

Experiences of Age and Gender in Early UK Tabletop Role-Playing Magazines

Nick Webber

Birmingham City University
Birmingham, UK
nick.webber@bcu.ac.uk

E. Charlotte Stevens

Birmingham City University
Birmingham, UK
charlotte.stevens@bcu.ac.uk

Keywords

magazines, TTRPGs, game history, gender, age, players

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores experiences of age and gender in the early UK tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) scene, as recorded in a selection of UK-based TTRPG magazines published during the 1970s and 1980s. As part of a larger project considering player experiences and their significance in the history of the UK TTRPG scene, we examined issues of *White Dwarf*, *Imagine*, *Warlock*, and *Adventurer* magazines, focusing initially on letters pages before moving outwards to explore the interaction between letters and other magazine elements, including editorials, articles, advertisements (including 'classifieds') and art. Our analysis identified trends in conversations between players, and between players and game designers, which centred or otherwise engaged with issues of age, gender, and their relationship to and impact on player experiences. In this paper, we discuss how the intersection of subjectivities is visible in these historical sources, providing evidence for how players negotiate an environment often understood as youth-oriented and male-coded. These magazines include frequent, explicit engagements with themes of age and gender, reflecting complex discourses about access and exclusion which - somewhat surprisingly - resemble contemporary forum discussions about video games. Our paper will be of interest to researchers concerned with analogue games and TTRPG communities, and to researchers exploring themes of age and gender in game culture.

Gaming magazines have been extensively explored in game studies scholarship, although much of the focus has been on video game magazines specifically. Research has considered the age and gender(ed) dimensions of their readership (e.g. Bootes 2016; Cote 2018; Vilasís-Pamos & Pires 2022), alongside their central role in the formation of (video) gaming culture (Kirkpatrick 2012; 2015; Suominen et al. 2015; Suominen 2020). Scholarship on TTRPG magazines is less well-developed, and mostly focuses on the US context. Here, again, scene formation has been a central area of

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

© 2026 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

interest (Peterson 2022; Raymond and Fine 2024), strongly associated with TSR/*Dungeons & Dragons* (e.g. Huddleston 2022). In the UK context, attention has been more limited, and most magazines have received little or no examination. *White Dwarf* in particular remains critical to Games Workshop's ongoing success, and features in work on *Warhammer* (e.g. Sturrock and Wallis, 2016). However, there has been little direct or sustained attention to the magazine during its early, roleplaying-focused period, with the exception of Ian Sturrock and Tom Apperley's (2021) work on the *Fiend Folio*.

The UK TTRPG scene has historically been served by a range of comparatively short-lived magazines and our sample here reflects that. Using a corpus available through the Internet Archive, we examined 154 issues across our four publication titles. This corpus included the full run of *Imagine* (TSR UK's house magazine, 1983-85), *Warlock* (the *Fighting Fantasy* magazine, 1984-86), and *Adventurer* (an independent title from the English North-West, 1986-7), along with the first 100 issues (1977-88) of *White Dwarf* (the *Games Workshop* house magazine). The sample represented different magazine types: they were pitched at different age groups (e.g. *Warlock* at children, *Adventurer* at 'mature gamers'), with different levels of attachment to major brands. Our analysis of the texts draws on our expertise in media fandom histories (Webber and Stevens 2020; Stevens and Webber 2022), analyses of player accounts (Webber 2016), and past work with semi-pro and amateur fanzine publications (Stevens 2021). We approached these magazines with a general interest in histories of player experience, and through thematic analysis identified age and gender as prominent themes, alongside Britishness, new players, microcomputers and zines, among others.

In some ways our overall findings echo expectations of the TTRPG scene in the 1970s and 1980s, as documented for the early US TTRPG scene by Gary Alan Fine (1983) and Jon Peterson (2022). We saw gatekeeping around both age and gender across the sample. Older players sought to exclude younger players either discursively - by complaining about youth-focused content or play practices - or through withholding information, something visible in Fine's (1983, 162-165) account in particular. Overt misogyny was also visible at various points, as were attempts to position women in traditional gender roles (see also Raymond and Fine 2024, 314-315). However, we also saw these discourses challenged repeatedly, and two exchanges in the letters pages of *White Dwarf* that continued for several years reflected how ageist, misogynist views were divisive, and certainly not an established norm. It was significant that these issues were taken seriously by many editors, contributors and readers, who worked to address them through the submission and inclusion of specific content designed to tackle exclusion - *Adventurer*, for example, ran a 5-part series on 'Women in Roleplaying'. These findings complicate the prevailing sense that games were understood as aimed (broadly exclusively) at young men, and add usefully to our understanding of TTRPG history.

REFERENCES

- Bootes, R. 2016. *The emergence of gamer culture and the gaming press : the UK videogame magazine as cultural and consumer guide, 1981-1993* (Thesis). Newcastle University.
- Cote, A.C. 2018. Writing "Gamers": The Gendered Construction of Gamer Identity in *Nintendo Power* (1994–1999). *Games and Culture*. 13, 479–503. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412015624742>

- Fine, G. A. 1983. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Huddleston, S. 2022. "When Worlds Collaborate: The Style of Early Tabletop Role-Playing Games." *Analog Game Studies*. 9 (4). <https://analoggamestudies.org/2022/12/when-worlds-collaborate-the-style-of-early-tabletop-role-playing-games/>
- Kirkpatrick, G. 2012. "Constitutive tensions of gaming's field: UK gaming magazines and the formation of gaming culture 1981-1995." *Game Studies*. 12 (1).
- Kirkpatrick, G. 2015. *The Formation of Gaming Culture: UK gaming magazines 1981-1995*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan Ltd.
- Peterson, J. 2022. *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity, Game Histories*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.
- Raymond, V. and Fine, G.A. 2024. "Soft Communities and Vicarious Deviance in *Dungeons & Dragons*." In *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons*, edited by P. Sidhu, P., M. Carter and J. P. Zagal, 301–322. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press.
- Sturrock, I. and Wallis, J. 2016. "Total Global Domination: Games Workshop and Warhammer 40,000." In *Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming*, edited by P. Harrigan and M. G. Kirschenbaum, 603–622. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10329.003.0062>
- Suominen, J., Reunanen, M. and Remes, S. 2015. "Return in Play: The Emergence of Retrogaming in Finnish Computer Hobbyist and Game Magazines from the 1980s to the 2000s." *Kinephanos: Journal of Media Studies and Popular Culture*. <https://www.kinephanos.ca/2015/emergence-of-retrogaming/>
- Suominen, J. 2020. "Popular History: Historical Awareness of Digital Gaming in Finland from the 1980s to the 2010s." *Proceedings of DiGRA 2020 Conference: Play Everywhere*. <https://doi.org/10.26503/dl.v2020i1.1266>
- Stevens, E. C. 2021. "Historical Binge-Watching: Marathon Viewing on Videotape." In *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies*, edited by M. Jenner, 23–39. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474461986.003.0002>
- Stevens, E. C. and Webber, N. 2022. "The fan-historian." *Transformative Works and Cultures*. 37. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2022.2125>
- Vilasís-Pamos, J. and Pires, F. 2022. "How do teens define what it means to be a gamer? Mapping teens' video game practices and cultural imaginaries from a gender and sociocultural perspective." *Information, Communication & Society*. 25, 1735–1751. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2021.1883705>
- Webber, N. 2016. "EVE Online as History." In *Internet Spaceships are Serious Business: An EVE Online Reader*, edited by M. Carter, K. Bergstrom and D. Woodford, 189-209. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Webber, N. and Stevens, E. C. 2020. "History, Fandom and Online Game Communities." In *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*, edited by A. von Lünen, K.J. Lewis, B. Litherland and P. Cullum, 189–203. New York and London: Routledge.