacle’ in Magic-playing spaces, online and offline (see McKinnon-Crowley 2020). If their very presence is ‘spectacular’, it is not surprising that when Magic content-creators speak specifically to women’s experiences of Magic, they excite a disproportionate response. For example, Gaby Spartz published an article on the ChannelFireball website called, *6 things you can do to get more women into Magic* (Spartz 2015a), which quickly became the most-discussed article on the website (Spartz 2015b). I have seen similar reactions on other forums I have observed closely, such as *Magic: The Redditing* (/r/magicTCG) and the Facebook group, *UK & Ireland MTG Community & Trading Discussions*. Posts discussing issues such as women’s (or other minorities’) involvement in Magic typically excite 100s more responses than other posts. My own first Reddit post (about the use of ‘him’ to refer to gender-unknown online players) led to almost 600 responses, and was picked up by non-Magic Reddit (/r/subredditdrama), whereas I can count responses to other posts I have made (e.g. on Magic strategy) in the tens!

Being competitive – and thus, playing in public competitions – is stereotypically coded as ‘masculine’, and when the game in question requires in-depth knowledge as well as skill, fits the concept of ‘geek masculinities’ outlined earlier. As a woman Magic player, I find it extremely frustrating when commenters in Magic-playing communities explain the fewer women than men playing competitive Magic with variations of, “perhaps, on average, women have different goals than men when it comes to social spaces and competition”.¹³ Variations of this argument are often used to justify a refusal to accept that women magic players face significant sexism or misogyny in Magic spaces, as an obstacle to competing even when commenting in response to a woman player writing about how they have faced sexism in a Magic-playing spaces (e.g. Miller 2018). Whilst experimental studies do indicate women are less likely to want to enter competitions than men,

¹¹ D Hoi, Twitter post. March 9, 2018, 11:07 p.m. <http://twitter.com/mikk3333>.

¹² Amongst the alt-right, cultural Marxism refers to the theory that *inter alia* ‘the left’ are attempting to destroy Western values by pushing progressive politics on a supposedly unwilling majority. Calling someone a Cultural Marxist also exhibits underlying antisemitism (see Hermansson et al. 2020; Jones et al. 2020; Koulouris 2018 for further details).

¹³ A subreddit contributor discussing an article about microaggressions and sexism by Thea Miller (2018), https://www.reddit.com/r/magicTCG/comments/7vysji/death_by_a_thousand_paper_cuts/ (accessed 25/2/2021).

they also suggest that this is not through an inherent disinterest in competition, but more likely due to issues of self-confidence (Niederle and Vesterlund 2011).

My own Twitter efforts to counteract perceptions that women are less competitive (see Figure 4) resulted in responses from misogynist 'sock puppet' accounts who used the very argument I was trying to counter, as well as language that – again – seems straight from an alt-right playbook to accuse WotC (the 'corporate') of becoming "to PC" [sic] and to suggest that "Women should make their OWN card game and leave the White Males alone".¹⁴



Figure 4: Twitter responses from 'sock puppet' accounts to my own tweet about women doing well at a competitive event.

The premise that women do not want to play Magic competitively because they are not interested in being competitive is a 'strawman argument' that many women players have questioned. But when they do, they are often subject to accusations of not-knowing, and overstating their case, for example, "Is [sexism] severe enough that it warrants so much drum beating, chest thumping and article after article?"¹⁵ The perception that there is 'article after article' about women in Magic (or, indeed, too many women in Magic art) ties into wider discussions about the visibility of women, physically, and vocally, in public spaces and discussions. Experimental studies show that both men and women overestimate the degree to which women speak in mixed-gender settings (see Cutler and Scott 1990). Studies in courtrooms suggest that women legal professionals are more likely to be interrupted than men, even when factors like speaking length are controlled for (Feldman and Gill 2019); whilst studies of participants in academic seminars found women presenters were more likely to be asked more questions of a 'hostile' or 'patronising' nature (Dupas et al. 2021). These observations play out in my experiences of online Magic discussions too, and there are a certainly a sub-set of commenters suggesting political correctness (and by extension, women) are taking over Magic spaces. Although, ironically, those commenting on women-centric content also give it more visibility due to the way sites such as Reddit are shaped by algorithms pushing active discussions to the top of the page (see Massanari 2017).

Overestimations and criticisms of the amount of attention given to women by WotC, and hostile responses to successful competitive women (see Estephan 2018), are just some of the misogynistic 'policing' conducted to maintain male dominance of Magic spaces, particularly competitive spaces (after Manne 2017). Such actions could be seen as a 'backlash' against women's advancements in representation and competition (Faludi 1991); however, my observations are not fully captured by 'backlash', which implies a reactionary response. Whilst there may be a 'new' response to WotC's renewed brand activism around gender diversity, responses are also representative of, and shaped by, an *ongoing* systemic suppression embedded in modern society

¹⁴ Liliana of the Veil, Twitter post. November 21, 2017, 03:09 a.m. <http://twitter.com/@VeilLiliana>.

¹⁵ Another contributor on the subreddit thread about Thea Miller's article, https://www.reddit.com/r/magicTCG/comments/7vysji/death_by_a_thousand_paper_cuts/ (accessed 25/2/2021).

(Rowley 2019; Tyler 2020) that maintains the subordination of women to men, through misogyny (Manne 2017).

An important question is ‘why?’ Most Magic players do not perceive themselves as sexist (Miller 2018). Instead, a common response to accusations of poor treatment of women players is to blame players’ social awkwardness or lack of experience interacting with women, which plays into the image of ‘geeks’ as socially unsuccessful. That might explain some interpersonal interactions at tournaments, but it does not explain the strength of feeling represented by the volume of discussion raised by gender-related issues. And, it certainly does not explain the more extreme forms of misogyny experienced by prominent women players and content creators via trolling and other forms of harassment (see Estephan 2018).

Another possibility is that WotC’s increased representation of women has been picked up by those who perceive a ‘culture war’ taking place between socially-progressive liberals and the libertarian right, who have then stoked the flames of dissatisfaction by infiltrating and ‘trolling’ Magic-players’ discussions. The use of ‘sock puppet’ accounts and deliberately inflammatory posts do suggest this is part of the picture, as does the overlap between some people and online spaces in Magic-playing communities, and the ‘manosphere’, #GamerGate, and other alt-right networks. Indeed, the recent art direction of WotC has been picked up on by alt-right sites such as *Breitbart.com*, where they have tried to portray a ‘rational’ concern (see Jones et al. 2020) about ‘Social Justice Warriors’ who are trying to enforce ‘woke politics’: “like Gamergate, it concerns ordinary people who just want to be left alone to enjoy their hobby... playing games is not a left-wing thing or a right-wing thing but an everybody thing”, wrote Delingpole (2017) for *Breitbart.com*. The suggestion of an unwelcome intrusion of politics has been echoed by those who portray themselves as more liberal too, such as the YouTuber, ‘Boogie’, (Figure 5).



Figure 5: A tweet from Steven Williams (aka Boogie, a YouTuber with 4.25 million subscribers) in response to an ongoing debate about misogynistic bullying against Magic cosplayer Christine Sprankle in 2017.¹⁶ His involvement in the debate was significant as he is primarily associated with wider-reaching video games, rather than Magic.

Whilst for feminist social scientists it seems clear that without representation of diverse bodies, then “the community” will not be an “everybody thing”, that is perhaps less obvious for those not trained to examine their own privilege (especially if they themselves feel marginalized, as geeks). This observation is reinforced by the large number of commenters in online discussions about sexism who claim to have never witnessed sexism themselves whilst playing Magic. For them, brand activism on gender diversity is either an unnecessary distraction about a non-issue, or, more

¹⁶ Steven Williams, Twitter post. November 27, 2018, 01:08 a.m. <http://twitter.com/Boogie2988>.

worryingly, an unwelcome political invasion, into *their* leisure space. The implication that hobbies and politics should be kept separate might well seem rational to many players, and the presentation of supposedly rational arguments based on presumed intellect and knowledge has been instrumentalised both as an expression of hegemonic masculinities and geek masculinities (Jones et al. 2020; Reagle 2016).

Philosopher, Kate Manne (2017), posits that the policing of feminine incursions into masculine spaces is key to the logics of misogyny. Arguably, a combination of Manne's understanding of misogyny, combined with Connell's (2001) conception of hegemonic masculinities, whilst also acknowledging the notion of 'geek masculinities' (Lockhart 2015; Massanari 2017), can go some way to explaining the 'why' of the strength of feeling towards WotC's brand activism on gender diversity; especially when we consider the nature of Magic-players as a long-established 'manufactured subculture' (Dayan 1986), that has grown up alongside the internet.

Using Faludi's analysis of an all-male military college in South Carolina that was legally obliged to start admitting female cadets, Manne (2017) examines the question of male shame, and its role in reinforcing misogyny. After discussing the way in which feminine traits of giving, caring, and admiring are the 'goods and services' expected to be provided *by* women *to* men, Manne explains how female incursion into a previously all-male space disrupted this dynamic. The male cadets (and their superiors) were used to working free from a 'female gaze'; cadets did feminine-coded domestic work, they were made vulnerable by training and hazing, they comforted each other when needed, and they made ample use of derogatory sexist terminology – all of this had the potential to be appear shameful when seen through (their perception of) a women's viewpoint (Faludi 2019; Manne 2017). Women cadets observing potential weaknesses in their (previously) private masculinized space could remove the rationale for men to assume their position as receivers/takers of feminine admiration and care (Manne 2017).

Whilst military cadets might be an example of traditional hegemonic masculinity, a similar process could be taking place in Magic-playing spaces, with the additional consideration that these predominantly-male Magic players have created spaces, linguistically and materially, that reify aspects of geek hegemonic masculinity – the masculine-coded 'goods' of knowledge and expertise. If a woman enters that space to, literally or virtually, 'compete' for those 'goods', then according to Manne (2017), this can ferment misogynist aggression. This might be further complicated by Magic-players' previous experiences of marginalisation from other more-hegemonically masculine spaces. Responding to cases of bullying, pro player Brian Braun-Duin tweeted, "The Magic community is a haven for people who were bullied or excluded from other groups. How can we then turn around and harass or exclude other members of our community the same way many of us once were?"¹⁷ Whilst Braun-Duin maturely recognizes the risk of repeating previous abuse, not all victims of bullying have reached his point of security and confidence, or his position as a successful pro player, and may feel more threatened by 'newcomers', particularly those (women) who they fear may, literally, 'beat them at their own game' (after Manne 2017) upturning gendered hierarchies.

Conclusion

In recent years, WotC have employed brand activism to increase representation of gender diversity in Magic art, narrative and content creation; these activities may be read as both politically progressive, and commercial (trying to appeal to a wider audience of consumers). As Graham (2019) argues in relation to trolling, and Miltner (2014) in relation to memes, some of the community's negative responses to WotC's activities could be considered a form of 'boundary maintenance' between perceived 'newcomers' and 'insiders': a way of maintaining established hierarchies. This boundary maintenance, however, is highly gendered and can be misogynistic. I suggest that a combination of the perception that WotC are 'pushing' an unasked-for sociopolitical agenda, the

¹⁷ Brian Braun-Duin, Twitter post. November 25, 2017, 04:01 a.m. <http://twitter.com/BraunDuinIt>.

potential of newcomers (women) to compete for the masculine-coded 'goods' of knowledge and play-skill, and a fear of feeling 'shame' or 'embarrassment' in front of women, have led to some of the misogynistic responses I outline above (after Manne 2017). For Magic players, as a long-established male-dominated online and offline manufactured subculture, insider-knowledge and experience are reified as indicators of intra-community hierarchical position. I have suggested that these hierarchies suggest an expression of 'geek masculinities' (after Lockhart 2015; Massanari 2007) within the subculture. Responses to WotC's brand activism illustrate the risks of brand activism, especially when related changes threaten to disrupt the gendered community hierarchies of that brand's established market.

For many active in Magic, the opportunity to be part of a competitive community where play-skill and knowledge are respected (a 'geek masculinity') holds the promise of an alternative to stereotypical hegemonic masculinities that prize physical strength and social success. Having established spaces where their own attributes are recognized, changes to the social (and gendered) make-up of those spaces may be perceived as threatening by some Magic players. Certainly, not all community responses to WotC's actions have been negative, many – myself included – have welcomed the greater diversity, and say it adds to their love of the game, even whilst recognising that they still have work to do in this area to avoid diversity 'tokenism'. However, the sheer volume of Magic community discussion and reaction suggests there remains significant tension and uncertainty about this aspect of WotC's design and direction for Magic, and what it means for Magic players going forward. Whilst some tension relates to an understandable cynicism about the combination of commercial and political claims and interests, the visible overlaps, at least linguistically, between responses from a minority of Magic players and texts from 'the manosphere', and other alt-right networks, is a serious cause for concern.

What is also particularly upsetting in an immediate sense, however, for women (and other minority) players, is what negative responses to WotC's brand activism on gender diversity reveal about the underlying structures that shape their opportunities to exist and thrive in this predominantly masculine space. Assumptions about women not wanting to be competitive, the refusal to acknowledge sexism unless directly witnessed, the perception that agentic women are disproportionately visible, are all indicators of underlying assumptions about gendered interests and norms, and who has the right to be active in which spaces. As Manne (2017) and other feminist theorists make abundantly clear, those who attempt to push the boundaries of gendered spaces, and especially those who try to 'compete' with men for space, are often subject to increased risk of misogynistic vitriol and even violence.

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