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Unboxing *Magic*: An exploratory ethnography of a collectible card game discourse community

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Unboxing *Magic*: An Exploratory Ethnography of a Collectible Card Game Discourse
Community

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my friends, many of whom *Magic* players, who inspire and amuse me daily, but especially to my family. This is for my father, whose legacy I am proud to preserve, and my mother, Ruby, aunt Roxanne, and cousins Rusty and Karly, whose unrelenting support and compassion have kept me afloat. To my *tios* Alex, Edwin, Juan, and Will; my *tias* Leticia, Carole, and Christy; and numerous other relatives near and far, thank you for standing by my side. It is only thanks to you all, and especially my grandparents, Juan Carvajal Sr. and Rubi Graniel Carvajal, that I had the opportunity to study my passion and follow my own path.

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Abstract

This exploratory ethnography hopes to turn communication scholars' attention to tabletop gaming communities and genres by presenting relevant theory and a pilot study on the community of *Magic: The Gathering*. The world's most popular collectable card game. By approaching *Magic's* gameplay as discursive action and its fandom as a discourse community, this thesis applies a critical genre lens to inclusivity issues in *Magic* as a microcosm of "geek" or gamer subcultures. A body of qualitative and quantitative data was gathered through semi-structured interviews with *Magic* players and ethnographic observations of both local weekly tournaments (Friday Night Magic events) in Charlottesville, VA and larger regional *Magic* tournaments (the Grand Prix circuit) in Baltimore, MD, Secaucus, NJ, and Pittsburgh, PA. The data offers implications on a wide set of potential research interests within tabletop gaming communities such as identity-performance, inclusiveness, and manhood acts. Although a majority of the interviewed community members have always felt welcome within the community (87%) and feel that it is inclusive to difference (90%), there are several opportunities for improvement in light of the observed and reported phenomenon of non-white, non-male players being looked down upon in *Magic* play spaces. This research is preliminary and exploratory. Ideally, future research in the same vein will be conducted on tabletop gaming communities.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Background of the Study

Scholarship on Tabletop Gaming

Magic: The Gathering is a popular collectable card game with a dedicated fan base that is deserving of academic inquiry. Contentious conversations on inclusion of women and other underrepresented groups are common and often vitriolic within gaming communities. When examining these tensions, communication scholars are living in a kairotic moment for turning attention towards tabletop gaming. Board, card, and roleplaying games, which enjoyed prominence before the push to video, online, and mobile, are having a contemporary renaissance. Since 2010, board game sales have continued to rise, national bookstore chains have carried tabletop gaming products in greater volumes than before, and board-gaming events have seen renewed interest. In major cities, board-gaming cafes and bars have begun opening their doors. In online spaces, forums and imageboards buzz with conversation on traditional gaming, while crowdfunding websites like Kickstarter and IndieGoGo raise hundreds of millions of dollars annually for new board games to see print (Roeder, 2016). However, despite their reemerging relevance and popularity, scholars have paid little attention to tabletop gaming communities.

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This lacuna of scholarship is likely due to the preeminent position that video gaming has taken when it comes to research on communities of play. Scholars in game studies, rhetoric and composition, sociology, and psychology have paid far more attention to video than analog gaming because of the contemporary relevance of digital literacies in these fields, the lucrative nature of the video game industry, and the hyperbolic invective that often emerges in anonymous gaming spaces. Another factor that has limited the research conducted on tabletop gaming is simply awareness. Until recently, tabletop gaming was not a widely recognized element of popular American culture. However, with the ever-widening audience for tabletop games, the subculture is now much harder to ignore.

In fact, this research focuses on *Magic: The Gathering* because *Magic* is the first and most popular game of its ilk, making it well suited for a pilot study. The game, released in 1993, has been played for over two decades, is published in ten languages, and has an estimated consumer base of more than twelve million active players—a number which continues to climb annually. In 2012, analysts reported an estimated 25% increase in revenue as new players joined the game and purchased cards (Hasbro Annual Report, 2012). Each subsequent year the trend continues and *Magic* product is purchased at higher volumes and more new players enter the game. The growth of the community is aided by the longevity that players stay enfranchised with the game. According to *Magic* head designer, Mark Rosewater, the average *Magic* player continues to play the game for

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5 to 8 years. Most tabletop games do not remain in print for that length of time much less remain widely played. *Magic players* stick with the game long enough and have new players enter the game often enough to ensure a sustainable and invested community. *Magic's* community is vast, international, and dedicated, yet almost invisible to humanities scholarship. This study hopes to remedy that.

Understanding Magic: the Gathering

A history and basic overview of the game are important to understanding the research goals; the already initiated should feel comfortable skimming this section. In the early 90's, mathematician and game designer Richard Garfield got the inspiration for *Magic* from baseball and other trading cards that existed at the time. His innovation was that, instead of merely being collectables sold in randomized booster packs, the cards themselves would be components of a larger game. Garfield is thus responsible for creating the entire medium and business model of collectable card games. Wizards of the Coast, the company responsible for the ubiquitous Dungeons & Dragons, picked up the idea as a short "filler" game to be played in between longer roleplaying sessions and before long the game enjoyed widespread play. The popularity of the game, and its eventual profit margins, was partially responsible for propelling Wizards of the Coast from a small roleplaying game company to a dominant figure in the hobby games industry and eventual Hasbro subsidiary (Rosewater, 2014).

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Thematically, *Magic* is a fantasy game centering on the battles of dimension-jumping wizards known as planeswalkers. In a match of *Magic*, the players (most commonly two players compete, but many multiplayer variants exist) take the role of these planeswalkers and battle to defeat their opponent(s), usually, by playing cards and taking actions to reduce the opposing player's "life total" from its starting value of 20 to 0 or below.

Most cards depict creatures or objects that fight on behalf of the players or else individual magical spells that have a one-time effect. Each of these types of cards are known as "spells." Each spell has a cost that must be paid to play the card. Generally, players pay using a resource known as "mana" that is produced by a separate card type called "lands," which are not considered spells. Lands represent different types of terrain that the planeswalkers channel energy from. *Magic* has five different types of "basic lands" that are integral to play. Each type of land produces mana in a corresponding color: "Plains" produce white mana, "Islands" produce blue, "Swamps" produce black, "Mountains" produce red, and "Forests" produce green.

Before gameplay, the lands and spells are shuffled together into a deck of cards for play. Players start with seven cards in hand and may take mulligans as necessary. Each turn, a player can put a land from their hand onto the battlefield and activate it by "tapping," the game's terminology for rotating the card sideways to indicate it has been used for the turn, to add one mana of the corresponding color. From there, players can

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play as many cards from their hand as they can afford with their existing mana resources.

The rest of the game then is a resource management and strategic exercise involving managing access to cards from the deck, life total, and “threats,” ways to reduce an opponent’s life total or otherwise win the game, and “answers” cards that remove threats from play.

Most spells’ costs require mana of a certain color to be played, thus *Magic*’s decks and gameplay are closely tied to this mana system. Each color of mana has access to separate game mechanics and abilities that have their own strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, the colors are given philosophies and thematic relationships, such as blue’s connection to water, ice, and intellectualism and black’s to death, darkness, and ambition. The colors of mana create diversity in deck-building by ensuring players will play cards and lands of the same colors and players who identify with the philosophies and ideologies of the colors may form sentimental attachments to them.

Magic play is divided into formats based on deck construction and card limitations. In “constructed” formats, players assemble their decks prior to competing. Constructed decks are a minimum of 60 cards with 15-card sideboards (a second deck with situational cards that can be swapped in and out of the 60-card “main deck” between rounds). Constructed formats are further subdivided by the card pool available for players’ decks; “Modern,” “Standard,” “Vintage” and “Legacy” are the primary constructed formats sanctioned by Wizards of the Coast. Each of these formats limits the

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available cards that players can put in their decks through format-specific banned and restricted card lists. On the other hand, in “limited” formats, players open sealed *Magic* product and construct decks for play *during*, rather than before, the play experience has begun. In limited play, card evaluation and selection take place as part of the game, not as preparation. Limited decks are 40-cards wherein the sideboards consist of all the other cards a player has opened during the event but not placed into their deck.

Research Question

Research Catalyst: Magic’s Community and Controversy

Magic’s long history and popularity have spawned an impressive global community that gathers both online—on dedicated forums, social media venues, competitive play websites, and card marketplaces—and physically—at tournament venues for professional competitions, open events, and casual play. Gaming communities like this one, which have been historically white-male-dominated and heteronormative, are often home to contentious conversations regarding social justice and access for marginalized groups. The impetus for this research project was my desire to perform an academic inquiry into the *Magic* community’s acceptance and inclusion of difference (from the white, heterosexual, and male norm).

Women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people of color, and other socially marginalized groups tend to be underrepresented as depictions on *Magic* cards and, in the U.S., as visible tournament players – a disconnect that is especially noticeable at the professional,

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competitive level of play. For instance, in February 2017 the Pro Tour for the “Aether Revolt” set (Pro Tours are large professional tournaments that accompany the release of a new set of *Magic* cards every three to four months) had 0 female players competing out of the 192 slots for Wizards of the Coast’s approved professional teams (Rosenberg, 2017). This lack of diversity in *Magic* has prompted a fair share of community outcry from *Magic* players, particularly women, sharing their experiences in the community and offering strategies for better welcoming marginalized groups into the game’s community.

For example, Gaby Spartz, (2015) one of few female professional players and now a Wizards of the Coast employee, wrote articles explaining her experiences for popular competitive play and strategy website “Channel Fireball.” The first article was entitled *6 Things You Can Do to Get Women into Magic* and expressed her desire to see women better included in the game’s community and offered strategies on doing so. Later, she created a companion piece to address the telling amount of criticism she received from the predominantly male commenters on her first article. In these articles, she identifies issues she experienced and that she claims are commonly reported by female players that make the *Magic* community toxic or unwelcoming for them. She identifies issues such as the male-dominated play spaces leading to unnecessary, unwanted sexual advances; dismissive, sexist language (“You played well.... for a girl!”); and the prevalence of preconceived notions and internalized prejudices toward females and the feminine (Spartz, 2015).

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Similarly, Meghan Wolff (2015), another prominent female *Magic* player and content creator, published an article on the *Star City Games* website addressing the issue of female representation in the tournament structure. She identified two specific concerns for female representation in competitive *Magic*. One is visibility, the idea that barriers to the transition from casual to competitive play stop women from being visible as a demographic within *Magic*. The second is “girlfriendification,” which she defines as:

... the things *Magic* players do that differentiate female players from the community at large and that contribute to incorrect or problematic perceptions of women. The word's origins lie in the common misperception that women at competitive events are there because they're dating a competitive player rather than because they're a serious competitor themselves.

Before Wolff even describes these issues and offers her suggestions for addressing them, she offers the following preface:

I've wanted to write about women in *Magic*, but it feels impossible. Writing about it involves walking the world's worst tightrope between reason and passion, between contributing something both meaningful and relatable. How do you talk about a need for change without leveling accusations, hurting feelings, or alienating some of the very people whose help is vital to making a difference?

There are barriers to women playing competitive *Magic* - unnecessary and difficult issues that prevent potential competitors from ever leaving the “kitchen

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table” - and these are issues we can and should address. While it's something that I'm passionate about, arguing the point sometimes feels like throwing myself against a brick wall because there are people who don't believe it's even an issue and who don't want to be convinced. (Wolff 2015)

Wolff opening with these paragraphs is pertinent for demonstrating her acute awareness of the controversy surrounding the conversation that she is trying to have. I believe this was a trained rhetorical move when posting this article to avoid some of the same backlash that Spartz received and to demonstrate an awareness and respect for the existing resistance to her message. On the online conversation surrounding women and *Magic*, while many agree with Wolff and Spartz about both the existence and problematic nature of exclusionary conditions, some portions of the player base push back believing that the diversity issues are nonexistent or over and that these initiatives are a form of thought policing. On social media and video sharing websites, the conversation from members of both camps often becomes ugly.

Bowing to the increasing contentiousness of this issue within the *Magic* community, Wizards of the Coast has made their public stance abundantly clear to their audience. In recent years, they have been intentionally focusing on initiatives to increase the representation of difference within the game. Lately, on the tournament scene, Wizards of the Coast has prioritized female players during video coverage of feature matches. Similarly, the design and creative teams have sought to increase representation

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on the cards themselves. Within the past two years, *Magic* has depicted on cards and published stories featuring, to name a few: a non-gender-binary planeswalker, “Ashiok, Nightmare Weaver;” a trans character, “Alesha, who Smiles at Death;” two characters who are in a queer relationship, “Kynaios and Tiro of Meletis;” and a black female planeswalker, “Kaya, Ghost Assassin”— all of which are firsts for the game.

Wizards of the Coast’s official stance on the issue has not done much to ameliorate the contentious nature of the conversation online. In fact, certain *Magic* players have expressed feelings of personal attack or outrage that the company producing the game has made a public stance towards social justice. For instance, An online *Magic* content creator that goes only by the name Jeremy operates a website and YouTube channel known as “MTGHeadquarters.” He holds the opposite view from Spartz, Wolff, and Wizards of the Coast’s official policy. Jeremy is one of the players who believes that the diversity initiatives in *Magic* are unrealistic and overstep their boundaries; he has made public comments critical of them, such as the following tweet: “MTA (referring to Magic: the Amateuring, an all-female *Magic* content creation team of which Wolff is one half) is cancer. Campus feminists entirely misguided. They will learn at some point that their views are cancerous” (2016).

Jeremy has also made public statements that indicate his belief that inclusion initiatives in the game align with liberal vs. conservative party politics, such as the following tweets: “the mtg [*Magic: The Gathering*] community is not ready for truth.

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Cucks and white knights drive the entirety of the narrative,” and “Here is the thing about my fellow Shitlords. We have real numbers. Some would like to believe everyone who plays MTG is a Snowflake. Nope. (2016)” Here he is using a highly specified jargon for contemporary online political discourse, such as the term “white knight,” (a disparaging term for men on the internet who defend women or police sexism), “Shitlord” (a self-identity and rebranding of a derogatory term to refer to people that post controversial, or counterculture topics online). Similarly, the terms “Cucks” and “SnowFlakes” are intrinsically associated with internet conservatism the alt-right movement. As Dana Schwartz writes for GQ, “If “cuck” is the insult of choice for the alt-right to lump together and dismiss establishment conservatives, “snowflake” has become the go-to for enemies on the left. (2017)”

Jeremy has been outspoken that the movement towards inclusivity in *Magic* is, in his view, a noxious, liberal political agenda. Jeremy and by extension “MTGHeadquarters” have built their brand on appealing to *Magic* players that fall in line with this ideology and may themselves identify, as Jeremy does, as “shitlords” because their views run counter to Wizards of the Coast’s official policy and the inclusive sentiment that they feel is shared by the majority of *Magic* players. His statements so often being inflammatory and specifically directed to community members with differing views has caused his conversation with other Magic community members to be hostile, which, in late 2016 came to a head.

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When *Magic* releases new product, the upcoming cards are gradually revealed to the audience over a few weeks. During this time, certain prominent community members are given preview cards that they get to reveal to their audiences on behalf of the game company. When a PR firm for Wizards of the Coast gave Jeremy preview cards to reveal on his channel, this conversation reached a boiling point. Opponents of Jeremy's anti-feminist rhetoric and public disdain for Wizards of the Coast's diversity initiatives were outraged that someone who has made such remarks was given an official nod from the company. The ensuing argument took place over a series of YouTube videos and posts on Reddit and elsewhere on the web, wherein community members weighed in either to his defense or opposition. The conversation became so contentious that members were threatening to contact employers and loved ones and interfere with each other's lives outside of the game. After an investigation by Wizards of the Coast, Jeremy received a public reprimand from Wizards of the Coast, which he attributes to a form of discrimination because of his conservatism. He remains a polarizing figure and conversations on female inclusion and representation with this level of intensity, vitriol, and controversy are still commonplace within *Magic*'s community.

The interplay between the conversation happening on both sides of this argument, with Jeremy, Spartz, and Wolff representing high profile, high-visibility examples of the shape of this discourse, directly inform the value of focusing this study on masculinity. Much of Jeremy's particular language and argument reflected a belief in the value of

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appealing to a dominant, masculine “shitlord” ethos as a way to gain agency and perform identity. Although the role of political discourse in this moment of American history complicates the analysis, it is possible that *Magic*’s history as a white-male-dominated pastime may have created an implicit bias towards whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity that players, like Jeremy, tap into when making appeals to ethos. These performances may also manifest in the aggressive, gatekeeping language often observed in *Magic* discourse.

My research project was catalyzed by this nature of heated public discourse within the *Magic* community. These conversations are invisible to the world outside of the game, but have real-world ramifications for the way individuals communicate beyond merely *Magic* play spaces in society. *Magic*’s community is an archetypal tabletop gaming community and by extension a microcosm of gaming and “geek” culture. Thus, the communication practices and values of the members of these communities are important and worthy of study because they can shed light on the types of identities and rhetorical performances that are associated with “geek” and gaming cultures in regards to inclusivity.

Research Goals

This research is a preliminary study of community discourse and identity within the *Magic: The Gathering* tabletop gaming community. The goal of the study is to gather and analyze qualitative and quantitative data on *Magic* players’ perceptions of their

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individual and community values, identities, perspectives on diversity and inclusion, and rhetorical performances of masculinity/agency in *Magic: The Gathering* play spaces.

My hypothesis is that *Magic* players rhetorically construct and perform masculine identities to leverage ethos and agency in gaming situations. I theorize that a community-wide implicit bias towards a masculine ideal for “gamers” may lead players to make these sorts of ethical appeals. If this hypothesis is supported, it could explain the types of androcentric gatekeeping, exclusionary discourse that community members like Gaby Spartz have reported within the community.

To test this hypothesis, I ethnographically observed *Magic* events to determine how prevalent, if at all, these exclusionary discourse patterns were and analyzed the rhetorical performances of identity, agency, and masculinity that predominate *Magic* events. In addition to ethnographic observation, I conducted interviews with players to understand their motivations, values, and identities in regards to the game. The goals of the interviews were to gather the players’ perceptions of their personal identities and values as well as the identities and values they believe are shared within the *Magic* community. The goal of investigating with both ethnography and interview was to illuminate any existing disconnect between the values and identities that *Magic* players self-disclose and the identities and values that *Magic* players rhetorically perform on-site. This research contributes to communication scholars’ understanding of discourse and

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identity within “geek” and gamer cultures, specifically the oft-neglected tabletop gamer subcultures.

Of important note for this study, is that the work included here is preliminary and exploratory. The methods, observations, and implications are geared toward breadth rather than depth. This pilot study hopes to uncover certain relevant theories and models for examining a wide swathe of issues of identity-performance and language use in *Magic: The Gathering* play spaces that should serve as a jumping-off point for future scholarship.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Magic Players as Discourse Community

The foundational work of Erik Borg (2003) and John Swales (2011) provide the groundwork for defining discourse community, and *Magic*'s community meets all the major precepts they posited. Swales (2011) writes, "A discourse community consists of a group of people who link up in order to pursue objectives that are prior to those of socialization and solidarity, even if these latter should consequently occur." Although *Magic*'s community is a community of play and thus camaraderie and fun are a natural consequence, *Magic* players share features of discourse community beyond enjoyment.

Swales' (2011) six characteristics of discourse community are as follows: broadly agreed-upon common goals, highly specialized language, participatory communication mechanisms, information exchange, community specific genres, and threshold levels of content and discourse expertise required for assimilation. I will discuss each of the preceding characteristics as they apply to the *Magic* community.

The most common goal of *Magic* players is to evaluate and share opinions on the game itself. *Magic* players are outspoken about expressing their likes and dislikes of elements of the game, community, or organized play, and actively strive to shape the future of the game. *Magic* players, like many "geek" fandoms, discuss even the minutest elements of their pastime and offer criticism, praise, and suggestions. When new cards are revealed, players tend to hyperbolically judge the quality of the card generally in absolute terms. Players are quick to comment whether a card is "essential" and "overpowered" or else "underpowered" and "unplayable." Similarly, strong opinion and

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conversation are common about details ranging from the art and packaging to current events and controversies within the community.

For *Magic* players, particularly competitive ones, another core objective shared by the community is to discuss and appreciate the game. For competitive players, the core goal is to improve at the game and the many skills that it demands from its players: rules knowledge, individual card power-level evaluations, tactical decision-making, and understanding inter-card synergies to name a few. I speculate that the majority of conversations that occur about *Magic*, whether online or in person, hinge on understanding gameplay decision-making in order to improve players' win percentages. Based on these shared goals for *Magic* players, more than simple socialization is central to the objectives of this community. *Magic* players actively want to improve at play and guide production and interpretation of *Magic* products aligning them as a discourse community.

Magic players certainly share a specialized language. Some of which is slang created by the community; For instance, "to mise" meaning to be very lucky in a situation, "to topdeck" meaning to draw a specific card from the top of the deck. While, some are sanctioned by the game's rules: "library" for each player's deck, and "graveyard" for each player's discard pile, the names of the specific card types, and resources like "mana" and "life total." Specific vocabulary exists for discussing almost every element of the game from deck-building archetypes, like "aggro" (aggressive), "combo" (combination), and "control," to card evaluation and categorization (e.g. "bombs," for ultra-powerful cards, "removal," for cards that "remove" threats from play). *Magic*'s rules also employ a highly specific language to ensure that the game's over

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12,000 cards interact correctly even in corner-case scenarios. Thus, *Magic*'s rules proscribe the use of specific terminology to understand the games interactions. For example, to differentiate the mechanical effects of cards concisely, *Magic* employs a system known as "keywords," wherein cards have abilities dictated by the use of a certain term. For instance, creatures with the keyword "flying" have an evasive ability that makes them only able to be "blocked" (itself a game specific term relevant in creature combat) by other creatures with the keyword flying. Another example are creatures with the "defender" keyword that are unable to attack during combat. *Magic*'s specialized lexis is so comprehensive that several spaces on the web are dedicate to unpacking it to the uninitiated: from head designer Mark Rosewater's (2005, 2016) two-article series on design and development terminology, to professional player Reid Duke's (2015) glossary for new players, to the Magic wiki's dedicated pages listing "Slang" and "Keywords." Additionally, because of the centrality of communication practices to advancing the game, the game can be itself seen as a shared language while the rules can be seen as a grammar system (see Discussion). The shared languages that *Magic* players ascribe to are another key factor in considering this community as a discourse community.

As for participatory communication practices, information exchange, and shared genres, players share online and physical spaces dedicated to the discussion and play of *Magic*. Within these spaces, playing the game itself is a discursive genre unique to *Magic* players that involves linguistic and paralinguistic communication as well as generic expectations, conventions, and constraints (see Discussion). Outside of play, *Magic* players engage commonly in creating active online discussion communities and, especially, the writing and disseminating of information in a variety of mediums and

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genres, from podcasting to journalism. Unique to the *Magic* community is the genre of a “set review” or of a “pick order sheet.” A set review is a card-by-card evaluation of the power level, synergies, flavor, etc. of each card in a newly released *Magic* set. Pick orders, similarly, are card-by-card rankings of the cards in a set and suggestions of the order in which they should be prioritized for selection during the draft portions of limited play. Set reviews and pick orders are largely published by well-known professional players or teams in order to disseminate the information and perspectives of respected community members to the *Magic* playing public. The exchanging of information is essential to both the game and metagame elements of *Magic: the Gathering*. During play, information must be cleanly transmitted from player to player to determine and agree upon game states and in-game interactions. Within the community, information exchange is critical in communicating perspectives on what is working and what isn’t in the game as far as creative elements (e.g. storytelling and art) and strategic elements (e.g. the tournament viability of cards or particular strategies for certain situations).

Lastly, is Swale’s (2011) idea that entry to discourse communities is usually mediated by a threshold level of genre and content knowledge that an individual must have in order to be relevantly inducted into a discourse community. This certainly holds true for *Magic*’s discourse community, because to contribute to conversations on evaluation of the game or improvement of play skill, one must have a base level of game and terminology knowledge. *Magic*’s community neatly fits these criteria for discourse community because mechanisms and spaces are in place to facilitate these exchanges of knowledge, they take place in specialized genres using specialized vocabulary, and they are for the express purpose of achieving community goals.

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Additionally, precedent exists for examining gaming communities as discourse communities. For instance, a piece by the University of Wisconsin's Constance Steinkuehler entitled "Massively Multiplayer Online Gaming as Participation in a Discourse Community" (2006) provides a model for legitimizing the study of gaming groups as discourse communities. This research simply moves the analysis of player language from an online to a physical gaming space.

Rhetorical Identification and *Magic: The Gathering*

This study borrows heavily from Burkean rhetoric, as Kenneth Burke's (1965) foundational work on rhetorical identification is particularly important for a study that hinges so deeply on community identity. In *Magic* play spaces, individuals with wildly different backgrounds and identities are performing shared discursive acts and displaying or reconciling their *Magic* player identity with their other identities and values.

Specifically, for the second prong of my hypothesis that *Magic* players sociorhetorically construct and perform a "gamer" identity, I turn to "The Art of Invective: Performing Identity in Cyberspace" (Vrooman 2002) and "Messy Rhetoric: Identity Performance as Rhetorical Agency in Online Public Forums" (Grabill & Pigg 2012). Both of these pieces focus on identity performance through rhetorical actions specifically for the purposes of achieving ethos and agency in a situation and both specifically deal with understanding ethical appeals to identity in male-dominated contexts.

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The latter source by Grabill and Pigg (2012) serves as a relevant model to replicate when examining *Magic* player discourse. Grabill and Pigg (2012) humorously address the rhetorical situation of public discourse in online forums (similar to those that much of the conversation surrounding *Magic* is carried out on): “Imagine you are a museum administrator... imagine then, how you might read a discussion on poultry science on your museum's blog that contains more than one sentence written like this: “i luv chickens! w00t!”” They describe some specific quandaries of forum communication: postings are persistent in time and space, nonlinear in terms of engagement, and ephemeral, as they say, “the actors are many, not around often or very long, and typically engage via textual fragments. “Guided by the conceptual considerations and methodological limitations that emerged because of this, they focused on the leveraging of identity as a form of rhetorical agency and empowerment, which ties directly into my hypothesis that *Magic* players attempt to leverage their own identity and competitive skill in much the same way as the researchers observed in this piece.

Grabill and Pigg (2012) performed a discourse analysis on the information provided by a multi-year study on *Science Buzz.org*, the large public forum of the Science Museum of Minnesota. They used a coding scheme based on the following four criteria “building an argument,” “exploring new ideas” and appeals to either a personal “writer’s identity”, or a “community identity.” They found that identity performances were largely used to “move discourse” by pushing “conversation from the abstract and conceptual

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toward the immediate and concrete,” and “creating exigencies” that other forum participants would respond to by entering the conversation or nuancing claims (2012). I was looking to notice these types of rhetorical moves during the ethnographic observations, the operative difference being that, again, I looked emergent discourse in a physical space and not archived discourse in an online setting.

Masculinity, *Magic the Gathering*, and Manhood Acts

My hypothesis specifically focuses on the idea that players perform masculine “gamer” identities to attain agency in *Magic* play spaces. For this, an understanding of contemporary work in sociology and gender studies is necessary to make the important connection of whether or not the performances of “gamer” identity include performance of masculinity. Depending on what the players share with me in the interviews and ethnographic observations, I could see a myriad of reasons for *Magic*’s potential leanings toward masculinity. It could be that the combative nature of the game is war-like and competitive which appeals to males over females due to sociocultural factors. Take for example Alan Johnson’s (1997) case for the cultural construction of war and competition as indicative of the hegemonic ideal of manhood. Similarly, cultural norms of acceptable hobbies for males and females could also influence the interest level of players. My analysis will focus instead on access and inclusivity, effectively the guiding questions will be, “for those who **are** interested in playing *Magic*, do exclusive conditions exist?”

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and, “is the discourse being used by the community inclusive or intolerant of other, non-gamer identities?”

It is also worth making the distinction between masculinity and hegemonic masculinity. Leveraging appeals to what are societally known as masculine traits or values is not inherently discriminatory or patriarchal; in fact, in feminist contexts, particularly reclaiming gendered spaces like fitness or sports, these appeals can be important for community members and not hegemonic (Parinello-Cason, 2016). However, hegemonic masculinity, as defined by R.W. Connell (2005) is, “the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life. At any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted. Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women”

What this study is most interested in observing is if and when performances of “gamer” identities constructed by *Magic* players manifest in ways that draw upon and reinforce the hegemonic ideal. This work is informed by foundational sociological texts such as “Patriarchy” by Allan Johnson (1997) and R.W. Connell’s (2005) “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.” Connell’s (2005) work provided a model for understanding the variegated nature of multiple masculinities, however, the framework I am most closely applying to this study is that of the *manhood acts* perspective

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popularized by the work of Douglas Schrock and Michael Schwalbe (2009).

As an extension of the evolution of defining and studying masculinity, from the push in the 1980's to understanding multiple expressions of masculinities, the more recent manhood acts perspective focuses instead on the observable study of "the ways that males collectively and individually engage in identity work to present themselves as men. (Vacarro, 2011). The foundational "Men, Masculinity, and Manhood Acts" (Schrock and Scwalbe, 2009) first laid the basis of this theoretical framework and Christian Vacarro's (2011) "Male Bodies in Manhood Acts: The Role of Body-Talk and Embodied Practice in Signifying Culturally Dominant Notions of Manhood" put the framework to use analyzing paralinguistic, bodily communicant practices that people who identified as male used to gain agency. This perspective is particularly relevant for rhetorical scholars as it ties in well with Burkean identification and the action of ethical appeals in classical rhetoric. In this way, a research goal of the ethnography and interviews is to determine through self-disclosure and observation what sort of appeals to ethos and manhood acts exist within the *Magic* community and whether or not they are problematically linked to a "hegemonic ideal" for masculinity (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009).

Problematic masculinity in gaming circles is particularly relevant to this study and to the contemporary talk about gender and gaming in a post-GamerGate world.

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“Hypermasculinity and Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public” by Bridget Blodgett and Anastasia Salter (2012) is a case study of the events surrounding a video gaming controversy and provides a particularly close model for understanding how female identities and conventional gaming’s masculine implicit bias can conflict. Specifically, Salter and Blodgett (2012) bring up the idea of “geek masculinity,” a prime example of the multiple masculinities framework, which “develops in spite of traditional gender norms” yet still can manifest itself in ways that are hegemonically masculine and exclusionary. By asking participants about their value systems, identities, and ethical appeal strategies, I sought to gather a body of evidence on how *Magic* players self-report their own identities and whether this construct fits a “geek” identity, whether they view it (or themselves) as masculine, and which aspects of masculinity they buy into and propagate and which they reject and why.

Lastly, to my premise that *Magic* players’ performed masculinity manifests as exclusionary and aggressive gatekeeping language that alienates players (particularly women and members of other marginalized groups) I have turned to other work on identifying problematic, institutional language. For example, Barbara Plester’s (2015) piece “‘Take it Like a Man’: Performing Hegemonic Masculinity Through Organizational Humour” provides a methodology example for coding instances when rhetorical tropes may be used to perpetuate social hierarchies. Plester (2015) focuses on uncovering

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microaggressive language as performances of ethos to communicate an institutional identity, which is another relevant model when analyzing *Magic* players' communications at events, in the case that their communication and performance of a *Magic* player identity may push against or minimize other identities.

This pilot study seeks to build off the manhood acts perspective and these existing frameworks for analyzing hegemonically masculine language use and identification within institutions and discourse communities and apply them to the unique context of the *Magic: The Gathering* discourse community.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

For this project, I conducted a rhetorical ethnography of *Magic* player discourse during competitive and casual tournament events and analyzed their identity construction and beliefs in semi-structured interviews.

Theoretical Framework

The methodology I employed here was built out of the intersection of rhetorical study and ethnography noted by researchers like Middleton et al. (2015) and Hess (2011) as well as the push towards rhetorics of the vernacular noted by researchers like Barnett and Boyle (2016) and Ono and Sloop (1995).

I operated on a framework based on Teun van Dijk's (1993) critical discourse analysis model that seeks to point out and correct power inequities in organizational cultures. This standpoint does suggest that the researcher goes in with a bias towards

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finding and correcting systemic social problems as they manifest in discourse, however, I did take caution to avoid confirmation bias and strove to let the data speak for itself.

Similarly, I was inspired by Hess's (2011) critical-rhetorical ethnography method which focuses on participatory and engaged ethnography to enact institutional change from within. My hope is that my results, discussion, and implications may also serve as action research to be provided back to the community as a means to improve understanding about the existence and scope of exclusive discourse, identities, values, and systems within *Magic's* community.

Procedure

Ethnography

Using available online calendars, I followed the progress of *Magic: The Gathering's* larger competitive events on the east coast. *Magic's* larger events include open tournaments, invitational tournaments, and preliminary/qualifying tournaments for specific circuits of competitive play. My research focused on "Grand Prix" events. Grand Prix are the largest type of *Magic* tournaments that are still open to the public and not restricted to professional players. Prominent *Magic* or tabletop gaming-related companies host the Grand Prix at various venues across the globe and they are generally weekend-long events featuring a main event tournament with a prize payout in the thousands for the top 8 finishes, and also feature a series of side events and open *Magic* play. Since these tournaments are open to the public, generally have attendance in the thousands, and are in metropolitan areas that many players travel to from across the region, they make an ideal environment for interacting with a representative sample of regional *Magic* players.

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I was able to attend Grand Prix Pittsburgh from February 10 – 12th in PA, the Star City Games Open Weekend (a Grand Prix-like open event hosted by a different tournament organizer) from February 18th – 19th in Baltimore, MD; and Grand Prix New Jersey from March 10th – 12th in Secaucus, NJ. Outside of the larger tournaments, Wizards of the Coast sponsors a weekly series of events at registered game stores across the country called “Friday Night Magic” (FNM). FNM tournaments are casual events that are the representative, vernacular experiences of amateur tournament players. To remain true to the notion of rhetorics of the everyday, I attended two FNM tournaments in a research capacity at a game store in Charlottesville, VA known as “The End Games” in addition to the three larger tournaments. I employed the same methodology that I would use at a larger event.

At the events I attended, I acted as a participant-observer, field researcher, and ethnographer taking notes on venue, demography, scope, and particularly the discourse used in each space. Of particular interest, was access and agency, answering the questions of who is privileged to speak in these situations, what identities are performed, and what identities are marginalized or disparaged. During my field research, I observed and recorded players’ language use in the tournament spaces. I employed a similar strategy to Grabill and Pigg (2012), when identifying discursive purposes. I recorded when players actions were “building an argument,” “exploring new ideas,” and particularly when they are making appeals to either a “personal identity”, or a “*Magic* community identity” and how these identities may or may not be reliant on hegemonic masculinity. I paid close attention to players’ interactions with difference and was especially attentive to the balance between harmful gendered language or stereotype, neutral language, and

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inclusive or welcoming language. I did not audio record players' matches and conversations, instead relying on field notes.

Interview

During this ethnographic process, I met and requested interviews with specific community members, game storeowners, *Magic* players, tournament organizers, and judges. For those willing to be interviewed, the semi-structured interviews were recorded with the participants' informed consent. The questions asked were about personal value systems and identity, previous experiences as a player, and then perceptions of difference and power inequities within the community. The questions asked to each participant were as follows:

1. How long have you been a *Magic* player?
2. How long have you been playing in sanctioned events or competitive tournaments?
3. What type of *Magic* player do you consider yourself to be, serious, casual, etc.?
4. Have you always felt welcome in the *Magic* community or at these events, why or why not?
5. Do you consider being a *Magic* player part of your identity?
6. In a few words, how else would describe your identity?
7. Can you name three key values that you believe define you?
8. Do you believe these values or identities are shared by most *Magic* players?
9. Can you name some values or identities that you believe **are** shared by most *Magic* players?
10. Does your identity or personality change when you are playing competitive *Magic* or when you have *Magic* cards in your hand?
11. Have any of your other identities (including gender and ethnicity) ever felt at odds with your *Magic* player identity?

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12. What are some behaviors that you have noticed players use (or performed yourself) to appeal to their agency or credibility in situations?
13. Do you believe that *Magic* is inclusive to difference?
14. Should Wizards of the Coast do more to get women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people of color, and other marginalized groups into *Magic*?

These interviews were designed to gather a body of qualitative research and were coded following an emergent coding scheme, determining the codes based on the specific types of responses and trends I noticed. I analyzed the interview data to look for trends in value systems and identity formation among players, to determine if the players I interviewed constructed their identities or characterized the identities of typical *Magic* players in similar ways. Additionally, I analyzed whether or not those trends express patterns of masculinity and whether or not these expressions of masculinity are valued above other ways of being or used to gate keep.

Limitations

The key limitation to the scope of my research were my ability to travel and my selection of samples. I was limited to researching specific areas on the Eastern United States. This convenience sample was bolstered a bit in legitimacy due to the size and scope of the Grand Prix events I attended. However, this suggests that this research is not generalizable to the international discourse community of *Magic* players, though I fully expect that these local players do contribute to online, global discourse on *Magic* and are influenced by it. That said, this sample may be generalizable to the *Magic*-playing population in the commonwealth of VA or in the Mid-Atlantic region.

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My sample of interview respondents has a similar limitation based around convenience. When selecting interview respondents, I approached people as they exited the tournament venue and explained the project and requested their time. This convenience sample was semi-random and may not be fully representative of the *Magic* players in attendance. Most notably, my results may actually not feature the perspectives of particularly invested or competitive tournament players as they may have felt they did not have the time to sacrifice to be interviewed during the heat of competition.

Similarly, my sample selection of interview participants is also limited due to being based on identifying marginalized perspectives. When selecting interview subjects, I specifically targeted people of color, people that identified as female, and people that identified as members of other marginalized groups. By doing this, my research may provide underrepresented perspectives in numbers higher than their average membership within the community. I do not view this fully as a limitation, as my research is based on reclaiming these narratives that often get buried within the larger, white, male, heteronormative, “geek” ideal, but this factor is worth bringing to the readers’ attention.

CHAPTER 4 Results

Ethnographic Results

Friday Night Magic Observations

Friday Night Magic events are worth study as they are the casual, local, and vernacular experiences of Magic players and are held weekly. I began the ethnographic portion of this research by attending Friday Night Magic events at a hobby shop in Charlottesville, Virginia. The game shop is located in a quiet outlet mall next to a handful

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of restaurants and stores. The interior is spacious and hosts about ten long tables with folding chairs stretched across the space of the room to serve as play areas for a variety of games. In one corner of the space is a computer station featuring four gaming computers that can be rented out for spans of time as in a cyber café. Along the back walls are a counter to check out purchases and well-stocked shelves of board games, game accessories, and individual cards and booster packs for sale.

The turnout at Friday Night Magic events tends to be sparse, even in larger cities because they have many competing game stores and the communities for any particular game fracture into smaller groups of people that play at each individual store. When I attended “The End” games, Friday Night Magic was sharing the night with a local group playing Wizards of the Coast’s other most popular game, *Dungeons and Dragons*. More than half of the tables were taken up with “dungeon masters” behind screens rolling dice and many smiling players, most of whom were families with a wide range of ages. *Magic* was being played closer to the front counter, both because events like these sanctioned by Wizards of the Coast require access to software for matchmaking and because *Magic* product is sold behind that counter. Excluding myself, thirteen players were involved in the Magic event, eleven of whom passed as white, while two visibly presented as people of color. At this event, no female players were present, and in fact there was only one female on the *Magic* side of the room who spent much of the night looking over at her phone and not very often being noticed or spoken to by the players.

The male players were also somewhat reticent and did not communicate readily outside of with the one or two people that they came to the store with. However, occasionally, if a player mentioned a card name or humorous anecdote loudly enough,

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another in the vicinity would perk up, offer sidebar commentary, and maybe join a larger conversation. Conversations were similarly fractured during drafting (the event that I was attending was the draft variant of limited play), deck building, and play. For draft, eight-player pods are the most common. This number is ideal as brackets can easily be determined for winners and losers and the number of players is not so great or so few that the information obtained during the draft is overwhelming or muddling to the players. An important skill for drafting is an awareness of the cards that the players around a drafter that are passing to or from that player are selecting so that a player can choose an archetype or strategy where they are not competing with other drafters for the same limited cards.

During the draft at this store, conversation remained limited to conversation within the two separate pods that the thirteen players were separated into. During competitive drafts, players are generally almost silent as any communication could give away information to the other players at the table. However, at casual events “table talk,” as it is often referred to, is more common. During the draft, the types of communication that predominate are either small talk unrelated to the game, although highly infrequently, or else discussions of strategy on picks and which colors, directions, or strategies seem to be available in the draft, which is to say other players are not selecting cards in these colors or strategies making them viable for selection. A particularly common form of table talk that even I engaged in was self-deprecation or criticism of one’s own ability to select and draft cards. This is likely most common at casual events like Friday Night Magic events where the stakes are low enough that players do not feel the need to sugar coat or disguise information about poor practices. I overheard comments like, “this is an

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absolute train wreck of a draft” or, “this is not a deck, this is just a bunch of cards, I don’t even know what my decks wants to do.” People tended to either relate or else claim that their decks, on the other hand, seem to have had more success.

Grand Prix Tournament Observations

The larger open tournaments that I attended, Grand Prix Pittsburgh, Grand Prix New Jersey and the Star City Games Open Weekend in Baltimore were similar to the Friday Night Magic events in many ways, only with increased competitive tension in the air and the space scaled up massively to accommodate thousands of players. Each of these events had similar venues and aesthetics and the atmosphere surrounding the events was much like the atmosphere at a typical fandom convention such as Comic Con. They were each held in convention centers and featured large decorative arrangements such as plaques and posters provided by either Wizards of the Coast or tournament organizers to mark the space. The drab concrete floors and walls of a convention center were adorned by these decorations and populated by thousands of people moving to or from the main play spaces. The events were loud and busy with people generally rushing to participate in the scheduled events and overhead speakers blasting the results of the round and which events were starting soon.

The play spaces were generally on the ground floors of the centers and featured hundreds of tables that were numbered and arranged systematically. Along the corners and walls of the convention spaces were the vendors. *Magic: The Gathering* card and accessory vendors were well represented. Each doing business on behalf of individual storefronts or retailers, they set up booths to display products and sell, buy, or make trades. Other specialized spaces on the play floor were the concession stands provided by

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the venues, the information booth toward the front entrance, the stage for tournament organizers and judges to manage the events, declare pairings, provide prizes, etc., and the feature match area, where coverage teams record and stream matches of interest to viewers outside the convention center.

Outside of the bustling play areas was a sparsely populated lobby that players would loiter between matches or pass through when leaving the convention center. In these lobbies, tired players would rest on the floor and in the corners of the room, some would still be excitedly discussing lines of play, in-game decisions, and events of the tournament, and many were pacing around the lobby talking on their cellphones.

At these events, about 2,000+ people are present between the lobbies and main play rooms at any given time. The clear majority of players were white males, although it is impossible to record an exact number as this demographic information is not collected by tournament organizers. As I observed the crowds, I saw relatively few people visibly differ from the homogenous groups of white men that have become stereotypical of tabletop gaming spaces. I saw few people of color, people with disabilities, or female players at any of these events, although I did observe many players talking about the fact that the event turnout for these groups has increased greatly since *Magic's* past. At the average table, seating forty-four players, I recorded on average one or two female players and two to three players of color.

Most players carried backpacks and many displayed their membership in the *Magic* or other geek fandoms with their clothing and accessories. Many shirts, hoodies, and backpacks referenced anime, comics, science fiction, punk, or other subcultures considered niche. Many *Magic* players also proudly displayed their connection to the

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culture of *Magic* by wearing shirts, sunglasses, bags and displaying deck boxes, playmats, binders and dice.

Similar to Friday Night Magic events, was the noticeable cliquish nature of players' interactions in the space. Mingling between player groups was not as common as individual groups sticking together and largely conversing only with one another. This was observable with judges, vendors, and staff members not exclusively players. At the Star City Games Open Weekend, the format for the main event was one in which players competed as teams of three. At this event, the cliquishness and tribalism was dialed up even further with many people dressing in jerseys or uniforms to match their team and being hesitant to communicate outside of the team. It was at this event specifically, that I noticed more impatience and hostility to my role as an observer and when requesting interviews. Whereas, the Grand Prix events had an overall friendlier atmosphere.

Types of Discourse Observed

Generally, the types of game-related conversations did not differ much between the casual, vernacular Friday Night Magic events and the larger tournaments, the difference was largely in attitude and depth of discussion. At all the *Magic* play spaces that I observed, game-related discourse was primarily used for the following purposes:

- To progress or explain the game states during *Magic* play (e.g. “I’m going to activate the ability on my Walking Ballista {card name} and hit you for 2 damage”);
- To evaluate or critique individual cards either for power level and gameplay reasons or for game-external reasons like artwork or story (e.g.

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“that card is so freakin’ cool” or “that card is a must-pick it wins the game by itself”);

- To evaluate or critique strategic decisions made during deck building, card selection, or game play (e.g. “I don’t know if that was the right play, you didn’t leave up any blockers,” or “I wouldn’t put that card in my deck, it doesn’t do enough”);
- In-game predictive questioning (e.g. “Uh oh, am I about to see you cast an instant and kill my guy?”);
- Explanations and performances of individual philosophies, values, or opinions (e.g.
- To explain or teach new information (e.g. “you need to do that before the Dawnfeather Eagle’s {card name} ability resolves {game term for a card or ability having its effect on the game state}. As you cast the Eagle, you can respond to the ability by tapping it to crew your vehicles {in-game action specific to the card subtype known as vehicles} so that the vehicle gets the bonus”).

That latter type of conversation was particularly common as *Magic* is an information-dense game and players tended to be excited to share new information with others whether out of genuine desire to help those players or as an appeal to their own mastery of the game. At the casual level of play, at both Friday Night Magics and at side events at the Grand Prix events, players would occasionally offer these teachable moments in game even when their opponent knowing this information would lower their own chances of victory.

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At the larger events, there was a greater sense of urgency, emotion, and investment than at the casual events largely due to the greater stakes. Conversations about strategy were conducted on average with terminology that is more specific and for longer spans of time. Additionally, unlike at the FNM, many players in the larger events were visibly frustrated or upset.

Non-game-related conversation occurred less frequently than game-related conversation at both types of events, but seemed to be even less common on the play spaces of the larger Grand Prix events. These conversations tended to be either friend groups interacting within and conversing intimately and jovially, or else when paired with players they have not met people generally engaged in small talk when shuffling or before or after matches asking about work, school, etc.

Problematic Interactions with Difference

During my ethnographic observation at the larger tournaments, I observed several instances where problematic interactions occurred between male and female players and where sexist, ableist, and homophobic language was used. The fact that the spaces were male-dominated did manifest in the types of behaviors and communication practices that were normalized and expressed. The crowds were generally raucous, enthusiastic, and talkative but piercing through the crowd one could occasionally hear people freely using sexist, transphobic, or homophobic language. At Grand Prix Pittsburgh, there was a sign on the door leading into the play space warning against bullying or exclusive language but at the same time in the average players' vernacular, I frequently observed male voices disparaging other males using the term "faggot" or "fag," sometimes quite loudly.

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Additionally, the abundance of males normalized a degree of objectification or sexualization of women. I observed several open conversations by males about the attractiveness of other (female) members of the community and occasionally their desire to sleep with them. At one of the Grand prix events, while waiting to talk to a staff member on the tournament organizer stage, I observed a group of staff members talking amongst themselves—while on the job and within earshot of attendees—about whether one of the male staff members would “bang” a certain female attendee. This conversation culminated in homophobic teasing of that staff member as he tried to deflect that topic. One staff member went as far as to say, “I bet you’re just gay, I bet you’d roll over and take it.”

Often, I noticed when a woman would walk by a group of male *Magic* players all four to five necks would crane to follow her as she walked. I certainly felt the sense that women were aware of this male gaze during their interactions. At the same time, there was a degree of awkwardness and inability to communicate across differences like sex. One particular observation that a female friend of mine reported during grand Prix Pittsburg was that she approached a male *Magic* player to compliment his shirt and he looked at her, made brief eye contact, and simply walked away. She reported to me that she was unsure why that happened but that it had made her uncomfortable. Similarly, she told me that she became aware of individuals in the crowd looking at her often and was especially sensitive to when they would look at her, turn to their group of male friends and laugh.

I did not observe any particular instances of problematic language or interactions regarding disability status, nationality, ethnicity, or religion, which is not to say that these

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did not occur; I may have simply not been privy to them. Additionally, although these sexist, homophobic sentiments were pervasive enough to be noticeable they were not often intrusive and represented only a small portion of the typical discourse. Interestingly, I did not observe any such problematic interactions at the FNM level, only at larger events. This may simply be due to the abundance of people at such events.

Interview Results

I interviewed twenty-five players across all the events that I attended, fifteen of whom identified as men and ten of whom identified as women. Of the men, seven were men of color, two being Asian American and five being African American. All the female respondents and the remaining seven male respondents were white or white passing. One of the female respondents disclosed that she was a transwoman and one male respondent disclosed that he was gay, but no others disclosed any sexual identity, disability status, or other nonvisible difference. The following paragraphs identify the number and percentages of responses to each question, both holistically and in groups based on gender identity. Each question does not always have 25 individual responses as some participants declined to answer certain questions and for some questions, participants respond with multiple answers.

For the question of the competitive level of each *Magic* player, six respondents declined the question since they were not players but involved in the *Magic* community in other ways, as *Magic* judges, artists, or as travel companions for friends and significant others who were competitors. Three men and one woman identified as competitive players. Six male respondents and two female respondents identified as “in-between” or “casual with competitive aspirations,” while two male respondents and four female

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respondents identified as casual. Thus, of those who answered, 22% of respondents identified as competitive, 45% as between casual and competitive, and 33% as casual. Of the male respondents, 27% said competitive, 56% said in-between, and 17% said casual. For the female respondents, 14% said competitive, 29% said in-between, and 57% said casual.

For the question of feeling welcomed within the community, twelve male respondents and eight female respondents answered the question in the affirmative, while two male respondents and one female respondent answered that they had not always felt welcomed. Thus, 87% of the respondents had always felt welcome and 13% had not. For men, 86% had always felt welcome and 14% had not. For women, 89% had always felt welcome and 11% had not.

As for why they had felt welcome, each of the respondents mentioned primarily that they were treated with kindness and not discriminated against in *Magic* play spaces. Six female respondents and two male respondents, both of whom were African American men, identified specifically that although they were aware of conversations about exclusivity in *Magic* play spaces they had “never had a problem with [it]” in their own lived experiences. Similarly, four white male respondents identified their white male identities contributing favorably to their being welcome in play spaces. One respondent and long-time judge answered the question with, “Yes, [I’ve always felt welcomed]. I’m a tall Caucasian man, that has to count for something, right?”

As for the few respondents who cited that they were not always welcome in *Magic* play spaces, three key reasons emerged: exclusive or prejudicial language being normalized (One respondent particularly took issue with the word “retard” being used

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freely as an insult by *Magic* players), the abundance of players who react angrily or “salty” after matches, and the financial barrier of the expensive decks, and accessories.

The next questions focused on personal identity and value systems. When asked if they considered being a *Magic* player part of their identities, sixteen people responded yes and seven responded no (70% yes, 30% no). Divided by gender identity, eight men said yes and six said no (57% yes, 43% no), while eight women said yes and one said no (89% yes, 11% no). Notably, of the seven men of color interviewed, five said they did not consider being a *Magic* player part of their identity (29% yes, 71% no). From those interviewed, the five men of color were the largest demographic of individuals that did not self-disclose an identity of *Magic* player. Besides them, only one white male respondent and one white female respondent self-disclosed a non-*Magic* player identity.

Then, the respondents were tasked with summarizing other defining identities in addition to or instead of their *Magic* player identities. These were the most common codes for individual identities:

Table 1: Number and Percentage of Self-Disclosed Personal Identities of All Respondents

Identity	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Profession-based	8	20%
Athlete	6	16%
Tabletop Gamer	5	12%
Creative	4	10%
Friendly, Positive, Outgoing	4	10%
Nerd/Geek	4	10%
Video Gamer	3	7%
Passionate, Diligent	3	7%
Compassionate	1	2%
Competitive	1	2%
Confident	1	2%
Family-Oriented	1	2%

Table 1b: Number and Percentage of Self-Disclosed Personal Identities of Male Respondents

Identity	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Profession-based	6	26%
Athlete	5	22%
Creative	3	14%
Friendly, Positive, Outgoing	2	9%
Nerd/Geek	2	9%
Video Gamer	1	5%
Tabletop Gamer	1	5%
Passionate, Diligent	1	5%
Competitive	1	5%

Table 1c: Number and Percentage of Self-Disclosed Personal Identities of Female Respondents

Identity	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Tabletop Gamer	4	21%
Friendly, Positive, Outgoing	2	11%
Nerd/Geek	2	11%
Passionate, Diligent	2	11%
Profession-based	2	11%
Video Gamer	2	11%
Athlete	1	6%
Compassionate	1	6%
Confident	1	6%
Creative	1	6%

After the participants disclosed the above personal identities, they then disclosed personal values that they held dear:

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Table 2: Number and Percentage of Self-Disclosed Personal Values of All Respondents

Values	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Honesty/Integrity	11	25%
Kindness	6	14%
Fun-loving	5	12%
Determination/Hard Work	4	9%
Passion	4	9%
Self-Improvement	4	9%
Competitiveness	2	4%
Friendship/Community	2	4%
Loyalty	2	4%
Teaching Others	2	4%
Critical Thinking	1	2%
Humility	1	2%
Stubbornness	1	2%

Table 2a: Number and Percentage of Self-Disclosed Personal Values of Male Respondents

Values	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Honesty/Integrity	6	22%
Fun-loving	4	15%
Self-Improvement	4	15%
Determination/Hard Work	3	11%
Kindness	3	11%
Competitiveness	2	7%
Passion	2	7%
Friendship/Community	1	4%
Stubbornness	1	4%
Teaching Others	1	4%

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Table 2b: Number and Percentage of Self-Disclosed Personal Values of Female Respondents

Values	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Honesty/Integrity	5	28%
Kindness	3	18%
Passion	2	12%
Fun-loving	1	6%
Friendship/Community	1	6%
Determination/Hard Work	1	6%
Loyalty	1	6%
Teaching Others	1	6%
Critical Thinking	1	6%
Humility	1	6%

The next phase of the interview dealt with community identities and values to gather data on the group ethos of *Magic* players. Participants indicated which of their personal values and identities they believed were generalizable to the *Magic* community at large as well as some values or identities that they did not hold but believed were emblematic of the community at large. The following identities and values were reported:

Table 3: Number and Percentage of Values and Identities for the “Average” *Magic* Player as Reported by Interviewed Community Members.

Community Values and Identities	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Competitive	9	19%
Kind, Friendly, Accepting	8	17%
Dedicated/Passionate	6	12%
Geeky/Nerdy	4	8%
Honesty/Integrity	4	8%
Male	4	8%
Insider Cues (Magic jokes, clothes, items)	3	6%
Fun-loving	3	6%
Determined/Hard-Working	2	4%
Self-Improvement	2	4%
Impatient	1	2%
Intelligent	1	2%
"Salty"	1	2%
Straight	1	2%

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Table 3a: Number and Percentage of Values and Identities for the “Average” *Magic* Player as Reported by Interviewed Male Community Members.

Community Values and Identities	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Competitive	6	20%
Kind, Friendly, Accepting	4	14%
Dedicated/Passionate	3	11%
Honesty/Integrity	3	11%
Determined/Hard-Working	2	7%
Fun-loving	2	7%
Geeky/Nerdy	2	7%
Self-Improvement	2	7%
Impatient	1	4%
Insider Cues (Magic jokes, clothes, items)	1	4%
Intelligent	1	4%
Male	1	4%

Table 3b: Number and Percentage of Values and Identities for the “Average” *Magic* Player as Reported by Interviewed Female Community Members.

Community Values and Identities	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Kind, Friendly, Accepting	4	17%
Competitive	3	13%
Dedicated/Passionate	3	13%
Male	3	13%
Geeky/Nerdy	2	10%
Insider Cues (Magic jokes, clothes, items)	2	10%
Fun-loving	1	4%
Honesty/Integrity	1	4%
Intelligent	1	4%
"Salty"	1	4%
Straight	1	4%
White	1	4%

When asked if their personal identities or personalities changed when playing *Magic* or when having *Magic* cards in hand, sixteen players said yes and eight said no (67% yes, 33% no). Of the male participants, seven said yes and seven said no (50% yes,

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50% no), while, for female participants, nine said yes and only one said no (90% yes, to 10% no).

Table 4: Number and Percentage of Self-Disclosed Identity/Personality

Changes When Playing Magic

Changes in Identity/Personality	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Emotional Intensity, Prone to Anger or Retribution	9	45%
Uncharacteristically Competitive	3	15%
Clinical, Detached	2	10%
Sense of Empowerment when Performing Well	2	10%
Try to be Outgoing and a Role Model	2	10%
Quiet, Unsure, Anxious	2	10%

Table 4a: Number and Percentage of Self-Disclosed Identity/Personality

Changes When Playing Magic (Male)

Changes in Identity/Personality	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Emotional Intensity, Prone to Anger or Retribution	4	50%
Try to be Outgoing and a Role Model	2	24%
Clinical, Detached	1	13%
Sense of Empowerment when Performing Well	1	13%

Table 4b: Number and Percentage of Self-Disclosed Identity/Personality

Changes When Playing Magic (Female)

Changes in Identity/Personality	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Emotional Intensity, Prone to Anger or Retribution	5	42%
Uncharacteristically Competitive	3	25%
Quiet, Unsure, Anxious	2	17%
Clinical, Detached	1	8%
Sense of Empowerment when Performing Well	1	8%

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When asked if any of their other identities ever felt at odds with their *Magic* player identities, nine participants said yes and fifteen said no (37% yes, 63% no). Divided by gender identity, four male participants said yes and ten said no (29% yes, 71% no), whereas for women five said yes and five said no (50% yes, 50% no).

The reasons cited for these identity disconnects by male participants were as follows:

- Worry about Judgment from Non-Players (3 participants, 33% of total);
- Not an Active Player (1 participant, 12% of total).

For female participants the reasons cited were:

- Female Magic Players Underestimated/Not Given Advancement Opportunities (3 participants, 33% of total)
- Prevalence of Exclusive Language, Jokes (2 participants, 22% of total.)

Then, when asked if they believed that *Magic* is inclusive to difference, eighteen participants said yes and only two said no (90% yes, 10% no). For male respondents, it was twelve to one in favor of *Magic* being inclusive (92% yes, 8% no) and for female respondents, it was similarly six to one in favor (85% yes, 15% no). The participants cited the following as the evidence or rationale for *Magic*'s inclusiveness:

Table 5: Number and Percentage of Rationales Given for the *Magic* Community's Inclusiveness as Reported by Community Members

Reason for Magic Community's Inclusiveness	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Wizards of the Coast's Representation of Difference on Cards and in Story	6	40%
<i>Magic</i> Players are Accepting Because they Focus Solely on the Game	4	27%
Magic Players are Accepting Because they are A Niche Group	3	20%
Wizards of the Coast's Official Stance on Acceptance and Anti-Bullying	2	13%

As an extension of the previous question, I asked if the participants believed that Wizards of the Coast should do more to get women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people of color, and other marginalized groups into *Magic*. Only one respondent said yes, two said no, and five indicated that Wizards of the Coast was already doing enough, the others declined to answer this question (13% believe more should be done, 25% believe that more should not be done, and 62% believe enough is being done).

Lastly, when asked about specific ethical appeals that players make in *Magic* play spaces to be granted agency or authority, participants gave the following responses:

Table 6: Number and Percentage of Ethical Appeals that *Magic* Players Make as Reported by Community Members

Actions to Gain Agency	Number of Respondents	Percentage of Total
Displaying Knowledge, Play Skill (Includes Advice Giving, Pointing Out Opponent's Mistakes, Bragging)	8	32%
Citing Tournament or Gameplay Results	6	24%
Displaying Expensive or Professionally Sponsored Apparel or Accessories	6	24%
Insider Terminology or Body Language	3	12%
Looking Physically Strong	1	4%
Carrying Self Confidently	1	4%

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

The Discursive Act of Magic Play

One of the most essential benefits from my ethnographic observations of *Magic* play is an accumulation of data that supports the concept that, in a physical play space, a game of *Magic* functions primarily as a communicative and discursive action. *Magic*'s rule set consists of a series of particular steps and phases that ensure a consistency of the way the game's rules interact with its ever-expanding roster of currently over 12,000 cards. In physical play, it is up to both players to use both verbal and nonverbal cues to progress and manage this game state. During play, the conversation is usually limited to one player and their opponent and much of the "language" is nonverbal and related to progressing the game. For example, a player may bow their head or gesture to their opponent to indicate passing their turn to that player. In the same vein, that player's

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drawing a card from the top of the deck expresses the progression from the “upkeep” phase of the game to the “draw” phase. Similarly, players “tapping” their land cards by moving them sideways on the play space corresponds to the in-game action of that player adding one mana resource of the corresponding color to their mana pool, and tapping creature cards during combat indicates to the opponent that those creatures are attacking as, with certain exceptions, creatures must tap to attack.

Since non-game-related verbal conversation was infrequently observed across each game of *Magic* that I either participated in or observed ethnographically, it seems that, within a game of *Magic*, verbal conversation is generally limited to progressing the game state as well. Particularly, verbal communication is used to express concepts that are difficult to by card manipulation alone such as indicating specific timing when playing a card or using an ability. For instance, one player may indicate nonverbally that they are passing their turn and then the other player would respond verbally, “During your end step, I ...” and proceed to perform an in-game action while it is still their opponent’s turn before the start of theirs. Verbal communication is also used to clarify rules questions and explain actions. In casual play more than competitive, most players tend to talk through actions even those that can be communicated nonverbally (e.g. “I play my land for turn.”).

In fact, the role of language and communication in *Magic*’s rule set is so pronounced that, for the rules to operate and for judging to be successful, specific guidelines for what verbal or nonverbal cues constitute what sort of in-game action have been codified and referred to in-game as “shortcuts.” Wizards of the Coast defines a shortcut as follows:

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A player thinks that, at a certain point of the game, it is useless to give too many details or information on what he's doing, generally in order to speed up the game. Therefore, he turns several sentences and questions into a word, a silence or a move... By extension, we can consider that any attitude or word that does refer to the technical aspect of the game in progress but doesn't have an official technical signification is a shortcut" and lists examples such as orally saying "my turn?" or "go!," nonverbal cues such as pointing to an opponent to pass turn or by looking at opponents in silence to indicate passing priority (the game terminology for switching which player can play cards) or even shaking hands to signify a concession (Wizards of the Coast, 2005).

In *Magic* judging, the concept of shortcuts goes even further to include "tournament shortcuts," that further codify a process for both players to progress the game through language-use exclusively. Tournament shortcuts allow players, through conversation and agreement, to advance events in the game to a point further in the future without having to act out every intermediary step of the rules as written. For example, according to the official *Magic* Judge blog, "A player may suggest a new tournament shortcut by saying something like, "I do this, you do this, I do this and this is where we end up". The shortcut is invalid if a player cannot demonstrate or describe the exact sequence that leads to the desired result" (MTR 4.2 Tournament Shortcuts).

The shortcut system was not an intentionally designed ruling procedure from *Magic*'s inception, but came about as a natural consequence of the practical ways players use language in physical gaming situations. The ways that language-use predominate *Magic* play support the premise that *Magic*, and perhaps physical tabletop gaming in

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general is a discursive action, or even genre, with its own expectations, constraints, conventions, and lexicon.

The implications for looking at *Magic* as a discursive action are far-reaching and reminiscent of rhetoric and composition's history with game studies. If a tabletop gaming event can be examined as genre of communication, then theoretical frameworks from writing studies directly apply to studying tabletop gaming. Of particular interest for this ethnographic study and for future research on tabletop gaming as genre is the critical genre awareness framework. As Amy Devitt (2009) explains in *Teaching Critical Genre Awareness*, "genres become embedded in the assumptions, values, and beliefs of the groups in power as any genre emerges, develops, and changes." In this way, the genre of a game of *Magic* itself reinforces and is reinforced by the values and privileged identities of the users of that genre.

Breadth of Goals and Identities within *Magic*

When it comes to identifying the values and identities that are central to and privileged by a discourse community, a certain degree of generalization is necessary. When interviewing *Magic* players and asking them to make generalizations about the values and identities of the "average" player, often they expressed hesitation. Many of the participants spoke a train of thought aloud before answering that question. They generally began quickly and almost in a compensatory manner something to the effect of "*Magic* players are just like everyone else!" before saying, "but I guess this game does make us different." For example, one participant specifically said, "We have a lot of stuff that is special to our community but at the same time we have the traits that are the same as everybody else."

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I believe that this sentiment speaks to a sort of unease with generalizing about groups that one belongs to and the slipperiness of defining geek fandoms, especially with the fear of judgment or stigma from outsiders. Further, this hesitation from the participants highlights one of the challenges with this type of research as it is difficult to gather anything truly generalizable from a community of twelve million players, but my hope for this project, as a pilot study, is to have players self-disclose what they perceive to be common values and identities to begin that understanding of the community.

One of the most important takeaways from the interviews with *Magic* players is the diversity of individuals' goals and purposes for pursuing *Magic*. *Magic* players offered diverse reasons for their participation in the community from a mere hobby, to coping with trauma (one respondent said, "*Magic* is the anchor that keeps me from going down a whole spiral of depression."), or using it as a competitive outlet (another respondent told of becoming injured before a national tennis tournament and replacing competitive sports with competitive *Magic*). In fact, the wide deviations in purpose and level of enfranchisement within the *Magic* community is, I believe, one of the largest challenges to identifying it as a discourse community. As the section on shortcuts and *Magic* a discursive action shows, the shared language criterion for discourse community is readily supportable for *Magic*. However, finding goals that are shared by the entirety of the community is trickier. Shared goals may even be limited perhaps to "evaluation and appreciation" of the game as my earlier posited goals such as "strategic gameplay improvement" may be limited to more competitive players. For instance, many players, particularly men, expressed competitiveness and drive to win: 21% of men reported their belief that the community is competitive while only 13% of women did (Table 3), and

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7% of interviewed men claimed competitiveness as a personal value, while 0% of women did (Table 2). At the same time, others had a more experiential interaction with the game; one female respondent said:

Though I do have days when I really want that win, usually I just enjoy the experience of the game and coming away with a silly story like, ‘oh my god, they comboed off.’ If there is a height in the game where everyone felt like they could win it, that’s my favorite game and I don’t have to win that.”

For this player, winning is not the ultimate good and, thus, improvement at technical play or strategy may not be as central a purpose to her as it is to more competitive *Magic* players.

Although, even within competitive players, participants reported a wide swathe of motivations and goals for *Magic* play. For future study, it may be worth further subdividing the *Magic* community into a series of smaller communities whose specific goals can be more readily identified. In fact, lead designer Mark Rosewater (2013) and his design team have already codified one potential axis to organize *Magic* players based on their motivations with their player psychographics: Timmy/Tammy, Johnny/Jenny and Spike. These psychographics identify reasons certain player groups have for playing *Magic* and what types of cards and effects they enjoy. The design teams take care to design cards specifically for these different types of players. For example, Spikes are cutthroat tournament players who evaluate cards for their efficiency and power level, while Timmy/Tammy is the type of player that prefers large, splashy, and exciting cards even if overcosted. This is an interesting angle to approach subdividing groups into because players already use this language. One participant said: “It’s interesting that you

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can have an identity through the decks that you play. I consider myself a mix of all three psychographics, I want to win, but I don't like playing just the most popular deck, but I also like doing big stuff. I'm not happy just playing a control match and grinding it out plinking in for two points of damage a turn. I like ramping up to big things." Her use of this specific terminology and her identification as a competitive player, but diverse and nuanced motivations and purposes are particularly interesting.

However, beyond the psychographics many other motivations and subcommunities exist surrounding the game of *Magic*. During my interviews and ethnographic observations alone, I identified a handful of purposes for *Magic* players beyond play improvement such as communities that are interested in the purely aesthetic side of the game (e.g. artists, writers, cosplayers, and craftspeople) and communities that are interested in the business opportunities within the game (e.g. card retailers, independent sellers, traders, and entrepreneurs). In fact, one of my interviewees described to me that he was launching a *Magic*-related start up offering a monthly subscription box with the goal of "offering the best cards at a much lower price." Many of these players have vastly different goals from what I had envisioned as typical of "Spike" tournament players.

One thing that most of the players had in common is a connection to the game and a desire to express that, which why I posit that "evaluation and appreciation" is the one purpose most generalizable to the larger community of *Magic*. Whether it be related to a card's power level, art, story, or price, invested community members will want to communicate to weigh in with their perspectives and opinions. As one player put it: "it's been a very interesting experience I've been rarely so motivated financially, socially, and

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mentally by a game. It's a weird form of lifestyle that I wasn't expecting." Sharing that lifestyle may be the clearest connecting thread between *Magic* community members.

Magic as Inclusive

Overwhelmingly, interviewed players reported that they had always felt welcome within *Magic*'s community (87% yes) and that the game was inclusive (90% yes). The most cited rationale for this inclusiveness was that 40% of the interviewees believed Wizards of the Coast's efforts to depict difference on cards and in story had a positive effect on the community (Table 5). Similarly, 13% of the respondents cited Wizards of the Coast's official policies towards anti-bullying and acceptance (Table 5), meaning more than half of the respondents credited the game's parent company for positively affecting the treatment of difference within the community. This belief seems also to be reflected in the 62% of interview respondents that believed Wizards of the Coast is doing the correct amount of outreach to make the game more inclusive. A recurring part of the narrative was that this move towards inclusion was recent and positive. In the interviews, one respondent said, "in the last year, they've been pushing to have characters with interesting storylines who are diverse." Another respondent even said that "Wizards [of the Coast] is becoming the most inclusive gaming brand out there." Still another said, "the message is: if [marginalized groups] can be [depicted] on our cards, why can't they be in our spaces?"

A few respondents spoke to the personal value this representation had for them: "I use the story to get my gay friends invested, 'hey, there's these cool [gay] characters you should read the story' and maybe that gets them into the game. By story and by statements [Wizards of the Coast] makes the areas safe;" "[Wizards of the Coast's introducing a trans

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character] did make me feel more represented. It's not necessary but it does make me feel good to know that this company acknowledges I exist and cares." For these players, visibility and representation within the game itself and within the parent company's policies and programming matters.

The data I have gathered indicates that Wizards of the Coast's diversity initiatives have been particularly effective for two reasons: subtlety and a results-oriented approach that matches well with the value the discourse community of *Magic* players places on results. As for subtlety, several interview respondents indicated that they did not "notice" the increased diversity on *Magic* cards. Even those staunchly in favor of the increased representation did notice that it was slow and blended into *Magic*'s usual milieu enough that people may miss it. One respondent said, "I read the weekly magic stories as often as I can and they have characters who are bi, gay, transgender, and people of color. I think that is another important thing seeing these characters featured in the game you are playing and many people can ignore that but I think it is having an impact." The contentiousness of the conversation surrounded diversity and inclusion in online spaces for gaming, and, especially, the possibility of backlash and negative publicity that can accompany taking too progressive of a stance are legitimate risks that Wizards of the Coast must navigate. Whether intentional or not, several of the interviewees believed that Wizard's weaving of diversity into cards and story is subtle enough to be "palatable" and well-received by their audience.

As for the results-oriented perspective of Wizards of the Coast's inclusion efforts, the company has been publishing stories and cards recently to represent different diverse groups in a manner that could be criticized for being akin to box checking. For instance,

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in one set they introduce a character who is neuro-atypical, Narset, and then a character who is wheelchair-bound, Daretti, and then a character who is non-binary, Ashiok. Opponents of these efforts have criticized them as quota-filling. However, the *Magic* players I interviewed happily rattled off these examples of different types of identities and realities being represented in the game proudly as though each one was an additional notch in *Magic*'s belt for diversity. I believe that this box-checking, almost quantity-over-quality, approach is particularly relevant for *Magic* players because it connects with how they themselves attempt to gain agency or authority in situations. When asked about the ethical appeals that *Magic* players used to assert their agency in situations, the second most common code was the 24% of respondents who used appeals to their own tournament results (Table 6). *Magic* players cite the number of times placing or winning tournaments to establish their credibility, and it seems that a very similar method is being employed when it comes to showing off their commitment to inclusion. I found that in the interviews people even used this results-oriented philosophy on a micro-scale when referring to their observations of new players entering their local communities. One respondent said, "At my local FNM there are four women who regularly play and 2 people of color, [*Magic*] has diversified and become more ubiquitous." There are certainly cons to that model such as the prioritization of visible difference, the risk of tokenism, and the fact that still relatively small shifts in demography may be disproportionately praised. However, it is particularly worth noting that the model being employed by the parent company is attuned with the models being employed by the user-base.

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The next most cited code for inclusiveness within the community was that *Magic* players are particularly accepting because the community is invested solely in the game. Respondents that held this view said such things as, ‘the female community of Magic is small. It’s like in a technology major [where] there are two girls at most, but I think they do a good job in the community; you don’t view them as a girl coming to play *Magic*, you view them as another player coming to play *Magic*,’ or ‘I’ve never even asked someone about the[ir] LGBTQ [status]. When I go play *Magic* it’s like I’m just going to play. It doesn’t matter who they are,’ or ‘when it comes to LGBT or color I just don’t see the need to address someone personally. I don’t think Magic points out a specific thing, it just tells a fantasy story and you can get into it or not. And no matter who you are you might be into it or not. I don’t think they need to develop a gay character or a black character.’ One respondent, a well-known female content creator said, ‘this is going to sound really weird-- I’m just another *Magic* player. I don’t consider someone’s gender, it just doesn’t matter for the most part.’ The pervasiveness of this code is something of a double-edged sword for the community, while at points it does contribute to how well people are treated in the spaces, which coincides with the six female and two African-American respondents who have expressed their feeling welcome in *Magic* play spaces merely by virtue of not experiencing discrimination personally. However, colorblindness and ignoring systemic issues does not make them disappear and this ‘new racism’ or ‘new sexism’ may also be problematic in *Magic* play spaces.

However, the final code offered for how *Magic* spaces are inclusive is less problematic and may speak to the benefit of tabletop gaming and geek subcultures as spaces for inclusion. 20% of respondents identified that *Magic* players are a particularly

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accepting group by being a niche subculture (Table 5). Respondents that identified this “outsider inclusivity” said such things as, “we’re all nerds so we’ve all been the underdog growing up. I think it’s something that’s a big issue for a lot of the known people in the community... So, I think it’s being pushed that it’s a welcoming space and if you don’t like that you can go but everyone is welcome here” and “We all came from a background where we were teased for something or another. So, I feel like the community knows what it feels like and doesn’t want to dish that out.” and “I’ll admit I’m a misfit, and a lot of people who are misfits want to play. It’s a community of misfits. It’s more forgiving and gives you a place to belong to.” These sentiments speak additionally to the value of radical empathy and ways to foster inclusiveness even among people who generally push back against diversity initiatives that is unique to geek subcultures.

Magic as Exclusive

Although, the *Magic* community presents opportunities for fostering inclusion it also is still ripe for exclusive behavior and sentiments. Of the 13% of respondents who indicated that they had not always felt welcome in the *Magic* community, for men the most dominant reason for this was fear of judgment from those outside the community. For example, one respondent said, “if I tell people I’m going to play *Magic* they’re like “why are you doing that?” It’s a waste of time in their opinion.” Another respondent, an armed service member said, “Yeah, some people call it a kids game [or that] it’s not becoming of an officer. I’ve been seen as geeky for doing it.” My interview data supports that the most common tension for male *Magic* players is this fear of outside judgment. 27% of males interviewed indicated that their professional identity was central to them, compared to only 11% of women (Table 1). Similarly, the males I interviewed

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claimed their Magic identities less often than the females. 57% of the males I interviewed said that they identified as Magic players, while 89% of the females did. This profession-based identity formation and fear of outside judgment from employers, coworkers, and other outsiders. However, this can be read a number of ways because the fact that male *Magic* players still “fit the script” for a *Magic* player means that their fear of judgment extends only outside other community, while for people of color, women, and other marginalized groups the fear of judgment was both from within the community and without.

White male *Magic* players presented a wide swathe of identities and I got the sense that the privilege afforded to fitting the template for a *Magic* player was a freedom to express multiple identities (Table 1b). Female players more closely reported their membership specifically to being a tabletop gamer or geek (Table 1c) and predominantly identified as *Magic* players (the aforementioned 89% of female respondents). It could also be that for female *Magic* players to attend events such as the ones I have observed, they must be fairly enfranchised as casual female players may avoid *Magic* play spaces for fear of poor treatment.

For people of color identifying as *Magic* players, I noticed the opposite trend. Of the seven people of color I interviewed, only two claimed the *Magic* identity as central to them. The other 5, all African-American males, specifically indicated that, although they had each played for several years, did not view it as anything more than a hobby, one even saying: “If I lost it, I would be just fine.” Another respondent said, “Magic can speak volumes about a person, the philosophy of card interactions do fit people, but it’s not something I’m like, “yeah, that’s me: *Magic* player.”” A few of the respondents

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indicated that this tension may have something to do with the disconnect between cultures and values. One respondent indicated to me that playing Magic had been a source of tension for him within his home discourse community, “I only have one life. I’ve learned to stop caring about this criticism. I struggle with insecurity in my personal life: Am I not black enough? People say, “oh you speak proper,” “oh, you play Magic.” People have called me Oreo, but I don’t mind it anymore.”

For many players of color, this tension can be particularly pronounced because one at once feels less welcome in their home discourse community for adapting a game that has a stigma of “whiteness” and also less welcome in *Magic*’s community for being of color and not fitting the expectation of a *Magic* player. The very same respondent offered this statement:

This may be only for me, because I’m black. I identify as being black, and, even if I didn’t, I’m being told I’m black, so it doesn’t matter. Because I’m black occasionally, I get looked at as though I am inferior. I have a [black] friend who is really scruffy looking, he went to a GP and made day 2. Most people don’t have the balls to come out and address their prejudice to him. No one is going to go up and use a racial slur. They are afraid they might get hit. We are perceived in culture as being aggressive, so unless you can fight or something, [they] won’t say that to a [black] person. There have been a few situations in my *Magic* experience I felt could have gone that way, but it’s tricky for me. I don’t want to jump and call someone racist. Most of these issues come down to miscommunication.

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Most notably, this quote speaks to the perception by the dominant group that has shaped the genre of *Magic* discourse, white males, that players that don't fit that demography are in some way inferior. That same respondent continued, "I've felt people go, 'I'm definitely going to win, he's black.' They'll point out things like triggers (the game term for effects that occur when certain conditions are met. In multiples, they are notorious for requiring attention to track) that happen in the game and assume you wouldn't follow that, because, looking black, they think you are less." He addressed me directly, "Your being Latino, you must get the same because we don't look like what they think is a *Magic* player."

Additionally, this respondent in his first quote indicates a hesitation to speak out against what he is perceiving, not wanting to seem aggressive and meet a stereotype and not wanting to be seen as overly sensitive to an issue that could be a miscommunication. That same sort of apologetic tone and hesitance to uproot the power structures of the genre are shared in the experiences of female *Magic* players.

When it comes to being seen as inferior to male gamers, notably, of the five women that indicated that they felt a disconnect between their identities as people and their *Magic* player identity, three specifically cited the underestimation of female players as well as their lack of opportunities to advance. Many other female respondents indicated similar sentiment. One of my interviewees, and also a prominent content creator and recognized "celebrity" within *Magic* stated, "I always face the [incredulous] "you got beat by a girl" comment which is frustrating. But I do better brushing it off because I've always done a lot of male-oriented hobbies." Another respondent shared a story of her receiving special treatment because of presumptions about gender, "the first time I played FNM at a new

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store...I sat down against a kid and I mulled to 6 (mull is magic slang for taking a mulligan. Each mulligan in magic reduces starting hand size by 1) and he said, “it’s okay you’re a girl you can go back to 7 [cards in hand].” It ticked me off so much.”

One prominent female judge added her story: “When it comes to judging at FNM my decisions are constantly second-guessed constantly...when judging people will always... double-check that my ruling is right, which is not always bad, but they are less likely to take my word for it.” This particular judge also shared the difficulties she has had navigating the expected interactions between sexes, “one of the first things my mentor in judging told me: ‘it sucks but it’s true, you already have a handicap and you have to be right almost all the time because that one slip up would tell the community ‘oh, yup see we were right [about female judges.]’” She explained to me her story, being the first female judge in the Michigan-Ohio-Indiana area in the history of *Magic*. She is currently in the process of moving through advancement to the highest level of judge and finding it difficult to balance her ethos with the societal expectations placed upon her. She said, “the biggest [issue] is the way I and female judges have to approach leadership because a confident and assertive male judge is treated differently than a confident, assertive female judge.”

Additionally, some male respondents indicated their experience with witnessing the barriers female *Magic* players face:

If you go and look at the comment section of YouTube, which I do not recommend this but you can do it, of any *Magic* recorded by a female. The percentages of negative comments are way higher than those reported by males. There’s a lot of stuff about appearance, there’s a lot of stuff about, ‘you don’t

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know what you're talking about.' Female Magic players functionally have to fight through a lot of misogyny. They seem to have more to prove because people are like "Oh, are you here with your boyfriend?" That is the worse. That makes me actively angry all the time... instead of [a player's] default [impression of another] being neutral or 'this person is okay at Magic'; They are neutral at best towards women.' They are like 'yeah, women in general aren't good at Magic' That's not true.... They have to deal with it...Men's default opinion is just the worst because that's the majority of *Magic* players.

Particular also to the experiences of women in Magic is the degree to which females alter their identities in *Magic* play spaces. The Male *Magic* players that I interviewed were exactly split between those who disclosed an identity shift when playing *Magic* and those that did not. However, 90% of the ten female *Magic* players I interviewed reported noticing a shift in their identity or personality when playing. For male players, the identity shifts that they did report were generally playful or empowering. Such as the following quote from a young man I interviewed:

When someone messes with [my] board, [I'm] like, "wow, so I have to rain down judgment on you now? This is where we're going with this?" It gives you a sense of empowerment in the game when you have a good board state and you're doing what your deck is made to do and it feels great. I'm going to win this game, I've got this in the bag and when someone is like, "haha no" you just go, "ugh, you're going down first."

Whereas with female players, the changes in identities were often a source of some discomfort. One respondent said, "When I'm playing at home I'm constantly asking

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questions, but when I sit down at a competitive event I don't want to say anything. I get really anxious when I'm playing here. That's why I didn't register to play [at this event].” Another female respondent said, “I tend to be very clam in regular life, the competitive spirit tends to make me more on-edge or emotional. I'll be like “argh, darn it” when something goes wrong. [It] brings out the emotional intensity in me.” Similarly, another woman that I interviewed reporting being more emotional and frustrated when playing *Magic*. She specifically said, although calm in everyday life, if her husband corrects her play when they compete, she is quicker to snap back and fight than with other activities. She even said this leads her into times when she wants to resign and not play *Magic* for a time.

In many of these cases, the female players are either becoming silent and unsure or else shifting from a stereotypical feminine personality or identity to a stereotypical masculine personality or identity. It is probable that the implicit bias toward masculinity makes female players feel obligated to shift personalities for acceptance during play. I hypothesize that this again is related to the genre conventions and implicit biases from the dominant group of *Magic* players. Within this group, a script exists for “male competitive *Magic* player” and women are obligated to reverse engineer and adapt to it.

Implications

My study was certainly mired with the constraints of attempting an ethnography of this scale within such a short time, and of the breadth of the scope being perhaps a bit too ambitious and unfocused. However, as a pilot study to begin surveying the identities and value systems of *Magic* players and to provide emergent methodologies, and theoretical frameworks for studying tabletop gaming as discursive genre, I believe that

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this work has achieved a modicum of success. I hope that this work can at least scratch the surface towards uncovering the types of questions communication scholars should be asking of tabletop gaming communities and the types of theoretical lenses we should be using.

As for takeaways of this particular study, the overwhelming narrative I observed was that *Magic* is becoming more inclusive and that Wizards of the Coast is leading the charge for inclusiveness in tabletop gaming, in a way subtle enough to be palatable to the often-vitriolic community of geeks and gamers. At the same time, *Magic* community members would be remiss to ignore the ripples of systemic power structures on their gaming discourse community. This data that I've collected regarding the experiences of women, people of color, and other marginalized groups in *Magic* play spaces is very much a microcosm of larger systemic and societal perceptions of marginalized groups and the roles and identities they are "allowed" to play in the larger culture. I advocate for a critical genre perspective to examining inclusion and difference in tabletop gaming spaces that speaks to the importance of altering genres to change problematic values and belief systems within institutional cultures.

For next steps, I think that any one of these individual premises posited from this data would present a great opportunity for a more focused inquiry into difference in tabletop gaming communities. I hope that this research can be part of continuing study on inclusion and difference in gaming communities and geek subcultures, particularly for scholars in writing and composition to continue to look into the discursive action that take place in physical gaming communities. Tabletop gaming studies are just as important as, if not more important than, video gaming studies because the interactions

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are personal and mirror other ways that people would interact with difference in their everyday lives without the veil of anonymity.

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