

Game Guise: Analyzing Hierarchical Heterosexual Masculinity and Its Effects in Game Spaces

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Abstract: This paper seeks to discover how the use of heterosexual hierarchical masculinity as a tool for domination might affect younger players' abilities to learn in Team Fortress Two, and what implications these barriers to learning might have in school settings. Game interactions were observed using YouTube clips, noting in particular the use of satire and ostracism by older members against younger members as an attempt to eliminate younger players from the game space. Results indicated that older adolescents utilize heterosexual masculinity to ostracize younger players from the game space, often by feminizing the victim based on childlike appearances, and asserting their own heterosexuality and dominance by undermining the masculinity of younger players.

Massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) are online social spheres that contain rich culture and learning environments. Yet despite the massive quantities of players, as well as the relative ease with which this information could be observed, MMO environments are rarely analyzed for research purposes. Massively multiplayer online games have cultures that are usually expressive of, but not limited to, social norms outside the game context (Steinkuehler 2006). Kurt Squire (2011) explains in his book "Videogames and Learning" that "[game] play is deeply tied to gender identity, culture and social norms, and embracing play requires an awareness of these dynamics" (p. 171). That is, social spheres in game play are usually centered within everyday social norms and dynamics but in some cases, like in Team Fortress Two game play, parts of American culture such as masculinity, dominance, and heterosexuality, can be exacerbated. Thus, videogames are expressive of a microcosm of reality and sociality that can contain positive or negative social interactions, culminated and enacted in similar ways to spaces outside of the videogame context.

Two of these negative social interactions are prejudice and ostracism, and these can inhibit learning in a game space, just as it can in educational settings. Multiplayer videogames are a space in which learning and collaboration are integral to successful game play. James Paul Gee (2006) argues that videogames can be seen as a series of puzzles that the player must learn to unlock. Social games like Team Fortress Two tie this learning to social interaction. In order for players to learn the game, they must interact with the game, but more importantly they must interact and gain knowledge from the game community. In Team Fortress Two, players must collaborate to successfully accomplish a mission, and to protect and defend each other. Each player takes on a different role, such as a medic, or tank, and all players are interdependent. Members strategize about the best way to beat the opposing team, utilizing each member's individual talents and abilities. Each time a strategy fails, new ones must be constructed; this cycle repeats itself indefinitely, much like the scientific process.

In Team Fortress Two, if a player is ostracized away from social interaction, which is the foundation where strategizing occurs, it can hinder their learning and ultimately whether the player can play the game successfully. Ostracism can also hinder learning and game play by leading the member to drop out of the game space entirely. It might seem that in a utopian game space, all players would realize their interdependence and never ostracize other members, but there are times when the need for masculine dominance and hierarchy overrides this utopian ideal. Whether for reasons of self-esteem, in-group bias, or otherwise, in Team Fortress Two, hierarchical heterosexual masculinity is utilized as a tool for status and dominance to harass and ostracize younger players from the game space and can inhibit their learning and skill advancement in the game.

Masculinity in Videogames

Videogames are a type of media that have been traditionally created for males by males. Designers often recognize the demographic of "hardcore gamers" (typically "adolescent males") as their target audience, and therefore incorporate design aspects that are meant to appeal to this group (Fron, et al., 2007). Consequently, many videogames available today feature "highly stylized graphical violence," "male fantasies of power and domination," and "hyper-sexualized depictions of women" (Fron, et al., 2007). Since videogames have historically catered to a male oriented player base, the recent integration of women gamers has disturbed the social norms of video games spheres. Masculine and feminine social constructs are often defined antithetically, taking up opposite sides of the gender continuum. That is, masculinity and femininity are defined in opposition of each other, and their definitions only gain meaning once contrasted with each other. A male is what a female is not, and vice versa. For instance,

Men are supposed to be “tough”, “strong”, “heterosexual”, and “dominant” and if they are not they are deemed “bitches”, “sissies”, “pussies”, and “faggots” (Katz 1999). With this construct, the recent introduction of females into gaming spheres may cause males to differentiate themselves by becoming hyper-masculine; furthering their behavior towards the extreme side of the masculine continuum in order to preserve their sense of masculinity. This antithetical view of gender clarifies why it is a direct insult to associate a man with a female, and it also clarifies why homosexuality, which is largely deemed feminine, is also typically rejected in this model. Moreover, a male player may be called a feminine name or associated with feminine characteristics, but it is unlikely that the name-caller truly suspects that the player is a woman. The sexual orientation of a fellow player, however, is more difficult to determine at face value than his gender, and therefore male players subject themselves and each other to constant scrutiny to determine whether they appear homosexual. Sanford and Madill (2011) explain this effect in their article “Resistance through Game play: It’s a Boy Thing”.

Society has responded to expanded alternative gender positions with a rigid homophobic stance regarding masculinity. Young males today are faced with a fierce policing of traditional masculinity, and the rules of masculinity are enforced in many overt and subtle ways (p. 297).

Heterosexuality and masculinity tend to be synonymous in American society. Judith Butler describes masculinity as the penetration of females literally and metaphorically. She abstracts that the idea of masculinity involves an impenetrable facade. True masculinity (or more realistically, the masculine ideal) in this abstraction is impenetrable, and the penetration of masculinity with femininity is a “panic over being ‘like’ her, effeminized” (Butler, 1993). From this model, masculinity entails both the impenetrability of masculinity, such as emotional toughness, and the penetrability of females and femininity in general with the masculine. The domination of masculine over the feminine, or the penetration of such as Butler puts it, is a core construct of masculinity. This masculine penetration is often expressed quite literally by emphasizing heterosexual prowess.

The literal penetration of the feminine is often used as a construct to gauge masculinity and social status in an all-male group. Heterosexual masculine identity and sexual prowess is a construct which is sometimes used to sort male hierarchal structure (Kehily & Nayak, 1997). Consequently, this often means harassment and social ostracism for those at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy (Yee 2008), (Kehily & Nayak 1997). That is, boys gain status by testing one other and exposing who is more heterosexually experienced. This can take the form of using fictional heterosexual experience, real heterosexual experience, or can take the form of feminizing the victim into a subordinate less dominant female role (Sanford, Madill 2011). James Paul Gee (1999) explains that people use “Discourses” in order to be recognized a certain way. “Discourses” involve using the right social symbols, language, and tools at the right times. In the case of male gamers, whether the heterosexual experience is real or fictional is not of importance, so long as the stories are used in a way that makes them successfully recognized as heterosexually competent, masculine, and dominant. Often however, this “Discourse”, or way of acting, is called into question by other members, and used as a means of harassment. Erving Goffman (1955) called these identities and symbols of social interaction “faces”, and “losing face” is being publicly shamed because other members refuse to see the presented face, or deem one as not being worthy of that “face”. In male groups, “losing face” often takes the form of not being recognized as masculine. Active attempts are often made to make some members “lose face” by demasculinizing them. Demasculinizing the victim can be done through sexualizing the victim like a woman, or through implying the victim is homosexual. Returning to Butler’s (1993) theory of masculinity, the attacker is thereby penetrating the victim’s masculine facade and proving his own masculine dominance and penetration over the feminine (i.e. the victim).

Dominant heterosexual masculinity often emerges through satire that unites the dominant party, and ostracizes the target. Kehily and Nayak cite Lyman’s research, indicating the way in which sexist jokes consolidate the bonds of an ‘in-group’ through mutual hostility against an ‘out-group’” (p. 71). Robinson (1977) furthers this argument explaining that the function of humor is to “solidify the in-group, to attain gratification at the expense of another group...and there is a pecking order to the joke-telling. The joke teller is the dominant one; the joke is his weapon; his laughter is a sign of victory” (p. 67). This heterosexual masculine satire is used as a tool for advancement of status among young males in the Team Fortress Two (TF2) environment. Alexander (1984) outlines how jokes can be tactically used in his journal article “Ostracism and Indirect Reciprocity: The Reproductive Significance of Humor”

C: Telling jokes on others is a way of

1. Elevating one’s own status;
2. Lowering the status of the butt of the joke;
3. Elevating the status of the listener by:

- a. Allowing him to be in the right situation to laugh
- b. Lowering the status of the object of ridicule;
- 4. Increasing camaraderie or unity by identifying the butt of the joke

(p. 118) [1]

Kehily and Nayak explain “our analysis suggests that humorous exchanges are constitutive of heterosexual masculine identities. We argue that humor is a technique utilized for the regulation of masculinities and the negotiation of gender sexual hierarchies within pupil cultures” (p. 69). These jokes are used to depress the victim’s status and heighten the attacker’s status. Further, these attacks increase in-group cohesiveness between some members, while harassing and deeming other males as out-group members. While this joke telling has positive consequences for in-group members, ostracized individuals tend to “feel sad and angry, and that they report lower levels of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence” (Abrams, Hogg & Marques, 2005, p. 58), and “even a brief episode of ostracism by complete strangers is sufficient to cause pain and distress” (Williams, 2007, p. 236).

When the ostracism in Team Fortress Two (TF2) is put into context with games as learning devices, it can be seen as a tool used to inhibit learning and skill advancement in the game space. Games like TF2 are a series of puzzles and problems that often require social interaction to complete them. Steinkuehler (2006) explains:

MMOG game play includes all of the traditional characteristics of problem solving—problem representation, conditions, goals, procedures, strategies, and meta-strategies—as well as shared practices typically found in problem-solving contexts within formal and informal instructional contexts—debriefings, theorizing about problem space, apprenticeship, and valuing of seeking out challenges just beyond the current level of one’s ability (p. 99)

In these problem solving sequences, goals provide a finish line, but do not define the path to get there. Much like the goal of chess is to eliminate the other player’s king, but the way to do so is open, the goal of videogames is often clearly defined, but the path to get there is not. Steinkuehler (2006) describes goals as well-defined problems. “Well-defined problems are problems that ostensibly have a clear initial state and goal state and with a tractable problem space between them” (p. 98-99). With this definition, games like Team Fortress Two have the characteristics of a well-defined problem. The game contains the initial state at the beginning of the round, and the end state is the team capturing the flag. The “tractable problem space between them” is the multiple strategies a team can use to reach their goal state. Moreover, TF2 pits two teams against each other for a *common* goal (much like capture the flag), and so the difficulty of the game increases as players learn more ways to get a leg up on each other. The two teams are forever co-evolving, as they learn to evade one another’s tactics while strategizing new, more efficient tactics to enact themselves. Teams must constantly devise strategies and reconstruct them to optimize the likelihood of reaching a goal state. It is this strategy-building around which learning is centered.

The rejection of youth in these social spaces negatively affects their ability to learn how to effectively master the problem solving space, so to reach the goal state. If the youth are cut off from the player community, they no longer have access to debriefings, theorizing about problem space, or apprenticeship. In a game environment like TF2, it is essential for members to be socially accepted by their teammates in order to do well in the game.

In the game play studied, none of the rejected youth were allowed into any of the listed arenas of learning. They were not offered help by their older peers, nor were they regarded as a member of their peers’ team. Anderson (1970) notes that for children in a classroom setting “It seems intuitively logical that pupils in classes where the teacher treats individuals in ways in which they perceive as inequitable, they will not learn as much” (p. 148). In the Team Fortress Two game space, youth were excluded from equal participation in game play, and were treated more poorly than other players. When the player is not socially included, they have no way to advance their skills. This is especially true in a social team-based game like TF2.

Methodology

This is a quasi-ethnographic exploratory study that uses qualitative methods to identify and analyze behaviors occurring in Team Fortress Two. Team Fortress Two is a first person shooter with cartoon like graphics and characters. All characters are highly skilled and customizable. Characters include “Scout”, “Pyro”, “Demoman”, “Heavy”, “Engineer”, “Medic”, “Sniper” and “Spy”. Team Fortress Two is a massively multiplayer online game, that uses goal-oriented tasks (Such as capture the flag) to define its rounds. Most rounds pit teams against each other so that players must work together and utilize the unique skill set each character has. Players have the ability to talk to other players through the in game chat system or through microphones. For these data only transcripts of the

microphone conversations were recorded.

Transcripts were taken of audio chat found on YouTube clips of TF2 game play. Three distinct YouTube clips were used that highlighted the use of dominant heterosexual masculinity. While these artifacts can sometimes be an exaggeration of the game culture, they are nonetheless representative of it. By exploring more conspicuous models of hierarchical heterosexual masculinity, like the YouTube clips chosen, a template begins to form that may evolve with future research to identify more subtle examples of hierarchical heterosexual masculinity in game settings, and other settings

Identification of players as youth was done mainly through voice recognition and identifying social interactions in the game space. Youth were often easily heard through their higher pitched voices. Moreover these youth were socially targeted for being young. Because of this, even if the players were not actually young is irrelevant, as the prejudice enacted is that against those that *seem* young. Moreover, while youth tended to be at the brunt of the struggle for heterosexual masculine identity, it was not necessary to be completely sure the youth identified were actually young, as the main dynamics involved were the social constructs and interactions, not the physical traits or characteristics of the players.

Team Fortress Two was chosen in particular because it seems to be a game with high tension between older and younger males.

Results

Hierarchical heterosexual masculinity was abundant in all three YouTube clips. In the first clip: "Team Fortress Two Annoying Kid" (gNatFreak 2009), this heterosexual masculinity took the form of sexualized mom jokes, and a lack of heterosexual sexual experience as reason for harassment. The younger male in this game first tries to assert dominance over an older male by using a traditional mother insults. He incessantly makes mom puns to an older male in the Team Fortress Two game space. Chris¹ goes from references of John's mom's vagina, to John's mom giving Chris a "bj" to doing "anal" on his mom. Sexualized mom insults might seem counteractive to a display of heterosexual masculinity since older mothers are often deemed less sexually attractive (save for fetishes), but Kehily and Nayak explain that "males are located as moral guardians of the sexual reputations of their mothers, girlfriends, and sisters" (p. 71). So sexualizing John's mother is a way to demean John's ability to protect his mother's sexual reputation. Alexander (1984) furthers this notion by explaining that jokes about sacred topics are often used to infer that the sacred topic is not important to anyone. Thus, Chris is implying that John's mother's chastity is not valued and is of little regard. John is demeaning Chris by implying that his mother has a bad reputation and that Chris is not "man" enough to defend her.

However, Chris's masculinity was contested right back. John attacks him saying "I can come up with the elaborate puns to make fun of you, like how I think your penis is so small so you have to compensate by saying you've had sex with 40-year-old women." By suggesting Chris has a small penis, John is making fun of Chris's ability to perform sexually as a heterosexual male. Thereby he is exerting his own dominance by suggesting that he has more heterosexual prowess and a bigger penis than Chris. John goes on "I just don't like it when [the game chat is] all about the sex puns from a little douche who's a virgin". Again John infers his superiority in a heterosexual masculine manner by implying that Chris is a virgin, and thus John is presumably more sexually experienced with women than Chris. These puns are directed at Chris's young age. Insults relating to the size of his penis and his potential status as a virgin are based on the assumption of his young age. His deemed inexperience with heterosexuality is also related to age, and ultimately it is this inexperience which is used to ostracize him from the game space. The bantering about heterosexual prowess continues throughout the clip, but the tactic remains the same: try to appear more sexually competent and thus more masculine by insulting the other player's sexual experience and masculinity. This is done until John completely socially dominates Chris. Chris finally leaves the game.

n clip two, titled "TF2-Kids These Days" (mygodthedingo 2008), dominating the younger player is done by deeming him sexually incompetent, along with feminizing him by sexualizing him. First Adam (the older player in this clip) demasculinizes Eric (the younger player) by saying "I bet you can't wait until you can masturbate". This pun infers lack of true masculinity because of his inability to perform sexually. This joke is targeted directly towards Eric's young age. The logic is, if you cannot ejaculate, you are not a real man. Eric defends himself and attacks Adam saying "what are you, like two?", but Adam furthers this logic and refutes by saying "but I can *cum!*"; A more literal expression of his ability to perform sexually.

Adam continues. He sexualizes Eric with feminine traits. This is a pun at Eric's age, inferring that his childlike features are feminine. After Adam says "I bet you can't wait until you can masturbate" he starts making groaning sounds as though he himself is masturbating. He tries to make Eric feel intimidated, saying "I'm watching you because I have your IP address and I can trace your house". Adam may be trying to make Eric feel vulnerable in

a feminine way by subtly implying that he could go over and rape him. He furthers this notion of sexualizing Eric by saying "I'm looking at pictures of you; you're well developed for an eight year old". He starts describing Eric's imaginary features sexually; he continues "he has short blonde hair, the brightest blue eyes...". During this monologue Eric contests, emotionally upset, "Shutup!" he shouts. "I don't have blonde hair you idiot, I have black hair! Freakin idiot!". Eric likely feels harassed and unaccepted in the game community and is using whatever he can to defend himself. Adam feeds off it though, and he begins an elaborate display of his apparent orgasm from Eric's photo. He screams and moans into the microphone and at the end he shouts "[Eric] just made me nut so hard, oh my god". Right at the very end, before Eric logs off, Adam vulgarly says to Eric "Can I fuck your mom? Let me talk to your mother, I want to talk to that cunt". Just like in the previous clip, Adam is trying to sexualize and demean Eric's mother and ultimately Eric's ability to defend his mother. This is the final straw before Eric logs out of the game space.

Throughout this clip Adam intentionally jokes at Eric's supposed inability to ejaculate, feminizes him, and makes mom puns to exert his masculinity over Eric. By making fun of Eric's ability to ejaculate, he highlights his own ability to do so, implying he is more masculine by being heterosexually competent. Male genitalia are clearly tied to masculinity, but an ability to use them in a heterosexual way (e.g. ability to ejaculate) is also essential to masculinity in this context. This is a direct insult to Eric's age because it is insulting Eric for not going through puberty yet. Feminizing Eric in a vulnerable way serves two purposes: First to demasculinize him by feminizing him, and second to make him feel vulnerable like a woman by inferring he could rape him. Finally degrading Eric's mother is used as an attempt to make Eric feel guilty and ashamed of his own inability to defend his mother's image. All three attempts are congruent in that try to raise Adam's apparent masculinity while lowering Eric's.

Finally in the third clip "Homophobic Kid Gets Messed With" (Humantorch00 2008), the older male Paul uses a unique approach. Paul puts on an elaborate act; pretending as though he was flamboyantly homosexual, he "hits on" the younger male Andrew. With the constant rigid policing surrounding masculinity in Team Fortress Two, it is unacceptable to be the object of a "homosexual" person's advances. There is no escape Andrew can take; Andrew is trapped. If he allows the advances to continue, he is feminizing himself and is seen as liking it, or even as homosexual himself. However if he violently contests the advances, as he does, Paul is quick to deem him homophobic and thus probably homosexual himself. Paul starts "this kid is darling, he is just super duper darling (in an exaggerated voice)". Paul may be using Andrew's youth as a way to target him. It is implied he looks feminine and cute because of his age. He is also demeaning Andrew's sense of masculinity by referring to him as "super duper darling"; a term of endearment for women. Andrew contests "Shut up! You're gay!", but Paul has the acceptance of the rest of the group, and he continues. Paul says "come on and give me a hug, give me a hug you little sweetie". The other players, while still on Paul's side, feel the need to exhibit their own masculinity at this point. One says "alright c'mon guys, too much man love". As if listening to this homosexual banter is antithetical to their own show of heterosexual masculinity. Paul continues anyway. Andrew continues to violently contest Paul's "advances", and Paul responds saying "god damn you're just a homophobe". Andrew contests "no, no, no, I think you are because you are talking like a gay little girl!". Andrew establishes a clear connection between acting homosexual and being a girl. He is trying to reclaim his masculinity by putting down Paul's. Paul has him trapped though and uses Andrew's apparent homophobia to his advantage. "It may be because of your homophobic issues. Because of your gay homophobic issues I think you're secretly loooovvvinnnggg this". He makes the accusation that Andrew's homophobia implies Andrew himself is a closeted homosexual.

Paul tries to make Andrew feel vulnerable by sexualizing him. He uses negative stereotypes of homosexuals as pedophilic sex offenders to his advantage. He says "sounds kinda kinky, grrrrrr, I want you in my room". Another player says "watch out he is underage" and Paul responds "that's just how I like 'em, grrrr". He makes Andrew feel vulnerable in a feminized way by implying that he might sexually coerce him. By utilizing the role of a gay man, Paul successfully victimizes Andrew. He not only demeans Andrew's masculinity, but victimizes him sexually. He successfully exerts his own sexual dominance over Andrew while demeaning Andrew's sense of masculinity by inferring that he is a closeted homosexual. In the context of heterosexual masculinity, inferring a boy or man (however blatantly false) is homosexual is a way to effeminize the victim. Revisiting Butler's (1993) idea of the impenetrable masculine façade, Paul successfully penetrates Andrew's masculine façade and credibility. Paul effeminizes Andrew by inferring he is a closeted homosexual, penetrating his masculinity with femininity. Further, Paul's hint at homosexual rape implies a further, more literal, penetration of the masculine façade. Erving Goffman's (1955) theory of "faces" of the self, that one tries to conform to the standards and expectations of a given social situation and to fail at doing so is "losing face", can be used in this context. The young boys were forced to "lose face". Their attempt at using the right social symbols, languages and tools, to create a certain "face" which was socially acceptable failed, (as the other members refused to recognize these "faces") and they were run off by the older members. Goffman explains that "losing face" is one of the worst things someone could do to another, as extensive shame and threatened feelings result. Many of these adolescents after "losing face" logged out of the game space.

Discussion

While this study intends to examine hierarchical heterosexual masculinity and how it is used to ostracize youth from Team Fortress Two, it can also be used as a reference for school environments. TF2 is a game culture that is derived from social culture outside of the game space. Hierarchical heterosexual masculinity as a tool of dominance is used in school *and* game settings (Kehily, Nayak 1997). This research should be used to alert schools that behavior among young boys that seems like satire might really be harassment and discriminatory behavior (Robinson 1997), (Alexander 1984), (Kehily, Nayak 1997). It should be realized that heterosexual satire is not just used as camaraderie among boys, but also tends to be used with the intent of harassing and “out-group” member.

This research should also serve as a halt to blind positivism regarding “affinity spaces” (Gee 2006). Pushing towards the use of participatory culture and affinity spaces in school is a great leap in education reform, but it has to be noted that these learning environments may be just as prone to negative social ostracism as face-to-face interactions. It is nice to think of affinity spaces as an arena of true meritocracy, where many normal prejudices like age, sex, race and class go unnoticed, but the truth is that affinity spaces can be just as prone to prejudice as the outside world. During the observed game play, youth were ostracized for their inability to adhere to their peer’s standards of masculinity. The affinity space of TF2 did not save them from being attacked for their age. The youth were not criticized for their skill in the game, as an affinity space would suggest, but rather for their inability to ejaculate, or their supposed homosexuality. The youth in the study were attacked in much the same way as they would be outside of the TF2 context, and indeed the TF2 context did little if nothing to shelter prejudice for identifying characteristics like age.

One possibility is that affinity spaces seem less prejudiced because there is not enough information about individual player’s identities to develop prejudices and stereotypes against them. In TF2, it was likely the youths’ young voice that clued older players to the boy’s young age and opened the floodgates for discriminatory behavior against the young players. I would question whether the ability to know race, class, weight, or gender would have similar effects. Derogatory comments towards identifiable female gamers in male dominated game arenas like online first person shooters supports the idea that identifiable information may be used to against the victim. Future research should be conducted to understand how information about a player’s social status such as race or gender might alter the way they are treated in a game space, as well as to what degree affinity spaces are more or less prejudiced arenas than the outside world. Future research might also try to understand how the demographics of the game space (such as young white males) might exacerbate some prejudices, while diminishing others. Gamespaces provide novel and interesting spaces in which to study culture. It is important to understand that the negative cultures, such as prejudice and ostracism, are not culminated independently in game spaces, but are rather representations of cultural models that exist outside the game space as well. It is a tactic too often seen, where videogames are pitted as the producers of such negative cultural characteristics. However, it is important to understand the ways in which videogames act as microcosms of reality, instead of producers of it. Because game spaces provide new ways of studying cultures, they also provide promising avenues for understanding how to negotiate negative cultures and culminate positive ones.

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