Epic Glory and Manhood Acts in Fantasy Role-Playing: Dagorhir as a Case Study

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Abstract

Based on a yearlong observational study of participants in a "Live Action Role Playing" group called "Dagorhir," using the manhood acts perspective, we focus on how masculinity is constructed among low-status, subordinate men who self-define as "nerds." We demonstrate that through fantasy role-playing, men are given opportunities to increase their group status, while women are typically relegated to subordinate positions. Increasing status in Dagorhir involved a type of self-enhancement strategy that we termed "epic glory," which positioned men as social dominants. Epic glory was earned through training activities, at Dagorhir events, and through simulating dramatic death scenes. Such actions served as a performance of masculinity that was not possible for these men outside the role-playing experience. Importantly, women were excluded from many of the opportunities to enact epic glory, which helped reproduce inequalities both among males and between males and females participating in the events.

Keywords

gender, masculinity, manhood acts, nerds, self-enhancement, glorified-self, live action role-play, LARP, analog games, ludology

Introduction

Every Sunday, in a quad of a northeastern college, nearly 20 men, in their early to late 20s, battle as knights and warriors. The men equip themselves with various swords,

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shields, and armors crafted from old furniture scraps, wood, and plastic pipes, which are wrapped in foam and cloth. They use their "weapons" to engage in a simulated game revolving around archaic military combat. While their foam weapons are not crafted with the purpose of injuring anyone, participants simulate death cries when struck by their opponents. The winner cries out in victory, proclaiming his glory to an imaginary king, clan, tribe, or army. Once the battle is complete, the losers rise from the place of the simulated death and the battle starts again. As this happens, other college students watch this turn of events from a distance. One mutters to another as commentary of the events they just observed, "What a bunch of nerds."

Dagorhir Outdoor Improvisational Battle Games (shortened as Dagorhir) combines both history and fantasy, allowing players to interact as historical or fictional characters. The activity of Dagorhir is very similar to what outsiders call Live Action Role Playing or LARPing, but members of this group reject the term for a number of reasons.[1] Some of the actions in Dagorhir may involve fantastic acts such as "defeating an invading group of orcs [monsters]" by simulating combat with foam swords and arrows known as "boffers." In addition, participants regularly engage in conversations as historical characters with manners, language, and dress that reflect the culture of the period. Participants also dress according to a genre that is characteristic of the game, such as in a knight's armor or Victorian/Tudor dress of historical England. Importantly, these participants follow rules for interaction which are agreed upon by individual group members and reflect rules established by a national network of organizations that span nationally and internationally. Larger Dagorhir events, which are called battles, are generally held in a restricted social space, primarily in a rented outdoor field. Small Dagorhir events and practices, however, are generally held at public venues.

The Dagorhir organization was founded in 1977 by Brian Wiese and was later popularized by others in the early 1980s (Tresca, 2011). Wiese's intention was to simulate, through the use of foam weapons and armor, fantasy themed battles. Dagorhir can be considered a form of fantasy play because of its chronological inconsistency between time and space in scenarios as well as use of characters that askew historical fact and physical reality. For example, events include a mix of historical, fantasy, and mythological themes and characters much like the fantasy role-playing board game Dungeons & Dragons (Fine, 1983). In some ways, Dagorhir can also be likened to children's games such as Athenians and Spartans, Cowboys and Indians, and war play but is far more complex in its organization, rules, and stories and also involves mainly adolescents and adults.

The focus of this particular study is on several groups of Dagorhir players in the Northeastern United States and, in particular, a nearly all-male group of players that practice on the college quad of Public North East University (PNEU). These groups are labeled by many outsiders as "nerds." Similarly, many insiders also identify as such. For instance, a member of a Dagorhir organization named Arin[2] said, "We're a dorky, nerdy, geeky bunch at heart. It's what makes us run around in our fantasy world and hit people with foam." In this context, both through external labeling and self-identification, Dagorhir can be categorized as a nerd group. Central to our focus on this group is the common depiction of their subordinate status as men, which make

them ideal to further sociological understanding of how definitions of manhood get constructed and enacted within low-status groups.

Review of Literature

Nerds and Nerd Groups

To date, the sociological research on nerds as a social group has been sparse. The focus of extant literature has generally painted nerds as outcasts and examined the negative consequences of this label (Rentzsch, Schutz, & Schroder-Abe, 2011). Nugent (2008) identified four common characteristics of people labeled as nerds: emotional with-draw, disinterest in traditional physical sport, emphasis on logic, and social exclusion. Awkward interactions, interest in extreme intellectual and/or esoteric topics, and stig-matized body types (glasses, obese, slovenly dress) are also often used by others as symbolic identifiers for nerd status. Those who become labeled as nerds may try to limit social interaction, which may provide explanation for the view that nerds experi-ence social isolation (Evans & Eder, 1993). Related to this, research on nerds tends to be conflated with those who are bullied and isolated within the social context of schools (Brady, 2014; Suitor & Carter, 1999). For example, Bishop et al. (2004) found that students labeled as "nerds" are individuals who tended to be more studious in their academic pursuits and were less institutionally valued than individual students who engaged in group athletics. While it is typical to focus on the negative consequences and isolation of individuals labeled as nerds, it is important to explore the possibility that nerd status is also part of group association.

Extant research on nerd groups tends to focus on group interactions that either help discard the negative label or reframe it into a positive one. For instance, Kinney (1993) demonstrated how group interaction helped shed stigmatized labels, such as "nerd," and allowed members to become less socially awkward. Other groups help redefine nerd-like behavior as masculine and cool, departing from the stereotypical tough guy mind-set and appearance (Cooper, 2000; Wilson, 2002). Other research demonstrates how nerd groups create alternative subcultures whereby nonconformity can be revered, as in the case of teenage groups refusing to smoke as a way to act "cool" (Plumridge, Fitzgerald, & Abel, 2002). Others suggest that groups allow for "nerd" labels to be transformed into something more positive (Ciciora, 2009). Although this research examines how groups help, in some way or another, to transform the stigma of the nerd identity, it neglects a focus on the gendered aspects of these processes including exploring the possibility that they may, intentionally or unintentionally, reproduce inequality regimes (Acker, 2006).

Manhood and Nerds

For many years, the sociological literature on men as gendered beings has focused its attention on masculinity as a "configuration of gender practices" and the notion that there are "multiple masculinities" with some fitting the hegemonic ideal and others

subordinate to this status (Connell, 2005). In this line, research on nerd masculinity has emerged as a particular configuration of practices that conform to elements of both hegemonic and subordinate masculinity (Cooper, 2000; Kendall, 1999). For instance, Kendall's (1999) research on nerd masculinity demonstrates how aspects of hyper-masculinity such as an intense focus on work skills and disregard for social skills are combined with elements of femininity such as disinterest and lack of talent in sports. Kendall (1999) suggested that elements of nerd masculinity increasingly link to the hegemonic ideal because of the trend of computer professionals occupying high-level positions within the employment structure.

Although the multiple masculinities perspective has helped adjust the research focus away from masculinity as monolithic and static gender role and toward acknowl-edging the power and privilege behind the status, it has paid too much attention on creating typologies of men and not enough on the commonalities between them (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). This is particularly true when it comes to the social practices and processes that simultaneously signify belonging to the gender category of manhood while subordinating others. Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) have forwarded the "manhood acts" perspective, which delineates common processes that males use to signify themselves as real men. Manhood acts consist of social interactions that elicit deference, resist exploitation from others, and assert control over others, self, and environment. These techniques are strategically used in social interactions to both subordinate others and signify manhood. Because the nerd subculture is largely male, but considered subordinate, this context provides an opportunity to explore if and how nerds act in ways that dominate others through their actions. Sociological exploration of male nerds from the manhood acts perspective (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) has yet to be researched and can likely contribute to our more general understanding of men as gendered beings.

Self-Enhancement, Glorified-Self, and Manhood Acts

Much of the underlying processes related to the manhood acts perspective can be cast under the principle of self-enhancement. Self-enhancement is a psychological princi-ple whereby individuals favor positive stimuli that augment self-conceptions and pro-tect against negative evaluations of the self (Sedikides, 1993). One particular, and extreme, form of self-enhancement is identified by Adler and Adler (1989) as the "glo-rified self." The glorified-self is an aggrandized version of selfhood resulting from internalization of fame. Adler and Adler (1989) found in their research on university basketball players that glorified-selfhood was a consequence of complex group inter-actions between teammates, coaches, media, and fans that at times inhibited, but ulti-mately enhanced the self toward internalization of a revered celebrity status. Important to this study, Adler and Adler's (1989) research demonstrated that self-enhancement can be conceptualized beyond a cognitive strategy to also include identification of generic processes of complex group interactions that result in self-enhancement over time. Relatedly, gender scholars have long noted that manhood is a revered social status imbued with power, privilege, and prestige (Acker, 2006; Connell, 1987). In

particular, Connell (2005) noted that hegemonic masculine status is "the most honored" form of manhood (p. 849). And the manhood acts perspective delineates some generic processes of self-enhancement that, as we will demonstrate, link to a glorified version of gendered selfhood.

The objective of our study of men who participate in Dagorhir was to utilize the manhood acts perspective as a framework for better understanding how subordinate men enhance their sense of selfhood. In addition, we use the manhood acts perspective to understand if such self-enhancement strategies contribute to the reproduction of inequality and gender stratification within this subcultural setting.

Settings and Methods

Data for this study derive from 10 months of fieldwork and 18 direct interviews of Dagorhir players.[3] During the study, the first author observed 30 practice sessions of a Dagorhir group, which held practice in the quads of PNEU. The first author also observed three larger gatherings of multiple chapters of Dagorhir and two discussion sessions of Dagorhir events.

Each of the 18 interviews lasted approximately 1 hr. The purposes of the interviews were to gather information from members about their participation in Dagorhir, the subcultural aspects of the group, and how members identify with the Dagorhir group. Interviewing men about their identities and, in particular, masculinity can be perceived as a threat to their credibility and lead to defensiveness and/or shutting down. Thus, the first author approached questions about how Dagorhir membership may also link to manhood through indirect questioning[4] during interviews (Schwalbe & Wolkomir, 2001). During practices and events, the first author also questioned participants about how they handle themselves when harassed by outsiders.

The Dagorhir PNEU college chapter was founded in 2004 and named "The Oaks." Participants were mostly men (15 of 18 members), and all members were White. At the time the Oaks was founded, Dagorhir was already established nationwide, with hundreds of active chapters. The Oaks chapter was founded by three men and two of the chapter founders, Ryuji and Strider (their Dagorhir character-names), were still active members at the time of the study.

In addition to interviewing members of PNEU, the first author also observed, created field notes, and informally interviewed participants at three regional Dagorhir battles: "Battle of Grand Summit" in September 2011, "Winter Invasion" in February 2012, and "Fires of Purgatory" in April 2012. Aside from "The Oaks," other chapters such as the "Triumvirate Phalanx" and the "Orc Monsters" participated in these events. It was at these events where multiple chapters met, battled, and socialized. Because each of the battles consisted of over one hundred members and a day's worth of activity, the first author captured many conversations about Dagorhir and viewed, firsthand, the unfolding of events. The first author also "lurked" on Dagorhir-themed Internet forums and discussions to get a clear understanding of mythology and of the culture of Dagorhir as a whole (Hine, 2000).

Qualitative Analytical Methods

Analysis proceeded inductively using a modified form of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to derive emergent themes within the data. Upon review of the field notes and interviews, we found Dagorhir members identified with the term *nerd* and came to learn that the nerd label was viewed by group members as relating to a deep investment in a task or hobby such as Dagorhir. What we came to understand during our early analysis of data was that gender identity played a far greater role within group interactions than originally anticipated.[5] Realizing that Dagorhir's focus on battle and conquest incorporated an abundance of opportunities to signify a masculine self, we were broadsided by our own oversight of the key focus on manhood. After all, war, battle, and violent conquest are part and parcel of gender hegemony, which was the main focus of the practice and simulated combat in the group. We came to see that participation had the effect of valorizing, in Arin's words, "a dorky, nerdy, geeky bunch" of male participants into real men.

Beyond the act of fighting, complementary themes within the data emerged, including heavy drinking, a focus on real and fantasized pain, and a conquest for producing a glorified version of the self (Adler & Adler, 1989). As these themes coalesced, we began to see how they also related to gendered signification.

The first author's self-identification as a fellow "nerd" was also important to our analysis. Because of this identity, the authors had access to the unique orientation, language, and understanding of "nerd" topics that made them more readily available for sociological analysis. It also helped in gaining access to the group and facilitated sympathetic understanding (Blumer, 1969) of the members within the Dagorhir organization. At times, however, the orientation of the first author as a nerd/researcher blinded him to some phenomena, but this myopia was reduced by continually sharing ideas, data, themes, and initial analyses with the other authors who do not self-identify as nerds. This procedure acted as a check and balance against blindness and bias to the other themes within the data.

Gendered Participation in Dagorhir

The enumeration of members in Dagorhir practices and events suggests that it is a masculine arena. For instance, more than 80% of members in the PNEU chapter were men, and this ratio was reflective of other chapters as well. Photographs taken during and after events were generally helpful in documenting the gender composition of membership, which clearly demonstrated that there were many more men than women. Almost every Dagorhir group, or "tribe," takes photos during events. For instance, the group photo of the tribe "Triumvirate Phalanx" at the Battle of Grand Summit documented only one woman member among their 44 person army (97% male). The count of the "Orc Monsters" tribe revealed that of the 23 members, 19 of them were men (82%). Other tribes, such as the "Fantasia," had a greater proportion of women members, but photos suggested that the group was comprised of about 10 women compared with 20 men (66%). By combining photographic data with official participant counts

at the Battle of Grand Summit, we estimate that of the 378 participants, between 78% and 85% were men. Photographs and field jottings suggest that roughly 40 women participated in battle and an additional 40 women were documented in costume and gear that was inconsistent with battle role-playing.[6] We were unable to get as accurate of estimates for ratios of men and women during the Winter Invasion and Fires of Purgatory battles, but the first author found no indicators that gender composition significantly deviated from the other events.

Similar percentages indicating the overwhelming participation by men are consistent in publicly available data found on Dagorhir-themed websites. Photographs from the website of the Triumvirate Phalanx demonstrate that approximately 85% of participants in affiliated clubs in the North Eastern United States were men (n-male = 189 of N = 220). However, website data are also not comprehensive, as many more participants take part in events than what the websites suggest. Nonetheless, we conjecture that members who are featured on websites likely comprise the group core and reflect the overall gender composition of its members.

Participant counts were complicated by a gendered division of labor whereby only some members of each tribe took part in the "battle" portion of the events while others did not. Although "battle" was viewed by participants as the central activity, many women opted out of it in favor of other types of labors such as taking care of the tribe's encampments. Women who participated in battle often dressed and acted as men. In fact, similar to girl high school basketball players who act like boys (Pascoe, 2011) some women go to great lengths to transform themselves into convincing male characters in Dagorhir battles. This made it complicated to accurately quantify the gender population during Dagorhir events, which were often chaotic and disorganized, but in many ways reinforce our claim that Dagorhir is a male-centric arena.

Gendered Opportunities and Participation in Dagorhir

While the data generally confirm that males comprise a majority of participants, the occupants of leadership positions in Dagorhir also suggest a preference for men. For instance, during the Fires of Purgatory battle, men comprised the majority of participants involved in administrative tasks for the events, such as treasurers, marshals, and referees. Similarly, during the Battle of Grand Summit, two of the three Fantasia tribe members who acted as garrisons for the encampment were men, including a young male college student and a man in his late 30s. In the Triumvirate Phalanx tribe, the leaders of this group including "Caesar," secretary, treasurer, head minister, and field marshal were all men. In addition, the "heralds" which is the name for the referees in this type of event were all men. At PNEU, the three founding members and the historical executive committee of the Oaks tribe were men who were revered by other members as the most meritorious warriors within the group. The gender composition of leadership within the Oaks changed from an all-male leadership team recently, just prior to the initiation of the research, with the selection of women as president and treasurer. Yet, it should be noted that the group's decision to select women as executives was based on their previous experience doing campus administrative work rather

than their credentials as warriors. In fact, only one woman in the chapter was regarded by others as an experienced "warrior." In sum, men generally benefit from the leadership structure because advancement into these positions is usually contingent upon the ability to fight well in battle, in which women—as we will demonstrate—are typically denied opportunity.

While not every participant in Dagorhir can be a leader, all members can select from a multitude of characters from fantasy fiction and historical stories to emulate in battle. These "super-human" characters include orcs, elves, dwarfs, halflings, and many others in the cavalcade of Dagorhir characters. While it is permissible for group participants to present themselves as a myriad of characters, the universe of character traits among Dagorhir members at PNEU was limited and more often related to manhood than womanhood. For instance, a person mimicking an elf character might try to convey a super-human ability for rational action, a trait of manhood (Connell, 2005), by presenting a sense of calmness in their fighting tactics (Vaccaro, Schrock, & McCabe, 2011). Similarly, characters often must conform to medieval or medieval-fantasy lore, which entails a gendered environment where women are generally constructed as a weaker sex. Participants most commonly selected medieval characters, including knights, paladins, squires, wizards, and barbarians; women warrior types were nearly absent from this spectrum of characters.

Another often used character was the Orc. Orcs, which are part of the Orc Monster tribe, relate to masculinity in a strikingly straightforward manner. They are—by definition—all male. Similarly, they are described as "thuggish, muscular, green, boar faced men" (Tolkien, 1954). These characters are said to be assembled by a wizard from the corpses of dead elves in "flesh pits" (Tolkien, 1954). Participants who adopt the Orc character mythologize their motivation in battles as guided by a desire to pillage, destroy, and participate in other forms of domination which connect them closely to manhood acts (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). Participants who enacted Orc characters fought with clubs and carried them in ways meant to convey that the weapons are both primitive and require a great deal of strength to hold. Orc characters were often observed charging into the mock battles without a plan or strategy, which conveyed their reckless abandon. Some participants painted their bodies green and wore costumes that looked like a hide of a boar. Sometimes the Orc characters kept pieces of others' armor, plastic gold, and event entry badges as trophies of their "kill." These trinkets were worn around the neck to designate that they had killed or dominated many other characters. When interviewed,[7] Orc characters acted aggressively and assertively, including yelling obscenities in an attempt to be intimidating, exemplifying manhood acts (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009).

Other groups, such as the knights, adhere to chivalry, a code of ethics originally used by male warrior aristocrats (Saul, 2011). The members mythologize their knight characters as being granted social power by God and as a result, their demonstration of chivalry simultaneously signifies them as privileged men. In fact, characters that designated themselves as the "good guy" implied a chivalrous code of the ethics. For instance, Ryuji, a founding member of PNEU Dagorhir group, stated that he follows the Japanese code of Bushido chivalry to be "a better man" both inside and outside

Dagorhir. While the main goal is to stay in character and is not perceived as purpose-fully intended to exclude or demean women, character roles and rules tended to value traditional masculinity at the exclusion of women and qualities associated with femininity.

It is important to note that there are neither rules barring women from battle nor are there any rules barring all-women Dagorhir groups. In fact, there are character groups in fantasy works of fiction that are both gender neutral and all female, which would imply that at least some Dagorhir tribes would reflect this diversity. Despite the avail-ability of female and gender neutral character types, we did not record an instance of an all-female tribe either at PNEU or larger regional gatherings. One reason for this might be there is not a significant population of women (or men) who wish to enact all-female characters as part of their participation. More likely, as we assume, the omission of all-female tribes indicates that masculine characters are most highly val-ued among Dagorhir members.

Costumes in Dagorhir also venerated manhood. First and foremost, costumes helped create a more believable experience that participants were a part of a medieval or fantasy world. Men were most likely to dress in elaborate costumes that signified their warrior status. Similarly, to signify belonging to the warrior class of members, women often dressed as men. We counted at least 11 women dressed as men during battles and practices. Women, costumed as men, at times bound their chest, adorned themselves with war paint, and were garbed in bulky clothing to give the appearance that they were men or young boys. The suggested intent for women to dress as mascu-line characters reflected a general desire expressed in interviews to be taken seriously as warriors. Conversely, men rarely switched their gender. In fact, only one man was observed donning a woman's wig and mincing around the battlefield in an attempt to distract other male participants in a mocking fashion.

Most women warrior participants in Dagorhir adopted characters that employed archery as their primary combat skill, which turned out to be a feminized weapon within the group culture. For instance, five of eight women on the "Cavalier's" official website are pictured with a bow and arrow with the other three women unarmed. However, none of the 22 men in the tribe were photographed holding a bow and arrows. This is interesting considering the prevailing assumptions about archery skills, which include having strong upper-body strength and possessing a flat chest that facil-itates aiming and firing arrows effortlessly. These assumptions have traditionally devalued women's bodies in comparison with men's. To counter these assumptions, many women archers would note the legend of Amazonian female warriors who would "'pinch out' or 'cauterize'" the right breast to compensate (Wilde, 1999). Despite their veneration of Amazonian resolve, women archers were often observed using a rule within the game titled the "suicide option" when their battle line was routed, which signified that they are no longer a fair target in game-play. The rationale given to the first author for the use of the "suicide option" is that the archer's bow and arrows are expensive and easily broken, and this helps save equipment. Yet, because women were often encouraged to become archers and were taught to use the "suicide option," it might also function to avoid breaching norms that proscribe women and men from

sharing symbolic space as equals in "battle." This seemed to relate to broader cultural debates about women in combat roles (Boykin, 2013). We found that breaking other equipment was less of a concern. In fact, the first author observed multiple instances of participants bragging about breaking swords, clubs, daggers, spears, and flails during battle, which seemed to signify manhood.

During an informal interview, a female member of PNEU, named Homunculus, talked about the female archer stereotype, "[they are] the girlfriend who gets dragged [into participating] and if she fights at all, she's going to do archery instead of like actually fighting." Homunculus noted that there are differences in the types of participation of women, with some joining battles reluctantly and others joining willingly. It is likely that, for women, being relegated to the position of an archer is a form of group boundary maintenance (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996) that reflects a devaluing of women members.

Other non-combat roles within a tribe, such as a scribe or members of the band, are regularly performed by women, and these roles were often devalued. For instance, one woman scribe said in a deflated tone, "I just take pictures for the website. I do not actually fight. I just call myself the scribe to fit in." The first author observed four women performing these lower status roles as opposed to only one man playing the drums and another man acting as a "servant" to the "Emperor of the Triumvirate." These roles themselves do not always have gendered connotations, yet the activity and its value seemed to be reserved for lower status members.

As the descriptions above suggest, participation in Dagorhir is a gendered phenomenon. Men comprise the majority of members overall as well as members in leadership positions in Dagorhir, which we suggest is a reflection of the higher regard given to them within the group. Similarly, opportunities available to enhance one's status within the group, such as selecting a character type and using weaponry, also seemed to prefer men and exclude women. We have demonstrated thus far that these two phenomena are not exclusive of one another but, instead, reflect the support for the signification of manhood as the most honored gender in Dagorhir (Connell, 2005).

Gendered Behavior in Dagorhir: Epic Glory

We have established that Dagorhir is both designed and played out in the context of this research as being structured with opportunities for increasing the status among male members. Here, we argue that Dagorhir is also an organization that, above all else, exalts behaviors that glorify the self. This is exhibited through playing off of the ample use of the word "epic" among Dagorhir members to describe acts that present oneself as heroic or legendary within the group. We call this type of glorification "epic glory." Importantly, asserting epic glory allows participants to associate their actions with revered warriors of historical and mythical lore, and positions them as dominants. Because the arena of Dagorhir favors men, the stories and characters that were epically glorified also tended most often to signify manhood. We demonstrate that opportunities to glorify the self are inherent in the training, fighting, and "dying" in Dagorhir activity. Importantly, threats to glory come from onlookers and hecklers. Obstacles to glory largely affect women participants and reproduce gender inequality.

Epic Glory in Training

Much like men in the sport of mixed martial arts (Vaccaro et al., 2011), it is unusual for new members to have, without a great deal of practice, the ideal kinesthetic and perceptual skill needed to be immediately competent at sparring and fighting. New members rarely have held a Dagorhir sword or weapon prior to joining a group, much less used one in a mock battle. Most new members, therefore, do not have the correct physical self-awareness to fight effectively with a boffer (foam weapon). This fact is quickly made evident to many of the new members as they have no idea when and where to block or strike during sparring, and therefore typically find themselves on the receiving end of a boffer and quickly put out of the game.

Learning the skill to be a competent player in Dagorhir also includes rituals that can enhance one's epic glory. For instance, the PNEU tribe required that "newbies" defeat every member in one-on-one combat before they were allowed to establish a character of their own choosing. The first author observed a newer member, a 16-year-old boy who had been introduced to Dagorhir by his father and named by the group "Random Character Number 42," as he underwent this rite of passage. His given name, "Random Character Number 42," signified that he had yet to earn enough status in the group to be given a "real" character-name. In fact, many new members are given humorous character-names that reflect their low status such as "Dinky Pooter," "Scruffy," "Shithouse," and, in the case of one woman who wanted to be called Tisk, "Tits." Random Character Number 42 lost more than 40 times before he managed to achieve the stated goal. His final competitor was Ryuji, the most skilled member of the group, who did not hold back his attacks. After 10 unsuccessful attempts, bruised and exhausted, the new member mustered up his last amount of strength and managed to "pierce" Ryuji in his gut. Ryuji then fell to the ground in a glorious manner. As Ryuji lay on the ground, someone started the celebration for Number 42 by playing the song, "You're the Best Around," by Joe Esposito on their iPad. The group members began to cheer loudly for Number 42, then picked him up and carried him on their shoulders. After his ordeal, Number 42 would be allowed to create his own name and construct his character for the next battle. Thus, new members move from giving deference to eliciting deference; in terms of the manhood acts perspective.

Along with teaching and practicing choreographed drills and sparring, other physical fitness activities are built in the training regimes such as calisthenics and running. For instance, the "Spartan" tribe made it a requirement for members to pass a physical test to participate in battles, which included 20 push-ups and a mile run in full battle gear. Members stated that physical training prior to a battle helped them "level up," which characterized their activity as helping them become better warriors. This also drew parallels of themselves to the manly warriors found in video games. While physical training alone is not necessarily a masculine activity, the exercises observed in this study were imbued with historical and fictional meanings of war that linked them to masculinity. It was common to see veteran members of tribes acting similar to a military drill instructor, yelling overtop of members to work harder and toughen up.

Despite the emphasis on training and physical fitness, observation suggested that such training was not necessary for participation in battles as each event typically lasted around 10 min and required a nominal amount of physical activity. In fact, many of the participants were not in peak physical health; some were overweight and others underweight, but few appeared to have difficulty participating. So why was physical training prior to an event important to members? It was because the interaction offered an opportunity for participants to glorify their chosen character. "Peet the Goblin" expressed the notion that his tribe's physical training provided the opportunity to "just yell at each other for five or so minutes to get ready to go." Here Peet is suggesting that the training and concomitant yelling and military-like drills help participants prepare to think, feel, and identify their actions in military—and hyper-masculine—terms.

Another way that tribe members earned greater status was by being ritually beaten by group members with their boffers. Peet also discussed his advancement in the organization through this ritual:

> [We have a] little initiation . . . we take . . . a three-foot sword or club or something like that and for a given amount of time we will beat on you to make you tougher . . . It's a cool ceremony. It's very powerful. I mean very testosterone manly sort of thing. Even just being an outsider and watching it, you get moved by it. Your heart rate will jump. And you will want to join in because it's very primal. I love it. It's so cool.

These interactions suggest that getting into character requires putting on a front of toughness found in the epic glory of training, which links to signifying manhood (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). It also resonates with joining other groups that "enact manhood" through initiation ceremonies such as fraternities and gangs.

Epic Glory in Fighting

Because Dagorhir is a fighting activity, battle exposure was a means to epically glorify the self. Fifteen of the 17 people in the Oaks tribe interviewed expressed that their main interest for joining Dagorhir was for the chance of fighting in battles. Conversely, only 9 members expressed a direct interest in enacting fantasy and historical aspects in Dagorhir. Fighting was a main interest because it provided an opportunity to act gloriously. In fact, the founder, Bryan Weise, claimed to have designed the game "to capture that spirit of adventure that could only come from wielding a sword or bow." In essence, if you are feared and respected on the battlefield, you are epically glorious. Victor, a knight, puts this succinctly:

> You know if you are beating ninety percent of the people that you fight it's a pretty good sign that you're darn good. Especially large groups of new kids will flock to those guys . . . when someone is winning and winning and winning they sort of take on a minor celebrity status.

Gobbler, a member of the PNEU chapter, suggests that in addition to winning the retelling of the epic events is important. He said, "Through their exploits on the battlefield, winning

. . . and other things that people talk about. If people talk about your exploits, everybody will know who you are." In addition, epic-glorified status can be conferred by fighting well-known "celebrity" members. Monk Forthwind says of this, "If somebody sparred with 'Bird of Prey' and won, that person would be known as the man who beat 'Bird of Prey'." In short, the more you fight, the more you win, and the more you defeat well-known fighters the more epic glory you will gain within the Dagorhir community.

Yet, fighting alone is not enough; how you fight is also important in gaining epic glory. This included adopting the values of Dagorhir, dressing like a Dagorhir member, and creating a Dagorhir identity in addition to fighting. In fact, fighting without giving proper respect to the tribe in this manner is somewhat taboo. Dangerous Brother, a female fighter, refers to people who neglect these other aspects as "stick jocks," which held negative connotations within the Dagorhir community. Therefore, fighting is a part of glory, but had to be affirmed by participating in other epic Dagorhir activities. Monk Forthwind talks about how gaining epic glory includes things beyond fighting:

> If you got good skills, fight against seasoned warriors, and you can talk about it, glory is a real bonding experience. . . . Yes, glory is about friendship . . . It's what binds us together. We all share in each other's glory.

Glory in Death

Observation of battles suggests that newer participants tend not to win very often and this can, at first, be seen as a barrier to the rewards of epic glory. More often than not, most new warriors tended to be first "causalities" during the battles. It was even common during the pre-battle events that the veteran warriors would practice their winning techniques on their lesser experienced peers. For instance, Assassin Creed said, "I want to be popular, but I can't seem to win. I am just a new member." On its face, this suggests that veteran members only have access to the reward of epic glory and surfaces an important question: Why would new members continue to fight in Dagorhir if they were generally the first to be defeated in battle? It is because new members learn that winning the battle is not the only measure of success.

As a way to make losing an entertaining part of Dagorhir battles, members learn that pretending to die in a dramatic way is glorious. This type of epic glory is called by participants an "Epic Death." As one member explained, "(It is) called Epic Death because it comes from the word Epic Fail. The death is so horrible that you cannot help but watch it." Observation of epic deaths during battles included people screaming in pain, imitating that their arm was severed, or pretending that the impact from a foam weapon caused the victim to fly off their feet. When a participant loses in Dagorhir, they are not simply out of the game, but a part of the process of creating a glorious battle scene. New warriors quickly learn that acting out an epically dramatized death is an important and fun part of the battle activity and the character building process. The Dagorhir official webpage illustrates that fighting gloriously, whether living through the battle or epically dying in the fight, confers immortality:

Will you listen to the bards sing tales of valor? Or will songs of your valor inspire enduring legends down through the ages? King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table stood bravely, earning immortality in legend, literature and song. Will you?

In this way, all members are offered opportunity to bolster their characters regardless of who is the actual victor. One motivation for participants to act out an "epic death" is the reward of "regeneration." If noticed by a herald, the "dead victim" can be granted the opportunity to come "back to life" and fight again in the same battle. In addition, participants are also motivated in part by the chance that other participants will notice and valorize their dramatic death after the battle has completed.

Threats to Glory: Onlookers and Hecklers

Dagorhir is most widely associated with general culture as an organization filled with "nerds and geeks . . . playing make-believe" (DeMeglio, 2010). During private events, this status does not pose a problem because it is insulated from outsiders and there is a shared acceptance of the behavior from insiders. However, spectators at PNEU Dagorhir events often gathered during practices held at the college quad including those who occasionally heckled Dagorhir members and caused intermittent interruptions. As such, hecklers were considered a threat to the epic glory of Dagorhir members. The chapter integrated this ongoing threat of harassment by policing it (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996).

Most outsiders to Dagorhir do not intentionally harass members, but are piqued by their unusual public behavior and dress. It was a regular occurrence to see a few onlookers give various facial expressions of confusion, interest, or disgust toward the PNEU group. Without prior context, some PNEU students confused Dagorhir as a theatrical practice or performance, while others pointed out that they saw Dagorhir on television or in the movies. Onlookers often had the impression that Dagorhir is a deviant act. As an onlooker turned onetime participant stated, "I would not want to be caught wearing those outfits . . . My friends would call me a nerd." Despite onlookers rarely voicing opinions of Dagorhir members out loud, a minority of onlookers created problems. For instance, a few reportedly stole some of the group's equipment as a prank, and members complained that at times: "We (have) had a bunch of (hecklers) making fun of us because we are just like (those people on TV)." While rare, hecklers constituted a threat that could directly delegitimize Dagorhir's epic glory.

The most common way members handled the uninformed onlookers was to reframe their presence as unimportant to the battle. Peet's account of onlookers reflected the classic technique of neutralization, condemning the condemners (Sykes & Matza, 1957) as he explained, "I really don't care what they are doing. Their lives are boring and mundane." Other members incorporated the presence of non-members into the action as "NPCs" or non-player characters. While unnecessary, these NPCs could help members establish that a setting is inhabited by more than just the actors of the story. By reframing outsiders as unimportant or part of the story as NPCs, Dagorhir members put their action as central and important which helped retain the legitimacy of their epic glory.

Because "the Oaks" group was a public organization, all university students are allowed to pick up a foam sword and battle with other members. Thus, Dagorhir members also used this rule of open membership to their advantage when trying to disarm hecklers or skeptical onlookers. Taylor recalled an event where a few hecklers approached the Oaks. "Ryuji gave one of them a broad sword. He said, 'you try it then!' In turn, Ryuji picked up a sword and began to fight one of the (hecklers). Needless to say, Ryuji kicked his butt." Similar stories of members chasing off thieves or yelling back at drive-by hecklers were commonplace during meetings. For instance, Peet suggests, "(The) people that steal from us . . . we have swords and we will give them a beating." These stories reinforce all three components of manhood acts (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009); "kicking butt" and "give them a beating" suggest eliciting deference and asserting control in the effort to resist exploitation by menacing hecklers.

Although five separate instances of a person or a group of people briefly verbally harassing members of the PNEU Oaks were observed over the period of the study, no acts of physical harassment toward members were observed. This was consistent with members' testimony that more direct and violent forms of harassment were rare. Yet, stories of warding off violent and serious hecklers served as an important means for coalescing group identity, which was also viewed as an epically glorious act and related to signifying manhood (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009).

Obstacles to Glory: Gender

While members recognized that more males tend to participate and be attracted to the organization, male members rarely reflected on how gendered performance related to Dagorhir identity. It was seldom during formal interviews that male members of the Oaks would overtly reflect on their participation and character identity in relation to masculine gendered norms. Yet, Dagorhir men expressed their disinterest in and/or a dislike for the idea of enacting feminized characters.

Interviews with female participants tell a different story about gender consciousness. For instance, female participants ($n = 7$) reflected on feminine norms in relation to their participation. Many of these interviews included defensive statements about their gender in relation to their participation. For instance, the female character Dangerous Brother stated,

> [With a raised voice] There are times when guys will go easy on you if they don't recognize you as a really serious female fighter . . . it doesn't bother me, I'm in it for more of a historical aspect . . . I am completely ready to accept the fact that in the past women didn't fight as much as men did . . . plus I am really masculine to begin with so I just don't care.

Here, Dangerous Brother acknowledged the inequalities in participation for men and women, but then focused her desires on historical enactment, excused them as part of the behavior of the period ("In the past women didn't fight"), and deflected the inequality as applying directly to her ("I am really masculine to begin with so I just

don't care"). This account demonstrates how gender inequalities are excused or justified as an acceptable part of the group culture (Scott & Lyman, 1968).

Levels of commitment also formed a gendered system of stratification between men, with "serious women" and "non-serious women" participants, further dividing women's interest in the group. For instance, Dangerous Brother stated while laughing sardonically, "There are [women] who just go because their significant other drags them, poor souls." Similarly, Homunculus, another female member, discussed this stratification: "Half are the girlfriend getting dragged along and if she [participates] at all, she's going to be doing archery. The other half is serious female fighters who fight just as brutally as the guys." The implication is that norms of femininity are inconsistent with Dagorhir participation. To be taken "seriously" in Dagorhir, women participants must act "as brutally as the guys." Despite some female fighter's astute abilities in battle, some discussed how they were pigeonholed as "non-serious" vis-à-vis a romantic relationship with a male Dagorhir member. For instance, one female Dagorhir member selected to role-play as an elf with the character-name "Duru" when she began participating in the activity at 17. When she began attending PNEU, she had started to date a male Dagorhir member who had selected the character-name "Harykduru." Coincidentally, her previously selected character-name, "Duru," comprised part of her new boyfriend's character-name, "Haryk-Duru" which one can liken to a woman named Erin dating a man named Aaron. Yet, members of Dagorhir assumed that Duru's name and character were derived from her boyfriend's name Harykduru. Duru said about her experience, "[My boyfriend's role-playing character] was called Harykduru and everyone [also] called him Duru [for short]. So [then] they called me 'Duru's Girlfriend' and I was pissed." Duru was "pissed" because her group did not credit her with her previously chosen character-name, which she developed independently before she met her boyfriend, Harykduru. Rather than viewing her character-name as a legitimate choice and her as a legitimate and independent participant, they viewed it as a derivation of her boyfriend's name and simultaneously pegged her as a non-serious "girlfriend" participant. She then had to actively resist the pegging of her name as a derivation of her boyfriend's and remind others that she had chosen her name and participated in Dagorhir as "Duru the Elf" long before she met her boyfriend.

Other women not only embraced the themes of masculinity but actually became male characters themselves. Homunculus noted that women's clothing acts as a barrier to participation:

> Guys will actually go easy on you if they don't recognize you as a really serious female fighter. It is kind of frustrating for me to get a serious fight out of someone [male]. The armor I'm designing specifically hides feminine features and accentuates masculine features. So I'm planning on making my shoulders a bit more broad . . . I'm actually binding so I look like a dude. My helmet will be covering my face and my hair is going to be tucked away . . . by the time I am done making my armor and garb, I intend to look like a guy [on the battlefield].

These women are practiced fighters, deserving of epic glory, and yet encounter resistance from members because of their feminine features.

Members of Dagorhir establish a collective storied masculine selfhood, which we dubbed epic glory. While training and fighting were the most available methods of establishing epic glory, new members also had a unique method for gaining epic glory, which is called epic death. Members also incorporated epic glory through the defense against hecklers and onlookers. A consequence of these behaviors is the reproduction of characteristics associated with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005), including gender inequality and the devaluation of women participants within the group.

Conclusion

Men comprise the overwhelming majority of participants in Dagorhir and when viewed through the analytical lens of the manhood acts perspective, it is clear why this is the case. Men are given structural preference in leadership positions, their characters are venerated, and their costumes and weapons are more valued on the battlefield. Women, in contrast, are more typically relegated to subordinate positions within the group, have few character choices, and are expected to follow rules that ultimately defer to men on the battlefield.

Increasing status in Dagorhir involved a type of self-enhancement that we termed "epic glory," which positioned members as social dominants and allowed achievement of manhood. Epic glory was earned through training activities during practices, in battles at Dagorhir events, and through simulating dramatic death scenes. In some contexts, onlookers and hecklers posed a threat to epic glory, but members found ways to reduce the effect of their scrutiny by dismissing the opinions of outsiders or incorporating their presence into their scenes as NPCs. They also constructed and shared stories about how the group bravely defended against particularly egregious harassers and invited onlookers to pick up a boffer and inevitably lose to their better players. Although largely unrecognized by Dagorhir men, opportunities for epic glory were far more elusive for women members. They had fewer choices for developing revered characters and, in battle, were encouraged to use the "suicide option" rather than die an epic death. Women members were largely relegated to subordinate positions within the organization, and it was often assumed that their participation was in support of their male romantic partner. In many ways, for women to gain epic glory, their best choice was to dress, act, and prove that they can fight as men. One question for future research would be if (and whether) women who beat the institutional odds that are against them to regularly achieve "epic glory" are thought of by other participant as more manly, less womanly, or something else?

Our study has many parallels with other research on nerd masculinity (Cooper, 2000; Kendall, 1999), which concluded that the subordinated masculinity of "nerd" has more in common with hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) than we tend to think. Our analysis contributes to the literature by applying the manhood acts perspective (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) to the study of nerds. This analytical framework sheds the multiple masculinities perspective proposed by Connell (1995) and instead focuses on the common processes within a predominantly male community that have the result of positioning men as dominants and women as subordinates. Through this,

we found how men in the context of Dagorhir collectively and interpersonally acted to elevate their status as group members while signifying their manhood in the process. By focusing our analysis on common interaction processes that signify manhood rather than delineating categories of manhood, we feel that the understanding of the gender performances within subordinate groups of men becomes more straightforward and directly demonstrates the commonalities with other masculinity types. Yet, we caution that the use of the manhood acts (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009) in our study was not intended to imply a contrast or test of the fit of other theoretical models of gender and, in fact, such an analysis would go beyond the data we collected. We would expect that an analysis using alternative theoretical perspectives with similar data would reveal important, but different, insights into the power relations and performances tied to gender inequalities within this and other nerd subcultural groups.

How can a group of subordinate men include a gendered hierarchy among one another, subordinate women within the group, and at times negate harassment or even dominate more culturally honored men? By implementing "epic glory," they simply use a subculturally adapted version of manhood acts, which encompasses eliciting deference, resisting exploitation, and control of self, others, and environment (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009). An important implication of this research is that manhood acts are not exclusive to stereotypical dominant men; instead, subordinate men can regularly engage in them by echoing the dominant culture. While the men in Dagorhir do not represent all subordinate men our findings are consistent with studies of other groups such as those of gay men (Connell, 1992; Frye, 1983), low-status men in the workplace (Henson & Rogers, 2001), and men of racial or ethnic minority status (Anderson, 1999), all of whom demonstrate hegemonic masculine qualities within subcultural groups.

Our study also demonstrated that within the low-status nerd organization, Dagorhir, manhood acts can be understood as an interpersonally constructed form of self-enhancement. Similar to research by Kinney (1993) that demonstrated how interaction in nerd groups increased confidence levels among members, we too found that Dagorhir's process of epic glory had a self-enhancing effect. In relation to other low-status groups, this form of self-enhancement was very similar to how homeless people engaged in identity work that instilled self-worth (Snow & Anderson, 1987). Yet, our study demonstrates that the means to self-enhancement in Dagorhir were not equally distributed as gender served as a factor in determining opportunities for much of the activities that led to epic glory. Future research may draw on this finding to better understand how organizational and institutional structure influences gender differences in self-enhancement.

In addition, we established early on that participation in Dagorhir events requires the performance of highly physical acts, albeit in brief duration. Thus, group members concerned themselves with kinesthetic and perceptual honing, which counters stereotypical perceptions of nerds as disinterested in physical pursuits (Nugent, 2008). Even a cursory observation of the group's activities establishes that Dagorhir members engage in extensive mock fighting and that such activity is deeply kinesthetic even if members are not in peak physical shape. More importantly, this physical activity is gendered in that it permits greater opportunities for men to participate and more often

venerates their actions over those of women. In fact, Dagorhir has many parallels to mainstream sports in this respect (Messner, 2002). Other nerd group activities, such as eSport (electronically played sports) and competitive cosplay (a form of costume fantasy play), incorporate physical activity and training. As such, future researchers may benefit from expanding analytical focus of nerd groups by making more direct connections with the sociology of sports literature.

At first glance, Dagorhir appears unrelated or even opposed to masculinity. Dagorhir is considered a nerd activity and therefore a subordinate one. This article, however, suggests that the Dagorhir members maintain mainstream cultural values (Fine, 1983) about gender that also serve to reproduce a form of hegemonic masculinity that results in gender inequalities (Acker, 2006). As Cooper (2000) has noted, American culture has shifted in recent years, moving toward incorporating what was traditionally considered nerd pursuits as part of mainstream masculinity. Often, cultural shifts and social changes also come with the prognostications that long existing inequality structures will erode and give way to a more equitable society for both men and women. Unfortunately, our study is much less optimistic when it comes to this point. Malaby and Green (2009) concluded from their study of a similar LARPing group that the context is "not far different from traditional arenas of masculine identity performance such as the playing field and job site" (p. 10). We can say that if we look at "nerds" through the lens of manhood acts, we can begin to see that they are, in many ways, no different from any other men—for better or for worse. This also suggests that the performance of the types of manhood acts that emphasize gender inequality and reify hegemonic masculinity within male nerd culture will only change as those acts associated with manhood in the larger culture change.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. Many members of the Dagorhir community rejected a comparison with LARPing because of its emphasis on acting in character and differences in equipment. Dagorhir culture tends to emphasize its incorporation of an array of boffer-weapons designed to be used with force in mock battles over acting in character. This type of distancing is very similar to those made with other games such as New England Role-Playing Organization (NERO), Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), Belagarath Medieval Combat Society (BMCS), and Darkon. We draw a comparison between Dagorhir and LARPing because from an etic perspective both involve character building and fantasy role-playing. We felt that this comparison would be useful to readers because of the greater familiarity with the term *LARPing* and its broad use in mainstream culture.

2.   All names used in this article are pseudonyms reflective of the tradition of the Dagorhir fantasy genre.
3.   Identifying information such as the names of Dagorhir characters, groups, and events has been changed to protect the confidentiality of participants.
4.   Interview questions aimed at tapping masculinity first focused indirectly on group relation-ships, then worked back to issues of dominance/subordination, and finally (if needed) to men and women.
5.   The initial interviews for which this analysis stems was guided by questions aimed to gain sociological insight into the phenomenon of social awkwardness. Rather than deriving interesting findings on social awkwardness, the authors began to see emergent themes relating to masculinity which we then pursued.
6.   Participants who engaged in battle role-playing typically were required to wear costume gear with padding and carried "boffer" weapons.
7.   When the first author interviewed participants about their experiences directly after engag-ing in mock battles during Dagorhir events, many would switch between answering ques-tions in their role-playing character identities and "breaking" character to answer questions in their non-role-playing identities. This type of switching on and off character was com-mon among members and most prevalent during events. It was consistent not only with how the members interacted with the first author but also with how they interacted with one another.

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