Who Gets to Be in *The Guild*? Race, Gender and Intersecting Stereotypes as Mythical Norms in Gaming Cultures

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Abstract

While media studies have frequently assessed the importance of representation, research in this area has often been siloed by institutional and methodological norms that define academics as "gender", "race", or "class" scholars, rather than inclusive scholars of all these and more. This paper thus responds to recent calls for more intersectional work by simultaneously addressing the overlapping representations of race, gender, and gamer identity, and their relation to Lorde's concept of the mythical norm, in the popular webseries, *The Guild* (YouTube, 2007-2013). Via a detailed, inductive thematic analysis of the show's two characters of color, Zaboo and Tinkerballa, we find a doubly problematic intersection between standard "gamer identity" tropes and gendered Asian/American stereotypes. The show reveals the workings of mythical norms and reinforces the oppressive, marginalizing practices it tries to mock, suggesting that gaming culture will not change until we address its intersecting axes of power and exclusion. This research also demonstrates how the constructed identity of media audiences–in this case, stereotypical "gamer" identity–can exacerbate and reaffirm existing power disparities in representation. We suggest that media scholars remain attentive to the intersecting articulations of media consumer and individual identities in considering how representation can influence systems of inclusion and exclusion, as well as viewers' lived outcomes.

Author Keywords

Representation, Intersectionality, Identity, Asian/American, Game Studies, Webseries

Media studies often deals with questions of representation–who appears in mass media texts, how they are shown, and how these representations intersect with, and support or counter stereotypes for viewers. However, research has also often been siloed by institutional and methodological norms that define academics as "gender", "race", or "class" scholars, tacitly encouraging a focus on one identity at a time. Further, it's important to recognize how multiple

axes of individual identities might intersect with media consumer identities, especially the characteristics of a medium's anticipated audience. For instance, the assumed audience for romantic comedy films differs strongly from that of action/adventure TV series, and the representations forefronted in media often shift to match these assumptions. A viewer is thus likely to have a different experience of inclusion or exclusion in each of these spaces based on the various aspects of their identity. This paper explores these issues and responds to recent calls for more intersectional work that addresses the convergent exclusions that occur when multiple identity representations are considered simultaneously.

More specifically, this study traces how representations of gender, race, and media consumer identities intersect in mutually reinforcing ways through a case study of the popular video game-oriented webseries *The Guild* (YouTube, 2007-2013). *The Guild* purportedly presents an "authentic", inside perspective on game cultures and communities—one that clearly resonated with many players, as evident in the series' ongoing success.[1] This "insider" view is important because, on the surface, the show appears diverse, featuring gamers of color and equal numbers of male and female leads. However, we argue that this veneer of diversity fails to hold up to closer analysis, which exposes the show simultaneously advancing limited and retrograde representations of gender, race, and gamer identities. Further, we contend that these pernicious representations are not just a failure to be truly intersectional or progressive, but that they reveal how games and other popular media function as sites where the intersections of different axes of identity become explicitly marked, mocked, and deployed as justification for minimization and exclusion.

We support this argument through the analysis of two of *The Guild*'s characters, Zaboo and Tinkerballa (Tink). As characters of color, Zaboo and Tink simultaneously grapple with norms of gender, race, and gamer identity; unfortunately, *The Guild* does not engage these overlapping challenges as opportunities to reshape norms, but rather reinforces them by foregrounding limited, cliched representations. By drawing on gendered and racialized stereotypes, the show centralizes Whiteness as a mythical norm, naturalizing its ongoing power in game spaces but also providing an opportunity to interrogate how such norms are perpetuated.

Ultimately, *The Guild* is an excellent case study in the interlocking systems of racism, sexism, and elitism in gaming culture, and suggests that this culture will not change until we find different ways to understand and intervene in its system of intersecting axes of power and exclusion. Further, it models how narrow expectations for a medium's audience—in this case, stereotypical "gamer" identity—can exacerbate and extend existing issues of representation and stereotype. Thus, media researchers should be attentive to how the assumed identity of an audience affects representation, constructing overarching, and often unequal, systems of power.

Literature Review

Intersectionality and the Mythical Norm

Intersectionality is a critical framework for understanding how overlapping systems of oppression, such as racism, classism, and sexism, affect a given individual or group. It emerged in Black feminist work dating back at least to American abolitionists such as Sojourner Truth (Mohdin, 2018; Vetter, 2017). Critical race scholar, lawyer, and civil rights advocate Kimberlé Crenshaw further defined the concept in 1989 in response to dominant, "single-axis" understandings of identity, which tended to focus on either gender or race. This meant that conversations around race prioritized Black men, while conversations around gender prioritized White women. Black women, whose experiences were affected by both race *and* gender, were not

fully considered (Crenshaw, 1989). Similarly, in media and game studies, much attention has been paid to questions of gender, race, sexuality, and disability, but fewer works have addressed how these overlap.[2] Like Crenshaw, we argue that the articulation of multiple marginalized identities creates unique and evolving exclusions beyond what focusing on a single identity can reveal. As such, they need to be addressed collectively to gain a fuller understanding of their significance and to avoid the default prioritization of straightness, Whiteness, maleness, and more. Intersectionality–or rather the use of intersectionality, particularly by White feminists and gender studies–has been critiqued for promoting an additive formulation of identity, wherein identity axes are treated as distinct, stable categories and one identity (usually race or gender) is centered while others are added onto an analysis. As Jasbir Puar notes, this can have the effects of recreating specific "others" as racialized, gendered subjects while "resecuring the centrality of the subject positioning of white women" in neoliberal, institutionalized discourses (Puar, 2012, p. 52).

Instead of this additive framework, we consider intersectionality in this analysis as a set of systemic force relations, wherein different identities collide and produce evolving, situated representations that serve to mark and exclude peoples. To explain how these representations develop and operate in dynamic, fluid ways, we turn to Audre Lorde's concept of the mythical norm–a set of ideals in a culture which everyone knows they do not live up to in some way(s) but which nevertheless is where "the trappings of power reside within this society" (Lorde, 2007, p. 116). Lorde identifies the mythical norm in the United States as being the intersection of "White, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian, and financially secure" (Lorde, 2007, p. 116). Crucially, Lorde explains how mythical norms can differ in various contexts and shift over time, and she is further critical of how those of us outside of a mythical norm often employ an additive intersectional model to "identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression" (Lorde, 2007, p. 116). Thus while Lorde theorizes primarily from the position of a Black, lesbian woman in relation to White feminists in the United States, she points to how mythical norms operate through difference for other positionalities, such as the Asian and Asian American (henceforth Asian/American; Palumbo-Liu, 1999) identities and representations analyzed here.

Many elements of culture's overall mythical norm also comprise the mythical norm in gaming cultures, evident in the still-common assumption that gamers are White, straight, non-disabled, nerdy men. This game-based mythical norm structures the experiences of every character in *The Guild* but is especially significant for Tink and Zaboo, who differ from the mythical norm on multiple axes. We argue that the characters' quest to embody the mythical norm serves as what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls "cruel optimism", or "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be *im*possible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic" (p. 24). Cruel optimism exists when an individual (or character) strives to embody an ideal that they expect to better their life, only to find that this ideal actually blocks access to true empowerment. Striving to assimilate to an unattainable, dynamic mythical norm is one such situation, trapping characters in a fruitless quest for fulfillment and reinforcing unequal systems of power.

Representation

Media representations play a key role in transmitting or challenging ideologies. Of specific interest here, media often reinforce or contradict mythical norms and existing stereotypes about groups of people. As audiences view and interpret these messages, their own views of the world, and the people in it, can shift accordingly. As such, media representations can "make certain

identities possible, plausible, and liveable," even though they can never fully capture the complex, shifting identities they represent (Shaw, 2014, p. 67). Representations complicate, mark, or mask the dynamics of difference in media.

As cultural scholar Stuart Hall explains, audience members do not necessarily always read a media text in the way its creator intended. However, he contends that dominant/hegemonic readings are more accessible to audience members than alternative readings, as the dominant/hegemonic position aligns with and is supported by existing sociocultural structures of power such as the mythical norm (Hall, 1980). A set of representations that *can* be read in line with existing stereotypes is also *likely* to be read in such a way.

It is thus crucial to understand what dominant messages texts like *The Guild* promote and circulate in our media environment. Although some audience members might approach the show with a critical eye and the ability to take a negotiated or oppositional stance to the material, many viewers will not have this background or training. By understanding what messages everyday viewers are likely to take from The Guild, we can more critically assess how racial, gender, and gamer stereotypes pervade popular culture, as well as what that may mean for audiences.

Why The Guild*?*

The Guild is significant because its claims to an authentic gamer identity illustrate how mythical norms and assumed consumer identities permeate media cultures. Created by actress/author/gamer Felicia Day, *The Guild* focuses on female protagonist Cyd "Codex" Sherman (played by Day), interspersing her confessional vlogs with video of related events. Codex is surrounded by five further characters, three male (Bladezz, Vork and Zaboo) and two female (Clara and Tink), who are members of an online gaming guild, The Knights of Good. Together, they play a massively-multiplayer online role-playing game similar to *World of Warcraft*, called simply "The Game". The first season revolves around Zaboo's unwanted obsession with Codex, conflicts with overbearing relatives, and the social dramas of using a game to avoid dealing with "real life" issues. Later seasons showcase the characters' battle with an opposing guild, their attendance at a large gaming convention, and finally Codex working at the company that makes The Game.

The Guild remains one of few narrative shows about gamers, both in mainstream media and in internet-based media[3]. Only two other webseries–*Video Game High School* (RocketJump, 2012-2014) and *Mythic Quest* (Apple TV+, 2020-present)–have attained meaningful visibility. Each show thus carries a significant burden of representation for who gamers are more generally. However, while VGHS achieved a level of cult popularity and early *Mythic Quest* reviews are positive, these shows do not yet rival *The Guild's* success. Although webseries viewership is hard to determine, *The Guild*'s first season has over two million views on YouTube alone, while subsequent seasons possess hundreds of thousands of views.[4] The cast also livestreamed a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* (in character) in April 2020 to fundraise for No Kid Hungry. The event raised over $40,000, and the recorded gameplay garnered over 69,000 views and 350 comments on YouTube within its first month. Despite its age, *The Guild* still resonates with many viewers, and provides an ongoing opportunity to reflect on persistent questions regarding representation, identity, and power in gaming culture and beyond.

Asian/American Representations

Of particular concern in this study is the representation of Asian/American characters within the show, as Tink and Zaboo emerge out of a fraught trajectory of Asian/American stereotypes and tropes. For instance, Western media evinces many moments when supposedly

Asian individuals were represented by White actors embodying racist caricatures, such as Mickey Rooney's portrayal of Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (Blake Edwards, 1961). Such yellowface representations continue through the modern White-washing of Asian-designated characters, including Emma Stone's portrayal of Asian/Hawaiian character Allison Ng in the film *Aloha* (Cameron Crowe, 2015) and Scarlett Johansson's casting in *Ghost in the Shell* (Rupert Sanders, 2017).

Even when Asian characters are represented by Asian actors, several tropes dominate their presentations. These have, of course, shifted over time, from the early 1900s representations of East Asian individuals as part of a Yellow Peril to more modern understandings of Asian/Americans as the U.S.'s "model minority" (e.g. Hoppenstand, 1992; Hsu, 2015; Lee, 1999; Takaki, 1998). Given the recent nature of *The Guild*, we will focus primarily on these modern trends.

Recent representations of Asianness are dominated by "model minority" tropes, which hold Asian/Americans up as exceptionally smart, gifted with technology, economically well-off, and docile or well-behaved, often linking these characteristics to a naturalized view of "Asian values."[5] As such, Asian/Americans are portrayed as admirable but also culturally unassimilable with White America (Kim, 1999; Okohiro, 2014; Wu, 2013). This builds a "racial triangulation" (Kim, 1999), where Asian/Americans are relatively valorized compared to Black Americans but barred from access to the overall power held by White Americans due to their perceived foreignness. While some argue that "model minority" discourse began as early as the 1800s (Hsu, 2015), researchers primarily trace this stereotype to the United States' 1960s Civil Rights movement, where it contrasted the "troublesome" nature of Black political activism by painting Asian/Americans as well-behaved and apolitical (Kim, 1999; Wu, 2013). Further, Asian/Americans were lauded for their educational, economic, and professional success as a means to criticize the supposed underachievement of other minoritized groups (Brand, 1987). Standard stereotypes of East or South Asian mathematicians, doctors, lawyers, and engineers developed out of the model minority framing as well as immigration trends (Hsu, 2015).

While being represented positively may seem beneficial, especially in comparison to the negative stereotypes that circumscribe other minoritized peoples, such stereotypes are limiting. At a broad level, the "model minority" frames Asian/Americans as admirable but perpetually foreign, upholding overall systems of White supremacy (Kim, 1999). This has recently come to the forefront with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, with many individuals facing racial bias over perceived connections between East Asia and the virus. Ultimately, the model minority stereotype masks ongoing economic and political inequalities and thus can "perpetuate the colorblind ideology, insinuating that the U.S. social system is fair and open. It ignores still-pervasive institutional racism" (Eguchi and Ding, 2017, p. 298-299).

It is important to note that discussing "Asian" or "Asian American" stereotypes is problematic. After all, "Asia is not a biological fact but a geographic designation. Asians come in the broadest range of skin color and hue" (Lee, 1999, p. 2). Describing such diverse individuals collectively elides their real differences. However, Asian groups and individuals are frequently collapsed in U.S. representations; "as a result, stereotypes of Asian Americans appear to be generalized" (Taylor, Landreth and Bang, 2005, p. 164). Because Asian/American stereotypes are so frequently collective in nature, we will often discuss Asianness collectively as well. When it is possible to be specific, such as when discussing Tink's East Asian heritage or Zaboo's Indian heritage, we will make these distinctions.

We must also consider racial stereotypes as they intersect with gender and sexuality

because further representational limits appear when racism and sexism collide. More specifically, South Asian men (and Asian men more generally) are often represented as weak or emasculated. In contrast, East Asian women are often represented in line with the so-called Dragon Lady/Lotus Blossom dichotomy; that is, they're either shown to be aggressive, manipulative and dangerous, or to be domestic, innocent, and demure. In either circumstance, they are defined by both their sexuality and their relationship to the mythical norm of Whiteness, straightness, and maleness. We address these gendered, racialized stereotypes and their expressions in *The Guild* in our analysis.

Gamer Stereotypes

In *The Guild*, Tink and Zaboo's Asian/American identities intersect with their identities as gamers, and gamer identity is central in how their racial and gender identities are arrested in relationship with stereotypes and the mythical norm. Traditionally, gaming is understood as a masculine hobby, more for boys and men than for women and girls (e.g. Kiesler, Sproull and Eccles, 1985; Kocurek, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2017). At the same time, gamer identity is not simply male; it is generated through particular kinds of masculinity that align with or are different from the mythical norm. "Gamers" have been understood as young, male, straight, cisgender, primarily White and secondarily Asian, and often socially awkward, nerdy, and outcast (Fron et al., 2007). These expectations affect how gamer identity is represented across media, which can in turn affect players' lived experiences (e.g. Bergstrom, Fisher, and Jenson, 2016; Chess, Evans, and Baines, 2017; Kowert, Griffiths and Oldmeadow, 2012). "Gamer" stereotypes build a mythical norm of whiteness, masculinity, and cisheterosexuality, which then marks non-male, non-White, LGBT, or disabled players as outsiders, opening them up to potential harassment (Consalvo, 2012; Cote, 2020; Gray, 2014; 2018; Nakamura, 2012; Salter and Blodgett, 2017). This dynamic complicates and traps many of the apparently diverse representations in The Guild by typing, othering, and thus controlling their identities.

It's also necessary to note that gamer stereotypes intersect with Asian stereotypes in unique ways. While representations often highlight gamers as White, there is also a strong thread of techno-Orientalism that runs through both the model minority stereotype and gaming culture. As scholars like Chan (2009), Fickle (2019), Patterson (2018; 2020), and Zhu (2018) explain, techno-Orientalism draws on Asian/Americans' presumed technological prowess as a model minority and connects this to the success of the gaming industry in East Asia. It also highlights the prominent success of East Asian, especially Korean, esports teams and competitive players to build and naturalize a connection between Asian-ness and gaming, as well as to extend historical stereotypes of Asian workers as mechanical and robotic (Patterson, 2018; Fickle, 2019). These stereotypes reach beyond arenas of play to infect understanding of Asian individuals, especially men. As Zhu (2018) writes in her study of esports players, "Discussions of work ethic are routed through robotics and mechanics, diminishing the human, sympathetic component of play and castrating the Asian male gamers who enact those same plays" (p. 238). Techno-Orientalism binds Asian/American identity, gender, gamer identity, and sexuality into a complicated, intersecting system of exclusions, particularly for male players. Therefore, it is worth exploring how these different identities circulate and propagate within a popular media text like The Guild, as it contributes to their normalization within broader gamer culture as well.

Methods

To evaluate *The Guild*'s representations and claims regarding gamer identity, each author

repeatedly viewed all six seasons while engaging in inductive thematic analysis; our conclusions emerged from observed implicit and explicit patterns in the show's ideas about race, gender, power, and gamer identity. After viewing the series separately, we compared our coding notes to develop overall themes. By drawing categories from our viewing, rather than from outside materials or previous work on *The Guild*, we were able to assess the show's content without the influence of its positive reception, claims of authenticity, or position within game culture. In other words, the content itself dictated our theorization that *The Guild*'s intersecting perspectives on race, gender, and gamer identity reinforce existing stereotypes and power disparities.

We also focused on patterns and themes because they reveal the show's dominant messages about race, gender, and identity, particularly within the context of comedy. As others have pointed out, comedy can challenge existing stereotypes and hierarchies of difference (Gray, 1986; Neville, 2009). However, Park et al. (2006) found that, in relation to race, "Theories of genre suggest that the naturalization of racial difference through stereotyping is more likely to occur in a comedic format because generic conventions discourage viewers' critical engagement with the racial discourse" (p. 160). Furthermore, although we could view The Guild as parody or satire–over-emphasizing gaming stereotypes to point out their flaws–the show's claim to authenticity and self-presentation as an "inside look" into gaming cultures instead marks this comedy as earnest, meant to be funny because it's supposedly true. Finally, within gaming culture, real issues of exclusion are often dismissed as "just a joke," and victims of harassment or trash-talk are critiqued for taking things too seriously if they complain about their treatment (Nakamura, 2012). Humor becomes a means by which offending players relinquish responsibility for their behavior, framing the victim's reaction as the problem instead (Gray, 2014). Thus, the structures of the show, its positioning, and its relation to the use of humor in game spaces can all complicate a viewer's ability to read it critically, making its identity operations a significant area of investigation.

Analysis

Overall, several relevant themes emerged for each of the characters under analysis. Tink's racial identity, for instance, was forefronted through her narrative positioning as an East Asian adoptee. However, it also emerged through and intersected with her background as a committed, involved gamer who embraces some of gaming culture's negative aspects, such as aggressive trash-talk and stereotypes about "girl gamers". Tink is also often penalized for her behavior and ends the show being "tamed" by her relation to a White man. Due to these narrative and character themes, we argue that Tink modernizes longstanding "Dragon Lady" stereotypes, linking these to girl gamer stereotypes and presenting both Asian/American women and female gamers as potentially deviant forces in need of reclamation.

Like Tink, Zaboo also fits into some expected norms about "gamers", being represented as lacking in masculinity and social power. Zaboo becomes both hyper- and hypo-sexualized; interested in sex, yet incapable of attaining it. While this is not unusual in representations of gamers, the sheer exaggeratedness of Zaboo's portrayal, combined with historical Asian/American representations, positions him at the nexus of Yellow Peril and model minority stereotypes. Further, as Zaboo is both Indian and Jewish in the lore of the show, his relationship with his mother furthers tired tropes of henpecked Jewish and Asian sons with domineering mothers. Most tellingly, Zaboo's only attempts to gain power become tied to techno-Orientalist stereotypes of the "gold farmer", and his character ends up showing no development over the course of the series. Thus, Zaboo represents how striving for a mythical norm, which promises one a vision of

acceptance and inclusion, is, in the end, unattainable. Tink, Zaboo, and all of the major characters are further straight-coded, corralling sexuality into limited forms and using any potential for queerness only as an opportunity for mocking jokes. In all of these ways, the representations of Tink and Zaboo reveal how mythical norms operate to constrain and control intersecting identities by marking and othering them as types.

Tink

"I'm adopted. I can't be the screw up. That's like a bad indie film." ("Downturn", 2011)

The character Tinkerballa (Tink) is played by American actress Amy Okuda, who is of Japanese descent. Although the show hints that Tink is also Japanese American, her specific ethnicity goes unnamed, allowing her to stand in as a generic East Asian representation ("Social Traumas", 2011). Tink assiduously guards her personal details throughout the series, but Season Five discloses that her name is April Lou, and she is an adopted member of a White family. She does not get along with her family, including her overbearing, obnoxiously nice parents and her thin, blond sisters, and she spends most of the show avoiding them. However, she is also grateful for their support of her education, as well as fearful of informing them that she has changed majors from pre-med to costume design. Tink describes this secret switch as "basically stealing from them" ("Downturn", 2011), given that they expect her to become a doctor.

This storyline not only highlights the pressure of the "model minority" stereotype, in that Tink's adoptive family anticipates her becoming a doctor, but it also shows how her status as an East Asian adoptee places her in a liminal position where she is expected to assimilate into the mythical norm of Whiteness while showcasing a superficial commitment to diversity. This is clear in the few scenes where she interacts with her White family, such as when her mother describes putting her "own spin" on Japanese dishes by replacing ingredients with ranch dressing and ham cubes ("Social Traumas", 2011). Adoptees are thus simultaneously included in the White American family and othered from it via markers of their racial identities (Donnell, 2019, p. 72; Hübinette, 2006; Oh, 2015; Okohiro, 2014).

From Skill to Sexuality: Tink's Shifting Gamer Position

Tink's racial identity further intersects with her identity as a gamer. Throughout the show, Tink is represented as a committed and skilled gamer. Not only does she play The Game intensively, but she frequently defeats other characters in in-game duels. Outside of The Game, Tink is almost always playing handheld gaming systems like the PlayStation Portable (PSP) or Nintendo DS.

However, Tink also embodies some of the negative, aggressive behaviors that permeate game communities and spaces (Consalvo, 2012; Nakamura, 2012; Salter and Blodgett, 2017). In the very first episode, she yells at Codex for failing to heal her, blurting out, "Oh my god! That was a total rim job, Codex! I was being raped by goblins and you were standing there with your staff up your ass!" ("Wake Up Call", 2007). She tries to maintain emotional distance from the other members of The Guild, complaining when things get too much about "feelings" and "holding each other's vaginas" ("Strange Allies" 2010), and readily turns on them if they go against her wishes. For instance, in Season One when Vork gives responsibility for the guild bank to Bladezz, Tink deliberately allows Vork's character to die and takes away Vork's opportunity to earn money by babysitting Clara's kids. Later, when Bladezz deletes her character in the game, Tink turns against the whole guild, joining their rivals the Axis of Anarchy.

Tink's harsh persona is not surprising; many female gamers trying to fit into game spaces

adopt the very behaviors used to drive them out (Cote, 2020; Gray, 2014). While players describe this as fighting for respect or equality, this behavior also perpetuates harassment, which often includes sexist, homophobic, racist, and/or violent language, as a normal part of gaming spaces. This in turn allows it to persist, as harassment occurs most frequently in spaces that normalize it (Chui, 2014). However, given the limited means marginalized players have for managing their position in game spaces, it makes sense that they would at times use community norms to fit in.

Tink takes on a normative position for a female gamer; however this position is refracted by its intersection with her Asian/American identity. Media often narrowly define Asian/American women in terms of their sexuality (Balaji and Worawongs, 2010; Brooks and Herbert, 2006; Cho, 1997, Ono and Pham, 2009; Uchida, 1998). This occurs in two primary ways. On the one hand, many media representations buy into and perpetuate the "Lotus Blossom" stereotype of Asian women as "naturally" more demure, docile, and passive than their Western, White counterparts (Cho, 1997). This submissiveness, combined with the presumption that non-White women are "more worldly, sensual, and sexual because they were different" (hooks, 1992, p. 368) sets them up as ideal sexual partners for White men seeking transformation. As hooks (1992) argues, White men are often encouraged by White supremacist social structures to seek out non-White sexual partners, under the assumption that these partners will grant them some measure of exoticness. The "Lotus Blossom" portrayal marks Asian women as beautiful, exotic, and controllable; thus, they are presented as ideal partners for powerful White men.[6]

On the other hand, if women do not comply with this expectation of passivity, they become demonized by the Lotus Blossom's counter-representation: the Dragon Lady. The Dragon Lady "is sinister and surreptitious and often functions as a feminized version of yellow peril. She is untrustworthy, deceitful, conniving, and plotting, and she may use sex or sexuality to get what she wants" (Ono and Pham, 2009, p. 66). The Dragon Lady positions Asian/American women as diabolical, manipulative, and aggressive (Cho, 1997; Uchida, 1998). Thus, Tink's gamer aggression contributes to her threatening positioning as a stereotypical Dragon Lady, especially when combined with how she uses her sexuality to get ahead. Throughout the show, Tink flirts with men to get them to do things for her. In Season Two, for instance, she gets Bladezz to help her in-game and buy her things; he maxes out his mother's credit cards showering her with gifts and expects to be repaid with sex. Tink not only turns him down, but she also shows no remorse, stating, "Bladezz, just consider this a little life lesson. Some boring girls are gonna come in your life and give you everything you want. And then some more interesting ones will come along and take everything you own. I'm the taking kind. Just be glad you're young, and you don't own a lot of stuff" ("Collision Course", 2009). In the same season, she informs Codex, "Men are meant to be used for their skill sets. [...] Fred, Joe and Ryan might as well be called Moving Van, Pharmacist and Oil Change. You just have to pick the right tool for the right job. And believe me, they're all tools" ("Sacking Up", 2008). This behavior persists throughout the show, with Tink's "male minions" transporting her around town, doing her homework, fixing her car, and letting her use their pool. In the opening episode of Season Six, she happily states, "I'm juggling fifteen sets of balls today. Literally" ("Dream Questline", 2012).

Tink encourages her fellow female guildmates to use their gender and sexuality to get ahead as well. At one point, when Codex is lamenting her lack of success with men, Tink tells her, "Codex, men think with their little heads, not with their stomachs. Just flash him some of that albino skin, and he'll be history" ("Blow Out", 2009). During Season Four, Tink and Clara compete with Vork to choose a design for their guild hall; whichever team earns the most money wins. Tink and Clara, unsurprisingly, use their position as female gamers to succeed. They team up to make

in-game items, then sell them to male gamers using their "bit":

> Clara: We invite the guy to a private chat channel called Fishy Lips, and then Tink goes--
> Tink: You want these gloves.
> Clara: Then I go, You need these gloves, and then really quick we say--
> Tink: Want.
> Clara: Need.
> Tink: Want.
> Clara: Need.
> Tink: 50 gold. Pay up.
> Clara: We sell a pair, every time. ("Supportiv'd", 2010)

When they demonstrate this tactic to their guildmates, Zaboo immediately replies, "Ooh, lady voiced. I'll buy three pairs," while Vork asks if he can report them for virtual prostitution. The show explicitly calls attention to the use of female sexuality as a commodity in game spaces.

In some ways, Tink's behavior is refreshing, as she is comfortable in her own skin, empowered, and in control. Unfortunately, it also reinforces negative stereotypes about female gamers and Asian/American women, narrows Tink's power to her appearance, and then critiques her for this. Female gamers often face a "girl gamer" stereotype that posits they game to get attention from men and their successes happen only because more skilled male gamers have helped them. Players express deep frustration with this stereotype, arguing that it makes others suspicious of their intentions in gaming spaces, doubtful of their ability to play well, and more likely to harass them (Cote, 2020). Tink's tendency to flirt to get her way thus dangerously plays into this perception. Further, it dismisses her evidenced skill; Tink is perfectly capable of completing all the tasks she assigns to others, especially in The Game. Delegating them to others is more a convenience than a necessity. However, doing so forefronts her sexuality, rather than her skill, as the true source of her power.

Taming the Dragon Lady

Perhaps most importantly, Tink faces many attempts to control or penalize her behavior. After she rejects Bladezz in Season Two, he decides to punish her because, in his terms, "You owe me naked time!" ("Collision Course", 2009). In revenge, he logs onto her computer and deletes her character (or, as she cries, "two years of my life, my gold, my reputation points! I don't exist anymore!" ("Fight", 2009)). This incident, and later ones where Tink's "minions" turn against her, speak to the gamer desire to control the threatening female Other who is entering masculinized spaces to take advantage of innocent, nerdy, socially awkward men. It is further worth noting how Tink is penalized for her manipulation of gender and sexuality in ways her fellow (White) characters are not.

Efforts to control Tink's behavior also play into how the Lotus Blossom and the Dragon Lady, although differently valenced, "are both strikingly sexed, defined in relation to men" (Uchida, 1998, p. 162). Tink is seen as unfairly using men to get ahead, and therefore needs to be brought back into their control. This occurs in Season 6, when she becomes involved with Donovan, The Game's lead programmer. Donovan possesses typical gamer characteristics; he is a relatively young White male who is socially awkward and uncomfortable around women. His uncle, The Game's creator, describes him as a "savant" who "doesn't do great with humans" ("Dream Questline", 2012). Later, Codex says "he's got a lady terror thing" ("Raid Timez", 2012).

When Donovan and Tink meet, she immediately seeks to use him for her own advancement. After a few instances of Tink flirting with him (and successfully receiving in-game

help), Donovan asks why she is into him, stating that since he went on a reality dating show for nerds, which taught him to work out and gave him Lasik, he feels like no one's being honest with him. Tink replies, "Well, if you want honesty, I'm not into you for your looks. I'm into you because you can buy me things and do things for me" (Occupy HQ, 2012). When he doesn't immediately respond, she tries to pass it off as a joke, but Donovan says he's "cool with" the tradeoff, where "I give you game stuff or whatever and you spend time with me" ("Occupy HQ, 2012). As they spend time together, however, Tink notices her behavior changing. At one point, she tells her guildmates she remembered to make Donovan's coffee the way he liked, and they react with shock. Shortly thereafter, Donovan asks her to lunch, and the following exchange occurs:

> Tink: Oh God! Donovan asked me to go to lunch later -no reason!
> Codex: So?
> Tink: There's something freaky going on in my chest area. Maybe I'm having a heart attack?!
> Zaboo: Tink, those are feelings.
> Tink: ...What?" ("The Case of the Game Leak", 2012)

Where Tink had previously used men with no qualms, she begins to feel uneasy about being "uneven" with Donovan. By the end of the season, the two tentatively enter an actual, non-transactional relationship.

Thus, the series ends with Tink's deviant and threatening Dragon Lady persona controlled through her relationship with a young White man and brought back into alignment with the performance of Whiteness her family expects of her. This places her character within a long history of Asian/American female representation, whereby "Asian women are seen, for the most part, as being 'tamed' by White masculinity" (Balaji and Worawongs, 2010, p. 226). Tink's move away from dominance and manipulation returns Asian women, female gamers, and all combinations thereof to their subordinate position in relation to the mythical norm.

Zaboo

In contrast to Tink, Zaboo, whose name is Sujan Balakrishnan Goldberg, is often portrayed as socially clueless, adolescent, and laughable. He is a skilled player who is deeply invested in The Game, but most of his narrative focuses on his comical, fumbling attempts to perform masculinity, to "get some" from women in his guild and beyond ("Block'd", 2008), or to stand up to his domineering mother. Zaboo embodies many stereotypical "gamer" characteristics, such as being awkward, nerdy, or bad with women. However, because these intersect with his South Asian and Jewish identities (Zaboo describes himself as a "Hin-Jew": Indian on his mother's side, Jewish on his father's), Zaboo's possession of these traits does further ideological work, reifying longstanding expectations about both gamers and Asian/American men.

Zaboo's (and Gamers') Fringe Masculinity

Take, for instance, Zaboo's over-performance of masculine norms to advance his relationships with women and his standing amongst men. Zaboo attempts to project strength, mastery, and sexual prowess through in-game feats such as acquiring rare items or actual-world activities like lifting weights, which he briefly pursues in Season Two. He often makes chauvinistic comments and awkward sexual passes at women, such as when he muses that Codex is moody because she is "ovulating" or when he appears in Codex's bedroom shirtless, with a gold party hat, and asks, "Do you like my helm? It's plus five to Sexterity. That's like Dexterity... with sex... in the front. I'm kind of a linguist" ("Link the Loot", 2008; "Zaboo'd", 2007). Such remarks reveal

Zaboo's warped belief that relationships between men and women are primarily (or exclusively) sexual and predicated on stereotypical gender roles. While the show uses Zaboo's obsession with gender norms for comedy and implicitly suggests it is misguided, none of the other characters challenge his assumptions—rather, they encourage him to pursue further masculine performances, such as when Codex advises him to find "a mentor with a penis" ("Block'd", 2008). By the end of the series, Zaboo is still mired in a narrow, hypersexualized version of masculinity.

Many of the other male characters in the show similarly over-perform masculine narratives. For example, Vork consistently exerts control over the guild (and later his girlfriend) as a patriarchal figure, and Bladezz objectifies women and holds transactional views of heterosexual relationships similar to Zaboo's. This is because, as stereotypical gamers, *The Guild*'s male characters inhabit positions of fringe masculinity, and they over-compensate for this by emphasizing masculine social behaviors (Cote and Mejeur, 2018). By making and laughing at sexist jokes or providing items for (while often patronizing) women players, the male characters attempt to draw closer to the mythical norm of masculinity.

These characters, and Zaboo especially, thus provide insight into key platforms and social mechanisms that perpetuate the mythical norm in gaming and digital cultures. Throughout the series, Zaboo learns heterosexist, masculine norms from online sources, declaring, "The internet is telling me everything I need to know about becoming a man" ("Sacking Up", 2008). He acquires many beliefs, behaviors, and assumptions about women through his "lady homework", or consumption of online videos, blogs, and posts from men who claim to understand women and how to manipulate them into sex ("Blow Out", 2008). The Guild portrays this pseudo-knowledge as absurd, though the recent rise of violent misogynist groups such as incels— "involuntary celibates," an online community of predominantly young men who promote male supremacy and believe they deserve sex from women—makes the issue significantly less humorous (Bratich and Banet-Weiser, 2019; DeCook, 2019). Zaboo exemplifies how such online cultures and platforms encourage people to lean into the mythical norm via concepts like male or White supremacy to obtain the benefits the norm supposedly provides (DeCook, 2018; Condis, 2019; Bjork-James, 2020). Like many young men online, Zaboo is drawn to this masculinist ideology because it seems to explain his lack of success with women, even as it exacerbates his harmful behaviors and forecloses any critical reflection on the sexist and racist norms that limit him. Online gaming culture is deeply intertwined with other internet communities that let this ideology spread and allow the mythical norm to persist.

From Yellow Peril to Gold Farmer

While all *The Guild's* male characters potentially reinforce stereotypes of gamers' fringe masculinity, Zaboo's performance of masculinity is especially exaggerated. Beyond saying sexist things, Zaboo often physically performs them in inappropriate ways such as attempting to grab Codex's breasts or dropping computer hardware down his pants and demanding "buff me!" ("Link the Loot", 2008; "Block'd", 2008). None of the other male characters are as desperate and unsuccessful in their pursuit of masculinity or heterosexual romance as Zaboo. This is because Zaboo is differently othered from stereotypical masculinity as both a gamer and a South Asian, Jewish man. As Ono and Pham point out, "Asian and Asian American men have often been characterized as a yellow peril, as physical threats, gangsters, or martial arts foes. However, they are also largely constructed as asexual and nerdy, as delivery boys or computer geeks, and ordinarily as physically unattractive" (Ono and Pham, 2009, p. 71). Representations of Asian men trap them in a type of Schrödinger's masculinity: on the one hand "incapable of living up to

Western definitions of masculinity," while on the other "'bastardized' males whose criminal libido must be controlled" (Ling, 1997, p. 317). Elements of both are present in Zaboo, who is emasculated throughout the show yet also played off as a sexual predator for laughs.

These stereotypes generally circulate around and describe East Asian characters, as the most common representation of "Asianness" in Western media. South Asian men tend to be underrepresented; however, as their media representations have increased, many have still aligned with Western stereotypes of South Asian men as effeminate or emasculated (Balaji, 2013).Thus, Zaboo's racial identity further alienates him from the mythical norm of Whiteness and masculinity, causing him to perform gender norms even harder and more harmfully than Bladezz or Vork to make up for a perceived lack. This also makes Zaboo an excellent case study in how attempts to assimilate to the mythical norm will never be successful—the harder he tries to meet stereotypical expectations, the more he fails to do so, because those same expectations will always mark him as an Other.

Zaboo's racialized and gendered identity further represents the intersection of the emasculated Asian man and the mother-dominated Jewish man stereotypes. A central part of Zaboo's narrative throughout the series is his relationship with his extremely controlling mother who infantilizes and emotionally manipulates him. For example, a climactic verbal battle with his mother reveals he breastfed until age eleven, and his mother begs him to not "abandon me like your father did," despite his father dying of a heart attack ("Boss Fight", 2007). Zaboo's attempts to free himself from his mother are a continual source of frustration, evident in complaints like, "Every time I try to grow up, she has a panic attack, or an ulcer, or some sort of breast polyp which she makes me feel" ("Tipping Point", 2007). By drawing on the domineering mother trope, the show portrays Zaboo as childish and incapable of asserting his independence. This narrative is re-entrenched as, once Zaboo is free from his mother's control, he expects Codex to care for him as his mother did, suggesting that Zaboo requires the care and control of women. The point here is not that Zaboo should control others instead of being controlled, but rather that the sexism and patriarchy of the mythical norm actively harm him despite its false promise to empower him if he assimilates.

Zaboo continues to be undermined throughout the show despite demonstrating skill and mastery in gaming. Zaboo is better at making gold in The Game than any of the other characters, evident in how he can stockpile and trade it to Vork in exchange for becoming Vork's roommate. Yet Zaboo's mastery of the in-game economy does not empower him; rather, it associates him with the racialized, techno-Orientalist narrative of the gold farmer. Gold farmers are players who generate in-game currency that they sell for actual world money, and they are often associated with East Asian countries (most prominently China) and stigmatized as unwelcome, untrustworthy invaders who cheat and ruin game worlds (Nakamura, 2009; Fickle, 2019). While Zaboo is not explicitly called a gold farmer, his preoccupation with the accumulation of in-game wealth draws on anti-Asian and anti-Jewish stereotypes that align both groups with unfair, underhanded money practices. These tropes invalidate one of Zaboo's greatest skills, which is further vilified later in the series when he becomes an unethical and power-hungry kingpin figure at a gaming convention. As one of the only instances in the show where Zaboo claims power, the fact that he is portrayed as ridiculous and villainous builds off racialized and gendered stereotypes to imply that Zaboo's abilities are dangerous, and he is untrustworthy and irresponsible.

Stuck in Fishy Fantasies

While Zaboo attains some level of independence throughout the series, his relationships

continue to emasculate and limit him. For example, Zaboo's only real romantic relationship in the series is with Riley, a strong woman gamer who consistently dominates him, calling him "puny" and forcing him to do chores or let her hunt him with a paintball gun. At the end of the series Zaboo is left alone, tellingly in love with Sabina, a fictional mermaid non-player character (NPC) in The Game.

Zaboo's infatuation with Sabina demonstrates how his hope of performing stereotypical masculinity to fit into gaming culture is a pernicious fantasy. Sabina is a blond, White mermaid who runs The Flacid Eel tavern in The Game's latest underwater expansion. Zaboo quickly becomes obsessed with Sabina, describing her as the "embodiment of everything that I could ever want in a woman" ("Occupy HQ", 2012). Zaboo's meaning becomes very clear throughout the season—Sabina is beautiful by American standards, she responds to his commands and requests, and, as an NPC, she is incapable of controlling or even asking much of him. Yet a relationship with an NPC is not real or fulfilling; rather, it is a fantasy Zaboo clings to because it falsely promises that he will finally be able to embody idealized masculinity through her. The fact that all of this takes place at a tavern named The Flacid Eel, an obvious penis joke, indicates the inevitable outcome of his pursuit of Sabina: instead of allowing him to attain masculinity and virility, it will render him further emasculated and impotent.

It is especially significant that Sabina is White. Like Donovan's role as the White man who brings Tink in line, Sabina is a figure for the siren call of Whiteness that promises acceptance and support as long as Zaboo protects and cares for her. Yet she cannot actually provide this, instead keeping Zaboo locked into pursuing unattainable mythical norms of masculinity. Zaboo can only have the relationship he wants with a fictional character in a game because he is trapped in assumptions and identity expectations he will never be able to fulfill, ones that actively exclude and harm him.

Conclusion

Stereotypes of race, gender, and gamer identity in *The Guild* demonstrate problematic trends regarding who and what is valued in gaming cultures. Specifically, Tink and Zaboo reveal how intersecting differences from the mythical norm work to constrain identities and positionalities, marking difference as something to be avoided in preference of sameness (meaning Whiteness, maleness, etc.). The pursuit of the mythical norm of gamer identity is a form of cruel optimism, a relation that "exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (Berlant, 2011, p. 1; Cote & Mejeur 2018). This cruel optimism tells the characters of *The Guild,* and players generally, that if they play well enough and minimize their differences enough then they will be welcome and supported in gaming communities and cultures. As many women, people of color, and queer folks playing games have attested, this is often a lie, but it draws people into feeling like they can belong, if only they act a little more in line with Whiteness, straightness, or masculinity. The cruel optimism of the mythical norm is present in some way for all the characters in *The Guild*, but Tink and Zaboo evince how it affects people based on their axes of difference and the intersecting stereotypes applied to them. Tink and Zaboo must work especially hard to fit in, whether that be by performing in-game dominance and mastery as Tink does or masculinity as Zaboo attempts to. Yet these efforts feed right into cruel optimism—no matter how much they change how they act and play, they can only come closer to the mythical norm by hiding or hurting themselves.

Intersectionality reveals how the cruel optimisms of gamer identity and other mythical

norms in media are themselves games—rigged ones that are impossible to win. Those with the most similarities to gaming's mythical norm get through the most gates on their quest toward full acceptance, but even these have at most a precarious relationship with gamer identity. Their ability to own a gamer identity will still be based on the performance of a narrow set of accepted traits, and any deviations will be used to mark, type, and minimize them. This also helps explain why some players with the most similarities to the mythical norm can get so violently upset when the system is challenged–their tenuous hold on an ideal that offers them acceptance is threatened. As long as the mythical norm continues unchanged, gamer identity will remain a cruel optimism that harms even those closest to it and excludes players more for how different they are.

Stereotypes matter in *The Guild* and elsewhere because they affect how people see and act towards themselves and others. These links are not deterministic, but there are many historical and contemporary examples of stereotypical representations being used "to exclude [peoples] from power and privilege, and to deny their status as 'subjects'" (Uchida, 1998, p. 170). For instance, Asian/Americans are often bound up within stereotypes that mark them as perpetually foreign, as we have seen emphasized in racist behaviors toward Asian/Americans during COVID-19. Gendered, racialized stereotypes can also link individuals' identities deeply to their sexuality, as when Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady stereotypes (among others) lead to higher rates of objectification or sexual harassment for Asian/American women, or when perceptions of Asian/American men as emasculated can drive them to invest in hypermasculine norms (Cho, 1997; Swami, 2016). Further, even if/when Tink and Zaboo break the boundaries of stereotypes, their roles in the overall show are still constrained by and in support of Whiteness, both through their romantic relationships and through their status as secondary characters to Codex's White female protagonist. Although most of the stereotypes in *The Guild* are comical and not intentionally harmful, they still reflect and perpetuate limited perspectives of marginalized communities and identities in games. Thus, there is a strong need to diversify how Asian/Americans are represented in media and to centralize them as main characters, making visible a broader range of identities.

Finally, the close articulations of race, gender, and gamer identities emphasize media studies' ongoing need for intersectional analysis that also attends to audience constructions. Who a medium is "for" can exacerbate existing stereotypes and inequalities, as gamer identity does in *The Guild*. While other media consumer identities are perhaps not as narrowly defined as gamer identity, we can see audience expectations similarly affecting other media from comics and comic book movies (e.g. Salter & Blodgett, 2017) to feminized romance novels, TV shows, and more (e.g. Levine, 2015). Thus, researchers should continue to assess and intervene in the intersecting articulations of media, representation, identity, and lived outcomes in order to ensure equitability for all audiences.

By drawing attention to the common stereotypes in gaming cultures and revealing the mechanisms of identity and community involved in gamer identity, we can identify ways to challenge the status quo in representations across media. The mythical norm and cruel optimism of gamer identity persist because we allow them to, but we can resist them by creating and furthering alternative narratives that imagine better ways to support and care for each other.

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[1] Balboa & Bedford, "The Guild," The Guild, 2014. http://watchtheguild.com/.

[2] E.g. Chang, 2015; Gray, 2014; 2018; Hutchinson, 2017; Kafai et al., 2011; Ruberg and Shaw, 2017; Russworm, 2018; Shaw, 2014; Stokes, 2017.

[3] Unfortunately, analyzing The Guild's position as a webseries is beyond this article's scope. Readers interested in industrial webseries analysis should see the work of scholars such as Aymar Jean Christian and Faithe Day.

[4] Most episodes of the show are now available only through streaming sites like Netflix. Therefore, these numbers are low estimates of viewership.

[5] E.g. Eguchi & Ding, 2017; Hsu, 2015; Kim, 1999; Wu, 2013; Taylor, Landreth, and Bang, 2005.

[6] Overhearing young men discuss their desire for non-White partners, hooks found that they had a clear hierarchy in which "Black girls were high on the list, Native American girls hard to find, Asian girls (all lumped into the same category), deemed easier to entice, were considered 'prime targets'" (1992, p. 368)