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Challenging Hegemony in the Digital Game-verse:

Why We Need Feminist Intersectional Criticism

Part I: Introduction

How much would you pay for a video of Feminist Frequency's writer being

raped by a group of angry black men? (Sarkeesian et al. 116)

This comment, from an anonymous internet user on a social media platform, targeted

famed media critic and feminist, Anita Sarkeesian, and embodies just one of the countless

experiences for those in the game-verse who do not identify as white, cisgendered males— (UC

Berkeley). Engagement by those outside of this limited heteronormative identity are often

viewed as encroaching upon a perceived, sacred space.

According to a 2014 study conducted by NPR that compares data from the National

Science Foundation, America Bar Association, and American Association of Medical Colleges,

the drop in the number of women in computer science coincides with the rise of the personal

computer (Henn). Although the numbers of women in other technical and professional fields

continued to climb in the mid-1980s, enrollment of women in computer science took a

significant dive, as enrollment of women plummeted from ~37% to ~16% (Henn). So, while we

might attempt, as a culture to celebrate *checkbox diversity* (DePass), perhaps what ought to be

considered in greater depth is how *inclusion* factors in to the larger discussion. Women have enjoyed games and have always "been there for the creation of computing technologies— and yes, video game technology" (Golding 131); however, scholar Daniel Golding argues that the *consumer-king gamer* identity formed (Golding 132) when these home computing 'toys' were marketed to boys and men, ousting women from the game-verse (Henn). When the concept of *gameplay* entered the video game lexicon in 1985 (Golding 132), it, too, shaped the consumer-king gamer identity: only the skilled, elite video game player could speak to the 'gameliness' of a game (Golding 131). This skilled, elite, *consumer-king gamer*— through the influence of marketers, journalists, and developers (Golding 135)— became a monolith, both highly-profitable and decidedly male (Golding 129).

This paper launches from a point in which it assumes the reader has some familiarity of the universal dialogue (the hegemony) of the heavily-marketed, cisgendered, white, straight, male gamer identity (Golding 130). The hegemony is fueled by those who have become entitled "lords of their domain" due to a compendium of "advertising, branding, and gamers, themselves" (Golding 140). Sherry Turkle, in fact, argues that multi-user dungeons (MUDs) are a means for players to think about their "postmodern selves" (Turkle 185). But what happens when one's virtual 'self' in games never matches up to any real-world equivalent? Media critic Anita Sarkeesian and sociologist Katherine Cross also argue that, although "the gaming world is— from the perspective of the average player— both real and unreal at the same time" (Sarkeesian et al. 114), players cannot completely detach their real-world selves from that of their virtual counterparts because of the interactive, participatory nature of the activity (Sarkeesian et al. 118). The language of video games reifies American hegemony (Sarkeesian et al. 125), a harmful

narrative that lacks diverse and collaborative discourse by those outside the consumer-king

gamer identity. The research presented in this paper explores and challenges this tired,

homogenous, androcentric narrative in games and argues that digital game criticism, in fact,

needs to engage a feminist intersectional analysis.

Part II: Feminism and scholarship— leading up to present-day feminist game scholarship.

In the 1980s, game designer, Toru Iwatani, noted an overabundance of masculinity in games, particularly in arcade games, and wished to bring more couples to arcades (Golding 133). Thus, Iwatani "imagined what women enjoy, [and] the image of them eating cakes and desserts came to mind" (Golding 133). Eventually, images of desserts gave way to images of pizza, and the resulting design became the popular arcade game, *Pac-Man* (Golding 133). Accurate narratives with respect to women were often missing from these early games— as in the case of Iwatami's *Pac-Man*— but what should also be noted is the presence and erasure of women in programming and games:

> Women have always been there for the creation of computing technology
> — and yes, video game technology, too—but their contributions have often been
> deliberately made invisible. Jean Jennings was one of five women who
> programmed ENIAC, the first general purpose computer, and although she was
> invited— required, even— to give a demonstration to the national press for its
> launch, neither she nor the four other women programmers involved were
> invited to the reception afterward. (Golding 131)

Feminist criticism often challenges this type of androcentric, masculine discourse (Silbergleid 157). Departing from the assumption that humans exist in a natural binary (in this case, the division between men and women) (Fischer et al. xiii), feminist critique can offer an alternative lens that argues how social constructions (Fischer et al. 9)— not natural conditions— "sustain men's social and political dominance" (Fischer et al. xiii).

Intersectional discourse addresses how the dominant narrative— particularly within white feminist discourse (Davis 73)— glosses over the multiple identities that become sources of oppression (Davis 73). In addition, white feminism denies these intersections (Davis 71) and aims to unify all women to a single, codified agenda in order to address the "broad-scale system of domination that affects women as a class" (Crenshaw 1241). In contrast to clumping all women into one whole as a means to solidarity, law professor and feminist scholar (Adewunmi), Kimberlé Crenshaw, argues that identity politics actually *strengthens* the voices marginalized by dominant culture (Crenshaw 1242). We can also learn from the *Combahee River Collective*, a Black U.S. feminist lesbian group who, in the 1970s, issued a "stirring and highly influential manifesto in which they argued that gender, race, class, and sexuality should be integral to any feminist analysis of power and domination" (Davis 73). The power dynamics addressed in physical or 'real-world' games also manifest in the digital game-verse, as we see power struggles amplified in shooters, fighting games, and war games (Koster 58). When only one type of narrative is allowed into games, it tells outsiders they are not welcome. In 2015, women held 57% of professional occupations, yet comprised only 25% of all computing occupations (Ashcraft et al. 2). The number of women continues to decrease annually in computer science (Henn), particularly for women of color, who hold 3% or less of computing occupations (Ashcraft et al. 2). The facts paint a clear picture that the exclusivity of the consumer-king narrative affects real-world outcomes, where women hold very little "power" in computer science innovation. A feminist intersectional lens, while appropriated from its original intent, provides a theory and the means with which we can "critically analyse the multiplicity of divisions and inequalities" (Davis 78) in digital games.

Part III: (Mis)representation in digital games

By applying a feminist intersectional lens to digital game criticism, we can create a sharp

and dynamic analysis of how characters and narratives are represented. There is merit in

examining the ineffable *gameliness* of a game by analyzing it through a traditional lens to assess

a game's aesthetic-entertainment value and its playability (Hunicke et al. 2); however, a feminist

intersectional critical lens considers additional, sociocultural layers in game scenarios and

assesses beyond the paradigms, the pleasures, and the subjectivity of the consumer-king gamer.

When game designer and author of *Theory of Fun for Game Design,* Raph Koster, argues how

"even the most whacked-out abstract games [] reflect reality" (Koster 53), what he means is that

games teach us about hierarchy— power and status (Koster 53). From a very early age, we

define or accept our social status through games (Koster 58). A feminist intersectional critique

provides the vocabulary to define these power struggles and equips us with a way to analyze how

games represent (or misrepresent) reality. Consider how designing AAA (blockbuster) games

solely for the consumer-king gamer (Brathwaite et al. 328) has resulted in a decrease of women

in tech: in 2009, women comprised just 18% of students receiving Computing and Information

Science degrees (Campbell et al. 95). This low enrollment of women demonstrates how

representation is constructed into the digital game medium. Anita Sarkeesian— media critic and

creator of Feminist Frequency, an educational nonprofit "that explores the representations of

women in pop culture narratives" (IMDB)— argues:

> …games often reinforce a similar message, overwhelmingly casting men as
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> heroes and relegating women to the roles of damsels, victims or hypersexualized
>
> playthings…The notion that gaming was not for women rippled out into society,

until we heard it not just from the games industry, but from our families,

teachers and friends. As a consequence, I, like many women, had a complicated

love-hate relationship with gaming culture. (Campbell et al. 96)

Reinforcing hegemonic narratives in games creates a never-ending cycle, and these sexist, racist,

heteronormative paradigms are perpetuated by the profitability of the consumer-king identity

(Golding 135). Ultimately, this toxicity *excludes* many who have been in the gaming realm since

its beginning. Sarkeesian's online video series, *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, episodically

examines women in pop culture narratives while expressing the basic vocabulary of existing

feminist criticism (Feminist Frequency). Sarkeesian, for one, addresses the *Smurfette Principle*

(Feminist Frequency) as it relates to representation in games— the trope of the lone and (often)

vacuous female character, surrounded by a variety of male characters (Pollitt). The game *Bully*

takes you, a troublesome student, through a new high school. Your prize for winning over each

clique of high school boys— groups whom initially act hostile to newcomers— manifests as a

make-out session between your character, Jimmy, and each clique's highest-ranking, wanton

female character (Rockstar). In the game *Metal Gear Solid V,* the character Quiet suffers on

multiple accounts, just by the very nature of the game's narrative design. Historically, a male

character from the Hideo Kojima's *Metal Gear Solid* universe suffers by way of a sci-fi parasite

infection (Kojima A). On the other hand, Quiet— an assassin in *Metal Gear Solid V: The*

Phantom Pain— must counteract the effects of her parasite much differently (Myers). While the

male sniper character in the third installment of *Metal Gear Solid* is able to wear clothes while

infected (Kojima A), Quiet can only breathe through her skin because of the parasite and, thus,

dons a bikini throughout the game. Quiet's narrative also suffers, in that she is surrounded by

male characters and cannot speak (Kojima B). Diverse and *inclusive* discourse cannot even begin

because Quiet's entire existence is subjected to a different set of rules. In fact, part of Quiet's

narrative revolves around an attempted rape actually *saving* her life: Quiet is taken prisoner and

dressed in prison attire. Later, her clothes are removed so a guard could rape her, and he drowns

her in the process. Consequently, removing her clothes is what allows Quiet's skin to breathe

(Wilson). The convoluted storyline— that a disrobing and rape save woman rather than harm her

— misrepresent and portray singular narratives of women, for one, and cause concern amongst

feminist critics (myself included).

Part IV: Identity in digital games

Through games such as *Metal Gear Solid*, we can see how games continue to reinforce misrepresented narratives. Some in the games criticism and scholarship community also challenge the token minority trope— a device which marginalizes communities (Harris 20) and serves to progress the storyline for the sake of a hegemonic narrative (Harris 19). Though the core idea of the *token*'s marginal status was meant to address sociological inquiries from a gender-neutral standpoint (Zimmer 64), the term addressed issues women faced as they entered the male-dominated workforce and academia (Zimmer 65). Tokenism also addressed behaviors beyond relationships between men and women in a "society plagued by sexism" (Zimmer 65). Evan Narcisse, game and pop culture critic, expands upon the token minority trope, synthesizing his own experience as it relates to identity (Narcisse A) in his long-form article, "Video Games' Blackness Problem" (Narcisse B). Narcisse excerpts this article for his contribution, "The Natural," in *The State of Play*, an anthology of "creators and critics on video game culture" (Goldberg et al). "The Natural" argues how even the subtle details of video game design actually amplify how hegemonic narratives appropriate and exoticize specific aspects of Black culture (Narcisse A 55)— tokenism— as a means to propelling a particular narrative in games. Narcisse discusses the *natural* in game design, a hairstyle donned by millions of black men (Narcisse A 56):

> Video game producers and art directors put dreadlocks in their creations to draw on that [visual] shorthand. *See, our black character is spiritual. Or edgy. Or threatening. Or threateningly edgy in a spiritual way. What's that?! An Afro?! Boy, this black guy must really funny! Get ready to laugh at him, players!* Look

at a natural and what do you think? *Boy, that sure is…middle of the road.*

(Narcisse A 56)

bell hooks, famed essayist and activist, also addresses how popular culture defines the black body when it exoticizes black female sexuality as a means for "whites to sexualize their world by projecting onto black bodies a narrative of sexualization disassociated from whiteness" (hooks 123). Professor Kumiko Nemoto argues that non-white bodies in interracial partnerships, as portrayed in media, often exist to create hyperfeminine or hypermasculine characters to appease white fantasy (Nemoto 296). Citra from *Far Cry 3* functions as the dark-skinned, exotic, and scantily-clad sexual interest (Frank) who serves to sate the male gaze of the consumer-king player and also to propel a storyline that involves themes of ritual sex and human sacrifice (IGN), and these themes directly conflict with the "'civilized heart of European culture" (hooks 123). Bao Phi, performance poet and critic, highlights how exoticism and tokenism manifest in relation to asian characters in his article, Missing Polygons: Asians, Race, and Video Games (Phi). Phi points out how Faith, the protagonist in *Mirror's Edge,* identifies as Asian; however, all the men designed to exist in Faith's life seemingly changed from Asian to white, "presumably to make her more relatable to a mass market" (Phi). In addition, by talking about the limited number of Asians characters— particularly as protagonists— in digital games, Bao Phi demonstrates the desire to see our own identities in the media we consume. Former editor-in-chief, Hussein Ibrahim, of at7addak.com— one of the largest Arab-language video game websites— discusses his experience, and "what it feels like to play the bad guy" (Ibrahim 75) when he witnesses his own identity thrust and relegated into the role of Middle Eastern terrorist, fighting the brave and valiant American warrior, such as in the Call of Duty franchise (Ibrahim

76). Ibrahim also demonstrates how Arabic is often given a haphazard treatment, resulting in major snafus: In Splinter Cell: Conviction, street signs are written in Arabic while other street signs contain "just a bunch of squiggly lines" (Ibrahim 78). *Call of Duty* fails in its attempt to employ proper Arabic audio and text and fails to space the letters to be read from right to left, in which the letters should connect (Ibrahim 78).

At San Jose State University's 2017 Gender and Video Games Conference, keynote speaker and Executive Director of Gameheads, Damon Packwood, argues that "low income, people of color over index in video games because historically games, play and competition [have] always been used to cope with institutionalized oppression" (Packwood). Packwood also cites that people of color, specifically Blacks and Latinos, actually helped the video game industry survive during its near fatal demise in the 1980s— by way of liquor stores and bodegas — and the crash occurred just prior to the creation of the consumer-king identity. Packwood, among many, argues that video games do not come out of a vacuum and are culturally relevant: "What people don't understand is that the video game industry broke right alongside the hip-hop industry. Video games, hip-hop, skateboards; all that kind of broke during the 80s. I had everything— the Ataris, the Segas. We grew up with it. —Ice T" (Packwood). Unlike limitations the hegemony offers, a feminist intersectional critique of games *explores* the experiences of players of color, rather than negates these identities.

Part V: Violence and the Economy of Entitlement

Over the last two years, I have had the opportunity to explore and define how games shape our experiences— whether we play them or not— and how we import ourselves into games, particularly multiplayer games, through the added element of socialization (Sarkeesian et al. 113). Not only is this an academic pursuit, but also a personal endeavor related to my own experience being harassed, singled-out, and subjected to rape and death threats in online multiplayer games, particularly *Grand Theft Auto V (*Rockstar*)*. An intersectional lens launches a certain dialogue and equips us with the means to address representation and identity in games. Evan Narcisse's experience, for one, leads us toward an understanding of the widespread, violent backlash related to paradigms that don't subscribe to hegemonic, heteronormative culture boundaries. When Narcisse argues for more black game designers (Narcisse 57), he is actually challenging the "white male 'gamer' identity (Salter et al. 413), which is now "under contention at the boundaries of the gaming public and marginalized communities" (Salter et al. 413). This hypermasculine backlash directly affects women and female-identifying gamers, where violent behavior is borne as a means to intensify an androcentric, secret society (Salter et al. 413). Many cite the source as stemming from the disproportionate amount of male-identifying, masculine presence in game design. In fact, only 18% of Computing and Information Science degrees were awarded to women in 2009 (Campbell et al. 95). The inherently violent nature of hypermasculinity (Salter et al. 410) is borne from an "exaggeration of masculine cultural stereotypes within subcultures" (Salter et al. 402) and managed by those who subscribe to consumer-king gamership, themselves, in online men's gaming forums. According to *Reaxxion*, an online game criticism forum for men, "Gamers share a collection of values and beliefs that

denote an identity which should be treated with respectful consideration" (Reaxxion). Although

Reaxxion claims the gamer identity should be treated with respect, Reaxxion and other social

media forums feel threatened by the "diversification of gaming culture" (Todd 64), and

"cyberbullying, including rape and death threats [are] directed primarily at scholars and women

involved in the gaming industry" (Todd 64).

Hypermasculine backlash in games also manifests in *Penny Arcade*'s three-frame comic,

referred to as the *Dickwolves[1]* comic (Holkins et al.). The comic, from one of the most popular

gaming webcomics (TIME), illustrates a commentary on the ethics of certain game mechanics in

World of Warcraft in which a fictional, beastly slave-master plans to rape the remaining prisoners

a player has to leave behind (Salter et al. 405). The comic also demonstrates the troublesome

game rhetoric that values sexual violence as a means to signify domination or victory (Salter et

al. 406). Critic Milli A. Shaker spoke out against the casual use of rape as a plot device in *Penny*

Arcade (Shaker). Shaker argues how sexual violence isn't an original design component of

World of Warcraft and challenges *Penny Arcade*'s decision to employ sexual violence rhetoric in

a commentary on game mechanics, particularly when slavery and sexual violence are a

legitimate concern for many across the globe (Obama):

> But unlike Gabe killing Tycho so he doesn't have to share a video game, a slave
>
> being raped is a real thing that happens in the world every day. I don't find this
>
> "joke" funny because, unlike characters cartoonishly killing each other
>
> repeatedly and coming back to life, just as in video games, rape isn't a central
>
> feature of (most) games—at least in the actual gameplay, totally aside from the
>
> language used by players. (Shaker)

Subsequently, Penny Arcade creators dismissed fans and critics who challenged the comic and released a mock-apology comic the following week (Edidin), urging people: "It's possible you read our cartoon, and became a rapist as a direct result. If you're raping someone right now, stop. Apologize and leave. Go and rape no more" (Holkins et al.). Penny Arcade creators did express a regret-like sentiment— "there are people who were offended" (Holkins et al.)— but their half-hearted acknowledgement occurred only *after* creating a divided community, full of *dickwolves* and *teamrape* supporters (Salter 410). Because of Penny Arcade's privileged and influential position as a top-ranking game website (*TIME*), they have an obligation to fairly address the rhetoric of sexual violence (Salter 411). Individuals and communities who fall outside of the traditional "gamer" identity and its universal narrative have been subject to its negative effects. Women continue to be the recipients of hypermasculine backlash from the *consumer-king gamer identity* (Campbell 138). Another prominent gaming controversy is widely known as #GamerGate (Campbell et al. 96). Several factors in 2014 converged as the catalyst for #GamerGate, which gave a "name and a brand to the ongoing harassment of women in games" (Golding 128). After a relationship ended between Zoe Quinn and Eron Gjoni— game designer and computer programmer & blogger, respectively— Gjoni, in a 9,425-word public blog post, accused Quinn of having an affair with a Kotaku writer in order to gain a favorable critique (Campbell et al. 96) for her new game, *Depression Quest* (Quinn 85). Zoe Quinn designed Depression Quest as a way to "show what depression is like for people who don't have it, and to reach out to other people suffering with it to try to let them know they're not alone" (Quinn 89). #GamerGate, on the one hand, brought out concerns people had that related to ethics in game journalism. The controversy was quickly overshadowed by gendered attacks

from consumer-king gamers (like Quinn) who found any measure of success in a seemingly male-oriented industry (Campbell et al. 96). Anita Sarkeesian at Feminist Frequency addresses topics such as "Damsel in Distress," "Ms. Male Character," "Are Women Too Hard to Animate?" "Positive Female Characters," and "Women as Reward." The videos highlight widely-utilized narratives employed in games. The Feminist Frequency series, hosted by Sarkeesian, challenges the need for particular tropes and representation within a narrative. Sarkeesian was also met with a near-insurmountable backlash when she challenged sexism in digital games. After challenging the monolith of toxic consumer-king gamer subculture, Sarkeesian awoke to "hundreds upon hundreds of violently misogynist and racist threatening comments" (Sarkeesian et al. 106). The gendered violence Sarkeesian endured in most aspects of her digital life ranged from text-based messages to explicit pictures, in which the sender masturbated onto Sarkeesian's picture and posted the resulting photo of her picture, now covered in cum, online (Sarkeesian et al. 108):

> Lengthy digital documents were created and published that included every piece of information harassers could find about me, including former employment, education, test scores, various addresses and contact information, previous hobbies and interests, personal photographs and videos. They didn't stop with me, however, and went on to collect further data about my [Feminist Frequency] team members, my friends, and my family.
>
> Imagine an exploding geyser: a never-ending, violent, and steady eruption of toxic, misogynist hate.

If there was a virtual venue for their hatred available, the harassers used if.

Geysers of abuse streamed from every possible source, their torrents flooding in

the physical realities of my everyday life. (Sarkeesian et al. 108)

When we wade through the toxic sludge of racism and sexism in games by looking at

Dickwolves and #GamerGate, we can see how the gaming sphere desperately needs a feminist

intersectional critique that challenges games— right down their mechanics. Sarkeesian now

mutes her in-game microphone and disables her camera anytime she plays to avoid misogynist

harassment (Sarkeesian et al. 109). Multiplayer games often have these skewed power dynamics

built right in: in my own experience playing Grand Theft Auto V, players would gang up on me

or report me using the in-game reporting system. I was banned from 'Survival' matches (four

players fight waves of computer-generated enemies) and I was also at risk of having my account

suspended, all because I used the game's in-game voice chat feature. At present, the power

dynamics of a game favor the violent, entitled power structure the consumer-king identity has

grown to expect; thus, the resolution begins with a feminist intersectional critique.

Part VI: Conclusion: Mechanics and beyond.

Katherine Cross argues that game discourse, itself, holds queer games to a higher standard (Cross). Cross challenges avatar designs in multiplayer games to acknowledge trans women of color like herself: "You can hack my psychology based on the avatars I chose throughout the years" (Cross). A positive, queer narrative can be found in games such as Dys4ia, by Anna Anthropy (a.k.a. Auntie Pixelante), and Merritt Kopas' game, Lim. These game designers highlight different experiences and the emotionality of identifying as trans women. When we explore representation, identity, and violence as they relate to the game-verse, it is fair to say that the celebrated, commodified, and heteronormative language of video games represents and reifies American hegemony. By engaging a feminist intersectional perspective in digital game criticism, we can— at the very least— better understand and address the violent backlash that targets and oppresses marginalized identities and narratives in the game-verse, as well as our physical reality. The good news is that the consumer-king gamer is on the decline, thanks to the growing community of vocal critics and scholars (Alexander).

On the other hand, we still see a dominant power system in place in the game-verse, one where white people continue to create non-white characters as a means to express racist thinking (Cross). This power system still shuts down discussion boards due to the toxic replies a woman receives whenever she discusses muting her microphone in a multiplayer game like Overwatch due to gendered harassment (Facebook). Even an innocuous-seeming game like Pokémon Go does not necessarily consider how these power dynamics live in relation to a player's location or identity. A major component of Pokémon Go relies on players moving about the city, and players must constantly pay attention to the feedback displayed on the screen; otherwise, they are

penalized by missing out on rare, collectible items or characters (Niantic). The disregard for a player's intersection becomes even more troublesome when coupled by real-world victim-blaming— "The University Police Department reminds the campus community to be aware of their surroundings…" (SJSU Police Dept.)— and misogynist, entitled, exclusive consumer-king-like behavior bubbling up from Donald Trump and his administration— "Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything" (NYT Election 2016). A feminist intersectional perspective in games is now more critical than ever to combat this commodified identity. Only then can we properly and respectfully celebrate and elevate identities rather than violently *other* people who have always had a rightful place in digital and real-world spaces.

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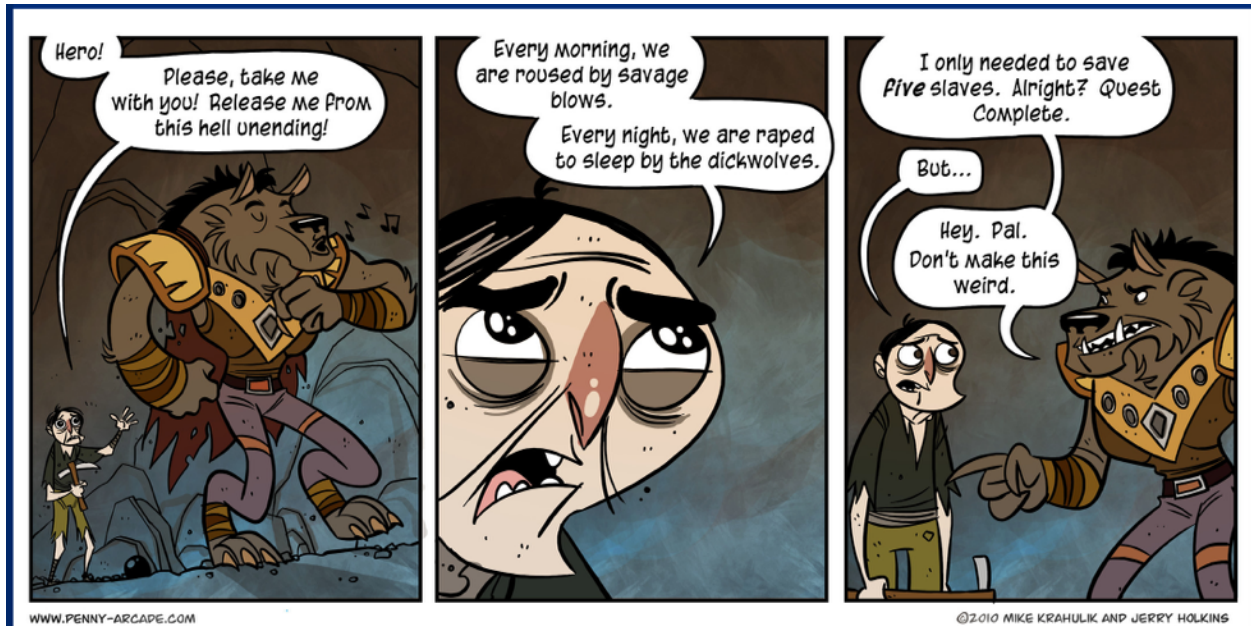
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Appendix

(Holkins et al.)[1]