‘Oh you’re really good for a girl’: Sexism, Stereotypes & Subcultural Capital in Board Gaming Culture

Introduction

In May 2023, responding to a Twitter thread regarding the lack of women board game designers, Ryan Dancey, Chief Operating Officer of major board game publisher AEG, offered what he believed was a simple explanation (Carter, 2023). Women, he suggested, tend to pitch certain types of games (party games or those having a political theme) while avoiding others (war games or games about “giant fighting robots”). Women’s designs also tended to be underdeveloped, perhaps a result, Dancey theorised, of women being "socialized in the West to avoid situations where they're subjected to fairly harsh criticism”. His comments came in response to Elizabeth Hargrave, designer of the multi-million selling board game Wingspan, who highlighted that only five women compared to 103 men had been nominated for the prestigious *Spiel des Jahres* award since 1999. The ensuing backlash led to a swift apology from Dancey who promised to better support underrepresented designers. This incident highlighted some of the deeper questions about gender dynamics within tabletop hobby board gaming, the persistence of stereotypes around women's capabilities and interests, and how women's participation in male-dominated leisure spaces continues to be restricted through subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) mechanisms of exclusion. As an activity that has surged in popularity over recent years, tabletop hobby board games serve as an important site for understanding gender (in)equality and shifting subcultural politics.

Tabletop hobby board games (from hereon simply referred to as board games) are those games not aimed at the mass-market but instead at those with more specialist interests, sometimes called hobby gamers (Woods, 2012). Although there is no agreed upon definition of these ‘modern/designer’ board

games, Sousa and Bernardo (2019: 77) describe them as “commercial products, created in the last five decades, with an identifiable author or authors, with original mechanics design and theme, with high quality components, created for a specific public”. The board games industry has seen dramatic growth and interest over recent decades (Konieczny, 2019; Sousa & Bernardo, 2019) and the importance of understanding and addressing gender inequality in this space is therefore significant. Indeed, it is estimated that the global board game market will be worth just under 40 billion US dollars by 2028 (Arizton Advisory and Intelligence, 2022). As board gaming becomes increasingly mainstream, understanding and addressing gender inequalities becomes crucial not only for social justice but also for the industry's continued growth and development.

The increasing popularity of board gaming has been accelerated by several cultural shifts. The COVID-19 pandemic may have encouraged more people into gaming (both digital and analogue) as a way to connect with others and de-stress during lockdowns and social-distancing (Kriz, 2020) while social media and digital platforms have played a significant role in democratising access to knowledge and awareness of board games (Barbier, 2001), including the digitisation of previously analogue games (Coward-Gibbs, 2021). In many ways board games have now ‘gone mainstream’, being available in high street shops and made much more accessible through the proliferation of board game cafes and in-person meet-up groups facilitated through online communities (Barbosa, 2021; Harrington, 2023; Scoats & Maloney, 2024).

Board game culture now encompasses not just the physical and digital spaces where people gather to play and discuss games—such as in person or online gaming groups, meetups, conventions, specialist shops, online forums, and social media communities—but also the values, practices, and social norms that develop around engagement with board games (e.g. the creation and sharing of fan-made content, or the widespread criticisms around AI generated art within games). Yet despite this mainstreaming and growth, research into research into the socio-cultural aspects of board gaming is severely lacking (Booth, 2018). Recent work by Scoats and Maloney (2024) found that while board game spaces and culture can be intimidating to women owing to their associations with masculinity, they can simultaneously be welcoming and inclusive.

Studying board games as a leisure practice offers significant sociological value beyond just understanding specific subcultures. Tabletop gaming occupies a unique position in contemporary leisure research—it represents a significant 'post-digital' resurgence of analogue social interaction in an increasingly digital world (Cramer, 2015), carving out distinctive spaces where people gather specifically to engage in structured play and socialise face-to-face. As Oldenburg (1999) theorises, such spaces can function as vital "third places"—locations separate from home and work where community connections develop, social capital can be enhanced, and traditional hierarchies are often temporarily suspended or reconfigured. Board gaming spaces—whether dedicated cafés, conventions, or regular meetups—embody many characteristics of these important social environments (Konieczny, 2019). Furthermore, leisure practices are never merely recreational but are sites where social hierarchies, cultural values, and group boundaries are constructed, maintained, or challenged. Understanding how traditionally niche leisure activities evolve as they become more mainstream can provide valuable insights into broader processes of cultural change—particularly regarding how historically exclusionary practices might become more inclusive over time or, conversely, how existing inequalities might be reproduced in new forms.

Building on Scoats & Maloney's (2024) research, the current article draws from the same data set of 43 interviews with women who play board games to focus on the micro-sociological, specifically how and when women are treated differently within board game spaces and interactions. Through this focus we explore the extent to which women are subject to sexism, exclusion, and stereotyping, as has been documented in other areas of gaming and geek culture, as well as more broadly across western society. Examining the gender dynamics within this hobby space can provide valuable insight into how marginalised groups negotiate historically masculinised cultural domains (Miller, 2014).

Similar to other geek cultures, we find women encountering sexism and sexist stereotypes in some of their board game interactions, most commonly conveyed in the assumptions which construct them as a particular 'type' of 'lower-status' and less competent gamer. Although some men would attempt to dismiss or contest interactions that challenged these sexist assumptions, others readily revised their attitudes and behaviours when it became apparent that their assumptions had been wrong. These

displays of board game subcultural capital were recognised by some women as helping them legitimise their place in the community (to themselves and others) as well as a necessary strategy for resisting assumptions made of them. Finally, it was not unusual for sexist encounters to be reframed as individuals with poor social skills rather than intentional prejudice. On other occasions, participants framed their sexist encounters (and strategies for dealing with said encounters) as no different to wider societal experiences, suggesting that their experiences were not a result of board game culture per se, but wider societal sexism. Accordingly, this research provides important insight into how women navigate and make sense of sexism within an increasingly mainstream but historically masculinised cultural space, illuminating both the persistent mechanisms of gender inequality and the potential for cultural change as board gaming culture continues to evolve and expand.

The gendered ownership of geek and gaming cultures

While there is relatively scant research on the gendered dynamics of board gaming (key exceptions are discussed in the following subsection) a substantial body of knowledge exists making sense of these dynamics in the wider 'geek' culture – that is, "the identities, cultures, and communities of certain media fandoms (especially science-fiction and fantasy ones) [and] forms of gaming" (Scoats & Maloney, 2024) – of which board gaming is an increasingly popular part. Underpinning these analyses, the 'geek masculinity' framework provides a way of understanding how geek and gaming cultures are policed by cisgender heterosexual (cishetero) boys and men who claim ownership over a range of related spaces, and at the expense of others' enjoyment and feelings of inclusion. According to Massanari (2015: 129):

> Geek masculinity therefore privileges the white, able-bodied, young straight cisgendered male over the woman of colour, for example, or the homosexual older man, or the disabled trans woman. This is not to say that these individuals are not active in geek culture but that they remain marginalized, relegated to its fringes, and frequently silenced.

The notion of geek masculinity – and how it acts as a powerful normative ideal in geek and gaming cultures – is, in turn, informed by Connell's longstanding and foundational hegemonic masculinity

framework (1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005): “the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations” (Connell, 1995: 76). In this geek cultural setting, cishetero boys and men who eschew “stereotypically masculine interests in favour of technology and gaming” (Braithwaite, 2016: 3), and who therefore might themselves be marginalised in other settings by failing to achieve wider normative masculine ideals, become ‘hegemonic’ and determine the inclusionary/exclusionary ‘rules of play’ for others. While these men may not embody the traditional normative masculine ideals (such as physical dominance or athletic success) that grant status in broader society, they establish within geek and gaming spaces alternative hierarchies where technical knowledge, gaming prowess, and mastery of complex rule systems become the dominant markers of status and masculinity. This creates a cultural milieu in which men who may be marginalized in mainstream contexts for their failure to meet conventional masculine norms can become “hegemonic” within gaming spaces, exercising power over others—particularly women—through their command of geek-related cultural capital. In their monograph, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, Salter and Blodgett (2017) provide the broadest and most exhaustive account how cishetero (and predominately white) boys and men have asserted dominance in geek cultural spaces and communities, and how notions of an ‘authentic’ geek identity are bound up in entrenched gender inequalities. Here, they argue that geek masculinity is “an inevitable evolution of hegemonic masculinity in a culture where dominance and technical mastery are increasingly interwoven” (Salter and Blodgett, 2017: 47). Furthermore, the centrality in geek and gaming cultures of technical mastery as masculine coded – including the ability to demonstrate knowledge of, for example, gameplay systems and/or the ‘lore’ of geek fictional universes – serves as a mechanism for the “continual rejection and negative framing of femininity” (Salter & Blodgett, 2017: vi). Exemplified by the #GamerGate harassment campaign of 2014-15, this subordination and marginalisation of girls and women in geek and gaming cultures extends into acts of vitriolic sexism and misogyny – in online forums, for example – by the cishetero boys and men who continue to govern these spaces (Salter & Blodgett, 2017: 92).

Salter and Blodgett’s (2017) broader portrait of the ways in which geek masculinity serves to subordinate and marginalise girls and women is supported by a range of more narrowly focused

scholarship, particularly in respect to video gaming cultures and communities. To give some key examples, Ratan et al.'s (2015: 456) study of popular multiplayer strategy video game, League of Legends, describes a male-centred culture in which women players are made to feel less competent than their male counterparts, and often pressured into playing feminine-coded 'support' roles "that, though requiring no less competence than other in-game roles (and arguably more), [are] nonetheless seen by many players as subordinate… and less desirable." Austin's (2022: 1116) study of first-person shooters found the very same phenomenon at work:

> Perceived infringement on an overwhelmingly masculine space pushes women to the margins of online team-based games, where gender norms inform the presumption that they play supportive roles that are viewed as passive and unskilled rather than actively contributing to team objectives.

Echoing this, Kelly et al.'s (2023) innovative study of gendered perceptions of gaming competence found that, when shown otherwise identical footage of gameplay reedited to feature either a man or woman providing voice over, participants were markedly less likely to assign high levels of competency to the latter.

Towards the more vitriolic and violent end of the spectrum – and supported by a range of other similarly focused scholarship (e.g. Ballard & Welch, 2017; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Gray, 2012) – Fox and Tang's (2017: 1290) large survey of female gamers' experiences of online multiplayer gaming settings uncovered the high frequency with which they are subject to "general harassment and sexual harassment" during play. Beyond providing important confirmation of the hostile gendered environments many female gamers are forced to confront when engaging with their chosen recreational pursuit, Fox and Tang (2017) also shed crucial light on the coping strategies they employ to continue participating – including self-blame, denial, avoidance, and gender masking – with some others ultimately making the difficult decision to withdraw altogether. Similarly, Thornham's (2008: 137) in-depth interviews with female gamers illuminates the ways in which they navigate this subordinated positioning through a "gendered public/private narrative" in which they seek to

minimise their negative experiences and express reluctance to ascribe them to wider sexism and misogyny in the culture.

Thus, there is significant evidence which highlights how men, and certain displays of masculinity, frequently dominate geek and gaming spaces, and these displays serve to marginalise women within these spaces. Despite arguments that geek and gamer culture is a 'contested' space where male gamers and geek masculinity itself are shifting towards more inclusive and socially progressive positionings (Bourdreau, 2022; Maloney et al., 2019), the research highlights a long and varied exclusion of women from these cultures, even if this may be slowly changing.

Subcultural capital & gatekeeping within hobby board gaming

Given the minimal research regarding gendered exclusion and hobby board gaming cultures, we cannot conclude that women are necessarily excluded in the same way—through the construction of masculinised geek hierarchies which marginalise women—as they are in other parts of geek or gaming culture. Despite this lack of research, the concept of subcultural capital highlights how hierarchies and exclusion very much still operate within the arena of board games culture, and that these hierarchies tend to be arranged along gendered lines (although not exclusively).

Drawing from Bourdieu's (1984) work on cultural capital, Thornton's (1995) subcultural capital refers to the "objects, practices, and beliefs that subculturalists use to distinguish themselves from outsiders and to demonstrate authenticity to insiders" (Haenfler, 2014: 91). Although hobby board gamers do not necessarily represent a subculture in many respects (Haenfler, 2014), the notion of subcultural capital is still an important tool for understanding gatekeeping and hierarchy within the community.

Looking to how subcultural capital can manifest, Thornton (1995) describes it in terms of both objectified and embodied forms. With a specific focus on the rave scene of the 1990s she states:

> Just as books and paintings display cultural capital in the family home, so subcultural capital is objectified in the form of fashionable haircuts and well-assembled record collections (full

> of well-chosen, limited edition ‘white label’ twelve-inches and the like). Just as cultural capital is personified in ‘good’ manners and urbane conversation, so subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being ‘in the know’

We see similar displays objectified and embodied forms of subcultural capital within board game cultures. For example, the board gamers’ ‘shelfies’ –images of board game collections shared collections with the wider community (Rogerson et al., 2016). are reminiscent of “well-assembled record collections” Thornton highlights. Likewise, in some collectible strategy games scenes (in this example, MtG and Mageknight) Williams (2006) shows how ownership of rare and exclusive cards and figures, and the sharing of gaming resources with newer players were both ways through which participants could boost their status. We also see embodied subcultural capital when board game players attempt to establish their credentials though discussions around games and wider geek culture (Konieczny, 2019), or when certain individuals are seen as “authoritative sources of information and opinion” (Woo, 2012: 669). Barbier (2021) too suggests that teaching games to others can add to one’s social standing through its demonstration of knowledge.

In many ways, subcultural capital operates as a mechanism through which boundaries and belonging are maintained and established (Haenfler, 2014). Returning to Thornton’s (1995) discussion of club cultures, she describes: “the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn’t.” (Thornton, 1995: 164). In this sense, belonging and acceptance to a group depends on how well one is able internalise and embody its norms and values, and distance themselves from the perceived ‘other’. As Konieczny (2019) highlights, it is common for tabletop gamers to criticize and distance themselves from mainstream, mass-market games such as Monopoly, as they are considered as being low quality, having few meaningful decisions to be made, and give a misleading portrayal of their hobby. Similarly, Barbier (2018) discusses the notion of bad players—those who maybe play too slowly or are ungracious winners/losers—who others then subsequently try to avoid.

Despite the opportunity that subcultural capital theoretically provides for anyone to attain status and acceptance, the boundaries of subcultural capital are still often established and policed along gendered

lines (Tramell, 2023) with authentic cultures and participation associated with men (Thornton, 1995) and particular performances of geek masculinity. Men are thus frequently seen as naturally belonging whereas women need to work harder to prove their legitimacy (Correa-Chávez et al., 2024) and accepted participation may require an active rejection of femininity in favour of masculinised ways interacting with the culture (Lumsden, 2010).

Given the masculinised history of hobbyist board games culture and the restricted access women have had to these spaces (Trammel, 2023), it is perhaps unsurprising that many of the cultural norms which have developed within board games spaces may serve to exclude women and promote particular versions of masculinity. For example, men and masculinity as the default can be seen in the games themselves, where men tend to feature more on the boxes of games (Pobuda, 2018) and the use of male pronouns in rulebooks is the norm (Jones & Pobuda, 2020). Booth (2021: 174) also identifies a variety of behaviours that can exclude women and restrict their participation:

> The microaggressions, gendered assumptions, paternal attitudes, casual sexism at a gaming table, throwaway homophobic remarks, and mansplaining…all add up to an environment that can sometimes be implicitly or explicitly hostile or alienating to players that don't fit the 'traditional' [male] mold. (Booth, 2021: 174)

Indeed, some literature suggests that women must capitulate to preestablished, masculinsed notions of 'gaming taste' or ways of playing or risk never being taken seriously (Pobuda, 2022). Women may also fear that aligning with stereotypes around female gamers, such as being less competent or (dis)liking certain types of games, can lead to a pressure to perform or an inclination to adopt the dominant norms of the culture, thus discouraging women from engaging agentically (Davis 2013).

To speak of a unified and singular experience, set of attitudes, or culture within board games is, however, an oversimplification (Scoats & Maloney, 2024). For example, more serious hobby gamers—those engaged deeply with the not just playing the games but many other related activities—and will engage differently to those who simply play the games (Rogerson & Gibbs, 2018). Technological advances now also mean that access to board game knowledge (e.g. understanding rule

sets) and the privilege this socialisation can afford no longer necessarily relies on in-person gatekeepers, has been democratised through the rise of more professionalised means such as online game tutorials or how-to-play videos (Barbier, 2021). The rise of board game cafes and public meetup groups also point to a divergence and diversity of board game cultures developing (Barbosa, 2021; Harrington, 2023) and as Trammel (2023: 159) argues, as the hobby has evolved, we have seen "an older generation of apolitical game hobbyists against a newer generation of geeks interested in shifting the unjust power dynamics of the past".

Numerous studies have explored how women experience masculinised, male dominated (sub)cultures but relatively few touch upon women's experiences within board games. It is unclear to what extent women experience sexism, exclusion, and stereotypes that hinder their participation and prevent them from being fully active members, as has been demonstrated in other fields. As Scoats and Maloney's (2024) research on women's perceptions of board game culture shows, women often perceive it as a male domain where they face numerous barriers to entry. The current article focuses on how women are treated within board game culture at a time when board game culture appears to be diversifying.

Methods

Sampling and procedure

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling leveraging the first author's personal network, recruitment posters in board game shops and cafes across England, digital recruitment posters in online board game groups and shared on social media platforms such as Facebook and (formerly) Twitter. Participants were invited to take part if they were 'a woman who has an interest in modern/designer board games[1] , or you view it as a hobby, or you consider yourself a board gamer'.

[1] The following description regarding modern board games was provided: 'These are not your more traditional mass market games (e.g. Monopoly, Game of life, Cluedo etc.) but those games that are associated with hobby board gaming (e.g. Pandemic, Catan, Azul, Gloomhaven, Dune Imperium, Tapestry, Barenpark, Sheriff of Nottingham etc.). Obviously there is some cross-over been mass market games and modern/designer/hobby board games but if you aren't sure if you'd be right for this research, feel free to get in touch'.

Although no participants were excluded, the description was written with the intent of generating a sample who could speak to their experience of hobby board game culture rather than occasional or incidental players who might not be aware or engage with the broader cultural elements and activities associated with board gaming.

Study information was provided via a webpage which included a lay summary of the study as well as participant information documentation and consent form. It was explained that the study wanted:

> To understand and explore the experiences, perspectives, and attitudes of women within modern tabletop (specifically board game) culture. Within board game culture, women are often in the minority, and this project thus aims to explore how they navigate and experience this predominantly male space.

A total of 43 semi-structured interviews were conducted in-person and online. Interviews lasted between 30 and 80 minutes and no incentives were offered for taking part. Ethical approval for this study was attained through *anonymised for review*.

Participants

The mean age of participants was 38.9 years (SD = 9.6). Participants were predominantly White (76.8%; including White, White British, White other), and more than half identified as heterosexual (58.1%). Most interviews were with women from the U.K., U.S.A., and Canada. This study draws upon the same sample as described in *blinded for review* published article. Accordingly, further demographic information for the participants can be found in the appendices of this aforementioned, open-access article. In the results section, all names and identifying information have been changed and participant details are provided after each quotation including: pseudonym (if not already mentioned in the text), age, and race/ethnicity.

It is important to acknowledge that while our sample offers valuable insights into women's experiences of sexism in board gaming culture, it cannot capture the full spectrum of sexism in these spaces. Despite some diversity in age and sexual orientation among participants, the predominantly White sample (76.8%) means our findings primarily reflect experiences of gender-based

discrimination and do not capture how sexism intersects with other forms of marginalisation such as racism, ableism, or transphobia. The experiences documented here should therefore be understood as capturing a specific, gendered dimension of exclusion and stereotyping, rather than the complex intersectional discrimination that might occur in board gaming communities. Specifically, our data primarily captures gender-based differential treatment manifesting as: assumptions about women's gaming preferences and competence; exclusion from certain gaming activities; positioning women as accessories rather than legitimate participants; and resistance to women demonstrating expertise that challenges gender stereotypes. Furthermore, the data may also demonstrate a 'survivorship bias' where where the voices of those with the most negative experiences are absent are they are no longer a part of these communities.

Analysis

The study employed reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021), an approach that offers flexibility in examining and interpreting participants' lived experiences (Clarke & Braun, 2006). The research team began by thoroughly immersing themselves in the data, developing an initial set of codes. These codes were subsequently refined through collaborative discussion, considering both explicit (semantic) and implicit (latent) meanings within the data. Preliminary themes were then formulated (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and iteratively revised until the researchers reached a consensus that the themes accurately captured the "patterns of shared meaning" (Braun & Clarke, 2019: 592) prevalent across the data.

As suggested by Braun and Clarke (2019: 595): "Assumptions and positionings are always part of qualitative research. Reflexive practice is vital to understand and unpack these". Accordingly, both authors recognise the potential influence and impact of our positioning as cisgender men conducting research on women's experiences. Indeed, during the participant recruitment stages some commenters on publicly posted calls for participants suggested that women would be reluctant to speak to men about their negative experiences, and the research would be better carried out by women. Putting

aside issues surrounding the additional burden of academic labour that would befall women if they were deemed the only ones suitable to investigate 'issues facing women', we believe that our positioning as (partial) outsiders bring valuable additional perspectives and constructions of knowledge.

All of the data collection and participant recruitment was conducted by the first author, a man with approximately 10 years' experience with hobby board games and their communities. The principal investigator thus shared both insider status with his knowledge and experience of board games but outsider status as a man researching women's experiences. As Mercer (2007: 7) suggests, "the more we conceive of [insider/outsider status] as points on a continuum, the more we are likely to value them both, recognising their potential strengths and weaknesses, in all manner of contexts" Accordingly, the authors reject the idea that only individuals from the studied group can generate understanding (Bridges, 2017; Merton, 1972), but instead acknowledge that the analysis and interpretations they bring may provide alternative insights (Bridges, 2017).

While recognising that there is no one 'truth' to be found in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), the authors recognize that their own subject positions may have shaped the knowledge constructed (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Despite the inevitable influence of the researcher on the research process, both authors engaged in discussions on personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual reflexivity with the aim of mitigating the impact of their prior experiences and biases on the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). For instance, they selected broader, open-ended questions and actively encouraged participants throughout the process to focus on what they felt was important.

Results

The 'female gamer' position

Although neither universal nor constant across different environments and groups they interacted with, many in the sample highlighted experiences of sexism in board game spaces. Sexism operated to

position women (at least initially) as possessing lower status in the subculture i.e. they were perceived as lacking in knowledge, experience, and deeper levels of interest. For example, women were often presumed to have particular interests—namely lighter games or those games with more 'feminised' themes; be less capable competitively; and were less likely to be seen as engaged participants in their own right. These expectations around women positioned them as less 'serious' gamers and helped situate them as outsiders.

Being characterised as preferring particular types of games, Elle described past interactions with exhibitors at large gaming conventions: "They'll direct the cutesy games at you…And if you go past more heavy euros they'll speak to the lads first" (31, White British). Verity and Aubrey described similar experiences at a game shops:

> But I felt slightly patronized by the guy who works there…it wasn't the case of 'Hi, how familiar are you with board games', when offering some help. I think he showed me the very basic level ones, the very well-known ones. And remember thinking, I know more than that. So that was a slight flare up of rage, mildly pissed me off. (Verity, 35, White British).

> Somebody who worked in the store came over and was telling me how difficult the game was and maybe trying to direct me towards something completely different. And I'm like, 'No, this is the weight game I'm looking at' (Aubrey, 41, White).

Whilst some participants did actually prefer lighter games—"There's a sort of stereotype (which in my case is true), that women like the lighter games" (Maya, 34, British Indian)—reliance on this stereotype meant that women were excluded from some tables:

> My partner and I have made jokes in the past about the 'big boys' games. You'd have a group of guys—it's always men—who have set up their table, and they're playing their kind of hardcore games there. And it's very, very rare that women would be included in that. (Quinn, 48, Mixed Race)

In addition to being symbolically (and sometimes literally) excluded from 'hardcore' games—those games deemed more complex and requiring a more significant investment in both time and mental

effort to play (sometimes also referred in terms of ‘weight’, e.g. light(weight) vs heavy(weight) games)—these sorts of games were often constructed as ‘superior’ to other games, thus relegating women (and their presumed interests) to a lower status within the board game subcultural hierarchy. Echoing Konieczny’s (2019) arguments around how distinctions between ‘hardcore’ and ‘mainstream’ serve to reproduce (in this case, gendered) subcultural hierarchies and insider/outsider status, Maya explained how she was reluctant to suggest what would be perceived as lighter games and had had her opinions diminished by some ‘serious’ gamers:

> When I’m around serious gamers, I feel like I can't suggest like Lords of Waterdeep because it's too lightweight. Or sometimes when I suggest games it can get quite dismissive, 'Oh, no, that's not that good a game'…I do wonder if it's a bit of ‘this game’s not macho enough, don't bother with this’. (34, British Indian)

Board Game Geek (BGG), a popular board game website and forum-based community which has a feature allowing for user scoring and an overall ranking for games, was a way through which certain types of games were constructed as ‘objectively better’ than others:

> BBG rankings, the top 10 games were all basically the same games that ranked in the top 10 list of heaviest strategy games. And it really seemed like people were getting some feeling of superiority for playing these really hard games… something that I found frustrating getting into the hobby is there's really like, tiers of like, superiority of like gatekeeping around games (Rose, 30, White)

Further intensifying the capacities of men to assert dominance over women in this particular subcultural setting, this type of gatekeeping was brought up by many participants as evidence that men were far more invested than women in competing for social position: “I definitely see the men in gaming as far more aggressive and far more gatekeeping than women are” (Stella, 27, White); “I feel like you get geeky bros, who try and like one up each other” (Clara, 41, White).

Alongside women’s supposed lack of interest in heavier games, their presumed lack of experience and knowledge meant they were often assumed to be novices compared to men: “There's comments about,

‘Oh, you're really good for girl’... it's just patronizing” (Quinn, 48, Mixed Race). Women would thus sometimes receive unsolicited advice, or what some participants described as ‘mansplaining’:

> We played Power Grid, which I've never played before. And this guy kept offering me unsolicited advice and talking to me like I was an idiot. And just to be contrary I did the exact opposite of what he told me. And then I beat him. Then the second time we played, he did the exact same thing. (Sofia, 35, White British)

> Sometimes I might get some mansplaining done to me. Just, ‘Oh no, you don't want to do that because strategically it doesn't make sense’. And I'm like, ‘I understand the strategic bit. But actually, from a different angle, it makes more sense’. So that happens sometimes, explaining the rules to me when I've been playing that game for three years and I understand very well what I'm doing. (Ruby, 27, White Other)

Consistent with the expectation of less knowledge and that women necessarily need help, it was often anticipated that women would not perform well. Furthermore, in what amounts to active policing of gender inequalities in this subcultural space, if women *did* do well, and won, some men would respond negatively: “I find that some of the guys really get agitated when I win” (Aisha, 53, Indian). Kylie also described how in some contexts her inclusion was conditional on her aligning with expectations around her diminished gaming abilities:

> If we're meeting for the first time, and it's a table full of primarily men, walking over to the table typically results in a lot of positivity at first, there's a lot of, ‘Oh, you’re a girl and you're gonna play that's awesome. Do you need help learning how to play?’ stuff like that. But then usually, once we get going, there's seems to be this weird, almost cognitive dissonance in the first half of most games, where I'm very polite, but also very upfront with stuff. And the longer the game goes on, if I'm doing well, the meaner people get. I've not really had this experience with most women. (35, White)

Similarly, Jade described a “natural order”, where women’s social position around the board game table did not include competence:

> If it's like a cooperative game and I do badly, I'm expected to do badly by certain members of my team. So the natural order is still there. Likewise, if I do well, I am not expected to do well, and therefore I must be cheating or something's gone wrong. I was with a group of men that had played quite a lot and their attitude was just bring the newbie in and she won't do very well—that was the expectation. And when I won.... they stopped just short of like overturning the board. It was like, 'how did you do that'? It was then picked apart—I must have cheated (39, White Other)

Further highlighting women's presumed position within board game culture, they were often treated as inherently less involved or interested in games culture. For example, some described being specifically introduced as someone else's partner: "I've had a man introduce me to other people when I was with my husband he said, 'Oh, this is Josh, this is Josh's wife'. Like I don't have a name. Like I'm not a person, I am property." (Sofia, 35, White British). Violet (64, White British) described a similar situation where a man she was with was explaining their board game scene to others: "And you'll find it's a nice place where we do have you know, mixed gender and people have been bringing their wives and girlfriends since we started". Being a long-standing member of the community however, Violet quickly challenged and subverted his comment: "Julie and I just looked at each other and said 'Yeah, some of us have been bringing our husbands and boyfriends as well'.".

Others spoke about their male partners would often receive better treatment than they would. For examples, within board game shops: "my partner will be on one side of the store getting a completely different experience than what I'm getting" (Aubrey, 41, White); or board game groups:

> So there was one point I was going to this group every single week for about six months. And nobody talked to me outside of who I was with. But my male presenting partner, oh, made friends, got invited to do this, got invited to do that… (Lucy, 46, White)

Highlighting the pervasiveness of these attitudes, Florence described watching a pre-convention live-stream event hosted by three men:

> They were doing this kind of two hours of kind of bro-dom. You know, lots of in-jokes and they did loads of interviews. And everybody interviewed was male and they had a bunch of callers and they were incredibly chatty with these guys. 'You're coming to the convention, what are you going to do?' Et cetera, and there was one female caller. And the first thing they said to her was, 'Hey, what are you doing today? You looking after your kids?' Like, what the fuck? (49, Jewish)

In summary, while experiences of sexism in board game spaces varied across different environments, it functioned to subordinate women's status in the eyes of some men. This operated in various ways: from the devaluing of female-coded 'light' games and related pressures to exhibit preferences for allegedly more 'hardcore' ones, to sexist assumptions around participants' capacities, and outright hostility to their instances of gaming success.

Becoming an equal

Despite the ever-present spectre of sexism within board game spaces, women were frequently able to challenge stereotypes they encountered and establish themselves as equals within these spaces. An active demonstration of board game subcultural capital, in the form of demonstrating niche interests or knowledge, or being good at games could aid women in breaking away from assumptions made about them. For example, demonstrations of board game knowledge could bolster a personal sense of belonging:

> So I walked into a boardgame café and went, 'Have you got furnace? I want to play Furnace' and the boardgame Cafe guy says, 'Never heard of it'. And it's kind of like, I know one game that you don't know! So you know, there's this shift, where you suddenly start to feel like actually, I'm not in an unfamiliar environment. And I do know this environment. So I walk in there with more confidence and more assertiveness. (Piper, 58, White British)

Echoing findings from the previous section in which gendered hierarchies of taste and knowledge are subtly but actively reproduced by men in gaming spaces, others highlighted how demonstrations of their knowledge could dramatically alter how male gamers responded to them. Mary described her

experience of going into a board game shop where she was initially met with stereotypes around her interests. However, once the staff member recognised Mary's more specialised interests the interaction changed:

> [The male board game shop assistant] was trying to point me towards Azul and fun games and I was actually in there to buy a Zombicide expansion. And they were like, 'Oh you know about Zombicide?' and I could feel that shift in conversation where once he knew that I knew what I was talking about it he definitely wanted to make me feel welcomed, but he'd made that assumption of you're a woman so you're probably interested in these really pretty tile-laying games (29, White British)

Some participants recognised that they actively needed to demonstrate their board game capital way to quickly diffuse assumptions made of them. As these assumptions usually came from men, Olivia acknowledged that there was more of a need to demonstrate her board game capital to other men rather than women:

> I would say it's rare for me to go into a shop or board game cafe where there are female staff, so maybe there's a little bit more the need to kind of prove I know what I'm talking about. Make sure that they calibrate their responses based on what I like (38, White Other)

Similarly, and evidencing the ways in which board game spaces require women (as women) to actively engage in strategies on entry that signal their insider status and right to belong, Ivy described how bringing specific games with her to public groups helped to silently convey her experienced position to men: "when I was going to the board game nights the games that I pick to take with us are almost like, here are the credentials, these are proper games. It kind of stops a lot of the bullshit" (38, White British). For others, their status was legitimised through other people's recommendations: "I've been introduced by my group of people, they've gone, 'Oh, Elle, she likes this game, she's really good, you won't be able to beat her" (31, White British). Without such recommendations, however, Elle suggested that it was much less common for women to be invited to join with others they didn't know.

In contrast to previously discussed finding that women who did well at games had their victories challenged and diminished, sometimes being good at games helped them to establish reputation and be welcomed by others:

> [Going to a board game group] was a good experience all round other than this kind of weird, we're not going to invite a girl to play, not at first. And then you start climbing like, alright I can pick up this game quite quickly. And that seemed to earn a degree of respect, that they weren't kind of having to dumb it down or slow the game down for me, that I could pick it up quite quickly (Ivy, 38, White British)

Elle described a similar situation where her demonstrated prowess with games was seen as a positive: "I pick up games really fast, and I tend to win. So after that, I got a reputation of always winning. So people always invited me just because of a challenge now" (31, White British).

Quinn, who previously spoke about the exclusionary practices around "big boys' games", described her acceptance from some board gamers based on her ability as bittersweet:

> The guy running the event was asking for a game of Brass Birmingham, and I said, 'I'd like to join because I like Brass Birmingham'. And I absolutely smashed it. And he didn't do very well. And then since then, he kind of changed his attitude to me, and now I'm allowed to be part of the big boys' games, which I don't know how I feel about it. Because a bit of me enjoys playing those games, and a bit of me wants to shrug it off and go, 'Well, you know what, you can go off and play your games', but also a bit of me wants to be part of it and show that actually I can do this as well as anybody can. So he's changed from somebody who was kind of excluding me to somebody who really who is actively seeking out playing games with me now (48, Mixed Race)

In conclusion, despite encountering sexist assumptions, demonstrations of board game subcultural capital could help some women to challenge and reposition themselves as equals.

Reframing sexism

Although clear that some had experienced what may be interpreted as sexism, many participants were reluctant to frame their encounters through this lens or view board game culture as any different to wider society. For some, sexist behaviours were instead recast as awkward social interactions that reflected individuals' introversion, poor social skills, or perhaps neurodiversity: "I think sometimes, you can find a lot of introverts playing board games. So it doesn't necessarily mean then that they've got the social skills to converse and say, 'Hey, how you doing?'" (Nina, 49, White British). Similarly, Jess said:

> In some board gaming cultures, people, me included, will gravitate to board games because it provides a social context for the interaction. They might not be the kind of people who are naturally outgoing or inclined to think about inclusivity in the moment, or have language for that (35, Mixed-Race)

Excessive, awkward, and uncomfortable behaviours were thus characterised as an individual failing rather than cultural problem, stemming from a small minority rather than being reflective of the overall culture. Rose's (30, White) account captures the complex way in which participants sometimes tread a line between individualising bad behaviours, while also acknowledging the failure of (male-dominated) gaming groups to adequately protect women in these spaces:

> There's often a guy in the room that everyone knows is a problem, and they don't deal with it. So like, there's one guy who, no matter what woman shows up, his eyes are following her or he's getting up to talk to her, even if she's visibly uncomfortable. And even if it's just like, it doesn't have to be anything, like aggressive or overly sexual, but if he doesn't know boundaries and can't take the hint to leave her alone. And everyone else is just like, oh, that's just Joe and he's just like that

Highlighting the difficulty in determining the intent behind people's actions, Angela (37, Chinese) said: "I feel like people have a tendency to read a lot into other people's behaviour, we assume people's actions mean things, which might not necessarily be true". This difficulty was vividly demonstrated in a situation Sofia described:

> I was playing with some people including a man in his probably late 50s, and he would have a rules query. I would answer him and he would just ignore me wouldn't make eye contact with me. It was like he couldn't hear women. After we finished playing the game, I had to say to my friend, 'Did that actually happen'? (35, White British)

Later on, more information came to light which shifted her reading of the situation:

> I found out through third party reports that the man is diagnosed as autistic, so that probably had something to do with it. I do think that there is probably quite high incidence of autism in board and community from what I've known. A handful of my friends who play board games have an autism diagnosis.

Likewise, Ruby explained that although she had experienced sexism behaviour from men, she didn't necessarily read it as intentional:

> As horrible as it sounds, in those of cases [of being treated differently] I've tried to go in and talk to them, and they will just be awkward about it. And if I'm with a male friend, and we're both talking, there'll be speaking to the guy, answering to the guy. So I think there's some sexism there that they don't realize, I don't think they mean to kind of create that society, but I think it's what they're used to (27, White Other)

In addition to attributing sexism to poor social skills rather than being intentional, others interpreted their experiences of sexism as simply part of "being a woman":

> I think there's the odd person that judges whatever game I've got in my hand. But I think that's just life as a woman. In any space where you have anything in your hand somebody has to make a comment and judge you on it (Ivy, 38, White British)

Accordingly, it made sense to adopt the same sort of strategies around board game tables that they did in their wider life:

> I think as a woman I feel the need to, if I'm not going to be patronised in life, to be a bit scary. And that's something I've adopted for years in certain situations. And people do kind of know not to cross me, because as a woman, people would just try it (Joan, 20, White British)

> There were a couple of people who like, 'oh we'll come and be your friend', like, 'oh you're a female, who is single now and vulnerable'. But nothing bad happened but for whatever reason, there was a vibe with them that made me feel more cautious than with other people. But again, they didn't they didn't actually do anything. This is all part of being a woman isn't it, like you carry your keys in your hand when you walk down a dark Street (Clara, 41, White)

One specific strategy that a number of participants highlighted was leveraging the sexist assumptions made of them into an advantage:

> A friend of mine had a 13-year-old daughter who was really very bright. And she used to play the little girl card in games, 'Oh, can you help me please? I don't think I can work this one out. Was I supposed to put that there? Oh, look, I've won!' Because everybody just assumed that being a little girl, she probably wouldn't know what she was doing. So she played the I-don't-know-what-I'm-doing card. And won almost every game that she was in because she learned how to completely twist all the adults and especially all the men around her little finger. And I think that there are still quite a few women who can get away with that. There is an assumption that that maybe we don't necessarily know what we're doing. I know quite a few women now who will play the room if they see that kind of thing coming up. So we have our own ways of handling situations sometimes. (Violet, 64, White British)

A notable element of Violet's example is the young age at which she suggests her friend's daughter had not just learnt to recognise sexist stereotypes but was capable enough to convert them into tools which gave her power within gaming scenarios. It also indicates that this teenage girl has already started to internalise what many of the adult women indicated to be lifelong strategies to navigating society as a woman.

Thus, it was clear that some women framed negative experiences as stemming from individual men's poor social skills or a normal part of women's lives rather than necessarily view board games culture as having a sexism problem. Furthermore, while some participants were conscious of the failure of board game groups to call out instances of sexism and misogyny from individual men, they also appeared reluctant to ascribe collective responsibility for such policing and instead chose to acquiesce to the status quo in the interests of maintaining peace.

Discussion

Through 43 semi-structured interviews with women who play hobby board games, this paper explores the gender dynamics of this culture and community. In previous research it has been shown how women often find board games culture/spaces to be intimidating owing to the perceived maleness of these spaces. Simultaneously, these barriers are being diminished and challenged through the presence of other women in board game spaces and the emergence of more inclusive gaming cultures. While Scoats & Maloney (2024) focus on overall perceptions of board game culture, the current paper focuses on women's experiences of being treated differently. Three core themes were explored in the data. First, when women were treated differently, it often stemmed from sexist stereotypes which positioned them as a particular type of gamer, one with generally inferior status to men. In contrast, the second theme highlighted how women's demonstrations of board game subcultural capital could elevate their individual gendered status, putting them on an equal footing in the eyes of some men, and thereby enhancing their personal feelings of belonging. In the final theme, we explore how experiences of sexism and sexist behaviour were often either minimised as isolated instances of bad behaviour from individual male gamers, or interpreted as inevitable "that's just life" expressions of wider gender inequalities.

The women in our study represented a moderately diverse set of social positions and life experiences, ranging from young professionals to retirees, parents to single adults. Many balanced their board

gaming hobby with demanding careers, family responsibilities, and other commitments—contexts that shaped both their ability to participate in gaming spaces and their interpretations of gendered interactions within them. Their experiences in board gaming often reflected and reinforced broader patterns of gender inequality they encountered elsewhere in their lives; often small, yet impactful and ever-present instances of sexism and misogyny.

Looking to the first theme, the stereotype of women being interested in particular themes or types of games, being less 'committed' or engaged compared to men, and being less capable, positioned women as inherently lower within some board gaming hierarchies. This mirrors writing on women within video game culture where femininity is associated with casual gaming: "feminized casual gamers are depicted as less intelligent, less informed, and less important than their masculine hardcore counterparts" (Vanderhoef, 2013: 14).

Sexist assumptions of women's interest, involvement, and experience can lead to tangible experiences of exclusion and differential treatment. In our findings, this manifested in a range of ways, including: not being invited to play particular games, being subject to patronising comments, and being seen as a 'plus one' to other 'real' gamers. Gatekeeping via a reliance on gendered stereotypes contributes to women's exclusion from this community as women felt they had to actively challenge stereotypes – and expend additional emotional and cultural labour – to be taken seriously and participate equally. Even then, it was clear that some men would actively resist challenges to the 'female gamer position' and what Jade described as the "natural [gender] order" of the hobby. For the types of men, women were expected to need additional help and support, and evidence to the contrary could be met with aggression and/or accusations of cheating. Although not a universal experience, these instances highlight how some men may never grant women the same status as men in board game spaces. We might interpret these men as defending a traditional gender order and their hegemonic status over women (Connell, 1995), particularly if these men have embraced geeky spaces as a place to build status; being unable to do so in other social realms. Regardless of what they did, women's demonstrations of the kinds of skills, aptitude and knowledge linked to subcultural status in the community were never accepted by some men.

Nonetheless, participants were able to disrupt the male hegemony of the subculture and achieve elevated status in the eyes of many other men in the community. Through their embodied and objectified displays of subcultural capital – such as exemplary demonstrations of skill during gameplay, knowledge of the more arcane (and male-coded) games and genres (Woo, 2012), and through their ownership of extensive collections (Rogerson,etal.,2016) – participants effectively challenged the longstanding sexist assumptions that govern this geek subculture, recasting women as potentially no less interested in 'hardcore' games than their male counterparts. That some women were able to find acceptance through such demonstrations of subcultural capital certainly represents a positive shift, evidencing greater openness on the part of some male gamers towards the inclusion of women in their hobby. However, these interactions still operate within a gendered hierarchy in which women are burdened by a greater imperative to 'prove' their bona fides. Furthermore, in participants' accounts of achieving acceptance in this male dominated subcultural arena, there are subtle strains of "benevolent sexism" in play, whereby women are "deserving [of] men's protection and admiration, as long as they conform" (Bareket & Fiske, 2023: 637) to the established male-coded frameworks of the given culture (or subculture).

Indeed, that which participants described as affording them subcultural capital was still generally masculine-coded. Certain type of games—namely bigger, longer, and more complex games—are often constructed as superior (Trammell, 2023). The elevation of these sorts of games reflects historical patterns in gendered leisure, with men generally having more uninterrupted leisure time to play such games (Mattingly & Blanchi, 2003; Trammell, 2023). It also reflects established gendered patterns found within video game culture: "feminized casual games are positioned as inferior to hardcore games, existing in their shadow" (Vanderhoef, 2013: 6). Women who do not align themselves with masculinised game tastes and ways of 'doing' board games may consequently find themselves unable to fully integrate or attain equal status within certain board game communities. Furthermore, attempts to reject these established standards may simply reinforce established stereotypes about women's interests.

Additionally, although women may be able to establish their status through the accumulation of board game subcultural capital, to do so necessarily requires them to engage with board games in a certain manner—one that requires significant additional time investment. Given historic gendered patterns around leisure, with men tending to have more leisure time and more uninterrupted leisure (Mattingly & Blanchi, 2003; Trammell, 2023), women may have less capacity to attain status not specifically because they are women, but because of persistent patriarchal structures which lead to the unequal levels of leisure time. Thus, although not necessarily always a direct source of their exclusion (or lower status), wider cultural factors and subtle structural inequalities related to gender create a platform of underlying inequality which create barriers to women attaining status and equal acceptance.

In respect to the third theme, participants were generally reluctant to view the sexism they experienced as being linked in any way to board games culture itself – despite our stated interest in both the positives and negatives of their experience – and instead sought to understand (and minimise) such patterned experiences as either unintentional missteps on the part of the more peculiarly 'geeky' men in their community, or simply the inevitable expression of wider and entrenched gender inequalities. Regarding the perceived lack of intention, participants often drew on non-gendered ways of explaining and excusing the sexist attitudes and practices they encountered. Perceiving ambiguity in intentions of men engaging in sexist behaviour (Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997) or giving men the benefit of the doubt – in other words, assuming they were not intending to be sexist – enables women to minimise the negative impact of discrimination and make sense of any differential treatment in a way that preserves their psychological wellbeing (Nappier et al., 2020; Ruggiero & Taylor, 1997). For example, not viewing behaviour as having malicious intent can reduce the sting of a particular comment or the rejection of not being invited to play. Here, a lack of intention was often framed through the lens of many board gamers being introverted, lacking social skills, or perhaps being neurodiverse thus recasting their behaviours as something they maybe 'couldn't help' or that 'wasn't their fault'. We could also view this framing as a way for women to avoid accusations of

unreasonableness or oversensitivity they can be subject to for calling out instances of sexism and misogyny (Calder-Dawe & Gavey, 2016; Kaiser & Miller, 2001).

As stated, sexist behaviours were also minimised as inevitable, and *inescapable*, reflections of entrenched gender inequalities in wider society. This speaks to the substantial body of scholarship on "everyday sexism" and how non-violent and other more "subtle manifestations of sexism often pass unacknowledged and become internalised and thus perceived as 'natural' conduct" (Joyce et al. 2021: 502). Findings here served as an important reminder of the much wider biographical context that the women involved in this study brought into this shared project.

These findings contribute to ongoing debates about the pace and nature of social change within gaming and geek cultures. While some scholars argue that toxic gaming cultures are being increasingly challenged (Boudreau, 2022) and that geek masculinity itself is shifting toward more inclusive forms (Maloney et al., 2019), our research reveals a more complex picture. Women's experiences in board gaming suggest that while overt exclusion may be diminishing, gender hierarchies are being reproduced through more subtle mechanisms—from the valorisation of established, and historically masculinised styles of play, to forms of 'benevolent sexism' that make acceptance conditional on conforming to masculine gaming norms. This highlights how social change in leisure spaces can involve the transformation rather than elimination of inequalities, and alternate forms of hierarchy may emerge alongside more progressive developments.

As this article demonstrates, board game culture, and women's differential treatment therein, sits within an intriguing nexus of traditionally gendered gaming dynamics, subcultural capital, and broader societal norms. The persistence of gendered stereotypes and the complex negotiations of status within gaming spaces mirror larger sociological debates about gender in leisure and gaming contexts. Yet, board gaming culture also presents opportunities for challenging these norms. The ability of women to leverage subcultural capital to gain acceptance highlights the evolving nature of this previously male dominated hobby space, even if these challenges may ultimately help re-confirm established hierarchies around the cultural value of hardcore vs casual games. Even here, however, women's ascension through the ranks of board game culture requires the signalling of one's

preference for ‘hardcore’ over ‘light’ experiences that itself reproduces other key dimensions of the gendered subcultural hierarchy. Alongside these dynamics, women’s tendency to reframe sexist encounters as either individual failings or inevitable reflections of wider societal norms may function as an important survival strategy in these spaces; but one which normalises and reinforces the everyday sexism they need to navigate. This reframing serves as both a protective shield and an unintended reinforcement of the status quo, highlighting how women’s strategies for persisting in male-dominated spaces can paradoxically contribute to the normalisation of their marginalisation. Of note, it is important to recognise that the sample does not necessarily reflect varied forms of intersectional discrimination which may further marginalise women within these spaces. Nor do we necessarily hear the voices of those who may have self-selected out of the hobby owing to sexism or marginalisation.

As geek culture continues to become more mainstream and board gaming grows in popularity, it will serve as an important site through which to examine how traditionally male-dominated leisure activities have the potential become more inclusive, while also remaining sites in which social inequalities are reproduced, albeit perhaps more subtly. Indeed, much like wider society, social change is never uniform or even fully coherent, and the future always carries with it remnants of the past, repackaged and given new life. The tensions between established hierarchies and emerging, more diverse gaming cultures offer rich opportunities for future research into the transformation of gendered leisure spaces and the persistence of systemic sexism. Ultimately, understanding the experiences of women in board gaming not only furthers our knowledge of this particular hobbyist culture but also contribute to our understanding of how gender shapes and is shaped by our recreation and leisure.

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