

Season 1, Episode 14: D&D and Ludology

## SPEAKERS

Marcelle Kosman, Hannah McGregor

**[Material Girls Theme plays: “Shopping Mall” by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]**

Hannah McGregor 0:30

Hello, and welcome to Material Girls, a pop culture podcast that uses critical theory to understand the zeitgeist. I'm Hannah McGregor.

Marcelle Kosman 0:39

And I'm Marcelle Kosman. Hannah, what the heck are we talking about today? I have been distracted lately.

Hannah McGregor 0:47

You know what, the world's been distracting. But speaking of distraction, we're talking about something real fun today. We are talking about games. And we're talking about one game in particular. But let's warm up by talking about games in general, because Marcelle, I know that you're a real game player, if you know what I mean.

Marcelle Kosman 1:07

I'm not sure I do.

Hannah McGregor 1:08

You like playing board games, and party games and stuff.

Marcelle Kosman 1:12

I love games. I chalk it up to being an only child. I grew up wanting to play games. And— sorry, we got real sad real quick.

Hannah McGregor 1:23

But instead, sitting alone in a darkened room. [Marcelle laughs]

Marcelle Kosman 1:29

Until relatively recently, there weren't a lot of good two-player games, or if there were, they weren't readily accessible. Board game cafes are pretty new; specialty board game stores are—not really new, but in my small town where I grew up, we didn't have any. And so if it wasn't a game that we just knew about because my family had played it for eons, like Monopoly, or

Sorry, or Scattergories, whatever. Like, those are not good two-player games.

Hannah McGregor 2:05

No. They're not great games at all. [Marcelle gasps] Like the games when we were—Sorry, sorry, Monopoly. I think it's a really boring game.

Marcelle Kosman 2:13

Scattergories is a phenomenal game.

Hannah McGregor 2:15

Scattergories is pretty good.

Marcelle Kosman 2:16

That is not—we're not allowed to play it in my partner's household because of a fight.

Hannah McGregor 2:21

Between?

Marcelle Kosman 2:22

Between said partner and his brother. [Marcelle laughs]

Hannah McGregor 2:29

And that is the good part about growing up as an only child. [Marcelle laughs] Okay, so yeah, when we were kids, I feel like it was just like Chutes and Ladders and Jenga, and not much else. I also feel like board games have gotten a lot better—

Marcelle Kosman 2:46

Definitely.

Hannah McGregor 2:47

—in the past decade. Do you have any real standout faves? What's your favourite kind of game?

Marcelle Kosman 2:52

Okay, so there's this really beautiful, thoughtful game called Photosynthesis. The mechanic is very simple; we can play it with our kid. And it's just about growing trees. I swear to God, Hannah the first time I played it, I've never been so stressed out about anything in my entire life. [Hannah laughs] Like, I was sweating. I was so stressed about what order to plant the acorns so

that the trees would grow and maximize access to the sunlight. So that, apparently—

Hannah McGregor 3:23

You're like, "This so much responsibility!"

Marcelle Kosman 3:25

I know. That is apparently not the kind of game that I enjoy playing. I think I really like playing games that involve a board that you traverse with little pieces. I really like little pieces. [Hannah laughs] I like to have little pieces to move around the board. I like tile games. I like the different variations of Carcassonne or—there's a game you may have heard of, it's called Settlers of Catan—

Hannah McGregor 3:52

I don't know her.

Marcelle Kosman 3:53

I really liked the original. I'm not a huge fan of all of the many, many, many expansions.

Hannah McGregor 3:59

One time—everyone, this is not a story for Marcelle because she was there, this is a story for the rest of you—one time, we were on vacation in Banff. [Marcelle laughs] And we were playing a game of Settlers of Catan and an important thing to know about Marcelle is that she is unbelievably competitive. You wouldn't think because she's so—

Marcelle Kosman 4:22

But only in the game. I don't carry it. I don't take it with me at all. I'm just a real bitch in the game.

Hannah McGregor 4:29

Yeah, and she was losing to our friend Steve.

Marcelle Kosman 4:33

I always fucking lose to Steve and I hate it.

Hannah McGregor 4:36

And Steve made a move in the game that really fucked Marcelle over. And Marcelle screeched at such a high pitch that it woke our friend Todd, who

was sleeping on the couch, and Todd jerked up and kicked over a can of soda that was on the table beside the couch, and the open can of soda fell into my backpack.

Marcelle Kosman 5:04

And just poured out in Hannah's backpack. [Hannah laughs]

Hannah McGregor 5:06

That might be the funniest thing that's ever happened. Don't play Settlers of Catan with Marcelle if you value your eardrums.

Marcelle Kosman 5:14

I would say don't play Settlers of Catan with Steve because he's a bastard. [Hannah laughs]

[Upbeat musical interlude plays]

Marcelle Kosman 5:25

Enough playing around, we're gonna get serious. We're going to talk about Why This, Why Now? It's not a game.

Hannah McGregor 5:31

It's a serious business.

Marcelle Kosman 5:32

We are going to identify the historical, ideological, and material conditions that allowed our object of study, Dungeons and Dragons, to become the zeitgeisty.

Hannah McGregor 5:43

Marcelle. First, thank you so much for indulging me in making what I anticipate will be the first of many episodes about Dungeons and Dragons. So get ready.

Marcelle Kosman 5:53

You're welcome.

Hannah McGregor 5:55

So I was feeling a little stressed about this episode, because there's so much to cover. And it's a world that I'm pretty immersed in. So I was like, "How could I even scratch the surface?" And then I decided, let's just scratch the surface. Let's just make this 101-level. Like, you don't know

anything about D&D, and you're kind of like, “Hey, why are people talking about it more now than they used to?” We're really just gonna start there.

Marcelle Kosman 6:21

That's such a good idea.

Hannah McGregor 6:23

Yeah. So if you're a deep a deep D&D fan, just come with me for the theory, and for my madcap hypothesis, but don't expect me to say anything truly revelatory in *this* episode. [Marcelle laughs] You'll have to wait for the subsequent ones. For now, we are going to travel back in time to 1974. Barbra Streisand's burning up the Billboards.

Marcelle Kosman 6:46

Oh, my goodness.

Hannah McGregor 6:47

You know she had the top song of the year, “The Way We Were,” from the movie.

Marcelle Kosman 6:51

Oh, I didn't know.

Hannah McGregor 6:52

It's the year the President Nixon resigned from office in the wake of the Watergate scandal.

Marcelle Kosman 6:56

Ah, now that was a good time.

Hannah McGregor 6:57

And both of those things are less important than the other thing that happened, which is that two nerds, Dave Arneson, and the spectacularly-named Gary Gygax, best name in human history, created a brand new kind of game. So the very first version of Dungeons and Dragons was based on an already established genre of wargames. So can you picture, say in Game of Thrones, when everybody's standing around those troop maps, and they've got those little figurines and they push them around?

Marcelle Kosman 7:29

It's Risk, right? I mean, it's—I know it's not literally Risk.

Hannah McGregor 7:34

Risk is another—is a board game adaptation of war games. It's significantly simpler than war games, because war games have different kinds of troops that have different tactics and can move in different ways. But yeah, it's basically that idea: you're controlling troops and trying to win a war. The really important innovation that Arneson and Gygax came up with was the idea that individual players, instead of role playing as a whole army or a whole nation, would roleplay as individual characters.

Marcelle Kosman 8:12

That is revolutionary.

Hannah McGregor 8:14

Yeah. And then instead of clashing on a battlefield, they were like, “Cool. It's going to be a party of adventurers who are getting together to fight monsters and find treasure.” So, you're going on an adventure and you're role playing as the one adventurer rather than, you know, all of these troops.

Marcelle Kosman 8:33

And, surely, dragons.

Hannah McGregor 8:37

Yeah, for sure. [Laughs]

Marcelle Kosman 8:38

Am I jumping? Am I getting ahead? [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor 8:41

For sure. It's right there. Dungeons, so in the original version, you're doing a lot of exploring dungeons; and dragons, you would fight dragons. Yeah, and monsters in general. So at its most pared-down version, you can picture D&D as a group of heroes with different abilities exploring a dungeon, fighting monsters, finding treasure, with the aid of someone called a dungeon master.

Marcelle Kosman 9:04

Ooh, kinky.

Hannah McGregor 9:06

[Laughs] Yeah, yeah.

Marcelle Kosman 9:07

Nerds fuck.

Hannah McGregor 9:09

Nerds famously fuck. [Marcelle laughs] So that, though, the Dungeon Master, that's another key difference that D&D introduced. The idea that there's someone who's running the game, who's not inhabiting the role of a single character. But as one of my favorite D&D podcast puts it, they're playing everyone and everything else. So they're the ones who, like, they know the dungeon map. So they know where everything is, and there's hidden doors and what the answers to the riddles are. And they control the monsters and they play any other characters you come across, which are known as NPCs.

Marcelle Kosman 9:46

Ah! Non-player characters, I know that.

Hannah McGregor 9:47

Non-player characters, exactly. And all of the—we're familiar with a lot of this terminology from video games now.

Marcelle Kosman 9:53

That's right.

Hannah McGregor 9:54

But the genre of RPG video games came from D&D.

Marcelle Kosman 9:58

Can I ask a quick clarifying question?

Hannah McGregor 10:00

Yeah.

Marcelle Kosman 10:01

So we have a Dungeon Master, and you've been referring to exploring the dungeon, and it is literally only just occurring to me right now that the dungeon is literal. That's the literal setting. That's the literal setting. It's a dungeon.

Hannah McGregor 10:13

Yeah. And in a lot of early versions, the idea is that you arrive in a dungeon that's full of traps and monsters and treasure, and then you just do what's referred to as a dungeon crawl. The game now is significantly more expansive, but the traditional version is like, we're fighting monsters in a dungeon.

Marcelle Kosman 10:33

Okay.

Hannah McGregor 10:34

We're fighting dragons in the dungeon. We're in a dungeon and there's dragons.

Marcelle Kosman 10:37

Okay, okay. Well, I mean, this sounds very straightforward. A nice game of make-believe amongst friends.

Hannah McGregor 10:44

Yeah, yeah. I mean, it is and it isn't. The basic idea of playing make-believe with friends? Very straightforward. But the history of D&D, kind of complicated, and we could tell it in a variety of different ways. But one really key development has been the evolving rulesets of the different editions. So, Marcelle, do you know what edition of D&D we are on right now?

Marcelle Kosman 11:07

Noooo. Can I take a guess?

Hannah McGregor 11:10

Yep.

Marcelle Kosman 11:12

Seventy...[trails off] [Hannah laughs]

Hannah McGregor 11:16

No, it's five.

Marcelle Kosman 11:17

We're on five. So it's not like one per year.

Hannah McGregor 11:21

No. It's also hasn't been 70 years since 1974. But that's fine.

Marcelle Kosman 11:24



You know what? Sometimes math is not straightforward.

Hannah McGregor 11:29

Nobody's here for math. And you know what else is not straightforward is the editions history of Dungeons and Dragons, luckily for us. So that first edition was published in 1974 by Tactical Studies Rules, or TSR, which is the really terrible name that Gygax gave to the publishing company that he created to publish D&D, because nobody else would publish it. So yeah, it was functionally self-published. In 1977, they split it into two versions. So they created Basic D&D, which was supposed to be a bit more rules-light and accessible to new players; and Advanced D&D, which was known as AD&D, which should not be confused with ADD, which I literally did once when I was working at Chapters. A teen boy came up and asked me for books about AD&D, and I was like, "Oh, in the mental health section." And he was like, "What?" [Marcelle laughs] Yeah, so AD&D was way more complicated.

Marcelle Kosman 12:36

Okay. So as somebody who's only played some very light, introductory, not dungeon-y tabletop RPGs, talk to me about why people would want a more complicated version. What's the get?

Hannah McGregor 12:54

Yeah, I think I think it's a really good question. I think we can compare it to the satisfaction of playing these fairly new, elaborate European-style board games, like Settlers of Catan, or Betrayal at House on the Hill. Think about the experience of playing one of those versus playing Sushi Go.

Marcelle Kosman 13:13

Okay.

Hannah McGregor 13:13

Right.

Marcelle Kosman 13:14

Yeah.

Hannah McGregor 13:14

Rules are part of the worldbuilding that games do, and more complex games with more rules can also feel more engaging and immersive. It's just that they have a really significant barrier to entry because of the learning curve.

Marcelle Kosman 13:30

Right. So you might want to play a very straightforward game like Sushi Go with a group of friends when you also want to be having conversations at the same time. But you can't really have conversations when you are trying to decide whether or not it is ethically or morally sound to put in roadblocks for the areas of the world that cannot be cured by—sorry, Pandemic Legacy, no spoilers, it's a very good game.

Hannah McGregor 13:57

Or rather, the conversations that you have while you're playing Pandemic Legacy are about playing Pandemic Legacy, because you all need to be fully immersed and involved in the game together in order to play it. And there's a great deal of pleasure at being involved and immersed in a complex task with a group of friends. That's why people like escape rooms.

Marcelle Kosman 14:19

Okay. I have another quick question, but if it comes up later, we can talk about it later. How much does wanting to act, like, acting come into it? You're role playing, so you're performing a role, you take on a character and stuff.

Hannah McGregor 14:34

It's such a good question. And we are actually going to get more into the question of gameplay versus storytelling a little later on, because that is one of the really key conversations happening around D&D: is it a game and the point is to try to win, or is it a mechanism for collaborative storytelling?

Marcelle Kosman 14:55

Okay, very cool. Great.

Hannah McGregor 14:57

So let's go back briefly to editions. So new editions of D&D have continued to be this ongoing negotiation between accessibility and complexity. So drawing in new players on the one hand, and then catering to the tastes of established fans on the other hand. And of course, complexity can have a gatekeeping function. So the harder a game is to learn and play, the more exclusive it can be. You might rely on somebody else to teach you how to play it and for certain iterations of nerd culture, exclusivity is a big part of the appeal.

Marcelle Kosman 15:33

Mm hmm.

Hannah McGregor 15:35

So, you can think of D&D in the 80s and 90s as an extension of the paradigmatic comic book store; like, a niche cultural space defined by its hostility to outsiders and by the dominance of a kind of counter-hegemonic white masculinity that is not conventional, culturally celebrated masculinity, but it's still hostile to women and people of color. You know, comic book, guys.

Marcelle Kosman 16:04

I know, I know, the Simpsons' Comic Book Guy is nothing if not a classic representation of that exact hostility.

Hannah McGregor 16:13

Yes, yes. Precisely.

Marcelle Kosman 16:15

Okay. So this is really interesting to me, because I feel like all the queers in my life are totally obsessed now with D&D. And so somewhere, something has changed. And not even just basic D&D, but really rich, immersive, world-building D&D. So someone got in.

Hannah McGregor 16:38

Yeah, we did. [Marcelle laughs] We squirreled our way in. So a whole bunch of things changed to turn D&D from being this deeply niche sub-cultural activity into something that is, I'm arguing, zeitgeisty, and I'll try to trace a few of them for you. But what I think is a really key moment is the publication of the fifth edition, D&D 5e. Okay, so to describe the key differences with 5e, I'm going to ask you to read this quote from a 2014 Polygon article written by one Griffin McElroy.

Marcelle Kosman 17:12

Oh, your littlest brother!

Hannah McGregor 17:14

You know, my littlest brother. Thank you. Thank you for knowing me.

Marcelle Kosman 17:17

“Conceptually, the fifth edition of D&D is moving away from a board-game-centric aesthetic towards a system that allows players to carry out their game in any way they'd like. The new edition's rules are built around broad mechanics which can be used to interpret creative ideas without worrying about whether a character has the right predetermined

powers to accomplish those feats, or how that information will be reflected on a game board. It's less mechanical and more theatrical.”

Hannah McGregor 17:51

So we're back to your question about how much of the pleasure is performance. And D&D 5e really leans into the pleasures of performance. They've redesigned the mechanics to let it be a very character decision-driven game, rather than being driven by knowing how to play the game strategically and when. So in 2014, D&D, which is now owned by Wizards of the Coast, which created the Magic the Gathering card game, which bought TSR in 1997, and in turn was acquired by Hasbro in 1999. So Hasbro, which owns every game, owns Wizards of the Coast, which owns D&D.

Marcelle Kosman 18:33

Okay.,

Hannah McGregor 18:34

So they released this new edition with the explicit goal of maximizing the game's flexibility. So if you love rule lawyering and playing strategically within the possibilities of different mechanics within the game, cool, there's absolutely a rule system available to you with a huge number of expansions and specializations and new worlds to play in. But if you prefer a more organic and rules-light approach to play that really focuses on storytelling and performing and role playing, then literally, the first rule of 5e is that the Dungeon Master can change any of the rules they want in order to tell a story.

Marcelle Kosman 19:19

Woah. That's a lot of freedom.

Hannah McGregor 19:20

It's a huge amount of freedom. So that means, for example, that the game doesn't just have to be about murdering monsters and ransacking tombs. It can be about, like, relationships.

Marcelle Kosman 19:35

Ooh.

Hannah McGregor 19:37

Yeah.

Marcelle Kosman 19:38

Okay, that all makes sense. But doesn't the importance of the Dungeon Master still present the same gatekeeping problem? Like, how can you expand the demographics of who plays the game when it still relies on one central figure in the game who knows all the rules? And who can decide if and when they change the rules? [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor 20:05

Yeah, 100%. And so even if it's more accessible now, it's like, cool, I still have to play in the world being created for me by a Dungeon Master. And if that Dungeon Master is, say, a straight white guy whose idea of gameplay is based in violence and conquest, then that's still gonna shape our experience of the game no matter how comparatively rules-light it is.

So the second transformation I want to talk about is the rise of actual play podcasts and web series. So for those of you who aren't familiar, actual play media is just what it says on the tin. It's media that shows you people actually playing a role playing game, often D&D, not always D&D, because there's a much larger world of role playing games out there. So, Marcelle, can you think of another significant cultural phenomenon that also launched in 2014? That's right. It's the true crime podcast Serial. You knew that. [Laughs]

Marcelle Kosman 21:07

I knew that.

Hannah McGregor 21:09

That is frequently cited as the turning point that made podcasts mainstream.

Marcelle Kosman 21:13

Yeah.

Hannah McGregor 21:14

And right around the same time, another new media platform was also rapidly rising into a new position of cultural dominance. And that is Twitch.

Marcelle Kosman 21:23

Oh, that's the one where you watch people play video games. When we were still doing Witch, Please, friend of the pod Michelle Thompson came and talked to us about people on Twitch playing the Harry Potter role playing game.

Hannah McGregor 21:39

Yeah, a lot of the way that people interact with and experience games now is watching other people live streaming them through Twitch.

Marcelle Kosman 21:46

Okay, this is a genuine question. And it's because I've never done it. So I'm going to ask it and maybe it's gonna sound bitchy, and I don't mean it to be bitchy. It is a genuine question. What is the pleasure of watching other people play games that you yourself could be playing but are not playing?

Hannah McGregor 22:05

There's a few different pleasures to it. One is that for very popular Twitch streamers, it's personality-driven. So they have running commentary as they play and people will get fond of, in the same way that you might listen to a podcast that is kind of about nothing. You know, that isn't a valuable, well-researched, educational podcast like ours, but it's just like—like, several of my favorite podcasts are two to three white male comedians just kind of chatting. I love the McElroy brothers. They're not bringing a huge amount of substance into my life. But I have a very intense parasocial relationship with them. And I find it very soothing to just listen to them chat.

Marcelle Kosman 22:48

Okay, that makes a lot of sense to me. I don't listen to My Brother, My Brother and Me any more. But whenever I overhear my partner Trevor listening to one of the numerous podcasts that he listens to, and one of the McElroys is on it, I'm always like, "That's my older brother, Justin McElroy!"

Hannah McGregor 23:07

Yeah, yeah. Anyway, so that's part of the appeal. And part of the appeal is also as video games get more and more complicated and more and more expensive, people will often watch Twitch streamers to learn how to play a new game; to see what a game is like before they buy it, because you can watch it get test played; to get tips on how to play a particularly hard game, you can watch playthroughs. So that's part of the culture as well. And while as a platform, it was originally designed for video game live streaming, people play lots of other kinds of games on Twitch, including tabletop RPGs: TTRPGs, as we like to call them, like Dungeons and Dragons. So, interestingly, when I actually went and looked at the dates, I was like, "Oh, this really lines up." So a lot of that podcasting and streaming actual play content aligned with the release of 5e, which was being framed by Wizards of the Coast and I think experienced by a lot of the nerd community as an

entry point not only for new players, but also for new potential audiences to watch other people play.

Marcelle Kosman 24:20

Okay, and so then we have a whole bunch of people learning how to play without knowing people who are already playing.

Hannah McGregor 24:30

Yes, exactly. So for example, the McElroy Brothers' massively popular podcast The Adventure Zone, which has been developed into a series of hugely successful graphic novels, was launched in 2014. Prior to the full release of 5e, they actually started by playing through the introductory adventure that Wizards of the Coast had published to teach people the new system.

Marcelle Kosman 24:52

Now that's a service.

Hannah McGregor 24:54

Yeah, yeah. 100% And you actually got to hear them learn how to play this new edition in real time, while also getting to hear the story that they were improvising.

Marcelle Kosman 25:05

Right. That's beautiful.

Hannah McGregor 25:07

Yeah. And then the year after that in 2015, nerd icon Felicia Day found out that some voice actor friends of hers had been playing a home game of D&D for the past few years. And she asked if they would like to start live streaming it for her Youtube and Twitch channel Geek and Sundry. And they had been playing—because they'd been playing since 2012 or 2013, they'd been playing an older edition, but they converted the campaign to 5e because the more rules-light edition worked better for live gameplay. There's less math and less having to stop and look things up. It's just a more straightforward game. So they were like, "Cool. Let's just make it 5e, because that will work better for live streaming."

Marcelle Kosman 25:51

So I might have missed something earlier, but you just mentioned they had been playing for years. Now, do you mean they've been playing the same game? Like the same—

Hannah McGregor 26:01  
Yeah.

Marcelle Kosman 26:02  
—they've been on the same journey?

Hannah McGregor 26:05  
Yeah.

Marcelle Kosman 26:06  
For years?

Hannah McGregor 26:07  
Yeah. Yeah. So this is another one of the characteristics of how D&D is played. You can do something that's referred to as one shots, which is a game that's played only in one session, but generally campaigns, which is what they're referred to as, last for years.

Marcelle Kosman 26:24  
Wow.

Hannah McGregor 26:25  
Yeah.

Marcelle Kosman 26:26  
Wow. That's an emotional investment.

Hannah McGregor 26:29  
And the game is built to reward that. You level up as you go and you can make leveling up decisions that are based in discoveries you make about the character as you're playing.

Marcelle Kosman 26:41  
Okay. So as you play, not only can you gain more powers by leveling up, or gain more abilities, whatever, but you can also learn more things about your character? Like in real life, when I discover that giving gifts is a love language, and all of a sudden things about myself start to make more sense? Oh, wow.



Hannah McGregor 27:02

Yeah. And that's part of what makes watching actual play or listening to actual play so pleasurable, is that you get to watch these players actually learn about the characters as they're playing. Because it's a fundamentally improvisational form.

Marcelle Kosman 27:17

That's really cool.

Hannah McGregor 27:18

It's really cool. I really love it. And you know what, lots of other people do as well. So that aforementioned Geek and Sundry series, which is known as Critical Role, became so successful that they're basically their own multimedia publishing empire at this point. They've got spin-off books and comics and player manuals, and an animated series on Amazon Prime that raised \$11.3 million on Kickstarter.

Marcelle Kosman 27:45

Holy guacamole.

Hannah McGregor 27:48

And again, a big part of the appeal is watching people actually play with the potential of learning to play alongside them.

Marcelle Kosman 27:59

Okay. I have another question.

Hannah McGregor 28:00

Good.

Marcelle Kosman 28:01

So, initially, you linked the exclusivity of D&D to its lack of diversity. So these immensely popular series, The Adventure Zone and Critical Role? Are they more diverse?

Hannah McGregor 28:19

Not really.

Marcelle Kosman 28:20

Okay, okay.

Hannah McGregor 28:21

Yeah, so The Adventure Zone is four straight white guys. And Critical Role does have women. Are they mostly married to the male players? They are, yeah, yeah. [Marcelle laughs] But Critical Role was also— one of the players in the original cast was Black, but he left very shortly after it became a series, and so the core cast is also all white. But what we are seeing a decade after the release of 5e and the rise of actual play, is that the net effect of these changes has been a massive diversification of who plays D&D, and in turn of who makes live play media, which in turn leads to more diverse people playing D&D because they're seeing people like them playing it, which in turn leads to more diverse media and so on. So it's been this kind of snowball effect.

Marcelle Kosman 29:14

So is it possible that perhaps, some of the reasons why, say The Adventure Zone and Critical Role became so popular was it also maybe had to do with the privileged makeup of the people playing? Not that they were the first, but that the success was amplified by their white privilege?

Hannah McGregor 29:37

Undeniably, and it's part of why they were able to build a foundation with a core audience of D&D fans who were disproportionately straight white men, and who, particularly when you hear some of the women on the Critical Role cast talk about the early days of making the show, they deal with a lot of hostility from that core fan base. But they also did a lot of boundary-pushing in terms of the representation that they chose to lean into via their characters. So there's a really lovely piece in Autostraddle called "Queering D&D" in which the author Valerie Anne explains how seeing the players in Critical Role create explicitly queer characters, because a lot of the characters in critical role are canonically queer, gave the writer an entry point into playing the game with other queer friends because it felt like, oh, D&D can actually be for and about queerness. And there's also a really huge queer and trans fandom around The Adventure Zone, in large part because one of the three main characters in the original campaign was canonically queer and had a canonically trans twin sister, who, for a lot of nerds in the 20-teens, was like a pretty revelatory representation of a badass trans woman who had a bunch of great fucking one-liners.

Marcelle Kosman 31:22

That's awesome. Okay, all right. So politics of representation, important matters.

Hannah McGregor 31:29

Important!

Marcelle Kosman 31:29

Essential to consider when we always historicize. Coach?

[Coach sings “Historicize”: Historicize, historicize, it’s always time to historicize.]

Marcelle Kosman 31:44

People see themselves represented in D&D media, and then feel empowered to try it out themselves. But can you tell me a little bit more about the gameplay itself and how that's changed? Because having not played the original, I would like to hear more about how it's different. You did mention less math, which, that's a bonus for me.

Hannah McGregor 32:11

Definitely less math. And Marcelle, rather than explaining the rules for D&D 5e to you in detail, instead I'm gonna do something even nerdier and I'm gonna give you some theory.

Marcelle Kosman 32:24

Well, you know what, Hannah? I'm *game* for it.

Hannah McGregor 32:29

Oh, I get it.

[Upbeat musical interlude plays]

Hannah McGregor 32:36

You come face-to-face with the dreaded theorist. It hits you with a bolt of incomprehensible academic jargon. But luckily, you deflect it with your shield of public scholarship. Now roll to understand theory, because it's time for the theory we need.

Marcelle Kosman 32:49

That's very good. That was really really good, Hannah.

Hannah McGregor 32:52

Thank you so much.

Marcelle Kosman 32:54

Also, very nerdy.

Hannah McGregor 32:56

Oh, yeah, I know. Today, Marcelle, we're going to be talking about the field of ludology. Tell me, do you know what that word means?

Marcelle Kosman 33:06

Okay, I do. But I don't know why.

Hannah McGregor 33:11

Ooh, fun.

Marcelle Kosman 33:12

So ludology is one of those terms that I definitely didn't just come across it. Like, I must have learned it in school. It's a study of games, right? But why? Why do I know that? And that's what really bothers me, but that's a conversation to have with my therapist and not with you right now. [Hannah laughs]

Hannah McGregor 33:36

So it is, you're right, the study of games.

Marcelle Kosman 33:39

Any particular kind of games?

Hannah McGregor 33:41

All kinds of games. But as a critical field, it really came into its own in the late 90s and early 2000s, with the rising cultural significance of video games. So that branch of game studies early on started grappling with a really key question, which is how to study video games, specifically whether they should be studied as narratives through the established methodologies of literary studies, or if they should be studied as games by looking at the platform logics, the rules, the gameplay, et cetera.

Marcelle Kosman 34:16

Quick question. When I talk about the mechanic of a game—I say, I really like that mechanic. Am I doing the ludology?

Hannah McGregor 34:27

Yeah, yep. 100%.

Marcelle Kosman 34:29

Okay.

Hannah McGregor 34:29

100%.

Marcelle Kosman 34:30

Thank you.

Hannah McGregor 34:30

So that debate, which is usually summarized as narratology versus ludology, really dominated the early years of game studies, and it's woven through a lot of the early key texts. So for example, I want us to take a look at a 2007 article by games designer and sci fi writer Greg Costikyan, called "Games, Storytelling, and Breaking the String," in which he summarizes the seeming tensions between stories and games.

Marcelle Kosman 35:00

"A story is linear. The events of a story occur in the same order, and in the same way, each time you read(or watch or listen to it. A story is a controlled experience; the author consciously crafts it, choosing precisely these events, in this order, to create a story with maximum impact. If the events occurred in some other fashion, the impact of the story would be diminished—or, if that isn't true, the author isn't doing a good job.

A game is non-linear. Games must provide at least the illusion of free will to the player; players must feel that they have freedom of action—not absolute freedom, but freedom within the structure of the system. The structure constrains what they can do, but they must feel they have options; if not, they are not actively engaged. Rather, they are merely passive recipients of the experience. If they are constrained to a linear path of events, unchangeable in order, they'll feel they're being railroaded through the game, that nothing they do has any impact, that they are not playing in any meaningful sense. In other words, there's a direct, immediate conflict between the demands of story and the demands of a game."

Hannah McGregor 36:28

Beautifully read. Now tell me if you agree.

Marcelle Kosman 36:31

I am struggling with it, to be honest. [Laughs] I agree in part that a story, like, the printed word, is printed literally in an order, but one's experience of reading a story or even being told a story isn't necessarily linear, like the way in which you respond or engage with a story. So what he's saying about stories just being linear is not true. I don't agree.

Hannah McGregor 36:58

Yeah, he also just fully ignores the existence of oral storytelling. [Marcelle and Hannah laugh] You know, like the oldest form of human art. Sure, sure. No big deal. So remember, I said that ludology emerged around video games? Well, intriguingly, Costikyan opens his article by claiming that “before 1973, if you had said something like games or storytelling medium, just about anyone would have looked at you as if you were mad, and anyone knowledgeable about games would have assumed you knew nothing about them.” And what changed after 1973?

Marcelle Kosman 37:38

Dungeons and Dragons was released?

Hannah McGregor 37:42

Yes, precisely. So with the rise of role playing games, we get the emergence of games as storytelling or storytelling being gamified, and the rise of the attendant tensions that Costikyan summarizes, and that so many games studies scholars were arguing over. And it's a tension I think we can see in those different editions of D&D as well, with a push and pull between systems that emphasize rules and structures, and systems that emphasize storytelling. But notice how in that version of the tension it's stories that are organic, and flexible, and responsive, and rules that are structured and unchanging?

Marcelle Kosman 38:18

It's like it's a false binary. [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor 38:22

How about that, like, really any binary we set up turns out to be truly arbitrary and not particularly useful?

Marcelle Kosman 38:33

I was worried because honestly, when I started reading, I was like, “Oh, no, there's no way that this is what Hannah thinks. And yet this quote—”

Hannah McGregor 38:44

Yeah, no, 100% It's a piece that's anthologized in the earliest collection of game studies scholarship, like it really characterizes the way people were trying to think about gameplay and trying to theorize it, and were like, “Well, it's a new thing, so it can't be anything like story, so we have to make it the opposite of story.” And it's like, nah, dawg.

Marcelle Kosman 39:06

The history of sports is also a history of storytelling. You have the underdog and you have the winning team, you know—it's okay, it's fine. It's fine. It's okay. So you know what, that article? Solid historical example of the way people were thinking—

Hannah McGregor 39:26  
Presicely.

Marcelle Kosman 39:26  
—not necessarily useful as an argument for storytelling and gameplay.

Hannah McGregor 39:31  
You know what we love to do? We love to historicize.

Marcelle Kosman 39:35  
We love to historicize. We love it.

[Coach sings “Historicize”: Historicize, historicize, it’s always time to historicize.”]

Hannah McGregor 39:45  
So luckily, more recent scholarship has pushed beyond that binary to think about how and why people play games like D&D in more expansive ways. There's a very interesting 2019 book called *Dread Trident: Tabletop Role-Playing Games and the Modern Fantastic* by English scholar Curtis D. Carbonell, and in that they argue that we need to consider the whole range of analog and digital texts that D&D players and fans interact with. So if we're looking at D&D, we can't be like, is it a game or is it a story? We have to be like, okay, there's these volumes of traditionally-published manuals, which can be read narratively like texts. And then there's the user-generated content that's often published for free online; like, people will make up their own campaign settings or their own homebrewed classes. And then there's the digital world of podcasts and Twitch streams and web series. And then there's all the game tools like paper and pencils and dice. We love collecting dice, I have like seven or eight sets of dice, and I am a very dice-light player. And then there's maps and mini figurines that you can make of your character and platforms for playing virtually that got way more popular during the pandemic. And there's digital soundboards you can use to create soundscapes for the settings of different scenes that you're role playing. And then there's—

Marcelle Kosman 41:12  
Oh, that’s charming.

Hannah McGregor 41:13

—web artists who basically make their living doing custom drawings of people's D&D characters. And then there's fan conventions where people cosplay as the characters that other people made up in a D&D actual play series, and then pose in pictures with the people who played those characters. And all of that stuff augments and enhances the gameplay moving out of the realm of representation into what Carbonell calls realisation, which is altogether more immersive and creative and imaginatively engaging.

Marcelle Kosman 41:47

And so rather than games being the opposite of stories, we get these story games or game stories that are actually really complex, immersive transmedia worlds.

Hannah McGregor 41:58

Yeah, and they're worlds that are realized through the act of play. So if we go back to that question of how the rise of D&D actual play media alongside the redesigned gameplay of 5e contributes to both the expansion and diversification of D&D players, we have to think about the way the actual act of playing the game can change what the game is. So despite the game's many flaws, and it has real structural flaws that we can talk about in the next segment if you want, queer and trans and racialized players are changing the game by playing it.

Marcelle Kosman 42:40

Hannah, you are getting perilously close to a thesis right now.

Hannah McGregor 42:46

Yeah, you're right. You know what? Let's just cut to the chase.

Marcelle Kosman 42:53

I guess it's time for you to roll for a thesis statement.

Hannah McGregor 42:59

I have plus 12 to thesis statement.

Marcelle Kosman 43:02

Ooh! I don't know what that means, but it sounds good.

Hannah McGregor 43:04



It's very impressive. It's like a really high—Anyway. [Clears throat]. Traditionally associated with a niche form of white male nerd culture that was hostile to outsiders, Dungeons and Dragons has become not only a mainstream form of popular culture, as exemplified in TV series like Stranger Things and movies like the 2023 Dungeons and Dragons: Honor among Thieves (which has 91% on Rotten Tomatoes, by the way), but a meaningfully diversifying transmedia phenomenon populated by actual play series, fan art, cosplay, and more. The game's expansion in the past decade can be linked both to the emergence of actual play podcasts and Twitch live streams, as well as the streamlined and storytelling-focused redesign of the popular fifth edition. Through the interaction and overlap between players, fans, and content creators, D&D has expanded not only through its shifting representations, but also and even more vitally, through its transformative realizations. In this essay, I will...

Marcelle Kosman 44:14

I want to talk about the problematic stuff though. This all sounds great. But at the end of the day, we've got classes and races.

Hannah McGregor 44:23

We've got classes and races.

Marcelle Kosman 44:24

And a lot of white guys who are like, "It's not racist!"

Hannah McGregor 44:28

"It's not racist. It's not racist. There's just dark elves, and they have black skin and they're evil."

Marcelle Kosman 44:33

"But it's not racist."

Hannah McGregor 44:34

"Don't worry about it, it's not racist. "Yeah, so...

Marcelle Kosman 44:40

Because Tolkien, right?

Hannah McGregor 44:43

Because Tolkien, yes. So if we look back to the properties that inspired D&D, its two big influences were Tolkien on the one hand, and then pulp fantasy à la Conan the Barbarian on the other hand. So in the original edition, they just called them hobbits and ents and, like, made-up fantasy

creatures that had literally been made up by Tolkien. And then the Tolkien estate was like, “Hey, guys,” and so then they renamed the hobbits “halflings” and they renamed the ents “tree ents.” [Marcelle laughs]

Marcelle Kosman 45:27

Not to be confused with ents.

Hannah McGregor 45:30

No, no, no, very different. This one has tree in it!

Marcelle Kosman 45:34

I gotcha. Gotcha. Gotcha. Okay.

Hannah McGregor 45:36

If you look at the art from the early editions, it's all pulp magazine, like, big burly muscle-y guys, and then ladies in fur bikinis, is the vibe.

Marcelle Kosman 45:50

Sexy. Maybe this is revelatory for some folks, but I feel like a lot of us, even if we're not immersed in the D&D universe, D&D is conspicuously built on the Lord of the Rings, or Tolkien's imaginative world more generally, right? Like, that's not a controversial thing to say. That's like—

Hannah McGregor 46:11

It's not. Gygax denied it for years. And then he was like, “Okay, well, I guess.” But it's not exclusively based on that, like, he's still quite—or they, Arneson and Gygax—stole, they were equal opportunity thieves of—you know, like a Rowling type where it's just like, “I'm just gonna pick from whatever I feel like.”

Marcelle Kosman 46:39

Yeah, just like a smorgasbord of things that might have been part of the popular imagination.

Hannah McGregor 46:45

Yeah, precisely. Often with no thought into the politics behind those popular representations. You know, we're talking right now about representation, but those logics are baked into the gameplay. So when you are creating a new character, you begin by choosing your character's race and class. Your character's race is their humanoid subspecies.

Marcelle Kosman 47:11

But human is an option, right?

Hannah McGregor 47:13  
Human is an option.

Marcelle Kosman 47:14  
So you could be human or you could be one of these numerous other subspecies that are similar to humans or humanoid but are not—

Hannah McGregor 47:20  
But are not human. Yep, the other races are not human. And they are biologically different. So they're elves, or they're half orcs, or they're halflings, or their tieflings, which are part-human, part-demon. They're these other biologically distinct entities, and when you're building your character, the race that you choose has a bunch of stable mechanical impacts on your character. So some races are faster than other ones. Some races are stronger than other ones. Some races are sneakier than other ones.

Marcelle Kosman 48:06  
Are some races better at managing money than other ones? Are some races smarter? Are some races more civilized? [Laughs

Hannah McGregor 48:19  
Basically, right? It really has encoded into the gameplay this really disturbing racial logic. And then you also have class and your characters class is the kind of guy they are. So a wizard or a sorcerer or a barbarian or a bard, or a, you know...

Marcelle Kosman 48:43  
I tend to lean towards bards, whenever—on the rare occasions that I have had the opportunity to play because I feel like—

Hannah McGregor 48:52  
Because you're a bard in real life.

Marcelle Kosman 48:53  
—being an entertainer, being an ESFP, what else could I be?

Hannah McGregor 48:58  
I will tell you, I have spent a lot of my D&D career playing wisdom-based builds. When you're creating a character, you choose what their big strengths will be. When you're a wizard, you're mostly intelligent; wizards are intelligence-based. And then that's like, you need high intelligence to be

good at being a wizard, but then you're also good at all the other things that are intelligence-based. And I have tended to play intelligence or wisdom builds, and in my current campaign, which is DM'd by friend of the pod Marshall, I'm playing a charisma build, which means that I'm good at lying to people and persuading people of shit. And baby, I should have been playing a charisma build this whole time. [Marcelle laughs] I fucking love lying to people. It's really fun.

Marcelle Kosman 49:49  
Oh my god.

Hannah McGregor 49:51  
Yeah, getting to tell an outrageous lie and then roll for it? And if you roll well, you get away with it? The best.

Marcelle Kosman 50:00  
Incredible.

Hannah McGregor 50:00  
The absolute best.

Marcelle Kosman 50:01  
Okay, okay.

Hannah McGregor 50:03  
Yeah, so we've got these stable categories that have, at the gameplay level, have these real impacts on how the characters actually can move through the world. So that's part of the problem.

Marcelle Kosman 50:21  
Yeah, I guess one of the questions that I kind of have, it's not a question for you, per se; it's something that I want to think through. Hearing you describe these two guys who just got together and made up a game and then self published it, it really makes me think a lot about when you and I, just a couple of guys, got drunk and started making a podcast. They couldn't have known how successful it would become.

Hannah McGregor 50:50  
Undeniably.

Marcelle Kosman 50:50  
But thinking about you and me, and the way that we have, and I think continue to constantly try to be more self critical, be more self aware, be

more attentive to the impact of the things that we do, the way that we talk, the people we invite on the show. I feel like basically from the moment people started listening and saying, “Hey, you said a thing and it hurt my feelings, could you not?” And then we were like, “Oh, shit, people are listening.” So I guess what I'm trying to say, in addition to patting ourselves on the back for just being the best guys, just the best guys [Hannah laughs], these folks, it seems like maybe they went longer without attending to the harm? [Laughs] Without attending to the harm?

Hannah McGregor 51:41

Yeah, yeah. And a big part of that is that when we think about homosocial environments, which is to say environments where everybody's the same, then people often don't notice the things that they have built into those environments that make them hostile to people who are not the same as them. So if you're looking at a roomful of white guys playing a game, they don't even understand themselves as being racialized.

Marcelle Kosman 52:11

Right?

Hannah McGregor 52:12

And so how would they necessarily understand race as a complex lived experience? So we can see how a lot of these aspects of it were able to remain stagnant, and thing that I think is interesting in 5e is that they were beginning to really think at that time about what changes they had to make to expand the audience beyond the conventional associations. And you see that, for example, in the fifth edition player's manual, where the art itself is much more diverse. And you can see women not in fur bikinis and you see people with lots of different skin tones and lots of different builds and ages.

Marcelle Kosman 53:02

Listen, some of us wear fur bikinis. And that's cool.

Hannah McGregor 53:06

It just doesn't make any sense. If it's hot enough for bikini, why fur?

Marcelle Kosman 53:11

You know, and that's okay. It's okay. It's okay. Sometimes fashion is for look and not for function.

Hannah McGregor 53:19

Sometimes fashion is for—look, you know what, some bathing suits are for lounging by the pool, and some are for swimming. That's really fair. You're not getting in the pool in your fur bikini. Yeah, so there was this effort at the level of representation to be more inclusive, and some of the level of gameplay to also be more inclusive, but inclusive in a different way. The way that they shifted the gameplay, I think, was really focused on making the game accessible to people who weren't already familiar, who liked the storytelling aspect, who liked the performance aspect, who liked the improvisation aspect. But the gameplay in 5e I don't think was changed in a way to meaningfully think about gender and class and race as political formations and identities. And there's a new edition coming out this year, they're releasing 6e—

Marcelle Kosman 54:18

Ooh, 6e, sounds sexy.

Hannah McGregor 54:21

—and I don't know anything about it, but I'm gonna be really curious to see what mechanics they have changed in light of how much more structurally diverse the D&D community is. Like, how many queer and trans and gender nonconforming people are high-profile D&D players or DMs, how many Black people and Indigenous people and people of color are high-profile D&D celebrities. A lot of those people came out of the world of comedy and improv. So there's been a huge port of the improv scene into D&D because it is fundamentally an improvisational form.

Marcelle Kosman 55:05

A logical union.

Hannah McGregor 55:06

And there are so many live play series, podcasts, and video series that are using the mechanisms of D&D to tell totally different kinds of stories. So for example, friend of the pod Aaron Keith has a D&D podcast called Sitcom D&D, which basically uses the mechanics of D&D to improvise one-off sitcom episodes. So people are doing really creative and fun things by hacking the rules a little bit. One of my favourite other D&D podcasts is called Rude Tales of Magic, and they often have arguments about whether or not they're “actually playing D&D,” because they—it's so rules-light, it's like 98% improv 2% rules. And one of the producers is like, “No, the first rule of D&D is that the DM can change any rules that they want for the sake of the storytelling. So you are fully playing rules-adhering D&D, according to the player's manual.” And the DM is like, “No, I'm not, I'm telling stories and once an episode, I make somebody roll a die.”

But that debate itself points to the way that the game has expanded so far out into the world of storytelling and media creation. And as people see it being treated more and more flexibly, and then feel like, “Oh, I can also thus treat it flexibly,” that creates more inclusive gameplay environments. But it also allows people to be like, “Cool, my character is going to be non-binary,” “my character is going to be like—I’m going to multi-class because I don’t like the idea of having to be a stable thing.” Or like, “Yeah, my character is going to be an elf, but I’m going to make it really clear that my character is also Asian, and that’s going to be a meaningful part of their identity and their history.” And so those kinds of things that are like, it’s not built into the game at all, but the way people are playing, it creates an environment of ever greater permission to do that kind of hacking the game, which again is why, for me, the difference between the representation and the realization is really crucial. It’s one thing to go, “Look at this cool character art, it’s more diverse,” and it’s another thing to be like, “Well, what actually happens to the game itself, when people who are historically gatekept from this activity get really fucking into it?” We change it.

Marcelle Kosman 57:54

I feel like it sounds really good. But I feel like—

Hannah McGregor 57:59

It’s too good to be true? Incorrect, it’s perfect.

Marcelle Kosman 58:02

So I don’t want to say that this sounds too good to be true, because I, like you, firmly believe that when you are playing a thing, the way that you are playing, you’re playing the thing. So if you are playing D&D, and you are following the official rules that say that you can change the rules, and you roll a die one time, sure, you’re playing. But I’m willing to bet that there are purists out there who are like, “It’s not real D&D. But that’s not real D&D.” So where are they? What are they doing?

Hannah McGregor 58:36

I mean, they’re being sad in a corner. Nobody cares about them anymore.

Marcelle Kosman 58:41

They’re still in the basement. [Laughs]

Hannah McGregor 58:44

Unfortunately, still in the basement. So I find Critical Role a really interesting example around this. So the Dungeon Master for Critical Role, Matt Mercer, is a super, super long-term D&D player. He's one of those guys who truly has the rules unbelievably memorized. Like, he knows them inside and out. He can rule lawyer you to death if necessary. He knows every mechanic of this game. He likes playing with the rules; that's his version of what makes the game fun. So for example, as a magic user, you generally need to have material components to cast spells. So like, if I want to do this spell, I need—you know, a lower level spell— It'll be like, a feather and some dust. But higher level spells will be like, a ruby worth 500 gold. And he really insists that if you are a magic user, you buy your fucking spell components. You have to have them; you can't just cast magic, because then you're overpowered. Like, you can just revivify people whenever you want? Absolutely not.

Marcelle Kosman 59:46

So you have to go to the market stall, you have to have 500 gold, you have to buy your ruby from an NPC, and then you can cast your spell. Okay.

Hannah McGregor 59:56

However, because Critical Role has such an enormous audience and platform, they've been very deliberately bringing other dungeon masters in to lead other mini-campaigns, who are both meaningfully more diverse and also who play differently or who DM differently. And I think it's a real intentional modeling of, like, there isn't just one right way to do this, there isn't just one right way to be a dungeon master. So one of my favorite celebrity dungeon masters is Aabria Iyengar, who is this very cool, incredibly hot, and extremely tall Black woman. Anyway, the way that she DMs is very story-first and very character-first. And she will do things like, “Yeah, I think this idea that you had is really cool, so just roll again, just try again.” Or like, “Technically, you can't do that, but I'm gonna let you do it because it was like a really interesting, character-driven decision.” And so we get this opportunity to see modeled an approach to playing the game that is about relationships, and storytelling, and improv, and interaction, not about just clinging to the rules. And making sure that that kind of gameplay is happening on these really high-profile platforms also helps to render less acceptable the kind of policing that that subset of nerds are still trying to do. So it's like, you can keep doing it if you want. But your heroes don't like it. The guy that you're looking up to, like, “Oh, like this is the guy I want to be”? He doesn't think it's cool. He doesn't think it's interesting. He's not down with it. You were bullying that woman player, that's his wife, and he thinks you're an asshole. So there is, by actually modeling different kinds of play, it's rendering it less acceptable in a lot of those spheres to be that



kind of fan. They're still out there, of course they are, of course they are. It's just that they don't get to take up all of the oxygen in the room anymore, they don't get to determine who has access and who doesn't. And they are starting, at a very material level, to be outweighed enough by other fans, that there is the money and audience support behind other kinds of actual play media.

Marcelle Kosman 1:02:46

That's very satisfying.

Hannah McGregor 1:02:48

Yeah, it is really satisfying to watch them not have all the money and power anymore. I for one look forward to the fall of the patriarchy. [Marcelle laughs] Sorry, what was your question?

Marcelle Kosman 1:02:57

I have one other thing that I want to bring up. But I could just save it for a later episode, maybe? I think it's a bigger conversation. I kind of want to talk about Hasbro and about the fact that all of this diversification and accessibility has arisen alongside the ownership, alongside the purchase by a huge game monopoly and business.

Hannah McGregor 1:03:27

A huge game monopoly which is making business decisions, probably not out of the goodness of their heart, but out of an eye on the bottom line. And actually, it is sometimes the case—actually, in a lot of spheres, it's the case that if you step back and look at the bottom line, inclusivity is better for profit margins.

Marcelle Kosman 1:03:27

That's right.

Hannah McGregor 1:03:32

Because more people can do the thing.

Marcelle Kosman 1:03:36

If people were just doing capitalism correctly, instead of gatekeeping. Capitalism is freedom for everyone.

Hannah McGregor 1:04:03

There's a fundamental incoherence to white supremacy that often, despite the fact that it is deeply entwined with capitalism, often works against the very logics of capitalism. Because it is not a logical system. Because it's

based on fundamentally made-up stuff. What is so interesting about your point, Marcelle, is the way that they are responding to pressures from their base. So for example, they released a campaign book recently that had these sort of half-monkey, half-humanoid characters who had historically been enslaved and shipped around on boats.

Marcelle Kosman 1:04:49

Nope, nope, nope.

Hannah McGregor 1:04:51

And they put it out, and a huge number of people were like, “Hey, what the fuck, Wizards of the Coast?” and their response was they pulled it, and they've created a new policy, where they will have a consultation process for every new piece of material that comes out. Whether or not they think that it actually needs one, they're just like, “Cool. Clearly we can't be trusted. So we're gonna put a consultation process in place for everything we do.”

Marcelle Kosman 1:05:20

Okay, I like, I like. Hannah, so something that's really standing out to me, as we have been recording this episode is just seeing how lit-up you are talking about this entire universe. And I see your face fairly regularly, not as much as I'd like, but fairly regularly. And I rarely see you this delighted. De-lighted. And so I was wondering if, for me, for the listeners, for the people, give the people what they want. Can you talk about what D&D gives back to you?

Hannah McGregor 1:05:57

Yeah. 100%. So I started playing when I moved to Vancouver, I started playing with Marshall. And the act of playing has been one of my most consistent outlets for my very favourite thing, which is making art with friends. In Edmonton, we would do these jam nights where we would all get together and just play music and sing, and playing D&D feels the same to me, it feels like getting together with a group of friends and making art together for a few hours. Building that collaborative art-making into my life is so, so important to me. It's why I love singing in choirs, that's why I love jamming with people, and it's why I love D&D. And its importance to me has only gotten higher in recent years, as D&D actual play series have become my primary source for meaningfully queer stories that I can be really invested in, that are so much queerer than anything you see on mainstream TV, that are so much more diverse, so much more interesting, and that I have a community that I share them with. So three years now, we're just

coming up on our third year anniversary, me and a group of friends have been watching a D&D live play thing together once a week.

Marcelle Kosman 1:07:37

That's really nice.

Hannah McGregor 1:07:38

We call our group chat the cousins—cousins! We're not each other's cousins. And some of us—I know everybody in the chat, but some of the people in the chat have never met in real life. But friends of the show, Claire and Lucia, who have been part of this for three years, they've proposed a conference paper together about D&D live play and parasocial relationships and those turning into real friendships during the pandemic. But they're gonna go to Chicago and deliver at a conference, and that will be the first time they meet in real life.

Marcelle Kosman 1:08:17

I love that.

Hannah McGregor 1:08:20

It's formed a lot of real invaluable relationships for me and communities for me, and a big part of it is that we can gather around the storytelling that actually really feels like it has space for us. Not like we're an afterthought or a token inclusion, but that it's that it's made with us in mind. Yeah, and that feels so fucking good.

Marcelle Kosman 1:08:45

Yeah.

### **[Musical interlude: “Shopping Mall” by Jay Arner and Jessica Delisle]**

Hannah McGregor 1:08:52

Material Girls is a Witch, Please production and is distributed by Acast. You can find the rest of our episodes and our other podcasts on Acast or at [ohwitchplease.ca](http://ohwitchplease.ca). The same website has a veritable dragon's hoard of other content, including links to sign up for our substack and our Patreon, as well as transcripts, reading lists, and merch.

Marcelle Kosman 1:09:15

If you have questions, comments, concerns, or frankly just want to tell us all about your D&D character, you can find us on Instagram, Threads, and X, formerly known as Twitter, at [@ohwitchplease](https://www.instagram.com/ohwitchplease) and on TikTok at

@ohwitchpleasepod. And if you want to level up your support of the podcast head over to [patreon.com/ohwitchplease](https://patreon.com/ohwitchplease) to find an embarrassment of bonus content.

Hannah McGregor 1:09:42

Special thanks to everyone in the Witch, Please Productions adventuring party: our digital content sorcerer Gaby Iori [Sound effect of BOING], our bard of social media and marketing Zoe Mix [Sound effect of record player reversing], our audio file artificer Malika Gumpangkum **[Sound effect of chimes]**, and our paladin of production Hannah Rehak, aka Coach **[Sound effect of sports whistle blowing]**!

Marcelle Kosman 1:10:07

At the end of every episode, we will thank everyone who has joined our Patreon or boosted their tier to help make our work possible. Our enormous gratitude goes out to Eva G., Jackson B., Cory C., Shelly S. and R. Mundo. We will be back next episode to tackle another piece of pop culture through a whole new theoretical lens. But until then...

Hannah McGregor 1:10:35

Later, roleplayers!