

Fine, Gary Alan. Shared Fantasy: role-playing games as social worlds. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983

Gary Alan Fine's 1983 work on role-playing games, *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds*, details the demographics of tabletop gamers through Fine's observations doing field research and surveys done by hobby magazines. In relation to the game Hero Quest: Quest for Glory, there are two important lessons to extract from Fine's reading of the role-playing world at large – the self-selecting playership and the perpetuity of that contained system. What follows is not arguing that role-playing games are still insular or that they will continue to be in the future; it is simply the confluence of Fine's book and the beginning of the computer role-playing game as demonstrated by Quest for Glory.

In his book, Fine lists traits deemed representative of the gaming population at large. Some of these traits in particular work to innately include or exclude populations from knowledge of or partaking in the role-playing game. Surveys conducted by popular gaming magazines *The Dragon*, *The Space Gamer*, and *The Judges Guild Journal*, revealed the median age of survey respondents to be 20.4 (Fine 40). During the nascence of computers in general and computer games in particular, the young computer scientists developing the games would be those most likely to know about them, play them, and evangelize them.

Following the age trend, Fine also mentions threads in other demographics areas of a gamer's life. They are very likely to have completed some post-graduate work (49.6% of respondents over age 20 in *The Space Gamer's* survey) (Fine 41). From his personal observations, they are more likely to be free of social commitments such as a long-term relationships and children (40). He also finds that gamers are typically working at jobs commensurate with their skill level (given that a large number have done advanced course work, one would expect these jobs to pay well) (47). This ample leisure time and disposable income give the "typical" gamer enough time and money to invest in such an immersive hobby.

These statistics are mostly backed up the by the Bureau of Labor Statistic's survey in 1990 of computer ownership. In 1990, a year after Quest for Glory was released commercially, only 15.2% of the population owned a personal computer. 24% of households age 35-44 owned computers, the largest percentage across the age categories. 37% of those with graduate degrees owned a computer (the highest in the education category), and 33% of the highest income quintile owned personal computers ("Computer Ownership up Sharply in the '90s" 2). The trending indicates that those of the age to be just out of graduate school with comfortable incomes are the most likely to own a computer during this time and thus more likely to play computer games, which matches Fine's analysis.

What does this come down to? The playership for an early computer game such as Quest for Glory would be self-selecting, and this comes from two sources. Those suggested by Fine to be the most interested or active in tabletop role-playing culture (young single males with professional degrees), and those most likely to have a computer when the game was released (early middle aged males with professional degrees). The audience for this game was built in by those two factors. As the author mentions later in the chapter, the "recruitment" techniques to a subculture such as fantasy gaming are twofold: those participating in a social group who switch

to this activity, and those interested in the activity and seek out a group (48-49). This reaffirms the target audience for an early computer role-playing game.

Thus the other side of the coin becomes apparent. If the audience is built in and fairly clear in focus, wouldn't a developer want to cater to them? This is unfortunately the case in *Quest for Glory*. Two glaring examples present themselves immediately: the fact that the character you play throughout the game is male with no exception, and that the characters in the game are portrayed as consistently Caucasian. Perhaps these were not overt errors or were created for expediency (i.e. there will be room for other game facets without having to code different skin colors and genders), but they are still readily apparent.

Fine presents multiple theories on why females are not involved in the gaming community in great numbers; Gary Gygax estimated active females to be 15% of the community maximum, and the readership surveys returned 2.4% (*The Dragon*) and .4% (*The Space Gamer*) (41). Based on personal observation and psychosocial research, he posits that: men are more fictionally imaginative (63), women do not want to spend the 8 to 10 hours typical of a gaming session (63), women are not interested in roleplay because they cannot detach themselves from reality (64), or recruitment models do not extend to females who would be interested (65). Whatever the reason, the developers agreed that women would not be a base demographic to market to and not only did not make a female player character, almost only a handful of women exist in the story at all.

Racially, the characters are presented as either Caucasian or monstrous. One possible reason for this is the town's setting of Spielburg, based very loosely on a medieval German township. Fine makes no mention of race as an aspect of gaming in this chapter, but the BLS statistics indicate that computer ownership for racial minorities other than Asians was very low during this time period; for example only 6.7% of blacks owned a computer ("Computer" 2). Again, this lack of feature may have been for expediency but it still dampens a minority player's experience when they are asked to identify with a character racially opposite in the immersion process.

Lastly, the dimension of computer games as a hold over from tabletop role-playing also excludes the player who has no experience in one and is new to the other. Of the first few screens, one asks the player to select a class, with no hint of the strengths and weaknesses of each. Likewise, after selecting a class the player must allocate skill points, which is alien to those not familiar with character sheets used in games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. A frustrating introduction with no signposts serves not only to turn potential players off this game in particular but fantasy role-playing games in general, fearing it is a culture from which they are too separate.

Using Fine's reading of tabletop role-playing gamers and their demographics, it becomes apparent that that specific stratum of society is custom made for early computer games, many of which were based of the very same pen and paper games they were used to playing. Looking closer at *Quest for Glory* itself, this creates a vicious cycle where the developers focus the game on their expected demographic to the exclusions of others.

"Computer Ownership up Sharply in the '90s" <<http://www.bls.gov/opub/ils/pdf/opbils31.pdf>>