Hardcore Gamers in Ballgowns: At the Crossroads of Gender and Play

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

High heels click on a marble floor, layers of satins swish over hoop skirts, and somewhere a string quartet plays an uplifting melody. The setting is a historic municipal building with neo-classical architecture and artisan details tucked into every corner. This building is ordinarily used by suited members of local government, but tonight it has been transformed into an enchanted palace filled with all manner of fairytale creatures. Tonight's event is a romantasy-themed ball where adults have gathered to partake in formal dancing, dining, and promenading. Romantasy, a portmanteau of the words fantasy and romance, is used to describe both the setting and the genre of media fandom involved. The attendees have spent exorbitant money on tickets, costuming, hair, and make up on a night of fantastical revelry. They dance to classical music, shop in a mediaeval themed market, dress in whimsical costumes, and adopt a character to roleplay for the night. What makes this ball interesting is that the attendees are not debutantes; they are hardcore gamers.

The event described above is a type of immersive entertainment experience popular with femme-presenting people in the USA, Canada, and the United Kingdom. Searching Google for 'romantasy ball' yields results from event hosts on TikTok and Instagram advertising a whimsical night of escapism for fans of stories and games about elves, magic, and true love. Defining what romantasy balls are, in an academic sense, is difficult because these glamorous events exist at the crossroads of several types of play and fandoms. There is clear overlap in theming between romantasy balls and role-playing games like *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios 2023) and *Dungeons & Dragons* (Wizards of the Coast 2024), in the direct invitation for ball attendees to role play, and yet the events fail to market themselves as a live action role play or gaming fandom event at all. Likewise, the ball's attendees do not fit stereotypical representations of gamers, even though many are self-described dedicated role-players and live action role-players. The attendees are largely femme-presenting people who love to wear ballgowns *and* slay dragons, which situates their fandom and play at a crossroads of gender and gamer identities.

Game studies literature has long pointed out that 'gamer identities' are contested ones in which fans of videogames are largely assumed to be masculine, white, and

'geeky' (Bell 2013; Kendall 2011, Kowert 2014). Research has shown that the masculine association of the hobby has roots in post-market-crash advertisements, and is reinforced through consumptive practices (Kirkpatrick 2017; Cote 2018). Attempts to expand the definition of who gets to be a gamer outside of this rigid ideal has been met with violence, as exemplified in #GamerGate (Chess and Shaw 2015; Mortensen 2016; Gray et al 2017; Massanari 2020; Massanari 2024), as well as in the daily interactions marginalised groups may have on the internet (Taylor 2003; Gray 2012; Cote 2020; Arangelov et al 2024). As DiGRA audiences are well aware, defining gamer identities along gendered lines is a recurring problem emblematic of larger cultural and societal misogyny (Paul 2018; Massanari 2024). However, even as scholars working in game studies lament the reproduction of social inequalities in gaming spaces, we cling to the hope that games have the power to right social wrongs and help us imagine better worlds (Gee 2005; Schrier 2016; Suominen 2017). This extended abstract contributes to the established body of knowledge on gender and games by both supporting previous arguments that games have limited ability to effect social change by virtue of being products of the systems and people who create them, and by adding a novel approach to reaching populations of gaming enthusiasts who reject gamer identities.

This paper presents early findings from a recent qualitative study on romantasy balls in which participant observation and 20 individual structured interviews create a rich data set reflecting on the meaning these balls have for the everyday lives of participants. This abstract focuses on an emergent aspect of the data set- that despite participant recruitment strategies not mentioning games, videogames, or gamers, the majority of interview participants (17 out of 20) could be classified as 'hardcore gamers'. While definitions of what constitutes a 'hardcore gamer' vary, this abstract has adopted the Quantic Foundry definition of folks who own high-end equipment and play seriously or competitively (Yee 2018). Large data sets support the idea that around half of all gamers in the United States are women (ESA 2024), and that who counts as a 'hardcore gamer' differs based on gendered perceptions of gaming (Yee 2018). This research adds nuance to quantitative findings by showing that the majority of romantasy fans interviewed dedicated a significant amount of time to gaming. Of these 17 hardcore gaming participants, 13 identified as women, 3 as nonbinary, and 1 identified as a man.

The findings of this study are of interest to the Digital Games Research Association as they represent a crossroads in gendered gaming identities as well as a paradigm shift in thinking about what being a gamer means. The presence of hardcore gamers in ballgowns draws into question what we know about gender as a determinant of the modes in which fandom is experienced and expressed. Early findings also highlight how different women- and non-binary-led gaming events are in structure and organization. Attendees will walk away from this talk with a stronger understanding of the relationship between gender, games, and fandom spaces.

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