

## 7 Precarity and Privilege: The White Politics of Board Game Streamers

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This chapter investigates the live streaming work that is done at *The Dice Tower*, one of hobby gaming's most popular game review sites. Technically a network of hobbyists from all around the world who contribute prerecorded game reviews, playthroughs, and miscellany to a singular YouTube channel: *The Dice Tower*. The network is owned and operated by Tom Vasel, a popular hobby game personality who manages it from Homestead, Florida. At *Dice Tower* headquarters, Vasel produces live streamed media alongside his own prerecorded content. When Vasel streams, he and his team play board games live, share top-ten lists with fans, share news about industry gossip and upcoming Kickstarters, and even fundraise. These streams are first presented live and then lightly edited and saved as content on the network's YouTube archive. Importantly, I focus on the racialized context of precarious labor and branding in my analysis, as I feel that the dynamics and context of this labor have ramifications not only just for YouTube streamers, but also for live streamers broadly construed.

As I will unpack in more detail later in this chapter, I focus here on streamers who work on YouTube as opposed to other live streaming media sites, such as Twitch. Because YouTube is first and foremost a site that specializes in recorded media first and streaming media second, the practices of YouTube streamers are somewhat idiosyncratic. Many YouTube streamers stream from the studio where they record their content, whereas many Twitch streamers share the content they are interacting with on their computer and build a streaming studio around the chair they are streaming from. For this reason, we must account for the ways that the old media practices that circulate around studio spaces inform the politics of streamers on YouTube. The adaptation of a studio model onto YouTube live streaming allows for a wider variety of content, as streaming in this context is

assumed to be the product of a sophisticated filming apparatus, as opposed to the digital apparatus of game capture.

To navigate the dynamics of identity and neoliberalism in the hobby game community, this chapter will show how brand identity is navigated by its streamers. Although the grassroots infrastructure of live streaming may offer streamers new opportunities to challenge the white status quo of their community, the politics of celebrity produces its own pressures and has the potential to reproduce the white-supremacist structures of other older media paradigms like television, film, and radio. To come to grips with race in the context of streaming, it is fundamental to understand how branding in this paradigm is racialized and connected to the very fabric of grassroots community. At the heart of this chapter is a story about how streamers who occupy a space of white privilege have been forced to confront it. By examining these moments of confrontation, it focuses on how the financial and social incentives of live streaming have pulled new and more diverse voices into the hobby game community—a community that is itself grappling with the implications of precarious labor within its own streaming apparatus.

### **Branding, Crowds, and Live Streaming**

Professionally, for live streamers, understanding this dynamic means recognizing how the precarity of labor makes the kind of ideal intervention discussed here difficult to achieve within their personal streaming environment. On a traditional movie set, the director, an assistant director, or even the director of photography might be tasked with ensuring that the composition of people on the screen reflects the values of the studio producing the movie. In other words, on the set there is a specific and manageable task related to the project of representation that is managed through the labor structure of the crew. In a live stream, however, each streamer is their own director, sensitivity editor, scriptwriter, cinematographer, public relations expert, and more.<sup>1</sup> In other words, diverse representation is only one of many things that streamers are tasked with managing as they tend to their stream. For streamers, being able to present a thoughtful and inclusive streaming environment is not only logistically and creatively challenging; it is also one more thing that they have to juggle as they balance the many aspects of their brand presence.<sup>2</sup>

A paradigm of precarious labor defines the context of live streaming in a variety of ways. The media scholar Nicholas-Brie Guarriello explains how companies like Amazon and Alphabet (which owns YouTube) encourage streamers to cultivate an embodied sense of “always-on labor” (Guarriello 2019, 1754). Similarly, other media scholars like Jamie Woodcock and Mark R. Johnson suggest that this labor eventually culminates in a troubling emotional toll (Woodcock and Johnson 2019, 820). Certainly, even though live streaming offers opportunities for people of color to break into a homogeneously white space, it is important to note also the potential ramifications of inclusion in this context, as scholarship that considers the impacts of streaming on streamers has revealed a troubling paradigm that accelerates many of the most concerning aspects of the attention economy.

As I have detailed elsewhere (Trammell 2019), live streaming is one of the many forms of labor that members of the hobby game community engage in to make ends meet. Importantly, it is central insofar as it is the primary media apparatus that the community uses to get industry news out to its consumer base. Unlike the media ecosystem that is relied upon in the digital game community, there are few for-profit organizations that organize the media presence of the hobby game community. Because profits are generally slim, sites like *Kotaku*, *IGN*, *GameSpot*, and *Polygon* generally don’t consider or review games being distributed in the hobby game community. Occasionally, these sites will run an article that covers news in the hobby game space, especially if it pertains to a franchise with a considerable presence like *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)* or *Magic: The Gathering*, but more often than not the media ecosystem of the hobby game scene is composed primarily of fans offering coverage of news and events on their own streams. The bottom-up nature of the hobby game media is especially poignant, given that hobby games have been most successfully sold through crowdfunding sites such as Kickstarter. In 2018, the cartoon adaptation of a live streamed *D&D* game broke fundraising records. *The Legend of Vox Machina* is officially the best-funded movie or television series of all time on Kickstarter.

*The Dice Tower* is a fundamental part of the hobby game media ecosystem. They frequently live stream industry news updates and fan updates about the newest crowdfunded games that are available. As the industry has grown to embrace crowdfunding, the live streaming work of *The Dice Tower* has produced the infrastructural context for industry growth. Grassroots game designers rely on the live streamed content that *The Dice Tower* records

because it helps them tune into an engaged fan base that has been cultivated through the site's prerecorded game review content.

Crowdsourcing and grassroots media have defined the hobby game industry in recent years. The industry's newfound reliance on the crowd has challenged holdovers from an earlier and more homogeneously white male moment in the hobby game industry to reevaluate their market strategies. The newfound emphasis on understanding one's market means that hobby game streamers must adapt to accommodate more diverse audiences who expect that their tastes will be represented in the transaction. *Critical Role*, for instance, draws on a "diverse" network of sensitivity consultants to maintain a media footprint that is read as tasteful by its fans.<sup>3</sup> Satine Phoenix keywords "everyone" when she talks about her work as the community manager of *Wizards of the Coast* to the media.<sup>4</sup>

The critical media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser draws attention to how the logic of crowds dictates the experience of the self in socially mediated spaces, "To be authentic to yourself, one must first be authentic to others; it is about external gratification" (Banet Weiser 2012, 80). In other words, diverse audiences have renovated the hobby game space by investing in personalities who adopt inclusive practices. Importantly, Banet-Weiser suggests approaching this sense of collective authenticity with ambivalence, as the constitution of the self in question relates to the interests and desires of the crowd that funds it. For example, even though *Critical Role* offers an excellent example of how some audiences desire diverse and inclusive representation in their media, other crowdsourced hobby games like the loathsome *Kingdom Death: Monster* packaged offensive and off-putting content in its Kickstarter. From a review at *Polygon*:

Kingdom Death is easily the most offensive game that few have ever played. One miniature called the Wet Nurse was sold alongside the first print run. It featured a monster with phallus-shaped tentacles in the midst of violating its female captives. You don't play the game as the Wet Nurse, nor do you play against it. But it's part of the game's lore, it exists in the game world and that alone troubles people. (Hall 2017)

Although there is a crowd in the hobby game scene that desires inclusive, welcoming, and generally palatable content, there is also a crowd that desires the offensive, outlandish, racist, and sexist.

As in live streaming overall, the work of incubating communities of toxic masculinity often takes place separate yet parallel to the work of anti-racist,

LGBTQIA+, and feminist organizing. Academic research by Anastasia Salter and Bridget Blodgett (2017) and Suzanne Scott (2019) on these topics often focuses on the ways that geek masculinity as a fragile and often toxic identity space is central to the ways that toxic behavior spreads online. I concur, and yet I feel that white privilege is also at play in these spaces.

### White Geek Privilege

Geek masculinity is best theorized as a set of contradictions. As T. L. Taylor explains, geek masculinity is the outsider positionality adopted by geek men who have been socially subordinate to other men in society. As such, geek masculinity often emerges as a performance of mastery over many esoteric elements in everyday life. In other words, by failing to master a conventional sense of masculinity, geeks endeavor to master trivia, games, lore, and technology (Taylor 2018, 111–112). One limitation of geek masculinity is that it falls short of connecting the performance of unconventional mastery to the greater problem, as articulated previously, of toxic geek masculinity. Thus geek masculinity is not inherently toxic, so we need to consider other frameworks for better understanding the racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic undercurrents of geek culture.

White privilege may have some explanatory power in this discussion. The concept entered public discourse during the movement toward desegregation in the 1960s as a way to describe the many structural hurdles that Black folks had to overcome in order to live in white neighborhoods. By the 1980s, the term had more fully entered the public discourse, as it was popularized by feminist activists such as Peggy McIntosh, who endeavored to simply list manifestations of white privilege in everyday life (McIntosh 1988). McIntosh's list of forty-six everyday kinds of white privilege is cited by the critical race theorist Richard Dyer as a key moment of dissemination and popularization of the concept (Dyer 1997, 9). For the purposes of this chapter, we can define white privilege as the many invisible and everyday advantages that white people enjoy in society that Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) do not. Although these advantages can be listed, no single list can sufficiently address the numerous ways that white privilege socially emerges.

To understand what I term “white geek privilege,” we must begin by understanding that it emerges through the negative space of geek masculinity.

Where geeks double down on esoteric and arcane forms of mastery in an effort to disguise the ways that they fail to achieve the normative standards of hegemonic masculinity, white geeks also enjoy the myriad privileges that are attached to white identity. White geek privilege is toxic specifically because it doesn't recognize its own entitlement. White geeks see themselves as outsiders and justify their actions as if they are oppressed. In fact, the most horrific takes on white geek identity—incels, Gamergaters, and denizens of Reddit's TheRedPill—all epitomize white geek privilege's most toxic potential.

Literature about live streaming and race frequently focuses on the tactics that Black people use to carve out niches to participate in a space that furthers the values of white supremacy. In the critical media scholar Kishonna Gray's study of Black Twitch streamers, one user remarked, "I never SAY I'm black in a game. That's almost as bad as admitting your [sic] a girl" (Gray 2017, 362). Elsewhere, Gray and coauthor Brian Chan convey the ideology of white supremacy in this context as a discourse around color-blindness. For them, "color-blindness" captures how the visibility of race itself in conversation is policed as a topic of conversation on Twitch (Chan and Gray 2020, 359). In this sense, the lack of conversation around race furthers a discourse that values the invisibility of race—a common characteristic of whiteness. These dynamics around race dovetail with the expectations of microcelebrity and branding streaming that expects streamers to "authentically" present their identities to the audience. Yet Black streamers on Twitch are actively discouraged from presenting their race. Thus, authenticity in this context suggests that fitting in to the standards of the white cultural milieu is an unfortunate and racialized part of streaming.

White geek privilege is the way that geeks justify misogynist, homophobic, and racist behaviors to themselves. It is the way that a perceived outsider identity allows geeks to justify, enjoy, and embrace the structural boons of white privilege. Thus, it is also the structural element that makes participating in the world of hobby gaming challenging. With the exception of some notoriously bad apples, the hobby gaming community does not inhabit white geek privilege in an extreme or violent way. Instead, the community performs white geek privilege through gatekeeping. The community sees itself as an enclave of outsiders and then demands that newcomers prove their mastery of the obscure games within—the toolkit of geek masculinity—to police its borders. The community's reluctance to change shows white

geek privilege at play within it. The politics of crowdsourcing, however, have forced the hobby game community to rethink its practices. The following case study highlights both how the values of white geek masculinity structured live streaming early in the hobby games scene, as well as how new, diverse audiences were able to challenge these toxic practices.

### Case Study: *The Dice Tower*

*The Dice Tower* is the world's largest streaming network of board game streamers. Although almost anyone can produce programming for *The Dice Tower*, it is all screened by the channel's host, star, and moderator, Tom Vasel. Vasel is a jocular white Christian gamer who positions himself as part of the grassroots hobby community and frequently claims that politics doesn't belong on his show. Fan pressure in recent years has forced Vasel to share the spotlight with a new and diverse set of personalities such as Zee Garcia, Mandi Hutchinson, and Suzanne Sheldon. This section shows how grassroots pressure and activism around inclusivity on the part of the board game community forced Tom Vasel to diversify *The Dice Tower*.

The personalities who operate *The Dice Tower* are streamers who produce streaming media that runs the gamut. This includes live playthroughs of games, "boring" unboxing videos, question-and-answer sessions with fans, live coverage of game conventions, conversations with board game designers, miniature painting videos, companion streams to podcast content, and even live variety segments where the hosts cover a wide-ranging spectrum of topics. While *The Dice Tower* owns a website that serves as a landing page for most of its content, its YouTube channel is the fundamental gateway through which fans engage with its content. In addition to the many streams that *The Dice Tower* crew presents, they use YouTube to archive streams from the past and stage prerecorded content—such as the board game reviews that sustained the group prior to the popularization of live streaming. Importantly, a good deal of *The Dice Tower's* clout within the hobby game community derives from the relationship that its owner, Tom Vasel, has with the community itself. This relationship is in many ways the product of white privilege because of the community's historically white demographic. Because Vasel resembles others within it, he has been able to position himself as a key figure within the hobby game community.

He built a cottage media empire by reviewing board games; thus its success is predicated in some major ways on his appeal to the average geeky white man who watches his videos.

Because tabletop games are not digitally born, live streaming requires a fundamentally different infrastructure than one would typically find on a live streaming rig for Twitch gaming. Live streaming in the world of tabletop gaming requires set dressing, time off-camera spent memorizing the rules of the game, and generally a cast of several streamers. In this sense, live streaming tabletop games is a fusion of many genres of digital media broadcasting, including the conversational format of podcasting, the consumer-oriented format of product reviews, unboxing videos, the lifestyle-oriented videos generally produced by travel bloggers, and indispensably, live streaming.

Even though live streaming is just one of many types of content produced by *The Dice Tower*, I argue that it is important to view the channel as a stream because the paradigm of labor encouraged by YouTube would encourage a reading of it as such. On some days, the cameras may only roll live for two hours at a time in *The Dice Tower*, but on others they may roll for as many as twenty-four hours. The labor of being always on in this context is the common ground between the streamers at *The Dice Tower* (and others with similarly unconventional YouTube streams) and the streamers who work within the conventional context of the medium—streaming video games on Twitch. In an interview Vasel has related to me how managing his affect, as well as the affect of the others who stream on his channel, has become a major part of the job. Smiling and presenting a cheerful upbeat demeanor are essential parts of understanding the common aspects of performance and production in the streaming economy. Although, as Bo Ruberg and Amanda Cullen have argued, this work is often gendered (as is the unfortunate work of navigating online harassment), this example shows that it is also often a necessary cost of participation (Ruberg and Cullen 2020).

When Vasel founded *The Dice Tower*, there were no models for live streaming and all of the videos they produced were prerecorded. Now, as *The Dice Tower* has adapted to a model that foregrounds live streaming, the personalities involved have adapted to these practices of streaming in a piecemeal manner. The somewhat haphazard rollout of streaming at *The Dice Tower* reflects a decades-long culmination of Vasel's engagement with the board game community.<sup>5</sup> Before reaching a critical mass of popularity that allowed *The Dice Tower* to fully fund Vasel and some other streamers, Vasel moonlighted as a



digital content producer while working an assortment of other jobs, including English-language tutor, pastor, and math teacher. The combination of Vasel being an early participant in the hobby games scene and the volume of content that he has eagerly produced has allowed him to cultivate an audience of almost 300,000 subscribers for his site and support his business with a Kickstarter that generally pulls at least \$300,000 annually.

Vasel was new to crowdfunding in 2012 when he launched the site's first Kickstarter. Along with his podcast cohost of nine years, Eric Summerer, Vasel was able to drum up almost \$70,000 in community support. At the time, this was a big deal for Vasel, who had been doing most of his review work pro bono in his spare time when he wasn't working as a math teacher.<sup>6</sup> In the 2014 Kickstarter, support for *The Dice Tower* nearly doubled. Only barely acknowledged on the Kickstarter page is Zee Garcia, a Cuban-American-identifying, trained theater teacher and board game enthusiast who began a heavy rotation joining Vasel in some of his video reviews. Garcia was one of the only content producers for *The Dice Tower* and the community overall during this period who was not a white man. In 2015, Garcia became a full-time employee of *The Dice Tower* when the site hit a stretch goal of raising \$100,000. Indeed, the group raised almost \$180,000, a reflection of a funding community that desired more diverse content.<sup>7</sup>

Vasel must have realized that diversifying *The Dice Tower* was key to the site's success. In 2014, he launched a series of videos entitled "Board Game Breakfast" that were essentially wide-ranging clip shows that were submitted by members of the hobby game community. On this show, Vasel began to air videos by women and people of color as well.<sup>8</sup> Key in this field of contributors was Suzanne Sheldon, who would regularly have a segment aired on "Board Game Breakfast." Sheldon didn't regularly roll with the men of *The Dice Tower*. Unlike Garcia, who lives near Vasel in Florida and is often featured in videos reviewing games in the same room, Sheldon is an Asian-American woman who lives in Seattle and submitted segments of herself reviewing games. Where Garcia offers a good example of how diversifying a community's streamer pool offered financial incentives via a rapidly growing crowd, Sheldon is a good example of how diverse streamers still must overcome white geek privilege to be seen in the community. One crucial difference between Sheldon and Garcia is that while Garcia rarely notes his Cuban heritage, Sheldon has been deliberate in signaling her engagement with intersectional activism to the community.

“Who the hell are Suzanne and Mandi?” coffeetude7 wrote to the popular Reddit board r/boardgames in 2017.<sup>9</sup> His voice is one of the many comments epitomizing white geek privilege in the hobby games community. He was responding to Vasel’s announcement that he and Summerer would no longer be running *The Dice Tower* podcast on a weekly basis, and instead it would be hosted by Suzanne Sheldon and Mandi Hutchinson every other week. Mandi Hutchinson is a Black Canadian gamer who, like Sheldon, foregrounds her intersectional activism in her social media presence.

The inclusion of Sheldon and Hutchinson as hosts of *The Dice Tower* podcast was scrutinized by many in the hobby games community. Some argued that the two shouldn’t be allowed to inhabit the same space as Vasel and Summerer, pushing for their podcast to be categorized and labeled as a separate stream.<sup>10</sup> Others still suggested that they would stop funding *The Dice Tower* altogether.<sup>11</sup> The hullabaloo about Sheldon and Hutchinson’s inclusion was stalwartly defended by Vasel, who, on a thread for the site *Board Game Geek*, insisted:

Mandi and Suzanne are on our show, and until THEY want to leave I’m not changing it. Starting a new thread every few weeks telling me to change it isn’t going to work. I’ve always done the Dice Tower the way I want. I take input from other people, and listen to a lot of feedback. . . . If that makes you not support our current Kickstarter, or point towards our Kickstarter’s funding and use that as proof to back up your argument, then so be it. Some things are more important than money.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps it takes white geek privilege to counteract white geek privilege, as Vasel’s response was celebrated by some members of the community on the same thread as “impassioned, principled, and well-reasoned.”<sup>13</sup>

*The Dice Tower* shows how the adaptability of streaming platforms allows streamers the flexibility to include and exclude simultaneously—potentially furthering a neoliberal paradigm of inclusivity that uses new and diverse faces as a way to reach new markets without necessarily challenging the white supremacist structure of the community itself. Yet, on the other hand, the board game hobby is undeniably reaching new and more diverse audiences, thanks both to the efforts of women and BIPOC who demand inclusion and the efforts of some white geeks with clout in the community, like Vasel, who went out of their way to make space for new and more diverse voices, like Garcia, Sheldon, and Hutchinson, to have a platform.

### White Male Privilege in the Board Game Community

The *Dice Tower* case study given here shows how efforts toward inclusion that foreground the participation of BIPOC creators have been successful in opening up board game streaming channels to broader and more diverse audiences. There is a clear economic motive for these initiatives, as they are often win-win forms of engagement for both streaming producers that seek to broaden their audiences and for BIPOC content producers that seek to participate in spaces that were once tightly managed through the invisible tethers of white geek privilege.

I explored the example of live streaming on *The Dice Tower* because it spoke to a clear moment of advocacy within the community that produced a change in the status quo of the channel's representation. Importantly, the case study illustrates how white content producers, such as Vasel, unknowingly further the dynamics of white privilege. And while in this example, Vasel was sensitive to this mistake and attempted to compensate, there are many other streamers who are less proactive in their responses. Perhaps this is the true cost of the precarious labor paradigm that streaming is embedded in. Exhausted and underpaid laborers have little incentive and even less time to consider how their streams may be more inclusive. And because the onus of branding oneself falls upon these streamers as well—and many stream alone—they may also be so locked within the tunnel vision of their content cycle that they cannot innovate for the needs of diverse audiences. Thus, white privilege unerringly captures their content despite their best intentions.

This chapter advocates that the theoretical framework of white geek privilege is useful for better understanding how streamers of geek media work to keep BIPOC content creators out of their communities. Understanding white geek privilege helps us to better contextualize the cultural backlash toward inclusivity in geek spaces and to understand how the politics of geek culture speak not only to a beleaguered geek masculinity, but to a community dynamic that has thrived on the toxic dynamics of white privilege as well.

#### Notes

1. In her book *Watch Me Play*, T. L. Taylor relates live streaming both to a history of television production and discusses how some streamers operate as if they are their own autonomous television studio (Taylor 2018, 138).

2. The critical media scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that in neoliberal economies, the paradigm of branding extends to the individual. She writes, “In the context of brand culture, the individual is a flexible commodity that can be packaged, made, and remade—a commodity that gains value through self-empowerment” (Banet-Weiser 2012, 17).
3. *Critical Role* is rather explicit about this. It offers a value statement here: <https://critrole.com/community>.
4. For examples of this, see this interview that Goldie Chan conducts with Phoenix (Chan 2019).
5. Vasel has produced an almost four-hour-long video detailing the site’s history and his work as an organizer in this space (<https://youtube.com/watch?v=5gQAqxofj7l>).
6. Intriguingly, many of Vasel’s early game reviews were crowdsourced through the community play groups that he curated through his work with youth as a teacher.
7. See <https://kickstarter.com/projects/tomvasel/the-dice-tower-2015-season-11>.
8. Although Vasel did it first with “Board Game Breakfast,” the content was still prominently white men until it was merged with Garcia’s short-lived yet diverse “Board Game Blender” community in 2017. Garcia continued to produce Blender videos, but would often host alone, while many of the diverse members of his community would go on after that point to submit to “Board Game Breakfast.”
9. You can find this Reddit thread here: [https://reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/6v7bji/the\\_dice\\_tower\\_podcast\\_changes](https://reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/6v7bji/the_dice_tower_podcast_changes).
10. You can find these critiques here: <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1919416/are-tom-and-erics-weekly-podcast-used-be-released>.
11. Despite these threats, *The Dice Tower* continued to raise more funds in its 2017 and 2018 Kickstarters.
12. Vasel’s response in full can be found here: <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1919416/are-tom-and-erics-weekly-podcast-used-be-released>.
13. Kevin Lause comments on Vasel’s response here: <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1919416/are-tom-and-erics-weekly-podcast-used-be-released>.

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# Real Life in Real Time

## Live Streaming Culture

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