Allan, Jonathan A. *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance.* Routledge, 2019.

Hegemonic masculinity has long been examined and contested across disciplines. *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* sets out to explore how men and masculinities appear in popular romance novels. In this monograph, Jonathan A. Allan engages in an interdisciplinary dialogue with popular romance scholars, such as Pamela Regis and Janice Radway, among others, as well as scholars of the critical study of men and masculinities (CSMM). In his introduction, Allan draws from Jeff Hearn's (2015) definition of CSMM that underlines the "socially constructed, produced, and reproduced" aspect of gender to examine men and masculinities as represented in female-authored popular romance, a genre which he posits is "clearly gendered" and "largely heteronormative," (2) although he also considers male/male popular romance novels. This book enables readers to think critically about men, masculinities, the male body, desire, and sexuality. Across seven chapters, Allan examines contemporary Harlequin novels and argues that normative, hegemonic masculinity is reinforced in these novels, while also allowing for more "hybrid masculinities."

In Chapter 1, Allan begins with the question of method in studying popular romance novels. He considers the challenge of sample size and wonders how much reading is enough, eventually contending against the idea that "size matters" (19). He draws on Northrop Frye's approach to genres to review men and masculinities in an archetypal fashion, which he is aware could be read in "generalizing tones" (22). In this chapter, Allan explains that he seeks patterns within the heroes in the novels, who undoubtedly embody what Radway (1991 [1984]) calls "spectacular masculinity." Allan convincingly delimits the scope of his book and explains his method to anticipate criticism.

In Chapter 2, Allan considers the desirability of hegemonic masculinity in a selection of short randomly chosen historical and contemporary romance novels. By conducting a textual analysis across novels, Allan argues that masculinity is central to the popular romance novels, and that it is hegemonic, heterosexual and "deeply committed to capitalist and bourgeois success" (39). Given the centrality of masculinity in popular romance novels, Allan rightly points to the underwhelming critical engagement between CSMM and romance. Thus, Allan sets the stage for further inquiries into hegemonic masculinity in the genre.

In Chapter 3, Allan examines the female orgasm. Through a close reading of select popular romance novels, he argues that female orgasm functions as a measure of the hero's masculinity, which hints toward the importance of action in reinforcing masculinity. This analysis leads to larger debates around inequality of orgasms and fake orgasms. In Chapter 4 Allan shifts his attention to the virgin hero – a seemingly opposed figure to the desirable and hegemonic male hero – to trace his complexity and capacity to challenge ideas of masculinities, much like "hybrid masculinities." Once again drawing on Frye, Allan examines "types" of male virgins and explores patterns and points of contact across novels. In his reading of popular romance, Allan notes that virginity does not undermine the hero's masculinity.

In Chapters 5 and 6, Allan explores why readers desire and consume male/male popular romance. Departing from popular romance novels, Chapter 5 offers a close reading of bromance in the Mexican film *Y tu mamá también* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2001). While this move might stand out to the reader, considering Allan's careful methodology and explanation of his sample selection, it is a fruitful one that expands his theorizing to other domains of cultural production. In this chapter, Allan notes that while male/male popular romance may challenge notions of hegemonic masculinity, the heroes in these novels are nonetheless complicit in its continuation. Thus, he argues that these male heroes can be read as examples of "hybrid masculinities." Allan continues this discussion in Chapter 6 and explores how the male body is consumed in male/male popular romance novels. Allan does not offer any definitive conclusions; however, these chapters invite further examination of masculinities and men's relationships in the popular romance novel, and fiction at large. In his seventh and final chapter, Allan addresses scholars of CSMM, as well as scholars of popular romance, and asks them to reconsider their critical engagement with pornography. In short, he suggests reading pornography romantically and reading romance pornographically.

Overall, *Men, Masculinities, and Popular Romance* is well-written and provocative. Allan poses insightful questions about masculinities, gender, sexuality, and desire. Perhaps one weakness is that each chapter seems to raise more questions than provide answers, yet this text encourages a rethinking of men and masculinities by bringing together two fields: critical studies of men and masculinities (CSMM) and popular romance. Allan acknowledges the limitations of his work, especially concerning trans* romances and disability studies, but there is much to be said about race and masculinity too (which he briefly discusses in his

analysis of a Mexican film). This monograph will hopefully encourage the growth of interest in CSMM and popular romance. Allan's balance between his detailed methods, his interdisciplinary dialogue, and flexibility (from romance novels to slash fiction to film) broadens his audience. This text will be useful for undergraduate and graduate students taking courses in masculinities, gender, queer studies, sexuality, literature, and popular culture.

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Anjaria, Ulka. *Understanding Bollywood: The Grammar of Hindi Cinema*. Routledge, 2021.

As the book's subtitle reveals, *Understanding Bollywood: The Grammar of Hindi Cinema* offers an introduction to how Bollywood melodramas operate. The emphasis on what has persisted in Bollywood and shaped it from 1947 to the present – instead of discussing what has changed – is explored in three parts. The first part is divided into five chapters, each of which explores a major convention of Bollywood; moral structure, love, song and dance, visual style, and cinephilia. Part two attends to the topics of nationalism and gender/sexuality as the two principal subjects that have dominated Bollywood scholarship in recent decades. The last part consists of an epilogue, where the author discusses the new trends in Bollywood and hypothesizes its future.

The introduction to the book provides general information about Bollywood. Anjaria notes that Bollywood refers to the style of Mumbai-based popular films that employ the pan-Indian heterogenous language known as "Hindustani" (7). These "2.5-3.5 hours long" films (5) are marked by excess in almost every aspect primarily because they are not interested in the imitation of reality, but in "audience enjoyment" and "emotional involvement" (12). In Chapter 1, the author locates the cornerstone of Bollywood cinema in the "Manichean moral universe of good versus evil" (17). In this Manichean universe, the hero always prevails, and morality is always restored in the end. Anjaria notes that within the opening scenes of a Bollywood film the established conventions set the film's morality based on the hierarchical sensibilities of love, family, sibling bond, and the adoptive family. In

addition, they identify the hero or heroine by granting them extraordinary abilities to prevail over the villain who disrupts the moral universe.

Chapter 2 considers the centrality of romantic love as a generic feature of Bollywood cinema. The association of the moral universe with love leads to exalting the characters who believe in love and villainizing those who are skeptical or dismissive of it. On some levels, Bollywood presents love as "madness and at times destructive to both lover and beloved" (41), a motif rooted in Sufi tradition and Persian poetry such as the story of "Shirin and Farhad" and "Layla and Majnun" (36). Chapter 3 focuses on song-and-dance sequences as another fundamental feature of Bollywood. Anjaria studies song sequences for their significance in offering the possibility of a range of emotions, erotics, fantasy, heteronormative sexual desire, and prohibited and queer sexual desire through metaphor and allegory. The relatively autonomous circulation of song-and-dance numbers, where the songs are released prior to the film and create anticipation for it, is another characteristic of Bollywood that the author addresses in this chapter.

In Chapter 4, Anjaria studies the excessive visual style in Bollywood, where "more is generally better" (84). According to the author, the visual style also plays a role in the establishment of the moral universe through associating colorful and well-lit visuals with heroes. The importance of the love songs is reemphasized here via discussing their visually striking mise-en-scene and their "desolate locations" to convey the "fantastical and extra-social" conception of love (94). The author ends the first part by exploring cinephilia, stardom, fandom, double roles, twin plots, cameos, parodies, and intertextuality in Bollywood as crucial features that substantially contribute to the popularity of Hindi cinema.

Chapter 6 examines Bollywood's role in defining what "Indianness actually means" (141). Anjaria studies nationalism in Bollywood through the controversial role of the mother as India, the inherently corrupting attitude toward money (particularly in early Bollywood), incompetent and immoral state and police, and the secular nation, not as the separation of state from religion but as "the embrace of all religions" (151). The second part ends with the discussion of gender and sexuality in Bollywood. The author studies gender roles and homosociality in Bollywood both as the challenges to patriarchal traditions and the possibility of the non-normative spaces that "queer erotics can be represented without necessarily being named as queer" (172).

As Anjaria acknowledges, *Understanding Bollywood* is predominantly written to offer an introduction to Bollywood. To fulfill this promise, the book frequently

explains cultural aspects of Indian life and details historical facts about India and Indian cinema. Despite this assumption, the author takes the potential reader's rudimentary familiarity with India for granted on multiple occasions throughout the book. For instance, Anjaria uses the original title of the films because, as she argues, they seldom describe the theme of the films but work metonymically (128). The sheer number of the film titles discussed under their original designations nonetheless would overwhelm the reader who is not acquainted with Indian cinema, particularly considering the author's approach in examining the films without clearly explaining their story. However, Anjaria's repetitive discussion of the selection of the films through various lenses and the scattered "Case study" sections, where she explains the storyline of the films, aid the reader in overcoming the inundation of unfamiliar film titles and stories after committing to a few chapters.

The discussion of diegetic and extradiegetic features in Chapters 3 and 4 is bewildering. Anjaria equates "diegetic" to "intradiegetic" and defines it as an aspect of a film that "takes place in the narrative world of the film" (63). Accordingly, "extradiegetic" is defined as the cinematic elements that "do *not* take place in the narrative world of the text" (63, emphasis in original). These definitions become problematic when Anjaria implicitly conflates cinematic story with narrative and consequently constrains diegetic features to the story or plot of a film rather than its narrative. This slippage prompts her to categorize dream scenes (65) and flashbacks (63) as extradiegetic aspects of the film, though these cinematic features are often categorized as "intra-diegetic" (Hayward 85), or "diegetic" (Bordwell and Thompson) in film and media studies. This oxymoronic approach to diegetic and extradiegetic categorization is evident in her argument that a dream scene presented as a love song and dance scene "even though the song did not actually occur within the film's diegesis, the nature of the couple's relationship has 'really' changed" (65). Therefore, despite Anjaria's categorization of dream scenes as extradiegetic and based on her own claim that the song and dance scenes impact the characters, the narrative, and the story of the film, they should be classified as diegetic aspects of the film and not as extradiegetic elements.

Notwithstanding the minor issues, *Understanding Bollywood* provides fresh insight into Bollywood cinema. Anjaria seldom uses jargon and carefully elaborates on the Indian phrases and technical terms wherever they are utilized. The author also equips her discussion and analysis of the film with culturally specific details that are often needed for a more in-depth understanding of the popularity of

Bollywood. Moreover, by examining the popular Hindi cinema through an introductory perspective and an interdisciplinary lens, Anjaria creates a piece of scholarly work with accessible language that can be used as an introduction to Bollywood cinema not only in film study programs but also in cultural studies, sociology, and anthropology classes.

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Booth, Paul. *Board Games as Media.* Bloomsbury, 2021.

While media scholars have increasingly studied video games over the last two decades, and rightfully so, the scholarly community has only given scant attention to board games, despite the similarities between the two media. Paul Booth seeks to correct this imbalance in *Board Games as Media,* arguing that the book "attempts to begin a conversation about how board games – just like media texts – create and complicate messages, and how we – as scholars, as readers, as players – can investigate these messages. What does it mean to read a board game, and how can we go about doing so?" (6) The book is based on extensive research into board games as texts, the community surrounding such games, and players and creators of board games. The questions Booth raises are appropriate, and his adaptation of tried-and-true media studies methodologies is carefully considered. "What has to change in our understanding of media when we move from screens to boards? How do the tactile and social natures of board games affect the deeper themes and meanings of them?" (7). *Board Games as Media* serves as an introduction into the nascent field of board game studies, as Booth showcases the multifaceted possibilities of studying board games.

In the first three chapters, Booth examines board games using a "ludo-textual" approach, which he conceives as a "way of analyzing the interaction between

players and material elements within board games" (10-11). In each chapter, he considers two to four games to examine ideological approaches to cooperative and competitive play styles (Chapter 1), the rhetoric of games (Chapter 2), and the interaction between a game's mechanisms (or actions a play can take within a game) and a game's theme (Chapter 3). In all three chapters, Booth compares complex board games, exploring their rules, mechanisms, themes, game components, and more. Anybody interested in textual analysis of video games, film, or other media texts should find the application of textual analysis to board games a novel and revealing form of study.

In Chapter 4, Booth focuses on game creators, and he outlines three approaches to board game authorship: the *créateur*, a board game designer with a consistent style and approach, which is analogous to the film auteur; the crafter, a designer who creates numerous games of varying styles and approaches; and the branded aestheticism of a board game company, whereby common themes and approaches span a company's catalog of games. The central question, what does it mean to be an "author" of a board game, is one without easy answers. Booth argues that for a board game to come alive, it needs to be played, and thus players themselves have an authorial role to play as well.

In Chapter 5, Booth turns his attention to the players of board games, investigating the gaming community through the lens of fandom studies. Booth argues that viewing board game players as "fans" opens new ways of understanding the relationship between players and media. Booth considers fans of board games that were adapted from video games, suggesting that fans should not be thought of as being confined to a particular medium, but rather that fandom can be an identity that supersedes any specific text.

In Chapters 6 and 7, Booth switches methodologies again, this time by approaching board game players with a traditional quantitative/qualitative survey. Chapter 6 details the results of the quantitative half, whereas Chapter 7 details the qualitative half. In the quantitative portion, Booth asks players how they play board games, what got them interested in board gaming, how often they play and purchase games, and so forth. This survey offers purely descriptive data, providing readers with some understanding of who constitutes the board gaming community. Chapter 7 is more interesting, as Booth reviews open-ended responses to reveal how players socialize through board games, what their ideal board gaming experience is, and what they think about the rise in popularity of board games. While these two chapters contain some intriguing observations about board gamers, they are also

the weakest chapters. Each chapter begins with a lengthy discussion of how quantitative and qualitative methodologies work, which will be familiar to anybody who has read an introductory methods textbook. Each chapter also contains numerous caveats about the limits of quantitative and qualitative research, so the result is a set of analyses that lacks confidence, compared to the first five chapters. On a technical note, the graphs, particularly in Chapter 6, came out very blurry, with chart labels that are almost impossible to read in some cases.

Chapter 8 focuses on issues of diversity in board games as texts and in the board gaming community at large. Issues of diversity and representation have long been concerns of the film, literature, music, and video games industries, so it makes perfect sense to discuss these issues in the context of board games. Booth interviews both players and board game designers to uncover their thoughts on diversity and to articulate the challenges the industry faces (where creators and players alike are often older, white males). The possible solutions offered to make this hobby more inclusive are insightful and necessary.

The final chapter is an autoethnography of Booth and his time playing an especially complicated board game, *Gloomhaven.* Booth focuses on issues of diversity, questioning his own cultural standpoint and how it influences his experience with the game. This is another chapter where Booth seems a bit unsure of his methodology, as he includes several caveats about what autoethnography can and cannot do, which limits the impact. The book ends with a short conclusion that brings up ecological issues with the physical production of board games (e.g., waste of paper, plastic, etc.). While this idea is not fully developed, it offers yet another topic of scholarly exploration.

Overall, *Board Games as Media* is a thorough introduction to the academic study of board games, and the book showcases numerous methodological approaches to this topic. This book will appeal not only to scholars interested in board games themselves, but also scholars of adjacent fields of study, such as video games, fandom studies, and textual criticism.

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Castronova, Edward. *Life Is a Game: What Game Design Says About the Human Condition.* Bloomsbury, 2021.

Life is like a game. Many philosophers have offered this metaphor over the centuries, yet Edward Castronova makes an adjustment to this mode of thought in his book *Life Is a Game: What Game Design Says about the Human Condition*. Rather than proposing an allegory in this twenty-years-in-the-making book, he asserts that the title is not metaphor. For Castronova, life *is* a game. In the introduction, he explains this direct comparison is based on the basic principles of game design, which inherently involves creating limits, incentives, rewards, and risks – a setup that is exactly like life, its consequences, and some inherent, underlying drive to win (whatever that may mean). This setup hints at what makes the book so compelling: it centers, inherently, on exerting agency.

Life Is a Game goes beyond the new field of game design – beyond game theory and beyond the neurobiology of games (how they make us feel, and how our brains respond to risk and reward). Instead, the book centers on the human condition as it is reflected in game thinking. At the core of game thinking is the strategic layer, where Castronova says we take our values, transform them, and implement them into norms and behavior. In other words, these are the general principles by which we live life, rather than the specific decisions we make to remain in accordance with these principles. Castronova divides his analysis into two parts: Part One details "life as a strategy" while Part Two catalogs the stances one may take in playing the game of life.

Part One is dedicated to examining the "black box" of existence: determining that, if life is a game, what are the packaging, pieces, and rules to this game? There are no easy answers to this question; therefore, Castronova draws heavily from philosophy to discuss the interactive nature of existence, leaning toward Viktor Frankl and Kierkegaard's will to meaning instead of the will to power or pleasure found in Nietzsche or Freud. From this philosophical foundation he transitions into a conversation about what can constitute "successful" play in the game of life (which is explored at the deepest level in Chapter 4). This conversation then transitions into a general discussion on the strategic layer an individual may play based on how they approach the game of life. In discussing how people choose their stances, Castronova says that while everyone has a stance, some people have thoughtful, coherent stances while others have unconscious or incoherent stances.

Part Two explores how people define "success" in life, with Chapters 6 through 10 exploring five main stances people may adopt as they define success: hedonistic, excellence, heroic, orthodox, and mystic stances. Castronova defines each stance's philosophical commitment and implications and evaluates each stance by its ability to facilitate inner peace or general happiness (whatever that means according to the stance). The book regularly draws from philosophical and religious texts to articulate these stances.

What really makes *Life Is a Game* stand out from other contemporary books on game design is how it draws from recent intellectual inquiry on games and connects to much older (ancient) conversations about reality and understanding. While previous literature compared life to a game, it neglected to dive as deeply into a clear definition about the philosophy and structure of games themselves. The scope of the book also differentiates it from other literature. The author seeks to bring a level of excitement alongside wisdom while also producing scholarship that investigates the states of life and living.

If we imagine life is a game, Castronova asserts, we solve the problem of "boredom" in life. This framing does run the risk of appearing to trivialize the challenges of those in less-developed countries (as well as the historically marginalized peoples in more developed countries), but it does confront the existential ennui that comes with a lack of stimulation or challenge. Castronova considers the diminishing benefits effect in the human condition (as life becomes better for swathes of the human population, the gains are increasingly diminished), yet readers are left wondering about the challenges looming ahead of us: climate change and its political, sociocultural, and conflict consequences. If humanity's most concerning problem is boredom, are forthcoming "nature-driven quests" something that bring purpose?

While it may be simple, one of the main philosophical takeaways of the book is that mystery is fun. Mystery brings meaning. For the game perspective, uncertainty at every scale and in every dimension brings excitement. The comparison to life as an RPG game (42-6) is amusing and thought-provoking, particularly the comparison between dynamic difficulty adjustment and education, job tenure, and relationship building. There could be some very engaging conversation further in this topic about agency, imposed limits, and growth caps as they relate to career or interest specialization.

Philosophically or theologically minded readers will find themselves repeatedly considering their own convictions and values. At no point in the book do readers

feel as if life is being trivialized by being referred to as a game. Instead, readers get the sense that Castronova carefully and thoughtfully created this framework.

Castronova notes at the beginning of the book that he will refrain from making any comments about a possible "dungeon master" (i.e., God) until the end of the book, where rather than a conclusion, he offers a two-page epilogue positing a brief philosophical outline to the idea of a "game designer." This structuring is intentional and thoughtful, as it does not influence readers as to the author's own beliefs and positionality. (I will not spoil the author's own thoughts about a grand game designer here, in the event readers wish to read through the book without having their own reception of the text colored.) Readers familiar with researcher positionality in design choices will appreciate the placement of the author's own personal beliefs. Like a well-crafted research memo or personal statement, it sits comfortably in the end of the article to minimize reader contemplation of the text. Overall, *Life Is a Game* is inherently interdisciplinary, bringing together content from across academic fields, and appealing to any scholarly and lay readers with interests in politics, philosophy, economics, sociology, and of course, game design.

Ellen A. Ahlness
Education Maksad

Duffett, Mark and Jon Hackett. *Scary Monsters: Monstrosity, Masculinity and Popular Music*. Bloomsbury, 2021.

Music is full of monsters, and humanity is better for it.

With *Scary Monsters: Monstrosity, Masculinity and Popular Music*, Mark Duffett and Jon Hackett have compiled a fascinating collection of analyses that provide new perspectives on popular music figures, popular culture, and the societies and cultures of both the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st. Thanks to their innovative utilization of different theories regarding concepts such as masculinity and monstrosity, their collection is of interest to a wide range of scholars. Indeed, their interdisciplinary approach to applying theories provides an example of how such transdisciplinary scholarship and research can be accomplished.

Scary Monsters presents analyses of various fictional and nonfictional musicians and musical figures. Through their close readings of popular culture figures, texts, and discourses, they demonstrate an adeptness at incorporating the less commonly applied monstrosity studies with the more prevalent gender studies to provide new insights into music studies. The introduction alone, with its reviews of these three fields, is well worth reading for anyone interested in this specific topic or even how to engage in such scholarship.

The remaining chapters each focus on a specific case study, with either Duffett or Hackett serving as the lead author. Each chapter explores a musical performer or fictional character that are themselves texts co-constructed by and situated within various fictional, popular, and public discourses; the authors examine these representations to illuminate how monstrosity provides a unique perspective on changing sociocultural notions of gender and identity. Despite presenting each chapter as a piece of solo authorship, they still cohere both in writing style and discussion. In each chapter the authors ground their analysis of their chosen case study in relevant literature, and the writing is approachable for any emerging or established scholar. Indeed, fans of these popular culture texts and performers may find the writing clear enough to understand without substantial academic training, as the authors explain key concepts and theories (although said fan may want to have a dictionary on hand to help remind them).

The real strength of these case studies is the method in which the authors situate the example within a larger context to understand the nuances and complexities of that case study. Each example seeks to understand how the concept of the "monster" allows musicians and musical figures to negotiate gender norms, stereotypes, and roles. Indeed, the book's title draws on David Bowie's fourteenth album, *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*, originally released in 1980. In an interview from 2003, Bowie described the album as a "kind of purge […] I felt I was on the cusp of something absolutely new. There were no absolutes. Nothing was necessarily true, but everything was true" (DeMain). While Bowie was discussing his own struggles with addiction and familial life, this reflection also aligns with the work Duffett and Hackett have done with their case studies. By employing monstrosity as a concept adopted by queer studies to deconstruct gender representation, the authors also demonstrate the playfulness in musical texts as to whether gender is truly a binary absolute of black and white, male and female, man and woman. Or, rather, as their analyses contend, is gender more fluid, more complex, and more playful?

For example, in Chapter 4, "The platformed Prometheus: Frankenstein and glam rock," Hackett weaves together the figures, texts, and discourses of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with the glam rock of the 1970s and the cult classic stage play *The Rocky Horror Show* Looking across nearly two centuries of popular culture, and popular music in particular, Hackett applies the metaphorical nature of Frankenstein's monster in glam rock, which has a magical quality similar to the alchemy responsible for the monster's construction. Indeed, Hackett presents the argument that the bricolage of Frankenstein's monster is akin to the styles, both in terms of music and fashion, that serve as the genre conventions for glam rock. This theoretical lens is then used to read and understand different presentations of the Frankenstein metaphor in glam rock texts, such as *The Rocky Horror Show* and Parliament Funkadelic. The result is a discussion of hybridized identities, including gender identities, that have influenced popular music and culture even after glam rock faded away.

I approached this book not as a music scholar but as a fan of many of the texts discussed. Even without being a music scholar, I found the analytical approach compelling due to how it provided new insights into texts I both knew and found myself realizing I did not know well enough. For example, in Chapter 3, "Colonel Parker and the art of commercial exploitation: The manager as monster," I had periphery knowledge of Colonel Tom Parker, but this chapter presented the man, and perhaps the myth, in a way that provided new insights into Parker, Elvis Presley, and their relationship. Duffett presents evidence for how public discourse and popular culture have repeatedly portrayed Parker in ghoulish manners, especially after Presley's death when people needed to make sense of how he could die so young and so unexpectedly. Positioning Parker as both the villain and the monster in this story helped Presley's fans maintain the myth and the image of Elvis they preferred. Duffett's work here will be interesting to compare to the upcoming Baz Luhrmann film *Elvis* in which Tom Hanks plays Parker; an analysis, I hope, someone completes using this chapter as a starting point.

One critique of the book itself stems from the lack of a conclusion chapter. Given that each author is credited as having written separate chapters, including a conclusion chapter written by both would indicate a place in which they engaged each other and their cases studies more dialogically. Such a chapter would have allowed for a summary of what was learned from the connections between the case studies while also suggesting further research that could be done on this topic and by using these different disciplines. This type of conclusion would also provide the

space to strengthen the insights on masculinity in popular music and culture gained from the application of monstrosity. Noting these specific insights would also allow for a discussion of other analytical spaces and case studies.

Overall, the book suggests a new approach to music studies, one that will hopefully be taken up and applied by others. Studying musicians such as BabyMetal and Lady Gaga, for example, from the intersection of femininity and monstrosity could be very insightful comparisons to the masculine figures discussed in this book. Similarly, exploring the zombie musical *Anna and the Apocalypse* (John McPhail, 2017)*,* with its Disney musical meets zombie horror genre mixing, could be an interesting analysis commenting on the *High School Musical* franchise. Indeed, this book has, in some ways, accomplished what Bowie sang in "Scary Monsters (And Super Creeps)": "She opened strange doors; that we'd never close again." Providing a theoretical grounding for new directions in scholarship is indeed opening "strange doors" that the rest of us can now walk through.

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Laine, Eero. *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage*. Routledge, 2020.

For a long time, critics and scholars have debated whether professional wrestling can be classified as theatre, sports, or something else entirely. Eero Laine's book *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage* acknowledges professional wrestling's peculiarity and examines its position in a stage of commercial interest. I observe that the book's title has a double meaning, as Laine not only examines

professional wrestling in relation to commercial theatre (the "stage") but also considers it as a part of a global "stage" of transactions and monetization.

The book is broken into five main chapters, each analyzing the relationship of theatre and professional wrestling under a different topic. Laine starts with his claim that professional wrestling is undeniably a form of theatre and World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) is a transnational theatre company (2-4). He then briefly traces professional wrestling's history and highlighting its carnival roots (18), but, more importantly, he acknowledges a major opposition between theatre and professional wrestling: in professional wrestling, the performers purposely enforce the idea that what they do is real (18-9). This idea is supported by a very interesting point that appears early in the book, when Laine refers to Michael Shayne Boyle's work of examining theatre through a Marxist lens and attempts to do the same for professional wrestling, as he considers both as forms of labor that lead to intangible productivity (22). From the start, the book delves into the issues that arise from the intersection of labor and spectacle in the world of pro wrestling. Also, Laine remembers to address the issues raised by so-called "hardcore" wrestling, remarking that labor is present even in the most (seemingly) barbaric aspects of professional wrestling.

Laine explains that professional wrestling characters are unable to rid themselves of their past, as previous behaviors are carried throughout their legacy (39). While exploring these behaviors, he locates some particularly negative ones, such as sexism and hyper-masculinity, and he argues that professional wrestling can do better. He then compares two theater plays, *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity* and *Trafford Tanzi*, both featuring professional wrestling elements, to further elucidate the connection of theatre and professional wrestling and to emphasize professional wrestling's potential for social critique. In addition, the book makes some solid points on how the fabrication of kayfabe (maintaining the illusion that professional wrestling is real) has permeated various aspects of profit-making in contemporary society (32).

Apart from similarities between commercial theatre and professional wrestling, Laine also delves into a major difference, that of branding likeness. According to Laine, a theatrical character can be portrayed by numerous actors, whereas in professional wrestling a character is usually (though not always) tied to one specific performer (81-82). Then, big corporations (in this case, WWE) find ways to commercialize and profit from that likeness in a continuous manner, even when

said likeness shifts (94), producing a theatrical performance that also dictates the company's stock market value (117).

For Laine, professional wrestling and capitalism go hand in hand, but wrestling itself allows for cultivating a resistant mentality (107-108). Laine mainly examines WWE under that lens. One could say that by reducing professional wrestling in the biggest part of the book to simply WWE, an analysis might be limited. Yet WWE is undoubtedly the biggest wrestling company in the world and for some people a synonym for professional wrestling, which makes the author's choice understandable. Regardless, I believe that similar examinations can bring forth interesting results for other big internationally touring companies, such as New Japan Pro Wrestling (NJPW) or All Elite Wrestling (AEW). Also, I would have liked to see more about contemporary social media and breaking (or maintaining) of kayfabe in a global commercial stage that is the internet. Furthermore, Laine quotes Sharon Mazer, who writes that wrestling promoters provide hyper-masculine content to satisfy one specific (e.g., young male) audience (39) and goes on to expand its position on the commercial stage. Yet, at the same time, promotions such as SHIMMER in the U.S. and Stardom in Japan also champion women's professional wrestling and thus cater to a largely female audience, thereby offering alternative readings to how professional wrestling is understood by somewhat disrupting prevailing hypermasculine attitudes. I realize that, as an introductory book published in the Western world, the text would focus on a specific market, but for a more complete overview, even brief mentions of those alternative products could have supported the analysis.

Apart from positioning professional wrestling to the field of Theatre and Performance Studies and highlighting its commercial practices as a spectacle, the book provides an excellent opportunity to consider professional wrestling as a product of society that can also provide a multi-sided form of criticism (something that theatre also does). It can furthermore satisfy a reader interested in historic aspects of professional wrestling, as Laine devotes a big part of one chapter exploring aspects of professional wrestling's past, always in comparison to theatre and its commercial side. Given its awareness of its position within Theatre and Performance Studies research but also Professional Wrestling Studies, *Professional Wrestling and the Commercial Stage* is certainly a nice piece that scholars should "grapple with." Regardless of their background, readers will certainly take something away from it.

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Parham III, Thomas D. *"Hailing Frequencies Open": Communication in* Star Trek: The Next Generation. McFarland, 2019.

All iterations of *Star Trek* use a "universal translator" to communicate or attempt to communicate with most alien races. Yet the various types of communication that are ever-present within the different series have not been explicitly studied to any great degree. Thomas D. Parham III's book *"Hailing Frequencies Open"* attempts to redress that omission with mixed results.

After a brief introductory chapter that describes *Star Trek* for anyone unfamiliar with the multiple series, Parham spends three chapters looking at different aspects of specific communication theory (as opposed to media and communication[s]) and how they apply primarily to *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (henceforth TNG). Chapter 2 focuses on intrapersonal communication, defined as the characters' "inner journey" (44), and unfortunately tends to include a bit too much opinion (e.g., "postulat[ing]" that Geordi LaForge is the "least realized" of the main characters [62]). Here, Parham uses different character vignettes to illustrate aspects of their personal growth throughout the series. The section on Data and symbolic interactionism is well developed, though the section on gender seems to endorse the fallacy of the gender binary. While one can argue that this situation occurs because the regular characters also fell into this binary, it is worth noting that episodes of TNG (and subsequent series) brought in concepts of genderfluidity as well as agender and third-gender individuals. While these individuals are briefly discussed within the context of relationships in the next chapter, discussing them here would have made for a more in-depth discussion of gender rather than simply focusing on the characters of Troi and Worf. Parham also seems to believe that

gender is not a discursive construct, putting him out of step with contemporary cultural and gender studies, which is unfortunate.

Chapter 3 moves on to discuss interpersonal communication, something TNG was known for in contrast to its more action-orientated parent series. Throughout this chapter, Parham focuses on various dyadic relationships in the series, though he seems to rely on non-academic interviews with members of the production team as evidence rather than academic work. While it is certainly valid to engage with members of production teams (and doing so can give great benefit to academic work, as in Pearson and Messenger-Davies' work on TNG), doing so uncritically as is done here is not ideal. Work on *Star Trek* by a variety of scholars could and should have been used to strengthen the arguments if Parham felt that the more general texts on interpersonal communication were insufficient.

Chapter 4 deals with the inextricably bound topics of group and organizational communication. This chapter focuses on leadership styles, primarily juxtaposing the styles of Kirk and Picard, though I find the subheading "the Real Differences" (88) to be somewhat disingenuous as well as falling outside the parameters of the book based upon the title. While the concept of this chapter is not necessarily problematic in and of itself it tends to exemplify one of the main problems in this work: its overreliance on uncritical interviews with the production team rather than interviews that are analysed critically.

The next two chapters are where the book's most serious problems lie. The mass communication chapters have a fatal flaw that results from how Parham conducts audience research. Qualitative research using open-ended questions (often in a semi-structured format) yields far deeper data than surveys with closed questions. Specifically, Parham's use of a Likert scale with statements rather than questions strongly limits the information that can be reliably gleaned; not only does the definition of "strongly agree/disagree" vary from person to person, but such a structure limits the number of potential answers (and, as such, data) and does not allow respondents to explain why they agree/disagree with a particular statement. The demographic "questions" are also flawed as they fall into the fallacy of the gender binary and fail to give space for respondents to fully self-identify. As a specialist in audience research, I unfortunately find this whole section to be of extremely limited use.

The final chapter is almost best described as "miscellaneous," with topics moving across several other series in the *Star Trek* universe. The chapter itself, when playing to the author's clear strengths in communication theory, is fine and

while the fact that it moves across multiple series is not necessarily a problem, given that the book positions itself in its title as being about TNG, it might have been better served to retitle the book to encompass multiple *Trek* series, and discussing the various issues brought up, e.g., discussing organizational dissent in *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* as part of the original chapter on organizational communications. Indeed, a restructuring of the book to be solely focused on intrapersonal, interpersonal, group, and organizational communications would have improved the text immensely. Just because *Star Trek* has been primarily a television text does not mean that a chapter needs to be devoted to it; the relevant parts of TV theory could have been used to contextualise the series in the introductory chapter.

All that said, Chapters 2 through 4 would be well-suited to an undergraduate introductory course on communication provided the problems discussed here were addressed in the class. The book covers most of the theoretical topics that are used in such courses and is written at a level that undergraduates with little to no prior knowledge of the topic can understand. The students would need to be cautioned about the problematic survey as well, but even that could be used as a teachable moment in which the students are encouraged to design a stronger audience research project on the topic. Overall, it is perhaps best to call this book a reasonable first attempt at understanding the various communication theory/ies illustrated in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, with the hope that future studies will only improve such important work.

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Peterson, Jon. *The Elusive Shift: How Role-Playing Games Forged Their Identity*. MIT Press, 2020.

In his book *The Elusive Shift*, author Jon Peterson writes, "Every *Dungeons & Dragons* character begins with throwing dice for abilities such as Intelligence or Wisdom, but it is up to the player to formulate statements of intention for that character, to decide what the character says and does, and through that process potentially to turn those characteristics into some semblance of a person" (71). Most of *The Elusive Shift* focuses on the role of the referee or dungeon master (DM) and how much control they should have on games designated as Role-Playing Games

(RPGs). The roots of RPGs are found in wargaming but one of the biggest differences is that the wargames genre and its various offshoots tend to be highly scripted with players taking control of already established characters in a pre-existing narrative. RPGs sought to open gaming up. *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) was revolutionary in tabletop gaming because it asked DMs to create an entirely new world with elaborate dungeons full of monsters to battle, develop a campaign story, utilize a system to award XP or gold, and determine how the game should progress, and it asked all of that with very few hard and fast rules which led to a Wild West of gaming.

Peterson lays out his book as loosely chronological: Chapter 1 covers the origins of RPGs in the cultures of wargaming and science fiction fan communities. Chapter 2 discusses the core of D&D which leads into Chapter 3's focus on character alignments. Chapter 4 dives into the role of the DM in RPGs. Between Chapters 4 and 5 there is an interlude that attempts to address how all the discussion transcends game design. Chapter 5 examines theoretical essays that attempt to define and situate RPGs in a concrete way in the tabletop gaming landscape. The book concludes with Chapter 6, which considers how the genre has matured since its inception in the 1970s.

The book concentrates on the mid- to late-1970s era of tabletop gaming but makes a few forays into the past and even touches on the popular text-based computer games of the 1980s such as *Zork* and *Adventures*. Many famous names are invoked throughout including Gary Gygax, Steve Jackson, Glenn Blaclow, and Lewis Pulsipher. The heart of the debate involves the role of the referee and how to accommodate several different common RPG playing styles (role-playing, wargaming, ego-tripping, storytelling). Role-playing entails players inhabiting their characters and is less concerned with gold or XP. Wargaming is the opposite of role-playing because it is about the players knowing the game's system. Ego-tripping is when players are only concerned with XP and power for their character. Lastly is storytelling, which is closer to acting out a fantasy novel than playing a game.

Peterson notes that RPGs were alternately referenced as Fantasy Role-Playing (FRP) and adventure games, highlighting how game adopters approached their characters and what types of bonds were formed between players and characters. Some players opted to create rich characters while others wanted to just gain experience points (XP) and power through a game. Would the DM allow players to roll the dice for their own abilities or would the referee do it for the players? Some

DMs permitted players to roll for 12 characters and chose the best. Other DMs went further with a point system which allowed players to "buy" points to level up. This all led to the character alignments most players are familiar with, even if only in meme form, and created more rules and work for the DM. How closely would the DM monitor character actions to make sure those actions are in the character's alignment? Would there be punishments for someone who went against their alignment? D&D took the wargaming alignments Law, Neutral, and Chaos and further refined them into what we know as Good, Neutral, and Evil on one axis and Lawful, Neutral, and Chaotic on another axis allowing for permutations such as Lawful Neutral and Chaotic Good. As Peterson observes, some referred to this as an ethical calculus that allows for personal goals within a game as well as the campaign's goals.

Along with focusing on the debate of what is and what is not an RPG and where it fits into the larger gaming landscape, Peterson touches on issues in the fandom. One issue is the lack of representation for women in the early gaming communities. Peterson does a good job of incorporating women's voices such as Jean Wells and Kathleen Pettigrew into the work. A second issue that Peterson attends to is ageism as older veteran gamers tried to close ranks against the rising tide of younger second-generation D&D players in the late 1970s and early 1980s, some as young as 14 years old. The younger players often had not played an RPG without using an instruction guide and so, for them, the rules were more finite. Older gamers did not like that. Somewhat disappointingly, Peterson elides a lot of the controversies of D&D and only obliquely references James Dallas Egbert, the Michigan State student who went missing in 1979. His disappearance was linked erroneously with D&D sparking a mild hysteria in the media. Peterson references Egbert and makes a point of separating his disappearance from the gaming community, but this brief mention is a bit unsatisfying.

From its roots in wargames and miniature tabletop games D&D has long been a genre-defying and defining game. By the end of the book Peterson concedes that there still is not an adequate definition of the phrase "role-playing game" that can succinctly characterize and simultaneously encapsulate the variety and richness of the genre. As part of the exploration of RPGs the book also examines the fan communities in the 1970s which were originally centered on science fiction/fantasy literature and the wargames that helped refine the genre's rules. Finally, the book concentrates on the different tensions between fans, players, creators, referees, and

the RPG game market itself, making it ideal for use in classes studying everything from fandom to games to the political economic structures of media.

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