

Gendering Magic – Men, Women and Eldrazi of Magic: the Gathering

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Keywords

Gender Representation, Gender Archetypes, Trading Card Games, Content Analysis

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Magic: the Gathering (MTG) is one of the most popular trading card games of all time. However, it is popular knowledge admitted also by the producers themselves that the game is played dominantly by men; this has been in part attributed to toxic tendencies of competitive gaming cultures (Pitcher, 2013). Recently, initiatives, such as Lady Planeswalkers Society (founded in 2011), have started to create more welcoming and harassment-free environment for women. Still, not much attention has been given to the actual gender stereotyping within the game itself. In our paper, we aim to explore gender representation (of masculinity and femininity) in selected expansions of MTG using the method of content analysis.

Given its fantasy theme of dueling magicians, it is understandable that MTG creators took inspiration from then popular fantasy sources, such as comic books, graphic magazines and game books (Garfield, 2008). It is important to note that gender representation in Dungeons & Dragons and its supplements, which have co-constructed the fantasy gaming milieu since 1970s, have been identified as stereotypical and bordering on misogynistic (Trammell, 2014). In consequence, individual MTG cards portrayed classic fantasy tropes along with the respective gender archetypes and stereotypes – wizards, priestesses, knights, angels, goblins, fairies, etc. The overall representation was also greatly influenced by the five-color scheme of magical sources, which from a thematic viewpoint functions as a mix between the basic four elements and the alignment systems from roleplaying games. Both the visual style and themes have progressed since 1993, the fantasy gender tropes were especially challenged in 2010 by the introduction of gender-less Lovecraftian creatures, so-called Eldrazi.

Proceedings of 1st International Joint Conference of DiGRA and FDG

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The aim of the paper is to analyze the gendered characteristics of MTG cards, taking into account not only the visuals, but also flavor texts, abilities, creature types, color identities and other aspects. The actual analysis will be guided by Pratt's (1981) work on gender archetypes and Bourdieu's (2001) symbolic power theory. Both approaches put emphasis on the power relations and access to power which are particularly important in MTG considering its theme of power struggle between two players. Pratt (1981) distinguishes between a positive female archetype (represented by maiden, mother and grandmother) and a negative archetype of a witch. The key aspect behind the classification is the access to power within the gender order. The powerful female magic-wielders are mostly understood as a threat to patriarchy. However, male magicians despite the similar abilities fulfill different and much more rational functions whether they are on the side of good or evil. Chaotic power of magic is gendered as feminine and considered by Bourdieu (2001) a deceptive way of fighting against "manhood as nobility".

Aforementioned gendered archetypes and characteristics serve as a basis for operationalization of the variables (gender, role, alignment) of our content analysis which will be complemented by official metadata available for individual cards. However, given the enormous size of the card library of MTG (more than 13 000 cards), we have decided to limit our analysis to four carefully selected sets from various historical eras of the game: the first set Limited Edition Alpha (1993); Urza's Saga (1998), Ravnica: City of Guilds (2005); and the most recent set Oath of the Gatewatch (2016) which features gender-less Eldrazi creatures. Altogether, these four sets have 1135 cards.

Our hypotheses are rooted in male-dominated gaming industry where gender representation often skews towards objectification and misogyny (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000; Kennedy, 2002; Trammell, 2014). We expect more heterogeneous roles and archetypes among representation of masculinity, while representation of femininity is likely to be significantly polarized into two extremes: positive roles of sexually passive women (priestesses, mothers, caretakers, angels) and negative archetypes of witches and sorceresses.

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