

DIVERSIFYING BARBIE AND MORTAL KOMBAT

Intersectional Perspectives and Inclusive Designs in Gaming

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ET AL.

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FOREWORD

BY JUSTINE CASSELL

Two decades have passed since Henry Jenkins and I organized a conference called *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*. The conference was one of a series of events sponsored by the MIT Women Studies Program as a part of an attempt to examine issues concerning women and cyberspace.

When we first organized the conference in 1996 and edited the subsequent volume in 1998, Henry Jenkins and I felt that we were documenting a specific moment in history—a turning point from a time when women were excluded from the community of serious gamers. We thought we could document the move away from a time when women had a hard time finding their place in the game industry, and to a time when gaming by women, games developed for all kinds of women gamers, and games that broadened the roles that women played in games were about to break onto the scene. I remember a conversation about wanting to get the book out on shelves quickly before discussions about women and gaming were no longer relevant.

And so, 20 years on, it's natural to ask if discussions about women and gaming are still relevant. What a question! While I'm thrilled that volumes like this one will enrich the shelves of academics and professional gamers everywhere, I'm sorry to report that the discussion is still very much relevant. In fact, as the co-editors and many of the authors report, the conference that led to *Diversifying Barbie to Mortal Kombat* took place immediately post-GamerGate—an attack against women gamers that targeted their physical safety as well as their identity as gamers. It is tragic that still today the norms of gender and of gamer collide in such dangerous ways.

And yet, while we mourn the need to protect our physical safety when we dare to speak out about the need to make space for women in games—as players, designers

and theorists—we would do well also to celebrate a new era in which these conversations are so much more complicated than they could have been in 1998 when the original *Barbie to Mortal Kombat* volume was published. Today, due to the introduction of theoretical constructs such as intersectionality and “reconstructive feminism,” it is clear that the multiple intersecting identities that we navigate and negotiate can no longer be disassociated from one another, and that “different” and “same” are both equally inadequate monikers with which to understand genders.

In 1998, I wrote:

Gender, then, involves active choices that are always in flux and that are determined by many things (race, class, age, peers, immediate context). Thus, the kinds of activities that have been described as “what girls really do” are not neutral or isolated acts, but involve the person becoming and acting in the world as part of the construction of a complex identity. In this case, we might argue that designing ‘games for girls’ misses the point. If we come up with one activity, or complex of activities that girls want, then we know that we must have only tapped in to one context in which girls are girls.

This new volume opens up the contexts and constructions of identity in ways that allow us to better understand what it means and what it could mean to be a gamer, and to better design for all the glorious instantiations of gamer today and in the future.

THE NEED FOR INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVES AND INCLUSIVE DESIGNS IN GAMING

BY YASMIN KAFAI, GABRIELA RICHARD AND BRENDESHA TYNES

Our title *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat* makes reference to two previous successful publications: *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* published in 1996 and *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* published in 2008. The commercial franchises of Barbie™ and Mortal Kombat™ have become cultural icons and continue to provide poignant illustrations of the key issues surrounding gender, diversity and gaming. Two decades ago, many people believed that girls and women were not interested in games and computers, though perspectives varied as to why. However, when *Barbie Fashion Designer* entered the market in 1996, it became the most successful software game of the year. *Mortal Kombat*, on the other hand, was a popular game at the time that exemplified the model of violent video games targeted toward boys' assumed preferences. There was great interest in video gaming because it served as one of the few portals into technology available more widely at home. The first book edition *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998) illuminated the gaming landscape in the 1990s and was also one of the first academic books on gender in gaming cultures.

Fast forward a decade, and the gaming landscape proved to have changed with a growing number of female gamers who could no longer be ignored. But the persistence of stereotyping women characters and players, and the lack of their participation in the gaming industry continued. The second book edition *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (Kafai, Denner, Heeter & Sun, 2008a) focused not only on this growing market segment of female gamers but also the growing prominence of international gaming and the growing role of gaming in education. The work presented in the volume moved beyond North America to showcase international

developments in gaming cultures and broadened our perception of serious gaming, which was rapidly gaining a foothold in education. Recent events have revealed that these issues, particularly around gendered participation, have not nearly been resolved. This is most evident with the continued gender stereotyping and harassment associated with #GamerGate as well as with the continued lack of workplace diversity in gaming and technology in Silicon Valley. Encouragingly though, these persistent challenges have now moved from solely being topics of discussion among academics and gamers to mainstream media and public attention.

It is time to revisit the discussion on gender, diversity, and games and offer new perspectives on who plays, how they play, where and what they play, why they play, and with whom they play. And, considering these questions, how can we diversify access, participation and design for such play? While it is hard to pinpoint a single event as the instigator for such diversification, several occurrences around both the treatment of and the lack of representation of women in technology have played a particularly critical role. Just in 2014 and 2015 we have seen the occurrence of three events—#GamerGate, #1ReasonWhy and #RealDiversityNumbers, exemplified through their Twitter hashtags—that, in fact, have been in the making for decades. They help to solidly frame our discussions around the need for diversifying *Barbie and Mortal Kombat* and ultimately why all of this matters if games and gaming are to rise to the social, educational, and cultural aspirations that many hold for them.

HARASSMENT OF WOMEN IN GAMING COMMUNITIES

Much of Fall 2014 was dominated by the discussions around GamerGate. The controversy started within the gaming community as a seemingly personal feud between a game designer and her ex-boyfriend. It then moved onto becoming a larger discussion about the harassment of women in the gaming industry. Finally it escalated to death threats. To briefly summarize, GamerGate started when a female game developer was accused by her estranged boyfriend of trading sexual favors with a gaming journalist in exchange for positive reviews of her game, *Depression Quest*. To this end, her ex-boyfriend took to social media to post “evidence” of her affair and promiscuity in the game industry. This one case was used as confirmation of women’s inability to succeed in the industry due to their own personal failings and willingness to manipulate and trade sexual favors to get ahead. Accusations flew back and forth, and the fighting eventually made the front page of the *New York Times* (Wingfield, 2014) when gaming activist Anita Sarkeesian became the target of Gamergate’s ire. Sarkeesian had previously been targeted by anti-feminist backlash based on her widely successful Kickstarter campaign (2012) to release a new video

series entitled “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games,” that would examine the extensive gender stereotyping of female characters in commercial video gaming, released under the label *Feminist Frequency*. However, during the height of GamerGate, in summer 2014, the first of her video series was released, making her once again the center of internet-based harassment, doxing and threats. Eventually her invited talk at Utah State University had to be cancelled because someone e-mailed the school, threatening to commit mass murder: “This will be the deadliest school shooting in American history, and I’m giving you a chance to stop it,” the message read. “I have at my disposal a semi-automatic rifle, multiple pistols, and a collection of pipe bombs.” What initially started as a mere but necessary academic exercise escalated into a threat of mass violence followed by an investigation of the FBI.

In 2015, the discussions around GamerGate continued and increasingly began to more explicitly address the lack of diversity in gaming. Not only did we see hashtag campaigns and academic panels exposing harassment against women in gaming and industry, such as #1ReasonWhy and #1ReasonToBe, but these topics were also discussed in two recent films. The film *GTFO: A Film about Women in Gaming* directed by Shannon Sun-Higginson (2015) includes a range of people involved in different aspects of gaming, each offering his or her own individual perspective(s) on the reasons why and how harassment occurs, why it stubbornly persists, and ways people have countered biases from overwhelming male or male-assumed players. The second film is actually a series developed by Samantha Blackmon, a professor at Purdue University and the founder of the blog *Not Your Mama’s Gamer*. Blackmon successfully launched a kickstarter campaign in July 2015 to open up a more public conversation about race and representation in video games. Her proposed video series *The Invisibility Blues* would build on the work that Anita Sarkeesian started but shifts the focus to the underrepresentation of people of color in gaming, addressing the lack of nuance, stereotyping, and their absence in design and discussions, while also providing examples of diverse characterizations.

Harassment of women in gaming has unfortunately been a part of the gaming culture since its early days. This harassment has often happened behind the scenes among gamers (Richard, 2013b). Now, however, gaming is becoming a more publicly understood and visible phenomenon, particularly with the rise of gaming as spectator sport, leveraging venues such as Twitch.tv. Even GamerGate was a public representation of this shift. Although participants framed their effort as critiquing ethics in gaming journalism, they came under fire for namely directing their attacks and harassment at female and feminist game designers, players, and critics, labeling them “social justice warriors” in order to vilify them. While there is obviously much

more to this complex and still on-going story, one thing is clear: the harassment and stereotyping of women in gaming is no longer an academic issue but one that has entered the public discussion and points towards the need to address the lack of diversity in games within the industry and wider culture.

LACK OF DIVERSITY IN SILICON VALLEY

The discussion about the lack of diversity is not just typical of gaming but is characteristic of (and has been amplified by) the lack of diversity in Silicon Valley (*The New York Times Editorial Board*, 2014). This lack of diversity began to become a point of discussion and investigation around the same time that GamerGate happened in 2014. In the last decade, since the publication of *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, not only have working conditions in the gaming industry come under increased scrutiny but also the lack of diversity as to whom is participating in the design and production of games themselves. This lack of diversity in the gaming industry reflects the lack of diversity in the technology industry at large. Few women and minorities occupy leadership positions in the IT workforce. Suddenly major companies such as Google, Apple, and Facebook became concerned over the lack of women and minorities in their companies and saw it as a detriment to their creativity and economic development. For instance, across all major Silicon Valley companies, women made up less than 25 percent of all technical staff as compared to over 50 percent of the non-technical staff. Even worse in terms of racial diversity, Hispanics and African Americans combined made up less than ten percent of all the technical staff as well as the non-technical positions.¹ The pipeline into the tech industry was leaking and clearly it had been leaking for a long time.

These concerns hit another crescendo when in November 2014 comments went viral about a book titled *Barbie: I can be a Computer Engineer/I can be an Actress* (Marenco, 2013) promoting potential careers for girls. The book, part of a series about careers ranging from superstar athlete to woman president, follows Barbie as an engineer. However, rather than coding and developing the game herself, Barbie must turn to her male school buddies Steven and Brian to complete the game since, in her own words, she's "only the designer". A day after the book's release, Casey Fiesler, a PhD student in human-centered computing at Georgia Institute of Technology, created a post "Barbie, Remixed: I can be a computer engineer" to counter the many problematic assumptions propagated in the book. In the remixed version, Barbie now has a team of coders and designers (because most software is written in teams), as well as a supporting computer science teacher, Mrs. Smith, who talks about the challenges for women to be taken seriously in the tech industry. Following Fiesler's

“remixed” story version, the Feminist Hacker Barbie website sprung up, allowing all visitors to take a page of the original Barbie book and write their own text to assist Barbie in being “the competent, independent, bad-ass engineer that she wants to be.”²

These events are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg that situates the discussions about diversity in gaming. They not only concern the design of games and the working conditions of the gaming industry, but also the role of learning and formal education as serious gaming increasingly moves into schools. The question of diversity is moving front and center when it comes to serious gaming, and its prominence can be attributed to how gaming researchers have addressed the issues of inclusion, race, gender and feminism over the last three decades. While gender issues have received researchers’ attention from the beginning, the consideration of racial issues as part of the diversity discussions is relatively new and continues to take a backseat to this issue of gender disparity.

FRAMING GENDER IN RESEARCH ON GAMING

It is helpful to understand that these recent challenges to longstanding gaming and technology cultures are not isolated incidents but can be informed by the larger discussions around gender and diversity. These discussions can be framed by what Henry Jenkins and Justine Cassell termed “waves of feminism and games” (p. 6, 2008). Richard (2013a) identified three waves in this literature. The first wave tended to focus on “how most games featured narrow gender stereotypes, how few games on the commercial market were of interest to girls and women, how female players wanted different gaming experiences, and how women were not a visible part of game production” (p. xi; Kafai et al., 2008b). Digital game play had long been associated with trajectories in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields, particularly computing (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998b; Kiesler, Sproull & Eccles, 1985), and the goal was to get more women and girls into these fields. In the late 1980s and 1990s, in particular, women were making up a smaller proportion of computing and technology fields than they had previously, especially as the field became more gendered. These associated gender disparities were seen even as early as elementary grades (Margolis & Fischer, 2003; Misa, 2010; Provenzo, 1991). Most of the studies done during the first wave attempted to uncover sex and gender differences in computer and video game playing, participation and experience, looking at thematic differences in game play and skill or interest differences across gender (e.g., Greenfield, 1994; Morlock, Yando, & Nigolean, 1985; Okagaki & Frensch, 1994; Subrahmanyam & Greenfield, 1994).

During the second wave, the emphasis was on understanding sociocultural context, and the experiences of women who play and participate in gaming (Jensen & de Castell, 2010; Taylor, 2006; Taylor, 2008). The research conducted between the two major volumes on gender and games, *From Barbie to Mortal Combat* (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998a) and *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Combat* (Kafai et al., 2008a), can be seen as encompassing the second wave. In particular, scholars critiqued how women and girls' preferences and motivations to play games were "unproblematically reported" as being linked to their supposed "natural" preferences for cooperation, non-violence and exploration (Jensen & de Castell, 2010: 51). Furthermore, games oriented toward girls changed from "pink" games, which typically relied on the most glaring of sex stereotypes, to "purple" games, which focused more on "real life" issues and social realities that would interest female players (Kafai et al., 2008a; Laurel, 2008). Some literature continued to try to understand differences between males and females in their gaming preferences by altering design themes in otherwise similar games (e.g., Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006) or focusing on how to expand marketing initiatives to be more gender-inclusive based on previous research (Ray, 2004).

Now in the third wave, the current research on gender and game culture is heading toward understanding intersectional concepts like sexuality, ethnicity, race and class, and the nuanced experiences across gender, which includes revisiting how we define and study masculinity. Queer game studies and studies that incorporate an intersectional perspective have emerged. The goal of this work was to make the field aware of the assumptions that we regularly make around gender, gender identity, and sexuality, and interrogate the performativity of gender (i.e., Butler, 1990). Furthermore, many researchers, such as Kishonna Gray (2012), Gabriela Richard (2013b; 2013c), and Adrienne Shaw (2012) put forth investigations that explored gender and its intersections with race, ethnicity and sexuality when understanding the experiences and preferences of such players. First coined by Crenshaw (1989) and Collins (1990), and derived from a long line of work from black feminist writers, activists and scholars, "intersectionality" as a lens extends gender studies beyond the binary by exploring the intersection of gender with cultural constructs and contextual experiences. Though part of scholarly work since 1990, intersectionality did not gain ground in research studying video game experiences until 2012. Richard (2013a) surmised this was partially due to "the complexity involved in studying intersectionality, which brings up intricacies in methodology, epistemological stances, and disciplinary approaches" (p. 278).

WHY INTERSECTIONALITY MATTERS IN RESEARCH ON GAMING

Since scholars are beginning to recognize the difficulty in constructing comprehensive understandings of experience and design without an intersectional approach, we are now beginning to see collections that address these problems and gaps in the literature. The *Intersectional Internet* (Noble and Tynes, 2016) is the first full-length volume with an explicit focus on intersectionality and the internet throughout. The book is informed by multidisciplinary perspectives and includes emerging and leading scholars from library and information science, psychology, digital media studies, and education who are all engaged in researching how power relations function in digital spaces. Central to this effort is understanding how multiple intersecting identities and oppressions might shape experience and design of the digital, as well how marginalized groups might counter and transcend these incursions. The book also begins a much needed conversation about how to intervene on social relations that are embedded in digital technology.

Other theoretical and empirical literature suggests a need for additional work in this area that explicitly focuses on games. For example, Everett and Watkins' (2008) argue that digital games are *racialized pedagogical zones* or spaces that teach and instantiate players into stereotypes about racial groups. They argue that the common framing of games as a gateway to computer literacy and optimal spaces for learning in a wide range of subjects has largely ignored the fact that games can be equally pleasurable tools for teaching racism and intolerance. This is done through the game's design, narrative structures, dialogue, and settings. For example, they have discussed how the "urban/street" game genre (*Grand Theft Auto* being the most popular) has been engineered around racial stereotypes of urban life. Moreover, the immersive feel of the game and the ways it may simulate a real life context furthers associations with stereotypes embedded in the game. Players are allowed to practice "doing race" (e.g., engage in stereotypical play by, for example, robbing or killing someone with a person of color as the avatar) through the characters.

We argue that this practice extends to gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status and other social experiences and identities, such that games are actually gendered pedagogical zones, sexuality pedagogical zones, and so on. With children, adolescents and adults getting much of their knowledge about race, gender and sexuality from games, more work is needed to document these experiences and reflect upon how they can broaden perspectives on others rather than reducing them to a single attribute advancing game play.

In *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat*, we continue the conversations started in the first two volumes but also expand them, addressing the stereotyping and lack of diversity as well as discussing wider barriers in the gaming industry that prevent more inclusive designs. The time is right to present updated perspectives on gender, race, and gaming. We are now at the crossroads of a field that has presumably achieved what it set out to do two decades ago: namely, to increase the number of women who play games. But this has clearly failed and continues to do so, as evident with the pertinent diversity issues on several fronts. Key groups were not addressed in previous volumes—male and female players of color, male players in general and diverse queer players—because research on these groups was largely absent at the time. While most of the game players have been male and continue to be so, beyond survey data we know little about their actual play behaviors and interactions. This absence of research is even more amplified in the case of African-American and Latino/a gamers, two populations that continue to be dramatically underrepresented in STEM and particularly in IT fields.

Finally, serious gaming has become a major force in K-12 educational technology over the last decade. Hundreds, if not thousands, of educational games and simulations have been designed to support learning in various domains. Accompanying these efforts were the launch of several conferences and journals, the funding of numerous research initiatives, and even the placement of a senior policy advisor on games and gaming in the White House. A report by the National Research Council (2012) has examined the learning benefits of digital games. Others have taken gaming principles to design new schools and learning environments (Corbett, 2010). What these developments indicate is that gaming for learning purposes are no longer considered a marginal activity but have gone mainstream in formal learning environments (Richard, 2013b).

PROMOTING INCLUSIVITY IN GAMING FOR PLAY, PEDAGOGY, AND POLICY

What the observations and research of the gaming landscape suggest is that if we want to broaden access and participation in gaming, we need to better understand different groups of gamers that so far have not been part of the mainstream research. But we also need to bring different theoretical lenses to inform our understanding of different gaming cultures. If we want to impact the design of games, this has to start in the design process itself as many prominent game researchers and designers have long argued that a game's inherent values (readily apparent or not) get embedded within the earliest decisions of a game's development. Furthermore, as digital games are developed for K-12 schools, new charter school designs adopt particular gaming

approaches. Participation in gaming is still seen as a springboard into becoming more technologically fluent, and these schools need to better understand the intersections between gender, race and sexuality to be inclusive and broaden participation in gaming and, in turn, learning.

We see a critical need to discuss issues around inclusive play and design because gaming has become mainstream media for Americans with over 60 percent or 145 million regularly playing video games (ESA, 2014). We know from content analyses that negative stereotypes of people of color, particularly African American and Hispanics males and females, are abound in video games and in online games. For instance, African American leading men are often represented as violent thugs or as sports figures as opposed to games' heroes, who are almost exclusively White. African American women meanwhile are more likely to be props and bystanders, frequently the victims of violence (e.g., Burgess, Dill, Stermer, Burgess, & Brown, 2011; Children Now, 2001; Williams, Martins, Consalvo & Ivory, 2009). But it is not just player characters and content that will need to become more diverse and inclusive; game designers also need to create more "authentic" or realistic representations of urban communities. Whether they are internalized by youth is largely dependent on the cultural models players have about the world, locally situated practices and the meaning making opportunities built into the design of the game (DeVane & Squire, 2008). What we need is a better understanding of how race, ethnicity and gender identity shape play, participation and experience with digital games. Furthermore, how these experiences across gender, race/ethnicity and identity relate to trajectories and the learning outcomes with games, technology and STEM more broadly are important. We also need to understand how race and gender intersect to impact engagement in digital games and virtual worlds. Finally, we need to know how gender and culturally responsive and inclusive design can impact participation and outcomes.

A focus on inclusive pedagogies in serious gaming becomes equally important. In other words, we need to consider culturally responsive approaches (Ladson-Billings, 1995). When serious games, made or played, turn into learning environments, it becomes critical to understand how pedagogy can be inclusive of race and gender. For example, research on player experiences with *Grand Theft Auto* showed how "at risk" Caucasian and African American male youth had differential practices in their game play (DeVane & Squire, 2008). White boys spent several hours of game play on their own and valued more "encyclopedic knowledge" whereas African American boys would more often play in groups with their friends, and, as such, had fewer opportunities to advance through the plot. These findings illustrate how cultural

context in which children participate affects the learning opportunities afforded by games. In their study of black males ages 11-14, researchers noted that African Americans males play video games more often in a social setting (DiSalvo, Crowley, & Norwood, 2008). They also note that common practices such as “cheating” or modding were looked upon as either dangerous, as breaking the rules or as making the game less challenging. These differing perceptions of the game may, as the authors note, close them off to practices that serve as a gateway to STEM interest.

Finally, we are equally concerned with how we can move from research into recommendations and policies. More concretely, through this volume, we want to generate ideas that can serve as guidelines for serious game designers in academia and industry to make issues about diversity more transparent. Researchers like Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissbaum (2014) have articulated the Value Design Framework helping designers realize their preconceptions and how they enter and determine design decisions. Furthermore, we want to think about initiatives that create valid indicators of diversity in games themselves. We believe that culturally inclusive design will have a larger impact if it can provide directions for future research and more concrete policies. In this book edition, we can begin the discussion on policies around gender and culturally inclusive game design, particularly with serious games.

Why is promoting inclusive play, pedagogy, and policy so important in the design of games? Research has shown that playing video games increases interest in STEM majors such as computer science by increasing individual’s curiosity about how things work, appreciation of and comfort with computing, desire to make games, knowledge and interest in programming and math problem solving (DiSalvo & Bruckman, 2009). We need to develop a better understanding in which ways digital games are racialized pedagogical zones and what kind of practices promote STEM skill development for underrepresented groups in digital games and virtual worlds. Furthermore, we need to examine the links between playing and making and the long-term STEM efficacy among marginalized groups in a world in which we are seeing increasing gender and racial diversity.

BOOK OVERVIEW

We have organized the book into two sections, with the first focusing on intersectional perspectives in gaming by situating gender, race and sexuality in public discussions around gaming, communities, and the game industry, and the second section focusing on inclusive designs by developing models for inclusivity in public venues, game design, and serious gaming.

We start out the first section of the book edition with a part devoted to different framings and understandings of the GamerGate movement/harassment campaign and related events by drawing on feminist and critical theories. In chapter 1 titled “Press F to Revolt” Katherine Cross discusses how gamification, the use of game-like logic and incentive structures to organize social behavior, became the GamerGate’s moral framework rationalizing their interactions. Using a purposive sample of tweets, forum posts, and images that evoked videogame play, the discussions illustrate how this distanced participants from the often-serious consequences of their behavior. While gamification might be successful in incentivizing certain behaviors, it cannot teach the morality and ethics needed to understand issues around diversity and equity. Chapter 2 by Lisa Nakamura continues this examination by focusing on “social justice warriors”, a term coined to describe feminist and anti-racist video game players who publicly advocate for more diverse games and gaming cultures. Her focus is on how complex feminist identity can emerge within social media platforms like Tumblr and in independent game designs like *Journey* that can exemplify the unintentional and uncoordinated growth of intersectional anti-racist and ableist feminist theory within a gaming culture. Finally, chapter 3 by Constance Steinkuehler brings a public policy perspective on how issues of diversity impact video gaming and participation. Game publishers and marketing have historically ignored the diversity of their consumers, treating the white male player as their base; their trade organizations however have not, relying on the diversity of their consumers as a salve to anti-videogame rhetoric in the U.S. It is the diversity of views games can enable and the diversity of their players that protects them against stiffer regulation.

The second part continues to examine the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality in gaming but turns its attention to players from non-dominant groups, who are often avid players but whose participation has largely remained undocumented. Chapters here provide insights into the gaming experiences of often marginalized gamers such as African-American women who play Xbox Live or Latina girls and women engaged in intergenerational game play at home. The overall findings reveal how intersections of race and gender are critical in understanding how gaming cultures and communities can be exclusionary and welcoming in play. Chapter 4 by Kishonna Gray reveals that within a community of women gamers of Xbox Live, there is much agreement on their gendered realities but very little agreement when it comes to the racialized dynamics of oppression when a cohort of African American women attempted to incorporate a discussion on #BlackLivesMatter. In chapter 5, Gabriela Richard interviewed, surveyed and observed hundreds of players and non-players, across gender, race, gender identity and sexuality, and conducted a

participant ethnography of a female-oriented gaming community as a supportive space for fostering resiliency, to understand what shaped diverse players' identification, self-efficacy and persistence in gaming. She found that taking an intersectional perspective helped to highlight intersecting and diverging privileges and marginalization across sociocultural identities. Sinem Siyahhan and Elisabeth Gee describe in chapter 6 family context and culture around video game play and participation for women and girls to develop confidence and IT competencies. A field study conducted with urban Mexican-American families, many of them first-generation immigrants, illuminates how gender dynamics and family values shape on what counts as legitimate participation for girls and women in gaming, how it is negotiated among family members. They reveal the importance of designing games that facilitate co-play between mothers and daughters as a means to support girls to become women gamers.

The two last chapters in this part focus on player groups and identities that presumably are well known but in fact are not. Male gamers are the largest group of players, but they too have actually not been extensively studied. Gaining a better understanding of what motivates (or not motivates) such players is equally critical for diversifying participation in gaming. In chapter 7 on Caucasian American males who identify as "gamers", Betsy DiSalvo explores their digital game play practices and patterns. What she uncovers in her interviews both supports and contradicts stereotypes about male gamers and reveals the diversity of masculinities. Finally, in chapter 8, Kelly Bergstrom examines non-players through a critical feminist lens to illustrate how social forces continue to write digital gameplay as a primarily heterosexual white masculine space outside of a very narrow definition of games deemed "acceptable" for female play. She argues that there is much to be learned by asking players about what games they do not play and their reasons for quitting or never purchasing or downloading a particular game in the first place. Using *EVE Online* as case study, she collected the thoughts and experiences of current, former, and non-*EVE Online* players. She identifies several features and actions on the part of both the developer and current players which have created a community that seems welcoming to only a very particular demographic. This theme of inherent biases and barriers will be revisited in examining work contexts in the gaming industry that replicate many of the observations and findings about the lack of diversity in the gaming communities.

The third part addresses the lack of diversity and participation in the larger gaming industry. As mentioned before, this is a major issue that has garnered much attention. The production of games remains a mostly male domain. Several high profile cases of

harassment and threats against female game developers in conjunction with the ongoing GamerGate controversy have resulted in widespread popular media discussions around the roles and representations of women in the game industry. Industry leaders, scholars, and educators have become increasingly more invested in discovering how we can support women and other underrepresented populations in succeeding in the game industry. While there is extensive research exploring the gender divide in technology fields broadly, there is surprisingly little research on women in the game industry specifically. Chapter 9 by Shana Bryant, provides an insider perspective on the gaming industry where Black women are rare. Reporting from her personal perspective, she reveals what it means to work at the intersection of “woman in tech” and “black in tech” as the rarest group of “black woman in tech.” She points out that black women in tech are simultaneously *invisible* by gender and *highly visible* by race, often creating a double Impostor Syndrome. As discussions of diversity and media representation are at fever pitch within the gaming industry and other tech fields, it is critical to raise awareness of these issues. Chapter 10 by Amanda Ochsner explores a Twitter conversation from late 2012 in which female game developers sought to describe their reasons and motivations for persisting in the digital game industry. Bannering under the hashtag #1ReasonToBe, the conversation reveals many reasons why women choose to stay in games, including a passion for the medium, inspiration from the support of colleagues and players, and a desire to contribute to making game industry culture more inclusive and welcoming for the next generation of game designers. Finally, Chapter 11 moves into one of the central hubs of gaming in Asia. Florence Chee’s long-term ethnographic fieldwork in South Korea reveals some of the more subtle barriers to participation in the games industry such as the role of compulsory military service for men as well as educational policies and industry practices that implicate how labor originates from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) disciplines.

In this second section of the book edition, we take a more interventionist stance by reporting and examining approaches that can promote inclusivity in gaming by addressing diversity and intersectionality. In the fourth part we cast a broader net by focusing not just on the games themselves but also on contexts in which they are designed and discussed. Three chapters in this part focus on designing public venues such as gaming conferences in which games and design are discussed. Chapter 12 by Sarah Schoemann and Mariam Assad reports on the rationales and design principles that undergirded the foundation of the *Different Games* conference in New York City. The now annual event serves as both an intervention in the New York indie game scene as well as a challenge to normative tech and computing culture by elevating the voices of those marginalized in gaming. Chapter 13 by Jennifer Jenson and Suzanne

deCastell describes a related effort on how the *Feminist in Games* international research program designed to re-conceive and re-mediate the “problem” of women in games. The authors and co-founders of these conferences look back at years of collectively organizing one of the first events of this kind and examine the strengths of creating community events based on shared values, paying special attention to the way that efforts to cultivate diversity and inclusivity exist as active processes involving dialogue and reflection. Finally, chapter 14 by Celia Pearce reflects back on curatorial design efforts in creating and developing the independent gaming movement through *IndieCade* and *Alternative Voices in Game Design*.

The fifth part is concerned with how we can design games that are critical of stereotypes, promote gendered expressions, and allow for different forms of romance. In chapter 15, Mary Flanagan and Geoff Kaufman tackle the task of translating established theories and decades of empirical work in social psychology on implicit bias into practical game design techniques. They focus on how not only the design of characters and patterns of player interaction, but also how the “framing” or marketing of games impacts the perpetuation of stereotypes and biases. Using examples from their own design work, they illustrate techniques for game designers to overcome the often-unrecognized influence of unconscious biases on their design choices *and* to create more diversified games that effectively combat biases through play. In chapter 16 on gender as play, Emma Westecott considers how a continuum that runs from an absence of gender markers to the more typical hyper-exaggeration on display in many contemporary games could radically expand design practices in games. This framework is discussed and developed in this chapter via application of germane feminist and queer theory with the intention to offer a range of approaches for a more diverse game design and is, importantly, an act of play. Chapter 17 by Heidi McDonald uses findings from the second *Romance in Games* survey that asked over 1,700 gamers, designers, and industry and design about their experiences and expectations with romance in games. The chapter reveals that straight audiences are ready, and queer audiences crave more LGBT romance content in single-player role-playing games as can be already found in *BioWare* games. While each chapter takes a different approach, the overall findings present information and design ideas that will allow game designers to broaden their approaches and perspectives.

The sixth and final part of this book focuses on diversity issues in serious gaming, those efforts that use game design and play for educational purposes. Chapter 18 in this section examines the rationales and successes of using game making activities for broadening participation in computing. Numerous studies have engaged students in game design activities leveraging interest and widespread usage of games to broaden

participation in computing. Yet what happens when interests and values are no longer tied solely to gender? Yasmin Kafai examines the practices of youth who engage in what she terms constructionist gaming. She documents the historical experiences of girls who are underrepresented in computing and gaming, and expands how a connected gaming approach, which combines playing and making, can extend learning opportunities for different constituents. A second paper examines how gaming activities can be used for broadening participation by designing serious games to help low-income and first generation high school students to learn about college applications. In chapter 19, Zoe Corbin and Robert Danielson present findings from interviews with 120 high school students who play-tested the *Mission: Admission* game. Students' perspectives offered insight into how college-related online resources interface with support from peers, institutional agents and family members as students develop college-going efficacy and build understanding of the college application process. The final chapter, 20, uses games for learning about sexuality, a topic that has received primarily negative attention, in particular because many of the most popular games are known for their limited and harmful representations of female sexuality and lack of inclusivity of non-heterosexual romantic or sexual relationships. Gina Lepore and Jill Denner, in their chapter, review representations of sexuality in popular video games in the U.S. and the U.K, including those with a sex-negative approach, as well as the recent shift to include more positive depictions of sexual content and relationships. Within the framework of sex-positive education, they review the current state of sexuality education and conclude with recommendations on how a new generation of games can incorporate a sex-positive and content critical approach that promotes diversity in terms of gender roles, sexual scripts and sexual identity.

Overall, this collection of chapters begins to map out directions for intersectional research and inclusive design in gaming for diversifying *Barbie* and *Mortal Kombat*. What started out twenty years ago as a venture into understanding the unique phenomenon of video games, has now become a global platform through which we play, socialize, and learn. This volume extends discussions around diversity to further understand this medium in light of its proliferation in our social, cultural and participatory experiences.s

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Notes

1. For most recent data on diversity of employees in prominent Silicon Valley companies, see <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1PcrhcisG6G3QpOClgdRSGWdhjmpmlNwiynyQhpMi6JM/edit#gid=0>
2. See <https://caseyfilesler.com/2014/11/18/barbie-remixed-i-really-can-be-a-computer-engineer/> Accessed May 15, 2016.

PART I.

**UNDERSTANDING GAMERGATE AND
THE BACKLASH AGAINST ACTIVISM**

CHAPTER 1.

PRESS F TO REVOLT

On the Gamification of Online Activism

BY KATHERINE CROSS

You are going up against gamers. People who are programmed to win, to grind and slog for months for a prize, who can put up with the most horrendous insults being thrown at them. And your plan is to try slander [sic] and outlast these people? Good luck. – GamerGate activist on social media.

At the heart of many recent cultural debates about gaming is whether or not (and, if so, how much) video games influence the views and behaviour of individual players. While a consensus has emerged in academia that argues against simplistic causal notions of video games producing killers or other violent offenders, the more subtle and sophisticated forms of influence that prevail in all media (e.g., Collins, 1990; Moyer-Guse & Nabi, 2010) also obtain here.

Amongst members of the online anti-feminist movement GamerGate¹, which exploded from a false allegation against the developer Zoe Quinn about trading sexual favours for positive press, it was commonplace to assert that even this subtle impact was vastly overstated. In response, opponents of the movement, and targets of its ongoing harassment put together the “Games Don’t Influence Me” Tumblr, replete with examples of GamerGaters using ludic language, words or phrases that liken their behaviour to a video game. The influence of gaming on GamerGaters could be felt in how they organised and represented their movement, providing both an organising model and a schema for understanding reality.

This can be considered a form of “gamification,” the use of ludic incentive structures to promote certain kinds of behaviour in the physical world (McGonigal, 2010; 2011; Werbach & Hunter, 2012; Zicherman & Linder, 2013; Burke, 2014). At its most basic level, gamification seeks to harness the compulsive aspects of gaming, compelling people to act in ways they might not otherwise for the sake of ‘winning’ within the

game structure presented to them—getting ‘points’ for driving safely, for example, in a gamified driving experience.

What GamerGate presents us with is gamified activism—“activism” understood here as organised political action to achieve certain goals. But via gamification, it becomes a game with bosses and NPCs, and overarching win-conditions that determine the ethical framework in which the movement operates. “Grinding”—that is, simple, repetitive play that advances you to a distant goal in minute iterations—is a theme one can return to again and again in any study of gamification, and it forms much of GamerGate’s ludic discourse as well, with participants enjoining one another repeatedly to “keep grinding” or “level up.” There’s a similarity to how gamification proponents in business express a fascination with this phenomenon. Such fascination stems in no small measure from the fact that businesses well know that repetitive and tedious labour is rarely considered likewise fun and rewarding. Yet here among such players hard work, tedium, fun, and accomplishment can all coexist as a rewarding form of “work” (Nardi, 2010). For GamerGaters, one of the crucial forms of “grinding” was the sending of emails.

Operation Disrespectful Nod, one of many sub-“operations” within GamerGate, which often favoured a militarised rhetoric for describing its praxis, was a campaign to target the advertisers of every video game publication that had published the work of someone whom GamerGate had disagreed with (often these were the “final bosses” like author and editor Leigh Alexander) or someone GamerGate deemed to be “corrupt.” In addition to garden-variety harassment of the specific person in question, the operational strategy was to convince advertisers that these websites had somehow bullied or otherwise offended the wider “gamer community”. GamerGate had appointed itself as the representative of this community and by publishing these peoples’ works and the publications in question, they conveyed that advertisers should pull their ads accordingly. GamerGate scored an early victory with this strategy, breathing undoubted new life into the movement, when in October 2014 Intel pulled its advertising from the game developers’ trade publication *Gamasutra*. Intel later apologised and reversed its decision when it became clear to them that they had been misled about the movement’s goals and claims.

Because of this early success however, emailing became the core-grinding mechanic of the movement. The practice became central to GamerGate propaganda—often expressed in the form of photoshopped World War II-era or Soviet propaganda posters. Emailing was emphasized in every “how-to” guide for new movement

members and routinely advertised on Twitter and in movement forums like the subreddit Kotaku in Action.

The email strategy was a form of repetitive motion that seemed both respectable and substantial; several often expletive-laden guides for writing emails gave GamerGaters crash courses in sounding civil, appealing to the ethos of the company they targeted, and provided sample emails to help neophytes get started. GamerGaters exhorted each other to send emails, even on holidays, echoing massively multiplayer game-style “world events” that required the participation of thousands of players contributing small, repetitive actions to complete for the benefit of all.

The following snippet from an internet relay chat (IRC) chat that helped organise GamerGate is revealing: “[Gaming critic Adam] Sessler is miniboss. Leigh Alexander is final boss. We won’t win this unless she is dealt with.” Often as not, prominent women targeted by the movement were considered the toughest and most important “bosses,” conjuring up images of great battles to sunder an implacable and implicitly unhuman foe (see figure). “Boss” rhetoric prevails throughout a lot of GamerGate, although the movement has a number of contradictory opinions over who the final boss in their game actually is. Some GamerGaters actually consider that boss to be the larger, corporatist AAA industry itself and justify their targeting of relatively penurious independent critics and developers by saying that “one doesn’t take on the final boss first,” following the ludic logic of attacking or “grinding on” weaker enemies first to build up one’s strength.

Feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian has commented in the past, before GamerGate’s advent, that her long-term harassers have treated her like she is the final boss in a grand video game (Sarkeesian 2012). This reached an extreme incarnation when a literal game was made by one of her most committed harassers that involved repeatedly punching Sarkeesian in the face until she became bloodied and bruised. Its creator, Benjamin Daniel, later became an ardent GamerGate supporter.

THE REAL UNREAL

The gaming world and the internet more widely should be understood as a real place for all intents and purposes, contrary to popular assertions that the internet is the opposite of “the real world,” which I generally refer to as “the physical world” for absolute clarity. But this popular cultural conceit, comprising a near-consensus view of the internet, transcending lines of class, ideology, nationality, gender, has led many people to become implicitly socialised into viewing actions taken online as somehow less real or otherwise lacking in serious consequences.

Gamification deepens rather than ameliorates this problem when applied to the internet, and GamerGate's conception of final bosses is a clear example of this at work. The activist player, in this case a rank and file GamerGater, conceives of themselves as the hero in control of their situation who simply needs to find the right path through the obstacles arrayed before him or her, fighting their way to an end goal guarded by powerful enemies. The vast majority of games, with only a few exceptions, treat bosses like an equation to be resolved. They are simply a quintessential problem to be overcome, not a person with feelings, thoughts, or motivations. Some narrative-based games disrupt this ideal, but the pattern holds. A final boss is there to be slain and to provide the rewarding challenge that gamification activists like Jane McGonigal extol.

But seeing someone as a final boss, almost by definition, means you do not apprehend them as a person. The final boss is entirely ludic essence, not a flesh and blood being like the player; they exist solely at the whim of the player, who switches their console or computer off at will, taking the boss' life with them with the touch of a button. The boss serves to entertain, challenge, and provide "eustress," in McGonigal's phrase, culminating in catharsis. Nowhere in this model is there really any room for humanity, anything outside the inherently objectifying role of "boss." In short, gamified activism is an efficient way of ensuring the dehumanisation of targets.

When internet users fail to apprehend one another as persons, or to accept the reality of their virtual environment, it makes it all the easier for anti-social behaviour to take hold and easier to suspend any ethical constraints on that behaviour. "It's just a game" takes on a sinister meaning when looked at in this light, but matters get more complicated. For GamerGate's supporters the movement was not "just" a game, it was, in their eyes, a vital cause against a mighty foe, one that had even provided them with a sense of purpose in life and with what many GamerGater's described as a "family" of accepting peers.

What I have called the Möbius strip of reality and unreality comes into play here: though we have been socialised to see the internet as unreal, we enact meaningful social behaviour there and develop strong emotional attachments in spite of the conceit of unreality (Cross, 2014). We create and guard "territories" online that we implicitly treat as real, but in their defence we may engage in actions that are only ethically credible because we act as if the perceived invaders are not actual people, just pixels. Real when it is convenient, unreal when it is not.

For GamerGate, this has meant a contradictory approach to harassment, where on the one hand harms to those in their group were keenly felt, but even more egregious and widespread harms to GamerGate's targets were treated under the rubric of unreality. Harassing behaviour, such as hundreds of Twitter users piling into the mentions of a prominent target like Brianna Wu to hurl abuse at her, were seen by GamerGaters as "disagreement" rather than harassment. The fact that the Tweets were "just words" was repeatedly emphasised, as was the idea that GamerGate's opponents had no right to "not be offended." In one instance, extreme transphobic abuse (a user calling transgender opponents of GamerGate "trannies" that no one should "give a fuck about" who were "retarded... autistic fucks") was excused by another GamerGater as "distasteful comedy" that should not be "policed," dismissing the harms of such statements as "hurt feelings."

This is noteworthy as a contrast to how GamerGate reacted to Leigh Alexander's *Gamasutra* editorial "Gamers' Don't Have to Be Your Audience: 'Gamers' Are Over." Many were absolutely furious at this, considering it an "erasure" of the "gamer identity," some even likening it to genocide or Nazi-style persecution. One GamerGate propaganda image argues in favour of targeting advertisers with emails asking them to divest from major gaming websites that host feminist content because "we have the right to make them aware of transgressions against us."

Put in more simplistic gaming terms, GamerGaters were the players, and their targets were the Non Player Characters.

WIN CONDITIONS

GamerGate's leaderless nature all but ensured that their goals remained nebulous and sometimes contradictory, in a manner analogous to other self-organising movements (Tugal, 2014). Some wanted to "burn down" the gaming press, some wanted to see their targets fired and rendered permanently jobless, a minority wanted them dead outright, others simply wanted to secure apologies from certain games journalists that they felt had offended them, while many others wanted journalists and critics to "disclose" every aspect of their personal lives so that GamerGate activists could comb through them looking for potential "ethics violations."

This litany of goals would seem to demand a plurality of methods to reach them, but GamerGaters nevertheless had a clear, if simple, ethical system to govern their behaviour throughout their activism, which will be detailed in the next section. For our purposes here, it is enough to say that the win condition itself, whatever it was, mattered above all else and often implicitly justified whatever strategies were used to

achieve it. Another unifying factor was the fact that the defeat of GamerGate's final bosses was always seen as essential to achieving these win conditions. The movement's targets, both prominent final bosses and minor mini bosses alike, were people that GamerGate wished to see fired and driven from the game industry; some even wanted the most prominent ones arrested on vague charges of "fraud."

The nature of gamified win conditions is that they must be achieved no matter what, and that they are morally agnostic. One does not fret about the deaths of all the Goombas and Koopas Mario must stomp on his way to defeating Bowser, after all, or the nameless soldiers James Bond mowed down in Goldeneye 007. Finding a strategy to meet the win condition is almost never a moral question, but one of pure tactics. There is only the game and the player. This works for videogames as such, but the consequences of this logic for political behaviour are explored in the next section.

LUDIC LONELINESS: ACTUALLY IT'S ABOUT ETHICS IN GAMIFICATION

Gamification has been suggested as a tool to "nudge" people in the putatively right direction in a whole universe of trivial moral choices, such as obeying the speed limit or recycling one's rubbish. The point is to use the Skinnerian motivations of video games to positively reinforce "good behaviour" with stimulating emotional feedback—the intangible and evanescent rewards of "victory" in a video game (Yee, 2001). The operant conditioning this entails, however, is a deliberate bypassing of one's higher functions in order to automate the process of doing "the right thing," as determined by the game's designer. It may entail conscious thought, but it favours thinking only about ways of achieving the goal, the aforementioned "win conditions", not whether the goal is desirable or even morally right by one's lights.

When activism becomes gamified, the overarching political goals of the movement become win conditions that demand a strategic approach that sublimates moral reasoning beneath tactical thinking. GamerGate exemplified this tendency through its deliberately simplified ethical code, which centered on two key areas: 1) the legality of the tactic in question and 2) how the tactic would affect the movement's image. Larger moral questions of whether certain actions were right or wrong, irrespective of their tactical expediency relative to win conditions, were rarely considered. On Twitter and even on 8chan, which quickly became notorious for its noxious postings, one can find conversation after conversation where one GamerGater is being corrosive, bigoted, or engaging in harassment, only to be met with one of their fellows who encourages them to de-escalate their behaviour because it will "make the movement look bad."

This public-relations-centered strategy for dealing with harassment was not particularly successful. Internal divisions developed among GamerGaters, some of whom accused their PR-conscious comrades of “tone policing” or otherwise impeding the movement. But very few challenged the fundamental ethics of harassment or openly prejudicial speech. Most argued that such things were, ultimately, harmless but that their appearance would hurt the reputation of the movement in the eyes of outsiders who, it was hoped, would join their cause or report on it favourably. Other GamerGaters, particularly those vituperatively opposed to any kind of “tone policing” of their speech (“I will say whatever the hell I please, your feelings be damned” wrote one GamerGater to a woman outside the movement complaining about its penchant for rape jokes), operated by a different kind of binaristic morality: whether or not the behaviour in question was legal.

One Reddit post on *Kotaku in Action* lamented that the mainstream press would not mention that “no one was hurt, no one got raped, no arrests were made” as a result of GamerGate, which “proved” that the “damsels and white knights” (i.e. the women targeted by GamerGate and the people who defended them) were not really harassed by anything more than a few unpleasant Tweets. Still others defended the movement’s common practise of “doxing”—that is, releasing batches of personal information like legal names, private emails, addresses, and financial records to the public internet—as a legal one, “otherwise phonebooks would be illegal,” one claimed. One GamerGater was asked by an anonymous internet user whether “the ends justified the means,” to which they replied, “As long as it isn’t illegal.” Still another GamerGate activist acknowledged that there might be “trolls” lurking in the movement’s Twitter presence but asked, “what have they done that’s illegal?”

I found many GamerGaters defending their movement’s tactics through recourse to this legal rhetoric. So long as a movement tactic is not illegal (or so long as they believe, rightly or wrongly, that it is not illegal), then it is morally permissible to them.

What led to the win condition was inherently “right.” For most activists generally, respectability politics and public relations management are self-conscious means to ends that are not confused with being morally right. What makes gamified activism different is that it effaces or even obliterates that self-consciousness; it makes moral reasoning and strategic thinking one and the same. What is “right” is what helps you win.

Thus, in gamified driving, obeying the speed limit is right because it gets the driver points, not because it is moral or responsible to keep other motorists safe. Similarly, in gamified activism, achieving the political win condition becomes paramount. What is “moral” is fully isomorphic with the tactics and strategies needed to win, which has the great danger of exacerbating the already latent tendencies of extremist politics to give themselves over wholly to their goals at the expense of day-to-day ethics (Freeman, 1972; Berlin, 1990).

Hannah Arendt’s conception of loneliness and the logicity of thinking under totalitarian conditions sheds some light here. She argues that the “everyday experience of the evergrowing masses of our century” (1951, p. 176) is one of loneliness, which she specifically defines as a state in which one loses access to one’s higher rational functions, “deserted by one’s self” as she terms it (p. 174). But this is not isolation, rather it is loneliness in a crowd that then gives itself over to the last rational tools available to it: “the ability of logical reasoning, whose premise is the self-evident” (p. 175). When denied the silent dialogue between “I and myself” that Arendt extolled as essential to moral reasoning, one fell back on simple mechanistic logics that proceeded from bad premises to worse conclusions, organising “the masses into a suicidal escape” from this sense of loneliness and meaninglessness, a sense of terror amidst the press of the crowd that other theorists identified as a prominent sentiment in our society (Fromm, 1941).

It was this “ice-cold reasoning” that, Arendt (1951) argued, prepared people for totalitarian rule:

Under the conditions of loneliness, therefore, the self-evident is no longer just a means of the intellect and begins to be productive, to develop its own lines of “thought.” ... The famous extremism of totalitarian movements, far from having anything to do with true radicalism, consists in... this deducing process, which always arrives at the worst conclusions. (p. 175)

There are ways of updating this theory, however, to fit it to the new fashion of leaderlessness that has come to characterise many modern social movements, not least GamerGate. “Ice-cold reasoning” or “the logicity of ideological thinking” assumes the character of a ludic strategy: the way in which one wins the game. As discussed earlier, in most gameplay this is a dispassionate, even cold, process. On the screen, one does not often cathect with the NPCs² that one must overcome to reach the win condition; one simply strategizes their way through the game’s myriad puzzles and obstacles, and if violence is the idiom in which progress must express itself, then so be it. Victory is all that matters in the end, after all. For a video game

this is a tolerable enough state of affairs, but the application of this logic to real social interactions and collective action can be disastrous.

GamerGaters came from diverse backgrounds, but many were politically and socially disaffected before joining the movement and often asserted that they had found family and community in the GamerGate cause. Several talked about not caring about the world or politics until they felt that “social justice warriors” (see Jenson and Nakamura’s chapters in this volume) forced it upon them by trying to take over the world of video games, as they saw it. This perceived invasion—which, it must be noted, was projected mostly onto women critics, developers, and academics who had been a part of the gaming world for years or even decades—was galvanising and lent them purpose amidst the postmodern ennui they had once lived in.

But it led them into a world where there was a blind worship of logic as a process, something they contrasted to the output of feminist academics and critics who they believed were driven by emotion and a scorning of evidentiary standards—“reals > feels” became a slogan tossed about by many GamerGate activists. Nevertheless, they failed to acknowledge the deeply emotional origins of their movement, first as a response to game developer Zoe Quinn’s supposed sexual indiscretions, and then the almighty umbrage taken to the “Gamers are Over” editorials, of which Leigh Alexander’s was the most prominent. In addition, their definitions of “logic” and “reason” were impoverished, not so much philosophical tools as apotropaic talismans to ward away opposing arguments. “Logic” was given an emotionally positive resonance as a process that always produced true and valid conclusions, even when it simply operated as it always did: proceeding from assumed givens and churning out conclusions abstracted from all but those givens.

The logic they adopted was ludic: a game oriented towards a set of win conditions, governed by a simple set of rules that told them what they had to do in order to achieve victory over the final boss. The same logical rules also told them everything they needed to know about their enemies. Feminists were liars and “professional victims,” in this worldview. “Around dyed hair, beware!” went another propaganda poster, enjoining GamerGaters to distrust any woman who dyed her hair in bright colours because they matched the profile of women like Zoe Quinn or programmer Randi Harper and their colourful tresses. It lent itself to “if → then” thinking par excellence. ‘If we assume feminists and women with brightly coloured hair just want attention, then any one fitting this profile claiming harassment has made it up and is doing it to hurt GamerGate,’ might be one form of logical reasoning under this regime.

Any harassment directed at the target would then be justified under GamerGate's simplistic moral rubric, which could never evolve beyond simple binary propositions because gamified activism could do no other.

CONCLUSION

As already demonstrated, gamification cannot act as a moral guide, nor does it even provide a means of learning moral discernment or judgement. The structures of even the most complex video games are deliberately predictable and rational; however challenging a video game may be, there is always a way to win—save for rare independent video games that deliberately eschew this as a form of commentary, or open-world paidiaic games (Pearce, 2009, p. 28-9). Video games achieve this in part by being closed systems that keep out any uncontrollable variables or irregular inputs, and failing all else, there is always a cheat-code to help one traverse an especially trying obstacle.

Political activism was always a good deal messier than this, at the risk of stating the obvious. But the architecture of social media, with its emphasis on quantifiable popularity inevitably equated with success or importance—likes, upvotes, retweets, favourites—and the statistical galaxy of metrics that governs our perceptions of social life on the internet—ad impressions, hits, pageviews, Google search rank—all lend themselves to online activism being especially susceptible to gamification and its attendant maladies. Whether one “wins” depends on how many likes one gets, not on whether you adhered to an abstract moral code. Social media can sometimes seduce us into gameplay's fictions: that there are easily definable win conditions and amoral strategies for achieving them; that you are the player and your online antagonists are the NPCs.

It need not be this way, of course. Games are, and always have been, beautiful social laboratories whose conceit of play is useful for containing the risks of reinvention. But when the magic circle's boundaries stretch to the horizon, play becomes a terrible trap whence there is no escape, binding us to its amoral logics. The solution lies in asserting, more powerfully than ever, that the Internet is a real place and that avatars are us, a digital manifestation of our flesh and blood existence, a vulnerable form onto which we may project all that we are and hope to be, and which is thus lumbered with many of the same vulnerabilities as our physical selves. The principles of gaming have their uses for providing incentives and structures to unpleasant activities, but they must never become ends in and of themselves.

There is more to life than winning, after all.

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Notes

1. This chapter describes GamerGate adherents as “activists” and their group as a “movement.” This is not uncontroversial—some of GamerGate’s victims may see such terms as legitimizing or exculpatory, while some GamerGaters themselves eschew such language because it conflicts with their self-representation as a group of independently-minded individuals rather than a collective with shared responsibility. However, I use the terms for the sake of clarity, consistency, and because the evidence shows GamerGate’s homology with other collective actions we term “movements,” especially leaderless, non-hierarchical, and distributed movements.
2. Non-playable/Non-player character. These are the computer-controlled characters in video games.

CHAPTER 2.

“PUTTING OUR HEARTS INTO IT”

Gaming’s Many Social Justice Warriors and the Quest for Accessible Games

BY LISA NAKAMURA

Griefing, the purposeful use of digital affordances to destroy another user’s pleasure or freedom of movement, is a perennial practice, and women, people of color, and sexual minorities are targeted more than others (Gray, 2012; Nakamura, 2009, 2011, and 2012). This is true of the Internet, in general. Citing a recent study, Hudson writes,

In a 2013 Pew Research survey, 23 percent of people ages 18 to 29 reported being stalked or harassed online; advocacy groups report that around 70 percent of the cases they deal with involve female victims, and one study of online gaming found players with female voices received three times as many negative responses as men. (2014)

GamerGate, the coordinated social media harassment of female developers and social justice game developers like Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu, as well as feminist critic Anita Sarkeesian is part of a much longer history of sexual harassment of women in gaming. Its eruption into the news in 2014 only made this glaringly visible to the non-gamer world. Death threats, along with other abusive and misogynistic comments coordinated by users who gathered on Twitter and other social media using the #GamerGate hashtag effectively grieved these women in their personal and public lives, making it impossible for them to continue to work and even to move freely. These GamerGate targets and their defenders on social media were derisively labeled “social justice warriors,” or “SJW’s” because they publicly claimed the identity of “feminist” and asserted the need for more diverse games and game cultures. Men who entered the discussion to criticize misogynistic behavior in the gaming community were called “white knights” rather than SJWs, and were similarly dismissed as either “too sensitive” or “brainwashed” by the feminist movement.

This war over the meanings of gaming culture became a war of words and a war *over* words. This essay examines the complex identity of the “social justice warrior,” and explores how game designers can avoid the stigma connected to the term while pursuing a social justice agenda. I conclude by examining the work of two independent game designers, Jenova Chen and Anna Anthropy, whose game designs illustrate this strategy¹.

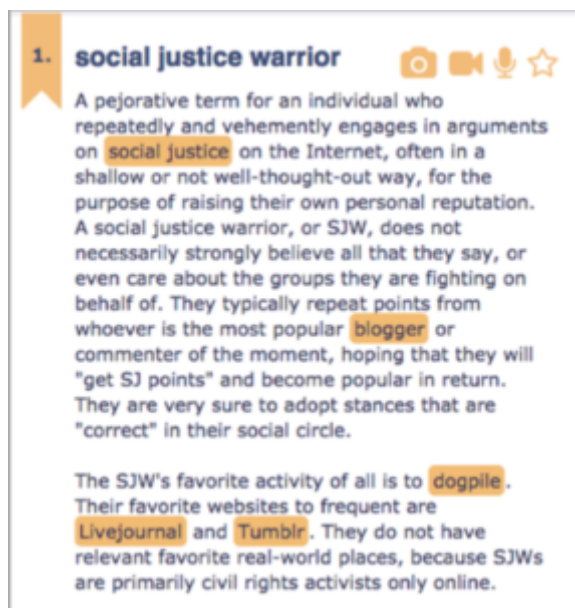


Figure 2.1. Screen capture of Urban Dictionary’s definition of “social justice warrior.”

The term “social justice warrior,” now popularized in part by GamerGate, was previously used in the mid-2000s by Tumblr and Live Journal bloggers to refer to the struggle against forms of body-based social discrimination such as sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, and classism. Yet the term has a much longer history with strong connections to religious practice. The term “social justice” dates back to 1840, when Luigi Taparelli, an Italian Catholic scholar, coined it (Ziegler, 2013). “Social justice” activism online is fundamentally a product of contemporary feminist media theory that evolved in reaction to one of second-wave feminism’s greatest weaknesses: its lack of intersectionality with other identities. Since at least the mid-eighties the U.S. feminist movement has suffered from its lack of relevance to and attention paid towards women of color. As woman of color theorists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa document in great detail, non-white women were not only excluded by the movement, they were pressed into service as de facto educators for

white feminists—serving as a “bridge” to span the racial divide (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1984).

Thus, social justice feminist practice online is a departure from earlier feminist identities because it encompasses a very wide set of concerns and forms of discrimination. “Social justice” feminists are a vocal and diverse group who are often stereotyped and dismissed as “PC,” or “politically correct.” This has led those who identify with the movement to come under attack as being too sensitive to forms of bias that do not directly concern them. This very willingness to consider race and sexuality, in conjunction with, rather than apart from, sexism has given the movement power and legitimacy among many feminists, particularly younger ones. It has addressed some of feminism’s earlier myopia. Others reject it, since it is so often used within mainstream gaming culture as an insult. This push for additional inclusivity becomes yet another way to grief other users in public digital spaces through comment sections and discussion boards.

According to “Know Your Meme,” a widely used online resource that traces the genesis of popular Internet-native images and concepts, “social justice blogging” is a legitimate and respected part of online activism; however, the term “social justice warrior” is fundamentally pejorative. The site (n.d.) explains that the “stereotype of a social justice warrior is distinguished by the use of overzealous and self-righteous rhetorics, as well as appealing to emotions over logic.” This definition of social justice as an overly “emotional” and irrational social movement sheds light on the dangers and rewards facing feminist, anti-racist, and anti-homophobic gamers. It also explains why some female gamers and game producers who may or may not identify as feminists distance themselves from the term “social justice warrior”. Undeniably, the widespread public condemnation of GamerGate resulted in some material gains for feminist gamers. One example is Intel’s decision to pledge \$300 million dollars toward improving diversity in the technology industry, funding a professional women’s gaming team in partnership with the International Game Developers’ Association (Wingfield, 2015). Yet despite these broad calls for reforms, on a smaller scale, the use of the SJW term is still prized among many griefers as a sure way to stigmatize and dismiss a range of feminist and anti-racist critiques and attempted engagements.

Yet these critique and engagements have found their way into gaming culture via independent designers of color and transgender activists. *Journey*, by Jenova Chen of a Chinese-American game maker That Game Company, and *Dys4ia*, among other games, by Anna Anthropy, a transgender game designer, decenter straight white men

as players and as objects of representation within their games. These independent games by women and designers of color use the medium itself to create spaces for social justice discourse that exceed the boundaries of the game, stretching their design and content to encompass radical new, intersectional identities and new play mechanics. Anthropy produces work that addresses transphobia and the experience of sexual minorities overtly, and thus she connects with the social justice movement. Chen's *Journey* is almost never discussed in terms of racism, sexism, or homophobia precisely because it avoid overt reference to these identities, though its design is entirely informed by a social justice agenda.

Luckily for game scholars, both Chen and Anthropy are also eloquent writers who are entirely forthcoming about their intentions as game designers. Anthropy's book *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters: How Freaks, Normals, Amateurs, Artists, Dreamers, Drop-Outs, Queers, Housewives, and People Like You Are Taking Back an Art Form* (2012) is full of insight about the need for marginalized groups to reclaim gaming as a vital cultural medium. Chen has not produced a similar manifesto about the ways that games can redress misogyny, transphobia, and other forms of inequality in gaming, but he has given interviews (Smith, 2012) in which he has been quite clear about how game mechanics and avatar design can engineer social relations that are radically collaborative, curbing racist and sexist attitudes, and entirely in line with social justice goals. Though Chen and Anthropy's games address different audiences, reside on different platforms, and simply look very different, they exemplify the unacknowledged and uncoordinated growth of intersectional anti-racist and ableist feminist theory. Such games are redefining a wider gaming culture that is slowly and painfully evolving past the medium's continued struggle with incivility and hate speech.

As many researchers have argued, the majority of representations of non-white and non-male characters in video game fit familiar racial and gender stereotypes (Everett & Watkins, 2008); accordingly, women and minorities often choose white, male avatars in order to avoid harassment (Kennedy, 2007; Yee, 2005). Scholars and gamers have been pointing this out for years, and have usually been ignored, but GamerGate caused this stalemate to flare into overt conflict. The gaming world's hostility towards its critics from within and outside the world of video game journalism took the form of thousands of angry tweets, posts, and public statements. As gaming scholar Consalvo (2012) wrote years before GamerGate in her essay "Confronting Toxic Gaming Culture: A Challenge to Feminist Game Studies Scholars," the enthusiastic adoption of video games— particularly casual games—by

women players may have led to more sexism within the gaming community rather than less.

This claim was proven true when game journalist Leigh Alexander (2014) wrote an essay for the popular gaming blog *Gamasutra* entitled “‘Gamers’ don’t have to be your audience. ‘Gamers’ are over.” Readers responded with hundreds of enraged posts blaming feminist players for destroying the culture by tainting it with cultural politics. As one commenter wrote,

Get over yourself. Gamergate isn't going away, and no amount of temper tantrums will change that. The fake feminists thought that they could start shit with gamers, and now they're finding out that gamers don't really like being called misogynists and other names just because they ignore and/or ridicule the imbecilic political positions of frauds like Sarkeesian and Quinn.



Figure 2.2. Screen capture of user comment. (Retrieved in 2015 from *Gamasutra.com*)

This comment characterizes social justice activists as insincere or “fake,” a claim that resonates with Urban Dictionary’s definition, which stresses that SJW arguments are “shallow or not-well- thought-out”.

Yet at the same time, games about race, gender, and sexuality have produced some of the most deep, beautifully crafted, and heartfelt play experiences to date. Transgender people who have played Anthropy’s game *Dys4ia* have found the experience of embodying a transitioning transgender body by playing the game a supremely, affectively resonant moment: many report in comment threads that they cried after playing it (Anthropy, 2012). Games produced by Anthropy, Porpentine, merit kopas, Deirdra “Squinky” Kiai, Mattie Brice, and others who foreground transgender and racial identity in their work give players the experience of gender embodiment and gender critique. But, above all, they create games that can be easily played by inexperienced or non-gamers in order to give players new types of access: access to the pleasure of games, and to new types of feeling.

Chen also designs games that make players cry. And like games produced by Anthropy, Porpentine, and Kiai, *Journey* replaces one affective register—the pleasure of winning experience within meritocratic media—with another feeling: connection. He achieves this by creating beautiful environments where players embody disabled avatars, diversifying the identities available in games in daringly radical ways that nonetheless can be easily read as serving aesthetic rather than social justice purposes.

Chen does not self-identify as a member of a social justice movement. He has been recognized instead as a gifted innovator and producer of high-end independent games. The trilogy of games produced for Sony's PlayStation 3 platform—*Flower*, *fLOW*, and *Journey*—are almost always discussed in terms of their innovative mechanics and affective power rather than in relation to social justice. Though critics have argued that his games are not very “game-like” because they are not technically challenging, or “hardcore,” their aesthetic beauty and creativity are almost universally recognized and praised by critics and reviewers. Chen's *fLOW* is one of twelve games held in New York's Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection. He is certainly not categorized as a “social justice warrior”—his work was never targeted by GamerGate—and with a few exceptions, scholars who study race, gender, and gaming tend not to consider his work within their area of research.² Chen's explicit disidentification with mainstream game culture and emphasis on designing emotional experiences for players by designing “feeling” into gameplay aligns. In an interview with Chen for the widely read gaming blog Gamasutra, Ed Smith (2012) writes, “Feelings have always been at the centre of Thatgamecompany's work.” *Journey* has also quietly engaged with an aspect of intersectional identity that is increasingly visible as a concern within the social justice world—ableism.

The avatars within *Journey* are beautifully stylized, non-photorealistic robed figures with jet-black faces and flowing robes, and they do not initially signify as disabled. The game is set within a desert landscape and the robes invoke Middle Eastern clothing; the animated movements of the robe and other pieces of cloth within the environment are hypnotic and soothing. Through these and other visual means, the game affords new ways of envisioning the body, violence, and social interaction in gamic space and, just as importantly, excludes others. For unlike most game characters built for high-end consoles, as the PS3 was in 2012, the avatars lack arms. As Chen explains, this was partly a pragmatic decision: Thatgamecompany has a 9-person development team (small by Triple A) standards, and “if we were the *Uncharted* team, the *Journey* character would have arms and have hands” (Smith, 2012). However, the decision to remove the avatar's arms and its mouth allowed radical forms of non-violent interaction to occur: “We cut the [character's] arms, because if

you have arms, you think about picking up some kind of weapon and hitting something,” said Chen (Smith, 2012). Chen explains how he purposely created less-abled avatars without mouths or arms in order to fix the broken social relations that occur in networked games when people can grief other players. Chen doesn’t mention women or people of color as his target audience, explaining instead that, “Our game is meant for average people to play, rather than just gamers” (Sheridan, 2013). However, because women and racial minorities are so often the target of grieving the mechanic protects as well as includes them.

This novel and intentional design decision also flies in the face of one of gaming’s most aggressive genres: first person shooters (FPS). FPS games are defined by the persistent presence of the hand and arm of the player character within the frame of gameplay. As Alex Galloway (2006) writes in “Origins of the First Person Shooter,” this visual convention gives audiences vital information about what kind of narrative to expect and, in the case of games, how players will approach the environment (p. 57). Providing the user with a body that purposely does less than it could within the constraints of the game’s affordances calls attention to new ways of being embodied. No game contains avatars that are all powerful; this would neither be fun nor practical. But where Chen’s design decision stands out is his explicit decision to engineer new ways of relating around race and gender by taking away features.

During game testing, Chen’s team discovered that players tended to grief each other when given the chance, even in the context of their game, which lacked a war-like or overtly violent narrative. The removal of arms from avatars, as well as several other key game mechanics changes, ensured that harassment is impossible in *Journey*. Balancing the game so that friendly behavior and collaboration are rewarded by graphic displays and power ups while aggressive behavior is unrewarded by visual feedback or harm to another player produced a collaborative experience many players found deeply emotional. While it’s certainly the case that independent games have the advantage of niche audiences that value the intimate feel and greater experimentation with form and content, Chen’s anti-griefing innovation paid off. *Journey* was an immensely successful and popular game.³



Figure 2.3. Gameplay image from *Journey*.

The design thinking behind *Journey* buries its message within a gamic experience that has been praised for its aesthetic beauty, stirring music, and the production of strong feelings of empathy and connection with other players. As gaming researcher Patrick Jagoda (in press) writes in his analysis of posts from the “Letters to Journey Companions” blog produced by the game’s fans, the experiences of collaborative play produced by these mechanics is intense and complex, and not all of them are positive. *Journey* exploits these feelings to provide the player with the experience of an intentionally dis-abled body, ambiguously gendered, and non-white body, a goal entirely in line with a social justice agenda.

Journey shows us that justice games don’t have to be low-budget “indie” games; they can fit into mainstream norms, have high production values, and use this benefit to produce strong affective reactions in audiences who may not view themselves as “social justice” advocates.⁴ Players who might never express interest in games like Anthropy’s *Dys4ia* because of its challenging social message about transgender identity and indie look and feel might be appreciative of *Journey*, which couches its anti-violent and anti-ableist message within an ecstatic visual and affective multiplayer gameplay experience. As Chen told an audience at *Games For Change*, the

premier conference for serious game designers and scholars, that “he hopes to see more emotionally accessible games,” and that “the only way we can do it is by *putting our heart into it*” (Lien, 2014, italics mine). Sincerity, commitment, open discussion of feelings, vulnerability, and a willingness to bring personal experiences to bear for the sake of social politics and activism are central values of the social justice movement.

It is exactly these traits that make them such perfect targets for gaming’s anti-feminist factions, such as GamerGate. As Julian Dibbell (2008) has described in his study of griefers and trolls within *Habbo Hotel* and *Second Life*, irony is in its hegemonic discursive mode. Anything that presents itself with earnestness or “heart,” such as the social justice moment, is to be mocked, dismissed, or destroyed. Hence the long-standing war on social justice warriors within some very public factions of the gaming culture, and the “toxic environment” for women and people of color who engage in it.

The critical reception of *Journey* however, shows us that games that underplay or even conceal their social justice agendas pass under the radar of gaming’s most destructive players. Gamers and game developers should not be deterred from straightforward and rigorous criticism of gaming’s problems with racism and sexism. Nevertheless, the history of the medium, starting with female game pioneers such as Kathy Sierra and Jade Raymond, and onto Quinn and Wu, shows us that the war on women within gaming culture has deep roots in the medium’s history. Long before the “social justice warrior” identity was created, women game developers have been doxxed, hounded, and harassed into silence, many leaving the medium altogether. Some of gaming’s most high profile creators, such as Sierra and Raymond, both of whom predated the social justice movement and thus the backlash against it, left the industry entirely. Chen’s identity as a man has protected him somewhat against this kind of treatment, but it is equally important that his games are not perceived as gendered in the same way that Quinn’s and Anthropy’s are. Disavowing the “social justice” identity has given Chen access to a mainstream audience and in turn made an accessible experience available to gamers who hate the sexism and racism that often characterize grieving.

Griefing is a symptom of networked social relations within sexist and racist cultural regimes. Though not all grieving is identity-based, much of its most virulent forms are, producing a toxic environment for women, people of color, and sexual minorities. The games discussed in this essay produce feelings or affective registers that do away with these environments, demonstrating that games can mean something other than what they mean now.

Social justice warfare can occur in many different guises. Those who claim the identity (and many feminist developers and women within gaming culture choose not to) are voluntarily engaging in a toxic discourse with the intention of changing it. Others engage in less discursively aggressive ways. Design decisions like Chen's, Anthropy's, Brice's, the Fulbright Company and others mentioned in this essay "do" social justice by creating procedural media that engage sincerely, rather than ironically, with racial, gender, and sexual identity. Though their games have been critiqued as not really games, but rather as "casual" (or in the case of *Gone Home* derided as "walking simulators") these are categories that are growing as the traditional triple A hardcore game market continues to shrink in comparison, at least partly due to the lack of access they entail.⁵ This increased access has resulted in the diversification and gender balancing of gameplay; despite the gendering of "easy" games as "casual" and thus less important than mainstream games, they allow all players access to forms of affect that un-grief the gameric experience.

Frank critique of gaming's inaccessibility to women and minorities is absolutely necessary; the resistance within gaming culture to overt identification with social justice is the "final boss" that must be beaten. It should not be necessary to disavow the "social justice" term or to distance oneself from the community that self-identifies this way on Tumblr and other social media. However, as GamerGate has proven, it is still personally risky to publicly articulate gaming culture's problems with misogyny, racism, and ableism. This is particularly so for women.

Social justice work occurs on many fronts. The measurement of impact upon gaming's problems should not be individuals' willingness to ally themselves with the term. It is in gaming culture's best interests, and by extension the interests of American culture as a whole, to create an affectively powerful and inclusive environment for all players.

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Notes

1. Retrieved March 3, 2015 from <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=social+justice+warrior>
2. For an exceptional example of critical work that analyzes the game's Orientalist imagery and politics perfectly with anti-racist, anti-sexist goals see: Chien, I. (forthcoming 2016). Journey into the techno-primitive desert. In J. Malkowski & A. Russworm (Eds.), *Identity matters: Race, gender, and sexuality in video game studies*. Manuscript submitted for publication. Chen's game Journey was designed explicitly "to address gaming's biggest problem—lack of emotional depth and engagement through collaboration with other players" (Smith, 2012).
3. Retrieved July 7, 2015 from <https://gamecuriosity.wordpress.com/2013/09/04/6/>
4. Griefing can and does occur in casual games as well. My claim here is that these genres hold the potential for a new and more inclusive type of gaming culture within these new forms and mechanics because they include new types of players and require them to interact differently. Trolls within Habbo Hotel and Second Life, irony is its hegemonic discursive mode. Anything that presents itself with earnestness or "heart," such as the social justice movement, is to be mocked, dismissed, or destroyed. Hence, the long-standing war on social justice warriors within some very public and active factions of gaming culture, and the "toxic environment" for women and people of color who engage with it.
5. Dimitri Pavlounis' (2015) brilliant reading of *Gone Home* as a queer text argues the game is structured as an "archive rooted in sentiment, emotion, and affect that validates the intimate and personal objects and documents of everyday life." This game's emphasis on feeling archives and, more specifically, the production of queer feelings diversify the medium in encouraging ways, but, as he argues, the game's straightforward mechanics ultimately undercut its radical potential.

CHAPTER 3.

WOMEN IN DEFENSE OF VIDEOGAMES

BY CONSTANCE STEINKUEHLER

On the morning of December 14, 2012, a young gunman named Adam Lanza walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School and shot and killed twenty-six people. Twenty of his victims were children ages of six and seven who attended the elementary school. Adam suffered from Asperger syndrome, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and experienced social isolation as a result of the conditions. He also had a mother who collected guns in her home and taught him to shoot at an early age. But when the shooting happened, it took only four hours for Fox News to insist that videogames were the primary reason behind these brutal killings rather than easy access to guns.

By the afternoon of December 14, President Barak Obama made a public statement to the nation mourning this terrible tragedy, and by December 19, asked Vice President Joe Biden to create and lead an inter-agency gun violence task force charged with making policy recommendations designed to address the growing gun problem in America. In preparation of producing this document, the Vice President hosted a series of discussion meetings with various stakeholders, content experts, and interested organizations across sectors related to or concerned with the problem of gun violence in the States. Over a short four weeks, he collected recommendations from 229 organizations and held 22 meetings total on a variety of key related issues. Videogames, given the media frenzy and subsequent public outcry, was the subject of one of them.

At the time of the Sandy Hook tragedy, I was no longer serving as Senior Policy Analyst in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), having

recently resigned from my post there as the videogames “fun czar” (Toppo, 2012) to return to my tenured faculty position at University of Wisconsin-Madison, where I researched commercial games and learning. I had spent a year on leave in OSTP in order to serve in their office, holding down a Washington apartment as well as our house in Madison and flying back and forth each week in order to continue to spend time with my husband and raise my own two small children at home. December was my holiday and the time to be back at home for good.

But then the call came on December 23, four days after Vice President Biden was charged with creating the task force to craft policy recommendations. It came while I was blissfully back on the arms of tenure and wrapping gifts for my kids. I got a call from his office asking me to step back into my former role temporarily to help organize the video games portion of his meetings and brief him on the current, as you might say, “state of play”. My original job in OSTP included advising on national initiatives related to videogames, coordinating cross-agency efforts to leverage games toward national priority areas (e.g., childhood obesity, early literacy, STEM education), and creating new partnerships to support a better ecosystem for games for impact. So I had contacts across both game research, my home field, and the industry, which designed and disseminated such content. Thus, when the Vice President’s office needed to organize a meeting of game industry and research leadership to discuss the potential relationship between gun violence and games, I was asked to step back in to help coordinate the process. This meant both organizing a meeting and writing a short brief as prep material for the Vice President himself.

Industry leadership from the largest video game companies commercial (i.e., AAA companies) were pre-vetted and then formally invited to attend the meeting: Entertainment Arts, Epic Games, and others. Leadership from the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), the industry’s trade organization, attended. Leading researchers on youth development, video game violence, and youth culture were also invited to the discussion. Also in attendance were Kathleen Sebelius, former head of Human and Health Services (HHS), Eric Holder, former US Attorney General, and of course the Vice President himself. My 2-page brief became a 5-page brief. My 5-minute in-person brief with the Vice President eventually became a 40-minute bout between myself, representing video games in one corner, and Vice President Joe Biden and four of his support staffers in the other. I knew it was going to be a rough briefing from the moment the Vice President walked into the antechamber:

“WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH THESE SCUM BAGS?”

Over the next 40 minutes, videogames, and myself as proxy, were under indictment. The briefing was less an information gathering meeting than a trial. Vice President Biden had just met with families from Sandy Hook and was justifiably upset by the time he was to meet with me for the brief. I have spent much of my career in defense of games, not because I am a games “advocate,” but for simply because I have had the audacity to study them. This was hardly the first time, then, that I had to confront sweeping, baseless stereotypes as to who game creators and game players are. But this was certainly the most difficult time. As a mother of two elementary school age children, the Sandy Hook tragedy weighed heavily on me. I felt my distance from my husband and children over the last year acutely and hadn’t been able to bring myself to watch any of the video footage from the shooting itself or the families grieving over what should have been their holiday. Just like every other parent in America, I was struggling to make sense of what had happened in some way that would help me feel I could, in some way, keep my own children safe. What were the lessons of the Sandy Hook shooting and what could be done to prevent such future attacks? Somehow, in the American public, this tragedy, like every other gun tragedy involving young people in the US, were linked to videogames. But why and how? The concerns and reasoning of Biden and his small support staff were no different than the concerns and reasoning of the American public; but they were also no better reasoned or informed:

“EVERY TIME THERE IS A SCHOOL SHOOTING, THE PERPETRATOR IS A YOUNG MALE THAT PLAYS VIDEO GAMES.”

This is a true statement, but it’s a bit like saying that every time there is a school shooting, it’s a young person that kisses their mother good night. Nearly all young people play: 97% of teenagers overall, and 99% of boys and 94% of girls respectively (Lenhart et al., 2008). More teenage males play mature-rated titles, including violent first person shooters or other video games with gun violence in them, than their female counterparts (79% versus 21% respectively), but the overall majority of video game unit sales come from games for children with ESRB ratings of E (for everyone), E10+ (for ages 10 and up), or T (for ages 13 and up) (Entertainment Software Association, 2011). Gamers are a diverse audience and always have been. The news media (but also the larger public) has ignored this fact as have, in some cases, game producers. But the diversity of the consumer base for games has only increased if nothing else. The rise of mobile devices, “free to pay” or “freemium” pricing strategies has given rise to a booming market for casual games. With this new expansion of the casual market, female players shifted from periphery to mainstream: women 18 years of age and older represent 36% the game-playing population compared to boys 18

years of age or younger who represent only 17% (Entertainment Software Association, 2014). This diversity undercuts the clear line of causation we assume between games about guns and guns.

“VIDEO GAMES INCULCATE YOUTH WITH VIOLENT, ANTI-SOCIAL AND MISOGYNIST VALUES AND IDEAS.”

Video games are a communication medium. Just like any other media, such as television or radio or film, they carry values and ideas. There is no one message or theme that “video games” as a unified category communicates. They are architectures for engagement, affording the player a first person experience of a narrative, a system, or an idea, be it the violence of war (the game *This War of Mine*) or the random kindness of strangers (the game *Journey*) or the experience of teamwork (the game *Battlefield*), or the visceral pleasure of pattern matching and goal stacking (the game *Drop 7*). Games can carry messages, but they are not the message. This is precisely why they are protected by the First Amendment:

Video games qualify for First Amendment protection. Like protected books, plays, and movies, they communicate ideas through familiar literary devices and features distinctive to the medium. And “the basic principles of freedom of speech... do not vary” with a new and different communication medium. (Brown versus Entertainment Merchants Association, 2011)

It is the diversity of views that video games can enable, just like books, that protects them under our constitution. Game developers can and do make games with violent or misogynist content. Game developers also make games about love, loss, happiness, greed, citizenship, silliness, and a handful of simple 2D rectangles that, through friendship and persistence, overcome their obstacles.

We are in a golden age of video games. Similar to what happened in Hollywood, as the mainstream industry grew more and more risk-adverse as budgets for titles grew bigger and bigger, a robust independent scene emerged. As the cost of game production tools steadily decline and access to distribution channels steadily increases, the number and diversity of independent game titles swell. Thus, as with film, a thriving indie scene has emerged. Independent designers working with small production teams are creating an expanse of edgier, riskier – and thus more innovative – game titles that appeal to markets well beyond the taken-for-granted mainstream. Zimmerman (n.d.) have indeed argued that we have entered a “ludic century” in which play serves into a primary form of interaction with socio-informational systems. What we are witnessing now, I would argue, is nothing short

of a broad and total diversification of games on the market. There never has been one video game or video game message and there certainly is none now.

“GAME MAKERS ARE ‘SCUM BAGS,’ TRADING ON ANYTHING TO MAKE A PROFIT.”

There is also no single video games industry. Thanks to the trend lines over the last decade, a company no longer has to make a blockbuster game that sells in the millions as the de facto business model. Game makers range from CEOs of massive AAA companies like Entertainment Arts to small independent creators like Erin Robinson Swink, the creator of the game *Gravity Ghost*, who work in private studios with only temporarily contracted staff. Thanks to these dynamics, we now increasingly have a spectrum of diverse products that reflects the diversity of the consumer market—and a concomitant diverse spectrum of individual designers and production companies profitably making them.

Game design and research programs in higher education have played an important role in this diversification. Recently, the Higher Education Video Game Alliance (The Alliance) surveyed 73 colleges and universities with video game certification or degree-granting programs and found that the average percentage of women in game based programs is 30% on the undergraduate level and 33% on the graduate level, double the percentage of women in other computer and information science fields. Video game programs have significantly higher retention rates from freshman to sophomore years (88%) than national averages for both public (64.2%) and private (69.8%) institutions generally (Higher Education Video Game Alliance, 2015a).

A second 2015 survey showed that overall employment rates for alumni of game-based programs were well above national averages: 93.1% had gainful employment after a single year after graduation, 8% higher than national employment rates for college graduates four years out of school. Average salary was \$76,200 annually for full-time positions or \$24,000 more than the U.S. national average for college graduates with full-time jobs, and overall workplace well-being scores on the Cantril scale for alumni showed 82.9% as “thriving” out in the workplace. More than half worked directly in the video games industry (55.8%) (Higher Education Video Game Alliance, 2015b).

While the industry itself is far from a state of parity (women represented 22% of the games industry overall in 2013, International Game Developers Association, 2014), compared to similar STEM-related fields, the games industry is far more diverse. Moreover, the jobs it offers are well above average in terms of both income and

happiness. Game designers, developers, producers, publishers, and marketers come in all different shapes and sizes, just like the games they make. Stereotypes of white men adding “one more headshot” to a title for a bit more dopamine bump to sell their game is no more descriptive of the complex code and art that goes into games than are those stereotypes of scientists as socially awkward, white males in lab coats. And such assumptions are just as dangerous. Trading in these clichés turns broad swaths of young people (especially women) off of fields that are financially lucrative, personally fulfilling—and currently hiring.

“FOLKS, I DON’T NECESSARILY BELIEVE VIDEO GAMES ARE THE CAUSE OF GUN VIOLENCE IN AMERICA, BUT I DO KNOW YOU’VE GOT A SERIOUS PROBLEM.”

My 5-minute briefing turned 40-minute debate with the Vice President drew to a close as Biden realized the time and that we had left the meeting attendees sitting for nearly an hour waiting. I had the terrible sinking feeling that I had just burned every ounce of political capital that I had earned over the last year of grueling White House work in order to defend the games industry against common (if antiquated) misbeliefs and stereotypes about games, gamers, and game makers in the States—for nothing. Vice President Joe Biden and his team seemed unconvinced (if not irritated) by my arguments and evidence and references to experts. We walked out the door of his ceremonial office and down the hallway of the Eisenhower Building to face throngs of reporters in the hallways and very serious (and a somewhat grim-looking) table of attendees inside the meeting room. The Vice President waved the press out of the room, looked around the table, and began his public announcement.

THE POLITICS OF GAMES

Diversity has always been as a salve to anti-videogame rhetoric in the United States. The right to make and play games with communicative content of all forms, confirmed in the Supreme Court’s 2011 ruling, has always functioned politically as a way to curtail their critique. Two decade ago or more, unlike today, it was viable for game publishers and marketers to ignore the overall diversity of the player base and market games solely for the white male player gaze. Their trade organization and senior leadership, however, have always trumpeted women players and makers, particularly when speaking to policy makers and the public. Women players and creators are frequently conjured in conversations where stereotypes of gamers and game makers have been evoked. Rhetorically, the presence, influence, and consumption of games by women have played a fundamental role in the slow and steady acceptance of video games as a communicative medium in the States. Mothers,

grandmothers, and aunts play games, not just daughters—and the variety of games they play, including casual games, puzzle games, and a myriad other genres—have shifted the internal discourse of game industry culture away from the very notion that there are “gamers” and “nongamers.” Professionals no longer snicker at the causal market given its size and value. Ironically, then, women in games are a key reason why some men in games continue to be able to play the games they fancy, even those with bloody headshots and scantily clad, hypersexualized impossible depictions of women in them.

In this way, GamerGate is a death rattle of a dying regime. White male-presenting players were never the only consumer base for games nor the only important one, and even marketing these days cannot afford to solely cater to their fancy. Broad sweeping baseless stereotypes about game creators and game players are no longer tenable when nearly every American, of any age with a smart phone or tablet device, uses some sort of video game or gamified application. Middle age women use the Fitbit and other gamified goal-management systems to monitor their fitness and nutrition. Mothers and daughters play *Words with Friends* as a way to stay connected through parallel play. Grandmothers turn the games portal on the American Association of Retired People (AARP) into the single most frequented section of their site. College age females stomp their guy friends at *Streetfighter 2* in dorm rooms across America. Entire families set up *Minecraft* servers and construct whole villages from textured cubes. Wives stay up late night running guilds in *World of Warcraft*. Video games have blown wide open. If a minority of ex-stereotypic players finds this threatening, then let the angry Tweeting commence.

While so-called GamerGaters whine and crying about the “feminist takeover” of video games, it is women in games who both symbolically and actively serve as defenders of the right to make and play games of all forms—from games about depression to games about boobs. When a bunch of self-declared “alpha males” sit around on 8-chan discussion forums bemoaning their dwindled importance and attention, I myself cannot help but think that those of us who have been positioned, by history and circumstance, to frequently defend video games as a communicative medium worth serious consideration can rest well in the satisfaction of a job well done. This is the golden age of videogames: GamerGaters who want to control games and keep them in their box should be disturbed; they have lost.

There is no lack of women who, through timing or position or force of vision, have played a significant role in the liberation of video games from their dusty stereotypes: the first female video game designer Carol Shaw who worked at Atari back in the

1970s; Brenda Laurel (2001), one of the first and most influential designers in games, who dispelled the notion that “girls don’t play games”; Patricia E. Vance, President of the Entertainment Software Rating (ESRB) Board that oversees the industry’s rating system so that enables video game companies to empower their consumers to make educated purchase decisions based on their own preferences and values; Brenda Romero who began her video game career in the 1980s with Wizardry and has since become one of the most influential and iconic game designers in the industry, Kate Edwards who runs the International Game Developers Association; Mia Consalvo who runs the Digital Games Research Association (Digra); Robin Hunicke who is single-handedly showing the industry what a 21st century work environment in the games industry should like look through her innovative and successful venture Funomena; or Jane McGonigal who made games for impact a household concept with her publication of *Reality is Broken* (2011). There have always been women at the forefront of leadership in games. Many of these women have stood with their female finger in the dam of social outcry for greater regulation, legislation, and even censorship at times in our history when that position was massively unpopular and cost them politically and personally. Game enthusiasts ought to be grateful to them—and GamerGaters are right to fear them. This is no longer their industry anymore, if it ever was.

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PART II.

**INVESTIGATING GENDER AND RACE
IN GAMING**

CHAPTER 4.

SOLIDARITY IS FOR WHITE WOMEN IN GAMING

Using Critical Discourse Analysis To Examine Gendered Alliances and Racialized Discords in an Online Gaming Forum

BY KISHONNA L. GRAY

The purpose of this chapter is to examine continued tensions within the feminist community using gaming culture as a catalyst for analysis. August 2014 proved a pivotal moment within the gaming community as the controversy surrounding GamerGate reached a peak with the harassment of Zoe Quinn, Brianna Wu, and Anita Sarkeesian among other feminist game scholars and gaming critics. Additionally, tension during the month of August intensified with the shooting death of Mike Brown propelling the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement and increased awareness around police violence against the Black community. Many netizens employed a variety of means to express support and opposition to each movement utilizing social media, blogs, YouTube, and even gaming spaces. Utilizing Critical Ethnography and Critical Discourse Analysis, this chapter explores the presence of both movements within one online forum dedicated to gaming. Interactions between female gamers who opposed GamerGate and female gamers of color who supported Black Lives Matter reveals racialized tensions among women.

MAINSTREAM FEMINISM, INTERSECTIONAL FEMINISM, AND DIGITAL SPACES

Broadly, feminist engagements with technology and culture are limiting as they fail to capture race and other identifiers, which must also be at the forefront of analysis (Gray, 2015). The analytical frameworks needed to capture the virtual lives of women must have the capability of deconstructing structural inequalities within the space. So the constructing of a hashtag that reads, “Solidarity is for White women,” is largely rooted in the failure of White feminism to adequately address the realities of women of color. Hashtag Feminism brings to the forefront the continued neglect of

mainstream feminism to the intersectional reality of women. It reveals the maintenance of White supremacy by foregrounding the gender struggle often irrespective of race, sexuality, religion, citizenship, and other identifiers. As Jessie Daniels (2015) posits, the dominance of White women as architects and defenders of a framework of exclusive feminism has yet to be interrogated by mainstream feminism in meaningful ways. However, women of color have historically challenged universal feminism and currently employ digital technology to continue this practice.

THE ORIGINS OF RACIALIZED TENSIONS IN THE FEMINIST COMMUNITY

The tensions within the feminist community stem from the historical origins in the Women's Movement and its discussions on slavery. Around 1838 the first wave of feminism was emerging and one of the earliest documents on the issue discussed how the ideal woman was to essentially be at least middle class and White (Newman, 1999). Many people believe that this affirmation continues to permeate among the feminist community (Kotef, 2009). Kotef goes on to discuss how universalism within the feminist community is damaging and has continued to fracture the community. But this has led to the construction of feminism as a movement for and by White women leading to the continuation of White supremacy (Ware 2015; Gilmore 1996; Taylor 1998).

Black feminist thought and intersectionality emerged with debate surrounding the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment (Brah & Phoenix, 2013). Their position created division among Black men and White women, a trend that would continue throughout the Civil Rights and Women's Movements. Black women were actively engaged in dismantling the institution of slavery as well as resist the sexism by Black men, racially gendered sexism by White master's (Taylor, 1998), and racism from White women.

Collective memory often retells a narrative of White women publicly and privately opposing slavery (Daniels, 2014). Historical research even suggests that during the suffrage movement, Black and poor White women supported one another's issues (Taylor, 1998). However, they soon parted ideological ways with the passage of the Reconstruction Amendments as White women realized that Black men would be afforded legal suffrage before them. As Black feminist scholars would articulate years later, White women wanted the exclusive power over the right to vote—granting the white race total supremacy and domination (Taylor, 1998).

The second wave was premised on the grounds of breaking away from the patriarchal chains that defined and controlled women. Simone de Beauvoir discusses how male discourse created women as 'other' placing them in a status shared by Blacks, Jews, and the poor (as cited in Tarrant, 2006). But challenging these traditional definitions was secondary to the route that the second wave took. The second wave of the American women's movement was invigorated by Betty Friedan's groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she discussed the "problem that has no name (hooks, 2009, p. 31)." With this text, Friedan challenged the traditional notions of womanhood and patriarchy urging for women's reentry into the workforce. Friedan was aware of the social construction that bound women in patriarchal establishments as she conducted interviews with housewives about their shared experiences of emptiness, boredom, and isolation (as cited in Hymowitz & Weissman, 1978, p. 342). Feminists of color responded by highlighting the classed and raced privilege in which Friedan was speaking. hooks (2009) points out that Friedan was speaking to and for "college-educated, white women who were compelled by sexist conditioning to remain in the home (p. 32)." The second wave of the feminist movement was proving to be a repeat of the First wave: a reinforcement of white supremacy, the refusal to address class and racial hierarchies, and the failure to bond women of all races and ethnicities (hooks, 2009). The adoption of a bourgeois feminist ideology led Black women to create their own space as they were told that the movement was 'theirs' and that Black women were only a part because they (white women) allowed it (p. 40). Even though second wave feminist were addressing the inequalities that existed in sexist power structures (Humm, 1990), they still ignored racism and elitism that would prohibit the full inclusion of Black feminists (The Combahee River Collective, 2009, p. 4).

Third wave feminist scholarship emerged mostly during the early 90's. Susan Faludi wrote about the backlash that women experienced in her groundbreaking book *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (Guy-Sheftall, 2002). By looking at advertisements, movies, radio, and even the Reagan administration, she outlined how social institutions had created the myth of the 'dissatisfied' woman. Even more damning was that feminism was the cause of this dissatisfaction according to these inflammatory reports. Faludi's purpose is just as significant as the method she used which is reflective of the third wave—media analysis. Even though Black women had always been critical of the imagery associated with Black womanhood, the third wave embraced it fully as a methodological approach.

Third wave literature is as diverse as the commitment to address the intersectional needs of all women. But overall, there seems to be four themes in which third wave

feminists construct their arguments: 1) mend the generational rift that exists between younger and older White feminists; 2) embrace various forms of femininity being inclusive of sexual freedom and agency; 3) acknowledge the contributions of feminists of color, particularly their contribution of intersectional theory; and 4) embrace non-traditional forms of conscious raising and community building (Gray, 2014).

The use of information technologies within contemporary waves is significant for protest and political activism; additionally, feminist scholars have critically analyzed television shows, movies, music, and internet technologies for meaning and implication (Crawford, 2007, pp. 123-124). A recent technological innovation that feminists are employing to organizing and mobilization is social media. Social media is an innovative venue for social activism. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Tumblr allow online users to share and broadcast information about interests and opinions to known contacts or the general public (Naaman, Becker, & Gravano, 2011; Java, Finin, Song, & Tseng, 2007). These networks are examples of how the successful use of the Internet might change the landscape of mobilization given the ability to reach millions in a matter of minutes (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). As an extension of traditional technology, social media has been utilized to address continued issues within the feminist community.

COMMUNICATION, CONFLICT, AND GAMING CULTURE

Gaming culture is an additional site of engagement for the feminist community. Feminist game scholars have incorporated an intersectional focus by engaging identity, technology, and gaming. Contemporary gaming consoles have proven to be more than just gaming platforms, but rather multimedia entertaining outlet for more than 160 million individuals worldwide. And the nature of these spaces distinguishes them from other video games and gaming environments. Specifically, there are several distinguishable features that set console games apart from other gaming outlets: 1) the game is mediated through a console not a computer; 2) online connectivity is not a requirement to game although it is required to access online features; 3) when connected to the Internet, there is the option to explore other mediated content other than just gaming; and 4) console users utilize their consoles for more than just gaming; some purchase the console to satisfy other entertainment needs (Gray, 2012).

As Henry Jenkins (2004) explains, we live in an era of convergence: technological, economic, aesthetic, organic, global—and they all intersect to redefine and reconstruct how we interact with mediated environments. One such mediated

environment is Xbox live which has evolved from a mere console video game to a massive entertainment outlet providing games, movies, TV, music, social networking, and more (Gray, 2014). By incorporating old and new media to provide choice for the gaming audience, Microsoft Xbox Live, Sony Playstation Network, and Nintendo Network (formerly Nintendo Wi-Fi Connection), have situated themselves to reach millions of individuals who may not necessarily be gamers, but who may decide to utilize the console to satisfy varying entertainment and functional needs (Ibid). As Quinn (2005) highlights, the popularity of media convergence originates from the need to reach as many individuals as possible to grant them unlimited access to information when and wherever they want it. Although Quinn was referring to news media, the statement readily applies to other entities striving for convergence. Multimediated Interactive Console Environments have continuously repositioned themselves as a convergent medium and have successfully maintained a following of users (particularly true for Xbox and PlayStation). In 2013, Xbox Live boasted 48 million unique accounts while Sony claims 110 million (McCormick, 2013).

Interactive communication is a key feature of gaming culture and this leads to much conflict. As Black Cyberfeminism reveals (Gray, 2015), marginalized bodies are unable to forego the physical body when they venture online. Women and people of color take with them aspects of their physical selves and are sometimes punished for not conforming to the White, male default operating within digital technology. The presence of real world identifiers can sometimes lead to oppression and inequality as was witnessed among a cohort of female gamers in an Xbox Live forum.

The presence of the #BlackLivesMatter campaign within Xbox Live specifically has generated a significant amount of controversy among gamers. Some contend video gaming is not the place for social activism while others feel that any platform that can reach a wide demographic of individuals is a great place to spread awareness for unarmed citizens being killed by law enforcement. The #BlackLivesMatter campaign has directly impacted a cohort of female gamers within Xbox Live who inserted this movement into a forum space dedicated to GamerGate awareness. This immediately triggered a response by the GamerGate awareness group privileging gender issues as opposed to a focus on race by the #BlackLivesMatter group. When discussing issues of race within these communities, the women who are adamant in their support of the #BlackLivesMatter movement were often labeled as 'angry' or 'bullies' by others because there was a lack of awareness of the lived experiences of racial minorities within the space. Critical race feminists within the space, who represent a small portion of this 'girl's only' space, are criticized as race baiters and are often blamed

for continuing racism. The lack of awareness of the lived experiences of women and people of color reflect a privileged stance, and that presumed safety in dominant society instills fear of losing that privilege of comfort along with possession and control over discourse in online spaces (Park & Leonard 2014).

RESEARCH DESIGN

To explore the nature and extent of racial tensions within the Xbox Live feminist community, critical ethnography will be utilized to explore comments and interactions in an online forum for Xbox. This type of critical race ethnography sees the examination of how language and speech create experiences for mainstream audiences of racialized bodies. As a critical ethnographer, therefore, I bring my critical value orientation and epistemology to ethnographic research. Critical ethnography, according to Madison (2012), begins with an “ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within the particular lived domain” (p. 5). Such an approach attempts to disrupt the status quo by questioning received wisdom and unsettling assumptions by highlighting relations of power (Jones, 2010). This reflects an appropriate method to explore mainstream feminism operating within gaming.

Xbox Live forums are user-generated spaces where gamers post content and respond to existing content. The particular forum explored was created for women who were victims of pro-GamerGate attacks through harassment, trolling, and intimidation. Because the forums are open to the public, a moderate is unable to center conversations on a particular theme. As such, a group of Black women entered the space and began raising awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement that began mobilizing around the death of Mike Brown.

To analyze the content generated and comments posted around these two critical issues, critical discourse analysis was implemented. Critical approaches to discourse analysis allow us to focus on more than social construction. Critical approaches to discourse analysis require us to analyze the power dynamic and see how language connects with the social as the primary domain of ideology (Germond-Duret, 2012). This approach is significant in tackling issues related to domination and subordination of a group on another. This project highlights how a particular discourse serves “dominant actors to maintain domination” (Germond-Duret 2012, 138). In examining the comments posted in the forum on the Xbox Live website, three major themes emerged: 1) colorblind racism and microaggressions run rampant among those who post comments; and 2) the hashtag

#SolidarityisforWhiteWomen captures the essence of Black women's response to the dominance of White feminism in this forum.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The forum began as a space on how to deal with GamerGate operating in Xbox Live. This forum was created to provide solace for women who were being attacked by GamerGate supporters. However, with the two events that unfolded seemingly simultaneously in August 2014, many women within the Xbox Live community began using this space to raise awareness for the death of Mike Brown and the #BlackLivesMatter campaign. This generated the bulk of the tensions within the space, which is illustrated in the excerpt below:

SheBangs321: This wasn't made for that.

TastyDiamond: What was the space made for then? For activism right? Why you picking and choosing?

SheBangs321: I'm not trying to be a bitch but we can't do all that. Like their lives are being threatened. These fucks are posting their addresses and shit.

TastyDiamond: Niggas is getting kilt. Aint nothing happened to these white bitches yet.

LotusBloom: Just make your own forum and let this one alone.

The larger conversation demonstrates the failure of mainstream feminists to fully embrace the racialized nature of oppression. The women within this aspect have failed to recognize the privilege of Whiteness by refusing to recognize their complicity in White supremacy. The failure to encourage an inclusionary participatory public leads to the maintenance of Whiteness as privilege.

Gaming communities are increasingly becoming primary spaces for communication so critical attention must be given to interactions within these spaces. The gestures, comments, imagery, and other types of engagement all explicitly and implicitly stigmatize certain groups and reaffirm the position of the dominant group. Mainstream feminism diminishing the racialized reality of Black women and other women of color serves a pivotal function in maintaining a social hierarchy of discrimination, exclusion, as the primary means of transmitting ideology through information and imagery. By framing Black women using diminishing and stereotypical terms, this reaffirms the universalism of White feminism and makes the diminished status appear natural and normal.

SheBangs321: Everytime you come to this room, you start problems. We're not racist so stop saying that.

TastyDiamond: The shit yall say make yall racist. Yall don't care what my color is? But yall want me to care about your pussy and the shit you go through? Fuk'd up logic.

SheBangs321: But this is an all girls space so of course we'd talk about girl shit.

TastyDiamond: But I'm a girl too! Right! I'm just a black one!

The above excerpt from a much larger and deeper conversation reveal the continued tensions among many who work to improve the conditions of women in virtual and real spaces. There is a failure oftentimes to capture the lived experiences of all women, particularly women of color in this context. As *SheBangs321* suggested, the all-girls space discusses issues among women and race is not a part of that conversation. This is one example of many illuminating mainstream feminisms inability to capture the lived realities of marginalized identities within the feminist community.

The women of color spent considerable time urging for acknowledgement within this community of women who were seeking support from attacks from GamerGate supporters. Their failure originates in the inability to recognize common oppression among women, acknowledging privilege and racialized differences.

SheBangs321: But we are addressing your needs too. We're talking about helping all women here.

TastyDiamond: But you're not. When you fix the whole gender issue, I still have to deal with racism.

SheBangs321: ...racism isn't a problem tho! Gamergate's not racist. They're attacking women.

This exchange reveals just how contested the space can become when challenge privilege. It also highlights the unspoken assumption that women don't criticize other women and they stand in solidarity no matter what.

While these women utilized this online forum space as a counter public where they are largely excluded from the hyper-masculine world of gaming, mainstream feminists essentially replicated these exclusionary practices sustaining White supremacy within the space.

#SOLIDARITYISFORWHITEWOMEN

After the cohort of Black women were asked to leave the forum they did so and created their own forum and brought the movement #solidarityisforwhitewomen to Xbox Live. In this forum, they discussed the continuation of many White women to recognize the amplification effect of race on oppression. Borrowing from the popular hashtag created by Mikki Kendall, Black women within this forum left and created their own, short-lived forum to discuss the lack of attention given to issues faced by women of color in the gaming community. The few posts made by Black women reveal that the tensions of previous generations of women have manifested in the gaming community as well. Ironically, the forum was short lived because it was flagged for being offensive and was removed by Microsoft administrators. But the excerpts below reveal the nature of their comments:

TastyDiamond: yall know we aint women. We black to them. And we don't matter.

KushKunt: since when did white women become oppressed. They white. And they settle for all the bullshit they men create. So why should I even care about what's happening to them.

FeministaJones: They aint never had to deal with nothing and GG scaring the fuck out of them. I was like, bitch, walk down my hood for a second and these GG pussies look like pussies.

KushKunt: Fucking thumb thugs. That's its. They aint doing shit.

TastyDiamond: Shit white dudes crazy. Dem muh'fuckahs a shoot in a heart beat. They talk about niggas and guns. Naw crackas and guns. And they let they asses walk around town with em all day.

KushKunt: LMFAO you right!

The initial conversations within this space created were venting sessions, they didn't even focus directly on the #BlackLivesMatter movement, but their isolated existence totally reflects the mantra that Black lives don't matter. They were kicked out of the forum for being Black, masked in the colorblind rhetoric of 'you're rude.' Although their comments also reveal a problematic understanding of White women in their assumption that they aren't oppressed. But the lack of understanding seems to be rooted in the close proximity that White women have to White men. Black women assume that White women have more power to influence men.

Women of color are often blamed for creating or contributing to a toxic form of feminism. The harsh reactions to racism and sexism seem to take precedent over the racism/sexism itself. There is still very little debate on the dominance of white

feminism historically and contemporarily. The Black women inserting themselves into the forum to seek solidarity among activists mainstream feminism reveal an attempt to mend the fractured community.

White women, especially those who are feminists are important in understanding the relation of White people to the racial formation. White women simultaneously occupy dominant and subordinate categories. Personal insights regarding their own oppression as “female” can be inversely applied to the oppression of people of color, especially women. A feminist perspective is by definition a critical perspective; that is, a stand for equality and against the status quo. Nevertheless, the various strands of feminism developed by white women are limited in their critical analyses especially in terms of race (Sandoval, 1991).

DISCUSSION

While interrogating and coming to terms with being invisible, Black women have to also critically challenge the narrative associated when Black women are made visible. Hashtag culture on Twitter reveals the uproar associated when Black women attempt to create and reframe narratives but these attempts are often met with extreme backlash accusing Black women of being angry, hostile, and creators of toxic environments for White women. However, Twitter has allowed women of color to shape herstory within the hegemonic structures of digital media. Hashtag culture and other forms of microblogging while limited, in the aggregate allow for an intricate analysis involving sometimes thousands of individuals on a given topic. This form of meta-commentary directs the audience’s attention to specific issues.

While there is usually limited engagement on the origins of the racialized tensions within the feminist community, the purpose of this paper is to situate contemporary issues within the digital feminist community within this much needed historical context. Intersectional feminists highlight interconnected identities, interconnected social forces, and distinct circumstances to better theorize women existing within society and even operating within internet technologies. This truly captures the uniqueness of marginalized women who sometimes feel compelled to create hashtags, disrupt exclusionary spaces, and protest to draw attention to their physical and digital realities.

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CHAPTER 5.

AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF PLAY

Intersecting and Diverging Experiences across Gender, Identity, Race, and Sexuality in Game Culture
BY GABRIELA T. RICHARD

In the summer of 2014, the hashtag #GamerGate made waves throughout the Twittersphere and gained national media attention and critique, as explored more extensively in other chapters in this volume. Markedly, the social media movement focused on a sense of gamer identity, as being one tied to the way games are currently designed around White, male, cisgendered (i.e., gender normative) and heterosexual norms (e.g., Ringo, 2014). Despite claims of wanting to reform gaming journalism, the players, developers and journalists most likely to be targeted and threatened by #GamerGate were women, racial/ethnic minorities or queer. Kathy Sierra, a game developer and one of the earliest recipients of prior digital public gender harassment, termed the backlash that results from increased visibility “the Kool-Aid point” to highlight how harassment becomes strongest when “haters” feel like people are drinking your Kool-Aid (Sierra, 2014). If we think about the intersections of gender and race, and the historical conflation of gender as being embodied by white women (Collins, 1990), it isn’t difficult to understand why the most visible victims of #GamerGate were white women who appeared to gain the most attention from media coverage and, conversely, the harassers. In fact, GamerGate became associated with a mascot, Vivian James (see figure 5.1), a white woman gamer who embodied all of the attributes typically associated with male gamer culture, and who was supposed to represent all of the supposedly diverse gamers who backed the cause (Ringo, 2014). In many ways, GamerGate and its mascot typify the historical reality that queer people and women of color are often left out of these popular narratives, particularly around digital games (Nakamura, 2012).



Figure 5.1. Vivian James, the GamerGate mascot.

Digital gaming and the physical and virtual spaces formed around its play and engagement have long been viewed as male-dominated and marginalizing, especially for women and girls. Gaming has largely been understood as a culture that primarily privileges and embraces male participation, and that has a strong relationship with trajectories and participation in computing and related careers (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kiesler, Sproull & Eccles, 1985). Since the early 1980s, a long line of research exploring gender inequity in gaming was prompted by concerns that game-based subject matter would not be of interest to women and girls, and this lack of interest would adversely affect women's decisions to pursue careers and competencies associated with digital technologies. In the late 1990s, there was an outgrowth in the desire to design games for girls (e.g., Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Kafai, et. al., 2008). These designs for girls prompted two new terms: first, there were "pink games" to describe games that had been designed around stereotypical female preferences (e.g., doll-based role playing or dress up); second there were "purple games", describing games that had been designed around the kinds of interests girls expressed, such as relationship building. Many of these assumptions around gendered interests and preferences have served as an unchecked foundation to game design, such that designing for gender became an explicit part of its practice (e.g., Lazzaro, 2008).

Elsewhere (Richard, 2013a), I noted that the scholarly work on gender and game play can be divided into three distinct waves: the first wave (roughly, 1980-1999) tended to focus on sex or gender differences in preferences or styles of play; the second wave (roughly, 2000-2008) started to address the variability of female interests and the role of age among other contextual issues, such as differential support, that influenced participation; the third wave (post-2008 to now), while still at its infancy, is intersectional in nature, exploring constructs and experiences across gender, race,

sexuality, gender identity, and class, for example, as well as conceptions of masculinity. Much of this third-wave work has questioned whether gendered interest and participation is a by-product of design (Lazzaro, 2008). Many scholars have raised the issue that socially-constructed gender assumptions around play, as well as physical and social barriers to play spaces, reinforce the widely held perception that females inherently have less of a desire to play video games (e.g., Bertozzi, 2008; Bryce & Rutter, 2003; Yee, 2008).

Focusing on gender difference tends to privilege masculinity as the “norm” and everything else as the alternative (Dickey, 2006), which is partly to explain why the focus on gender tends to implicitly focus on female experiences. Scholars who have attempted to understand the nuances of male experiences have found gaming spaces to be places where males can try out different masculinities (Jenkins, 1998), “dominance bond” (Kimmel, 2008) or “perform” masculinity, as it has been culturally defined, through violence and competition (Burrill, 2008). It also allows men to rectify the fragility of masculinity in geek identity, by utilizing technology and digitized spaces for masculine performativity (Burrill, 2008). While this creates a unique space for masculine gender expression, it symbiotically creates a space of exclusion for those that may threaten that expression (Kimmel, 2008). For example, Kimmel’s research highlights that cultural spaces, such as gaming, have increasingly been claimed as male bonding spaces in the perceived age of political correctness. The imbalanced playing field penalizes men’s masculinity when bested by a woman, but also punishes women for being in an arena where they are assumed not to belong (Bertozzi, 2008, p. 474).

While the gatekeeping of women and ethnic/racial minorities is not a new phenomenon in geek/gamer culture, its increased visibility through #GamerGate in 2014 has made these insular issues more popular. For example, when starting my ethnography in 2009, many of these issues were vocalized within safe spaces in game culture, such as female-supportive clans or guilds. In 2012, several events, such as the creation of sites like fatuglyorslutty.com and NotInTheKitchenAnymore.com to document gender harassment in game culture, and the public harassment of Anita Sarkessian after announcing her “Tropes vs. Women in Video Games” campaign (see figure 5.2), put issues of gender inequality and the need for reform on the public agenda (see, Richard & Hoadley, 2013), paving the road to the 2014 #GamerGate backlash. Also, during this time, blogs related to the “fake geek girl” and metrics to assess female legitimacy at increasingly popular geek and gaming conventions started to emerge (see figure 5.3) (Griffiths, 2012).

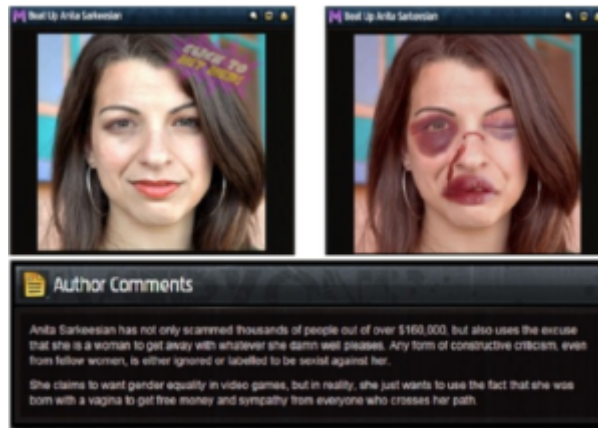


Figure 5.2. At the height of the backlash against Anita Sarkeesian in 2012, a game was designed to beat her up.



Figure 5.3. Memes designed around “fake geek girls” or “fake gamer girls” focused on female sexuality as a metric for authenticity.

SITUATING INTERSECTIONALITY HISTORICALLY AND IN DIGITAL PLAY

The concept of intersectionality has long roots, but was most popularly termed by black feminist academics (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991). Collins (1990) traces these roots back to black women activists, writers and scholars, such as Sojourner Truth and Audrey Lorde. Intersectionality has historically been a palpable experience for black women “...because women of color experience racism in ways not always the

same as those experienced by men of color and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252).

In game studies, several scholars noted problems in gendered and racial representations in games, with researchers critiquing games as promoting “racialized pedagogical zones” (Everett & Watkins, 2008) and “high-tech blackface” (Leonard, 2005). Both theories critique games as teaching entrenched stereotypes through an immersive medium that can serve to further harmful narratives about people of color. Lisa Nakamura’s (1995) work on identity tourism, dating back to text-based multi-user dungeons, further documents how playing with highly stereotyped gendered and racialized bodies furthers connections to harmful stereotypes as opposed to deeper perspectives on marginalized identities. In 2006, David Leonard (2006) issued a call to arms for game studies to incorporate intersectional investigations as part of their work, proclaiming that excluding intersectionality “contributes to problematic, if not faulty, understandings of video games and their significant role in contemporary social, political, economic, and cultural organization” (p. 83-4). However, until recently, most intersectional work focused on representations of game characters and in-game narratives, instead of the experiences of players consuming these narratives.

Contemporary work on gender or race and gaming has underscored the role that marketing and representation play in precluding participation (e.g., Fron, et. al., 2007). Scholars who have looked at representational issues in games, and found that whites and males, respectively, make up over 80% of game characters, have long hypothesized that representational issues will have effects on who plays and engages with gaming (Williams, et. al., 2009). A growing body of emerging work is finding that hypersexualized female representation as well as a lack of diverse characters across gender and race can have negative effects on players’ perceptions and self-perceptions of women and racial/ethnic minorities (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Dill & Burgess, 2013; Fox, et. al., 2014; Lee & Park, 2011). This seems to also effect what characters players customize on their own, as at least one study found that 87% of customized characters in an massively multiplayer online game are male, and 92% are white (Waddel, et. al., 2014). Studies have found that, despite skill, a female voice is three times as likely to be harassed than a male’s (Kuznekoff & Rose, 2013). Gray (2012) and Richard (2013b) have similarly found that women and players of color are more likely to be harassed. Shaw (2012) has found that marginalized individuals are less likely to identify with gaming and representation does not necessarily rectify this imbalance. Research has also shown that racial identity can further be assumed through play styles (Nakamura, 2009). Despite emerging

intersectional work, there is still a need to understand the complexity and nuance in marginalized play, particularly across intersecting sociocultural experiences, in part because, historically, different groups' experiences are assessed separately and juxtaposed to the experiences of the dominant group (in this case, white male players).

One approach to understanding these intricacies is to look at social identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). According to theory, social identities are largely affected by group affiliation, and social context plays a large role in individuals' goal orientations. Implicit biases can affect how the parents, teachers and the wider culture evaluate and support girls and women in pursuing certain careers, particularly in computing and technology (Hill, Corbett & St Rose, 2010, pp. 78). Research on learning environments has further shown that environmental bias can have measurable and significant effects on how individuals learn (Picho & Stevens, 2012). This effect is often termed "stereotype threat" (Steele, 1997), which occurs when negative stereotypes of a gender or ethnic groups' ability in a field or interest area are elicited, explicitly or ambiguously, causing stress, which then undermines the stereotyped groups' performance, regardless of actual skill. In the short term, stereotype threat can impact and inhibit performance on a specific task, but, in the long term, it can have disengaging effects with the interest area (Steele, 1997). These effects have been traditionally seen in highly stereotyped fields, such as math and technology, and have even been replicated in sports and leisure activities (see, Richard & Hoadley, 2013).

RESEARCHING INTERSECTING INEQUALITIES

The data presented here are excerpted from a larger mixed methods study of game culture, which began as an ethnography where I was a participant-observer as a woman of color in game culture and within a female-supportive gaming community – PMS Clan – from 2009-2013 (see, Richard, 2013b). PMS Clan, first documented as "Psychotic Man Slayerz" in 1998 (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998), now known as "Pandora's Mighty Soldiers," has members across gender, though men joined the linked H2O Clan. As the study progressed, interviews and surveys were employed to triangulate themes from my observations and participation. Over 60 game players and non-players were interviewed, and over 143 gamer players were surveyed online (see table 5.1) through different gaming sites to understand what shaped their identification, confidence and play¹.

Below, I discuss how players' sense of social identity is related to gaming confidence (self-concept) and identification. In other words, the data helps to highlight how representational issues, marginalization and gatekeeping, and other sociocultural

expectations relate to measurable outcomes and perceptions that impact belonging, confidence and persistence in gaming across gender, race/ethnicity, sexuality and gender identity. I first start by explicating the themes of intersecting and diverging experiences of players, and then discuss these within a snapshot of survey results.

INTERSECTING AND DIVERGING MARGINALIZATION

During the course of the ethnography and interviews, I uncovered several prominent themes related to the ways that individuals' experiences in game culture were shaped by gender, gender identity, race/ethnicity and sexuality. In some ways, these experiences intersected and in others they diverged. Many, but not all, of the interviews, were with members of PMS/H2O Clan, across gender. One thing to note is that players within PMS/H2O Clan sought it out as a safe haven from harassment, and their reflections on experiences of harassment occurred when playing with players outside of the community.

Gender	Males = 93; Females = 48; Genderqueer = 1
	Heterosexual = 117
Sexuality	Gay/Lesbian = 12
	Bisexual/Pansexual = 12
	Sexuality Unknown = 1 (Genderqueer participant)
	White/Caucasian = 102
	Hispanic/Latino = 16
Race/Ethnicity	Multiethnic/Other = 11
	African American = 7
	Asian American = 5
	Pacific Islander = 2
Age ²	18-57 (average = 28.7)

Table 5.1. Snapshot of Survey Demographics

Theme 1: Harassment as Gatekeeping Across Social Identities

Harassment was a prevalent form of gatekeeping for women and ethnic/racial minorities. Both experienced “linguistic profiling” (Gray 2012) such that the way they spoke was used to distinguish their gender or race/ethnicity. For example, an 18-year old, white female player described linguistic profiling as prolific when playing online,

and, while most popular opinion assumes harassment can be platform-dependent (and assumed to be higher in console-based gaming, such as on Xbox Live), she describes it as something experienced across different gaming environments. Of note here is not only gender-based harassment but also the assumption of masculinity (which I discuss more below):

I remember trying to play when I was... about twelve...on Xbox... and the computer... and every time I spoke on the microphone I would almost instantaneously start being harassed, hearing things like "oh my god, are you a girl?" and "you're not a girl, you're just a little boy who sounds like a girl." Or even worse, I'd get males who would send me photos of their private parts, or ask for photos of mine.

Similarly, a 22-year-old Latino male player discussed the prevalence of being harassed while playing with his other Black and Hispanic friends online. In his depiction, linguistic profiling is often limited to a binary view of race. As a native New Yorker, who grew up in the Bronx, the assumptions related to his word choice and accent were assumed to be Black. However, as has been historically noted (always_black, 2006), racial slurs directed at African Americans are often evoked as a form of gatekeeping and in-game dominance:

I'm Puerto Rican, I'm used to people calling me spic but people on Xbox when they hear [me and my friends'] voices, they're like "he's a nigger." I used to get mad, "I'm not a nigger, I'm not black, that's racist, stop!"... but now I'm used to it.

Both women and racial/ethnic minority players noted experiences of *Avatar or Bio Stalking* (Richard, 2014) to determine their gender or race. Sometimes this happened during the course of game play, when another player would announce they had looked at their profile, or would otherwise reveal information they could only have obtained by looking at their online gamer biography. For example, an African American female player described "bio stalking" as interchangeable with linguistic profiling:

...sometimes if your tag looks too feminine, I guess, for everyone in the lobby, they'll kick you, sometimes if you use voice chat, they'll kick you...

A 22-year-old Latino male player described witnessing *Avatar or Bio Stalking* during a live match. After describing the incident, I inquired into how the offending player knew her race when harassing her (since she was described as not using the microphone during game play):

So she wins, I just say, "Yo, great game." This other guy plugs in his mic...says, "Hey girl, get in the kitchen...nigger girl, get me some fucking fried chicken"... Her avatar was black on the profile picture,

so I'm guessing he just saw that and just decided, "Okay, she's black." It starts getting racist and sexist at the same time, and she leaves.

Despite some similarities in gender and racial harassment among participants, women reported to be more likely to be harassed based on their gender, over and above their cultural background (particularly when linguistic profiling was used), except for a few rare cases where they had strong ethnic identifiers. In PMS Clan, posts about racial harassment were less prevalent for female players (making up only a few posts out of hundreds for gender harassment). Ethnic harassment directed at a female player is highlighted in the following post from a community member from New Zealand:

It's really annoying. I come from a really strong cultural background so racial slurs make me pretty mad. I'm so happy there's a mute button or else I'd probably be leaving most games or having a pointless argument with a random person.

Even in interviews, women were more likely to discuss gender harassment, as gender may have been easier to ascertain than race/ethnicity, and one of the most prolific ways to direct vitriol and hostility at women in online gaming. Conversely, men of color cited exclusively being harassed based on their race or ethnicity, with a good amount of frequency. As discussed by a 25-year-old Latino male player, his experiences around ethnic and racial harassment mirror the 22-year-old players' experiences, with the addition of Latino slurs:

Most of my friends online are Black, Puerto Rican, Dominican... Every time I game with them, if they even sounded remotely with a deep voice, they were automatically black, they were the "N" word and told to go back to Africa... It's just like, "Wow!" One of my friend's mottos on Xbox is, "If I had a dollar for every time I heard a black joke, I'd be rich"... Sometimes, they'd call me all kinds of "spic" [and say] "oh, you're Mexican, go back to Mexico"... It just goes to show how uneducated people can be and how idiotic. I don't know. I really think it's about a power thing...

In his case, it may have been easier to ascertain he was Hispanic, based on his accent or use of words, but he again states the conflation of his assumed racial background as African American. Both of the Latino males interviewed and discussed here are Puerto Rican and native New Yorkers. Assuming that Latinos are not American was especially frustrating for them, given the historical significance of Puerto Rico as an American territory, and thus making them citizens. Furthermore, their cultural heritage is implicitly rendered invisible, as if Puerto Ricans were not recognized as players. While it is difficult to know who they were playing with, and what their experiences with Latinos were, the continued pigeonholing of their experiences as

being either African American or Mexican indicated a limited sense of racial and ethnic diversity players were attuned to, or the assumed denigrated value of these particular racial groups making the associated slurs perceived consummate insults. Similarly, the proclivity toward “nigger” as the dominant slur seems to relegate certain kinds of online linguistic participation into one binary category, which harkens back to Everett and Watkins, and Leonard’s critiques of games teaching racialized pedagogy, where exaggerated stereotypes around working-class blackness become entrenched in urban themes.

Women described harassment that was sexist or gender devaluing in nature, which mostly focused on rigid gender roles (i.e., “go back to the kitchen”), weight (i.e., “fat”) and appearance (i.e., “ugly”) as an evaluation of femininity, and their sexual availability (i.e., “slutty”)³. In other words, the themes of harassment imply that a woman who plays on male turf is seen as either there to cater to male desire or is too unappealing to be womanly. In part due to the male assumed nature of the space, female players also often discussed initially being mistaken for men or boys (as highlighted previously). Many women recounted similar stories of mistaken male identity, such that harassment seemed to be a way to interrogate and police male hierarchy. Furthermore, these categorizations of female value in the form of harassment happened across race and ethnicity:

They would send me pictures of things I didn’t want to see, or they would harass me, or if I were good, because I was great at Call of Duty 4, they’d say I was a guy playing under a girl’s name... I don’t talk on the mic, I just play... I just stopped talking cuz they’d be like, “oh that’s a girl, let’s harass her or ask for her number or something.” – Latina female player [interview], 29-years-old

...eventually someone will get it or read my bio and say, ‘Wait, you’re a girl? Are you ugly? Are you fat? You’re a slut...etc.’...I rarely ever run into just decent guys who either don’t say anything about it or say, “Hey, you’re pretty good.” – White female player [forum post], age unknown

Further, women found that pandering to male dominance in the space tended to shield them from harassment. In other words, being the sole female player among a group of men was a way to safeguard oneself from provocation, rather than playing with a group of women, which would in many ways be seen as being oppositional to the gendered power structure. As discussed by a female player in PMS Clan on a forum post:

...usually if I am in a party full of [male members] and I am the only [female] I don’t hear anything [from other players], but when there are 3 or more [female members] together that’s when you usually run into it...

For queer players, sexuality was often an invisible construct that players could choose to divulge, and, as such could avoid direct harassment for:

...most people don't recognize or identify me as being gay right away, so I can sneak in if I really want to and not face any real negative consequence because I can kind of blend if needed. – Gay, white male player [interview], 33-years-old

However, “coming out” was still considered a big deal, especially once a player was part of a community of other players they wanted to bond with. On the other hand, gaming lingo, which often used terms such as “gay” in a derogatory way, was seen as a major derisive factor in their play and participation, as opposed to direct harassment based on their sexuality or gender identity.

Frankly, I'd be happy if I didn't have to hear 'that was GAY' 10,000 times in almost any random game I join. Most people would never say 'that was black' or 'that was chinky' but they think nothing of using 'that was gay' to refer to anything negative or stupid that happens in a game. – Lesbian, female player [forum post], age & race unknown

OK so I'm a gay guy who likes to play video games ...I'm trying to find some other gay/gayfriendly players to play with... It would be nice just play with people without words like “homo” and [faggot] getting thrown around. – Gay, male player [forum post], age & race unknown

Although queer players did not cite direct harassment as a gatekeeping strategy, the prolific use of gay slurs in standard gamer lingo created an environment that seemed ripe for queer contempt. As such, communities that banned the use of racist, sexist and homophobic lingo, such as PMS Clan, were attractive, and were often sought out as safe havens for queer players, as well as other diverse players.

Theme 2: Game Culture and Narrow Definitions of Gender and Sexuality

Players across gender, race/ethnicity and sexuality discussed feeling the need to negotiate their sociocultural identities in the game space through a narrow view of gender. Women had to navigate competing expectations for their gender identity, in a way that was tied to pleasing and orienting themselves around men. On the one hand, they were more respected if they acted tough like the men, but, on the other hand, they were still expected to be sexually desirable and pleasing to the male gaze, without being overly so. Gay male players recounted similarly having their experience oriented around rigid male heterocentric assumptions in game culture. As discussed by a 33-year-old, gay, white male player:

...I think being gay gives me a different experience than most people of my gender. I think most typical guys have that sort of masculinity thing where this is their turf and their domain. I never

really related to that... I can see how women or girls being on the other side of that could feel very exclusionary, if that makes sense.

Many of the issues around a static heterosexually desirable female identity that the larger game culture framed for women can be a limitation even within safe spaces. I discuss the limits for sexual expression in PMS Clan in another chapter (see Richard, forthcoming), but, in summary, due partly to outside corporate sponsorship and the visibility of PMS Clan, many lesbian and trans gamers found their ability to express their identity and desires limited. For example, in response to having forum threads removed that discussed homosexuality, one forum member started a thread critiquing this practice:

So basically can I not speak of being a lesbian???...Cause that is what it is coming out to be on these forums because we can no longer speak about something as natural as boobs and sexual preferences. I'm a lesbian and I'm proud to be it!!!

Responses to the thread indicated that the discussion could possibly be considered “offensive” by sponsors. Shortly afterward, a thread was started to discuss these issues in the private, female members-only section of the website, seemingly out of view of sponsors and the public.

Similarly, assumptions of catering to a rigid, binary view of gender was alienating and isolating to genderqueer and transgendered players. Many marginalized gamers sought out identity supportive communities, such as PMS Clan; however, their focus on supporting female gamers in a male-oriented space created structural rigidity around gender categories in order to vet members and preserve their mission. As a result, creating an oppositional binary based on “gender” excluded those who did not fit narrow categories of maleness or femaleness. This can be evidenced in a forum post from an inquiring recruit to the clan in 2011:

Inquiring recruit: Hiya, I'm new here, I've had a look around the forums but couldn't really see an answer to this, are transgender girls welcome in PMS? It says PMS is for females, H2O for males, what about people who are trans/gender queer, are they allowed to apply for their chosen gender clan? Thank you.

Community General: Hi [name removed]. Please see our handbook [link]... this should answer all of your questions

Inquiring recruit: I found: “Female is defined as a person with the female sexual organs at the time of membership.” I guess that answers my question. There are people living fulltime as women who cant afford surgery, some who live in countries where surgery is illegal... I really hope you'll reconsider your policy one day. Thank you.

Theme 3: Gatekeeping practices as Limiting Play, Learning and Potential Trajectories

Gatekeeping practices, typically through harassment, had similar effects on the play of women and racially/ethnically diverse players. Harassment lead to silencing, hiding and similar forms of marginalization, as highlighted in ethnographic documents and interviews.

I guess they can tell I'm Spanish from my voice... It happens a lot... Most of the time, I play with a mic on but I keep myself muted. I want to hear just in case they [want to strategize], but [the harassment] gets annoying. –Latino male player [interview], 33-years-old

If I am gaming on my own, I usually play some music and keep my mic off, and just destroy people, or I go into a party chat with my friends. – female player [forum post], age & race unknown

I never play matchmaking on my own on my main tag, I'm always on my 2nd (are you shocked?) [where] you can't tell if I'm a girl or guy. – female player [forum post], age & race unknown

Harassment also negatively impacted the performance of female players and players of color. In several interviews, players recalled having visceral and memorable reactions to harassment that physically altered their engagement and performance, evidencing a form of stereotype threat.

I feel positive experiences are a little more than the negative experiences, but the negative experiences just kind of take down my whole vibe and my mood within the game...– African American female player [interview], 21-years-old

Sometimes, yeah, it does [affect the way I play]... it does... energy is everything when you're playing... when you're positive, you'll do anything to win, but when someone shoots out the racial slurs... you just want to get the game over with... the energy isn't there... you just want everything to be over with... – African American Male Player [interview], 21-years-old

Women, in particular, highlighted harassment as leading to discontinuing play altogether, at least for a short while. For example, in a PMS Clan forum post, a mother in her 30s discussed how her initial experiences playing online stopped her from engaging with gaming for a significant amount of time:

The first thing I ever heard the first time I played online was 'Go back to the kitchen and make a sandwich [bitch]'. It took me months before I ventured online again!!!

The themes underscore a gaming culture in which diverse players are often at the margins, negotiating their play and identities in complex ways. Unsurprisingly, other research has highlighted that the culture of game production, which is mostly White

or Asian, male and heterosexual has a strong effect on the culture of play (e.g., Fron, et.al., 2007). Research demonstrates the importance of informal digitally mediated spaces (including game culture) to later pursuits and efficacy to learn with technology (Goode, 2010). In other words, being marginalized from playful experiences with technologies and computing can have wide sweeping effects on how individuals engage in computing literacies and practices that can have major implications outside of the sphere of play (see figure 5.4).

Another way to understand this phenomenon is that stereotype threat in early learning experiences around technology – and in this case, gaming – can limit the engagement and persistence in computing and STEM. The themes above help to highlight how this happens, and follow-up surveys further quantify these themes of increased stereotype threat vulnerability for women, African Americans and Latino players and subsequent negative effects on their gaming confidence and identification. For example, women and players of color are more significantly vulnerable to stereotype threat (see figure 5.5), which has a measurable negative relationship to gaming self-concept (or belief in their abilities) that, in turn, affects persistence (see figure 5.6 and for a more detailed analysis, see Richard, 2013b). While it is difficult to know how many people have left gaming due to harassment, persistence seems to be an exercise in resiliency against the odds, as can similarly be seen in computing and STEM environments, where women and racial/ethnic minorities are often outnumbered and unsupported (Richard, 2014).

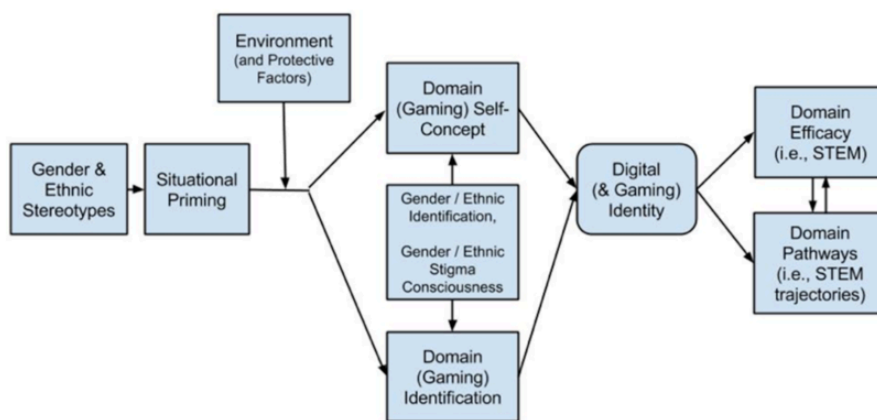


Figure 5.4. How social identities and stereotypes affect participation in game play spaces and later pathways in technology and computing.

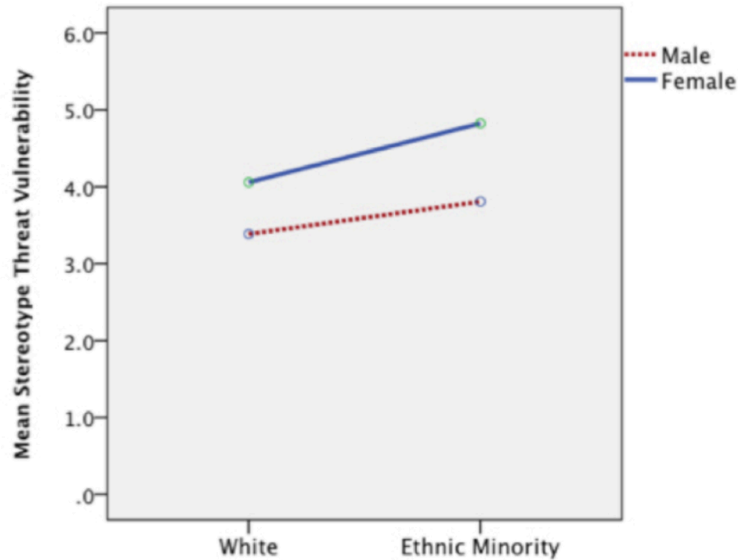


Figure 5.5. Stereotype Threat Vulnerability by Gender and Ethnicity.

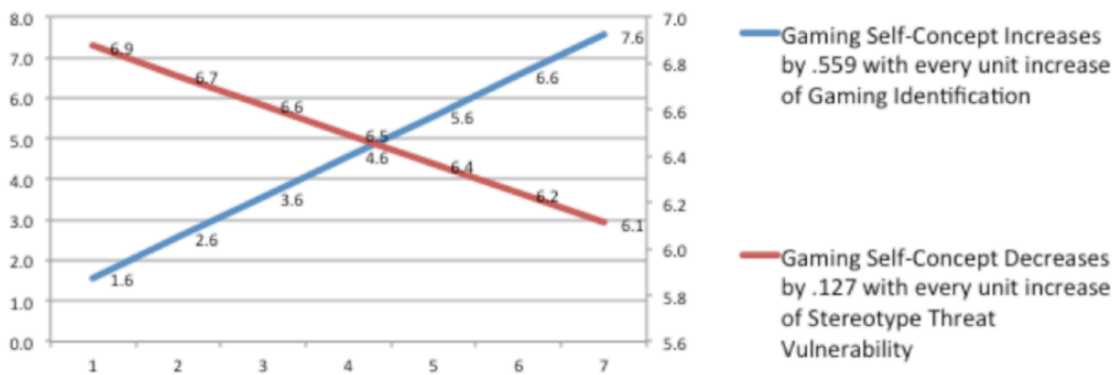


Figure 5.6. Gaming Self-Concept as affected by Gaming Identification and Stereotype Threat Vulnerability

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

By intersectionally analyzing a diverse set of players' experiences, three major themes of intersection and divergence emerged: (1) harassment and gatekeeping were varied yet prevalent for women and players of color; (2) narrow definitions of gender and sexuality in game culture created significant barriers for queer players and queer expression; and (3) gatekeeping and marginalizing practices limited or prevented marginalized players' learning and participation in gaming, and could have significant effects on their related technology pathways. In my surveys, I did not find

significant effects for stereotype threat by sexuality or gender identity, but this may be in part because direct harassment is less tied to sexuality, which typically needs to be disclosed, versus gender or race, which can often be discerned through other means. However, on the other hand, the rigidity of gender identity and the heteronormativity of game culture appeared to make disclosure and queer expression in a safe space challenging.

In light of the increasing presence of game play as professional spectatorship, through popular outlets like *Twitch.tv*, and other ways that our real identities are being tied to our gaming and play identities (i.e., consoles increasingly connecting “real names” to player profiles), our sociocultural identities are even more visible in our play. At the same time, the rising presence of diverse game players, and the increasing push toward making inclusive games has been met by negative backlash by a myopic fan base that views gaming as a limited culture from which they derive identity (i.e., GamerGate). On the other hand, this sense of identity tied to gaming can be partly explained by how games portray (or fail to include) diversity. Increased representation, while controversial, can help to diversify how game culture comes to embrace and support women, minorities and queer players, particularly if done in ways that defy and diversify old tropes. Another avenue is presented through independent development, which both subverts and applies pressure to established commercial entities, particularly as software and platforms become more accessible to small-scale development. However, indie game development cannot be the only end solution, since there is still a high cost associated with a low monetary returns, and similar persistent gender and racial barriers (Jaffa, 2016).

Another promising area comes from female-supportive gaming communities, with members across gender, which have been found to not only positively affect the play and practices of the female gamers but the male members as well (Richard & Hoadley, 2013). Further, there is evidence that the larger game culture has been significantly influenced by their presence, with many members going on to leadership roles in the industry. However, they also serve as a cautionary tale that focusing exclusively on gender does not provide a fully inclusive space. For example, since gender is the orienting framework of the community, ethnic diversity, sexuality and gender nonconformity often don't get as much attention or explicit support.

As part of a major effort to diversify pathways to gaming, our work needs to further explore and unpack the glaring assumption that white, male players are the norm, something that is implicitly assumed but not explicitly investigated, with rare exception. In an effort to widen our reach with inclusivity, our research and design

needs to similarly widen to focus on the intersections of play and participation in order to be more cognizant of and effective in furthering diversity in scholarship, design and participation. This would include dismantling assumptions in juxtaposition to the white, male audience by including them in our wider understanding of diversifying play.

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Notes

1. In addition, several game developers were interviewed to understand how they designed games around gender, race and sexuality (not reported upon here).
2. Note that age was limited to adults over 18, as per human subjects/IRB. The various gaming sites, and PMS Clan, had members as young as 12 or 13.
3. In this sense, both NotInTheKitchenAnymore.com and FatUglyOrSlutty.com, two websites designed to document and archive gender harassment in game culture, nailed the major themes of gender-based harassment.

CHAPTER 6.

UNDERSTANDING GAMING AND GENDER WITHIN THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF MEXICAN-AMERICAN FAMILY HOMES

BY SINEM SIYAHHAN AND ELISABETH GEE

Recent studies suggest that the digital divide between Latinos and Whites has significantly narrowed over the past decade (Livingston, 2011; Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Latino adults are acquiring smartphones, video gaming consoles, and tablet computers at an equal or higher rate than White and Black non-Latino adults (Rainie, 2012; The Nielson Company, 2014; Zickuhr & Smith, 2012). Yet, beyond these numbers, we actually know little about how Latinos, in particular girls and women, participate in gaming culture (Jenkins, 2006; Watkins, 2011). Latino men and boys are far more often to be the focus of discussions of Latino gamers, while Latinas, if mentioned at all, are treated primarily as “female” gamers (Entertainment Software Association, 2014; Gamboa, 2014; Louie, 2003).

Even less is known about the physical arrangements where games are played and the social context of the homes where video gaming takes place (Stevens, Satwicz, & McCarthy, 2008). In this chapter, we examine how Latino women and girls participate in gaming in the physical context of their home and in the socio-cultural context of their family life. By so doing, our goal is to move beyond the masculinity/femininity binary, and understand gaming practices of women and girls as socially, culturally, and physically contextualized. To this end, we analyze the physical arrangements of gaming devices in the home, and how family members interact with games and each other around games, the values that they bring to the gaming experiences, and the identities they develop around games within their family context.

Our data comes from a six-month ethnographic study we conducted with Mexican-American families, many of whom were first generation immigrants, primarily spoke Spanish at home, and had low income. Our findings provide a detailed account of the gaming experiences of Latino women and girls in the context of family life to illuminate the material conditions and social dynamics that are at play in shaping their participation and identities.

BACKGROUND

While the number of female gamers has significantly increased over the last decade (Entertainment Software Association, 2014), gender disparity continues to exist with respect to the nature of video gaming experiences between female and male gamers. Studies consistently show that women and girls often play social games that are now available on mobile devices, whereas men and boys play multi-user strategy and first-person shooter games that are relatively more sophisticated, require long-time commitment, and help develop computer and gaming literacy (Hayes, 2008). Much of the popular discussion has even speculated that the differences in gaming experiences between the two genders contribute to the low number of girls pursuing careers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) fields, emphasizing the important role early gaming experiences play in shaping girls and women's values and identities.

Literature on gender and video gaming have for a long time attributed the difference between males and females with respect to engagement in gaming and the kind of games they play to one of the two elements: (a) *gendered preferences* that females and males bring to their gaming experiences, and (b) *gendered culture* of video gaming that is often openly hostile towards females. Consequently, game designers and marketers have attempted to increase the participation of women and girls in gaming through a range of strategies. These include designing games that embody the values of females (e.g. collaboration), designing game content that especially appeals to women/girls (e.g. non-violent content), creating interventions that aim to increase the number of female game designers, and raising awareness around the representation of female characters in video games. More recently, scholars have developed a more nuanced way of conceptualizing participation of females in video gaming that acknowledges the *situatedness* of women's and girls' gaming practices and the *fluidity* of their identities (Jenson & de Castell, 2010).

Compared to what we know about female players, research about Latino players, and in particular Latino women and girls' gaming, is sparse. Recent large-scale surveys suggest that Latinos play video games more often than non-Latinos, and usually play

video games on consoles and handheld devices (Lenhart, Jones, & MacGill, 2008; Think Now Research, 2015). Latino parents tend to have negative perceptions of video games, and joint media engagement occurs more often around television than video games (Lee, & Barron, 2015; Wartella et al., 2014).

While understanding what motivates players provides rich insights into what and how games are played, understanding the contexts in which games are played is equally important. The ubiquity of gaming consoles, computers, and handheld devices in the last decade, has allowed people to engage in gaming in the comfort of their own homes. Family context has become increasingly relevant to the game industry with companies like Nintendo, Microsoft, and Sony specifically targeting families to purchase their gaming consoles with “family-friendly” games. In this chapter, we conceptualize video gaming as a situated activity within the everyday lives of families as opposed to an isolated activity of individuals. Families “with their own practices, routines, rituals, artifacts, symbols, conventions, stories, and histories” make up one of the most important *communities of practice* in which children participate (Wenger, 1998, p.6). Lave and Wenger (1991) describe a community of practice (CoP) as “a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (p.98), suggesting that we belong to multiple communities at any given time.

Traditionally, the CoP framework has been applied to studies of Massively Multiple-Player Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) in order to understand how players form a group around common interests, develop expertise and shared practices by participating in the joint activity of play. Yet, gaming as a shared activity exists not only in online spaces, but also in physical spaces like the home, where family members who share a common interest in playing games participate in the activity almost always with and around other family members often in the same room. Through engaging in gaming, families as communities of practice form norms, values, identities, and structures that enable or constrain the development of knowledge and diverse repertoires of gaming among individual members. Understanding gaming as a situated activity within families as a community of practice allows us to identify the social structures that provide opportunities and constrain the participation of women and girls in gaming. Additionally, it focuses our attention to capturing the key aspects of the gaming experiences of women and girls, including the way resources are organized around gaming, the identities that are taken up around games, the norms family members share, and the values they bring to their individual and shared gaming experiences. This socio-cultural view of gaming shifts the focus from psychological explanations for the game play patterns

and preferences of women and girls (e.g., assuming that women are innately more collaborative or more risk-adverse) to understanding the gaming experiences of women and girls as trajectories of participation mediated by social, cultural, and material contexts.

CONTEXT

The data for this chapter comes from an ethnographic study we conducted with 16 Mexican-American families over a six-month period. Families who had at least one child (“focal child”) between the ages of 4 and 6, and at least one child 7 years and older, and owned at least one platform for gaming (e.g. console, computer, cell phone, or tablet) participated in our study. Specifically, we worked with families who had origins in Mexico, the largest Latino population in Phoenix (United States Census Bureau, 2013), and resided in Maricopa County, which is both the most populous county in Arizona, and one of the largest Latino population counties in the country (Brown & Lopez, 2013).

We visited these 16 families every 2 months, and collected surveys and conducted interviews with parents and children both separately and together. We also observed family and child gameplay at home, and asked parents to keep photo-diaries of gaming between home visits. All except 2 families were first generation immigrants with both parents, and in some cases an older sibling, born in Mexico. Twelve out of 16 mothers spoke Spanish only, 2 mothers spoke primarily Spanish and some English, and 2 mothers spoke English exclusively although they knew Spanish. The two mothers who spoke English exclusively were born in the United States, were second-generation immigrants, and had the highest family income in our sample. For this chapter, we selected three families where the number of males exceeded the number of females, and both genders participated in video gaming within the household. Pseudonyms are used to preserve the anonymity of the participants in the report of our study.

ILLUMINATIVE CASES

Across the three cases, we identified different modes of engagement around video games, and examined how gender dynamics and family values shape women’s and girls’ participation and identities around video games. We conceptualize women and girls’ engagement in gaming activity or practice as *legitimate peripheral participation* within the family as a community of practice. It is “legitimate” because family members recognize the participation of women and girls in the gaming activity. It is “peripheral” because women and girls hang out at the edge of the practice as novices

within the family. It is “participation” because women and girls are actively playing games.

CASE 1: Different Family Expectations around Gaming

Our first case focuses on Amelia Perez (age 7), the youngest child of Zoe (age 36) and David (age 31) both of whom were second-generation immigrants from Mexico. She has two older brothers, Matias (age 9) and Daniel (age 11). Zoe is a stay-at-home mom while David works as an accountant. All family members were born in the United States, and spoke primarily English. The family owns 3 TVs, one of which is located in Amelia’s room. The Nintendo Wii and Xbox 360 as well as one of the three desktop computers are located in the living room. The family also owns a PSP and a Nintendo DS, which Amelia won at a church event, but these devices were not being used at the time of the study. The Nintendo Wii was initially purchased as a Christmas present for Amelia but currently was being used mainly by her mother Zoe for playing *Just Dance* and watching movies on *Netflix*. The Xbox is the whole family’s property but is often used by Amelia’s brothers to play video games.

The family’s interest in video gaming stems from dad, David Perez, who has been gaming since he was very young. He mostly plays games with his son Daniel because Daniel, as compared to the younger Amelia and Matias, is more capable of keeping up with the complex games David plays. At the time of our visit, the father-son duo was playing *League of Legends* and *World of Warcraft*. Since he works full time, David has limited time to play with Amelia and Matias, but he regularly engages with conversations with them about the games they play and the progress they make. Daniel also has a busy schedule with soccer practice and academic responsibilities. When he gets a chance to play video games, he either plays with his father or his younger brother Matias. As the middle child, Matias not only interacts with his older brother around games but also plays an important role in Amelia’s everyday experiences as her playmate. Matias plays with Amelia, coaches her on how to play, reads instructions and text in the games for her.

In the Perez household, expertise around video games is passed onto one generation to another with the father modeling ways of thinking and learning around video games to his oldest son Daniel who then models it for his siblings. For example, Daniel introduced the game *Wizard 101* and *Minecraft* to Matias, and they played these games together quite often until Daniel “grew out of” these games, and moved onto playing more complex games with his father. Amelia started playing these games with Matias who has more expertise with these games than Amelia. At the

time of our visit, in addition to playing *Minecraft* with Matias, Amelia played *Roblox* with other children she met online, *Just Dance* with her mother, and *Spore* by herself. Overall, Amelia spent 5 to 8 hours a week playing various video games, and more importantly her gaming experience included activities such as talking about games, observing other family members play video games, and searching online for information about different games alone and with other family members.

A few minutes into our conversation with the entire family during our first visit, it was clear that there was a divide between Zoe and David with respect to the value of video gaming. This divide created a conflict not only between the parents but also between Zoe and her children, and had some impact on how young Amelia organized her gaming experiences. Zoe did not play video games except *Just Dance* with Amelia to exercise. She played *Farmville* in the past, but quit playing because, in her words, she got “so addicted” to it. She and all other family members identified her as the person who monitors and reinforces rules with children around gaming including how much time they spend playing video games, the kinds of games they play, and with whom they play. When we met Zoe, she expressed deep concern as a mother about the number of hours her daughter spent playing video games. She already had “lost” her boys to video games, and was trying to avoid this happening again with her daughter. For example, it was her idea to hide Nintendo DS and tell Amelia that it was in the “repair shop” to limit Amelia’s gaming to the desktop computer and the gaming consoles in the living room.

The sharp contrast between the way Zoe and the other family members supported Amelia’s interest in animals speaks to the divide in the family. Zoe prefers to have long walks with Amelia and talk to her daughter about animals whereas other family members encourage Amelia to play *Spore* as a means to support her interest in animals. When we interviewed Amelia about her gaming practices, she showed an awareness of her mother’s sense of being left out by sharing with us that she plays *Just Dance* with her mother because that is the only game that her mother can play, and that her mother is happy when Amelia spends time with her. That said, Amelia likes playing *Minecraft* with Matias the most because they continue role-playing by taking on different characters in *Minecraft* beyond the game itself, and she enjoys spending time playing video games with his brothers.

CASE 2: Stepping In-and-Out of Different Roles around Gaming

Juliana Ornez (age 39) our second case, is a mother of four boys: Felipe (age 6), Alvaro (age 8), Edmund (age 12), and Levi (age 15). She moved to United States from Mexico

with her husband Julio (age 41) when she was 28 years old. As a stay at home mom with a husband who works 48 hours in a physically demanding job, Juliana is the primary caregiver in the family and spends time with the boys the most. Spanish is the primary language spoken in the Ornez household. Juliana speaks Spanish only, while her children speak both English and Spanish. Video gaming is a family routine in Ornez household. The family owns 1 gaming console, 1 handheld gaming device, 2 tablets, 1 iPod Touch, 2 computers, and 2 smart phones. In any given day, there are multiple opportunities for family members to play video games either together or alone.

Juliana did not play video games growing up because her family was unable to afford purchasing technology other than radio and later television. However, as an adult, she values having technology around the house and plays video games on her cell phone, on a handheld gaming device and on a tablet that belongs to Felipe and Edmund. At the time of our visit, she played *Angry Birds* and *Don't Touch the White Tile* on her cell phone. Felipe and Alvaro each own a tablet while Edmund owns the iPod Touch. The Xbox the family owns is located in the living room. Juliana and her husband Julio each own a smart phone. Juliana limits the amount of time Felipe and Alvaro play video games. She also limits their gameplay to certain times of day or the week, the types of games she allows them to play, and whom they can play with. She tries to reinforce these rules with her older sons, Edmund and Levi, but finds it difficult to limit their gaming although she is concerned about the content of the games they play (e.g. *Black Ops I & II* and *Grand Theft Auto 5*).

Despite Juliana's attempts to regulate video gaming in the family, ownership seems to determine who makes the rules around different devices. For example, while the Xbox was located in a shared living space, Edmund and Levi regulated its use because the device was originally purchased for them. At the time of our visit, the younger siblings Felipe and Alvaro were not allowed to play games on the Xbox by Edmund and Levi. The only other person in the family who was invited to play games on Xbox with Edmund and Levi is dad Julio. Juliana never plays games on the Xbox because the games that her older sons are playing do not appeal to her and she also finds it hard to use the controllers. Similarly, while Felipe and Alvaro share a room together, the owner of the device determines the rules around who uses which tablet.

Despite her concerns over her children's gaming, Juliana's identity around games in the family revolves not around being a "rule-maker" but being a "co-participant" in gaming. Juliana regularly plays games with Felipe and Alvaro on her cell phone and on their tablets. She plays with Felipe and Alvaro at least weekly. Felipe reported that

her mother is the one who plays the most with him in the family. At the time of our second visit, Felipe and Juliana played *Angry Birds*, *Don't Touch the White Tile*, and *Clash of Clans*. Juliana solves a problem or a difficult part for Felipe and Alvaro, explains what is happening in the game to them, and visits websites with them a few times a month. She regularly engages with conversations around video games with Felipe and Alvaro. For example, she has conversations about their performance in a game, what they learned through gaming, what makes a game fun, how to score higher in a game, and topics related to a game that come up in other contexts. She also likes to have conversations with Felipe and Alvaro about the games she plays. Additionally, at least weekly she reads instructions to Felipe who is in the process of learning to read.

CASE 3: Gendered Spaces and Crossing Boundaries within the Home

The Cruz family lives in a 3-bedroom house in an urban neighborhood. Valentina (age 7) is the youngest child of Sara (age 38) and Rodrigo (age 42) both of whom moved to the United States from Mexico when they were teenagers. Sara is a stay at home mom who frequently volunteers at her children's school while Rodrigo works full time outside of home as a painter. Valentina and her two older brothers Tomas (age 14) and Gabriel (age 11) were born in the United States, and speak both English and Spanish fluently. Spanish is the primary language spoken in the house although the boys speak English among themselves. The Cruz family owns a gaming console (PS3), 3 smart phones, 2 tablets, and 1 computer. The brothers share a room, and have the gaming console in their room. Sara, Rodrigo, and their oldest son Tomas use a smart phone. Valentina and Gabriel each own a tablet but rarely use their devices. The only computer in the house is located in the living room.

Valentina interacts with other family members the most around video games. She plays games with her mother, father, and her older brother Tomas. Although Sara is not a gamer herself, she plays with Valentina a few times a month on Sara's cell phone. At the time we visited the family, Valentina and her mother regularly played *Flappy Birds*, *Don't Touch the White Tile*, and *Candy Crush* together. Sara used to play video games off-and-on while growing up in Mexico but stopped playing as an adult because she does not find the content of most video games appealing nor has the time to play video games. She also believes she is not good at using controllers. That said, she spends as much time as Tomas does playing video games with Valentina. Both Sara and Tomas watch Valentina play video games a few times a week. Having taken more of an expert role with respect to gaming, Tomas also coaches Valentina, plays a

difficult part for her, explains to Valentina what is happening in the game, and visits supporting websites with Valentina.

At the time of our first visit, Valentina enjoyed playing *Sonic Dash*, a game that Tomas introduced to her and a game that Tomas himself played on his phone. Her favorite games were the ones that were geared towards gender stereotypical themes such as *Paint Nails*, dressing Disney princesses, and taking care of pets. This was consistent with her interest in dressing pink, playing with Disney princess dolls, and wanting to be as beautiful as Disney princesses when she grows up in real life. When we asked Sara about the video games Valentina played, she reported that she prefers Valentina playing the *Paint Nails*, and dress-up games over *Flappy Birds* because they were more educational in her opinion as they teach Valentina mixing and matching colors. “You learn which colors go with that,” she explains “and when you want to pick out a specific color.” Sara also expected Valentina to play more games like *Flappy Birds* as she grows older and whatever is popular among kids her age. Tomas and Gabriel, who play games like *Call of Duty* on their PS3, had a distinct distaste for the pink games that Valentina played. Yet, they occasionally joined Valentina and Sara in playing *Flappy Birds* at the kitchen table where they each take turn to complete the level.

Because the PS3 was located in the room that Tomas and Gabriel share Valentina had limited access to a gaming console. Sometimes her brothers let Valentina play on the PS3 but for a very limited time. She usually used her mother’s cell phone or the desktop computer in the living room to play video games. Sara compared to other parents in our study was lenient with rules around video games. The violent content of some games Tomas and Gabriel played did not bother her as much as it bothered other parents in our study. She believed children needed to be exposed to things in real life, and learn for themselves what is right and what is wrong. She explains:

“I hear people saying ‘No, but it’s too much violence [in games]’ and Ok, I do see the violence in those games, I do. But I am not scared or I don’t think it’s way too much...I can’t always have them here and always protecting them, you know? One or two times you have to let them go out so that they themselves learn how to protect each other. Because, what good is it to have them sheltered, then tomorrow comes and something happens to you, who is going to take care of them?”

The only rule Sara reinforced around video games is that all children complete their homework before playing games. Despite the shared rules around video games, the physical arrangement of devices created gendered spaces in the house with Sara and

Valentina occupying the kitchen and the living room while playing, and Tomas and Gabriel using their own room for their gaming practices. The only time family members crossed the physical boundaries was when Tomas and Gabriel played a FIFA game in their room. Sara loves playing and watching soccer, so when Tomas and Gabriel play FIFA, she goes to their room with Valentina to watch them play the game.

CONCLUSIONS

We began this chapter with the argument that attributing differences in gaming experiences between females and males to individual preferences is too narrow a focus to understand key aspects of gender and gaming. We offered a socially, physically, and culturally situated account of how women and girls participate in gaming through their interaction with other family members with whom they have shared histories, stories, and practices. Instead of viewing gaming as isolated individual activity, we conceptualized it as an activity that family members participate in as a family. Through this conception, our goal was to understand the identities that women and girls enact, the forms of engagement they exhibit, and the values they bring to the gaming experience as the members of a community of practice.

While we recognize the intersectionality of gender, race, and class (Andersen & Collins, 1995), the cultural background of families in our study did not seem to play a key role in social and physical arrangements around video games. There is so little research on family interactions around games in general that it is impossible to make any comparisons between Latino and non-Latino families. Video gaming is quite popular in Mexico so it would not be perceived as a distinctly U.S. practice (eMarketer, 2014). In fact, many parents who participated in our research played arcade games and owned gaming consoles while growing up but had stopped playing as adults. The only gaming practice that was distinctively connected to families' Mexican roots was watching children play FIFA games as a family. That is, families extended their common practice and repertoire of playing and watching soccer together to include the FIFA game as a spectator sport.

As our findings suggest, women and girls engage in video gaming in variety of ways. In addition to playing games and watch other people play games, women and girls talk about games with other family members, solve problems or play a difficult part for other family members, and visit websites related to games. Males provide support to women and girls by introducing games, being a role model, and coaching them around games. Additionally, women and girls position themselves differently in

relation to gaming in a family context, taking roles like “gamer”, “rule-maker”, “spectator”, and “co-participant”. As we have seen in the case of Amelia, family dynamics play a role in females stepping in and out of different positions in relation to gaming. Overall, our study highlights games as part of the daily experiences of women and girls as much as men and boys in the context of family life.

At the same time, our study also points to some aspects of gaming experiences of Latino women and girls that align with gender stereotypes in the context of families. To begin with, consistent with the current literature, we observed that women and girls interacted with gaming consoles such as Xbox and PS3 the least in families. However, one important reason behind this lack of interaction is difficulty with the hardware (i.e. gaming controllers) for women. The gaming experiences of the mothers in our study revolved around hand held devices like smart phones and tablets that allowed them to play games alone and with their younger children. Additionally, the physical and social arrangement of devices introduced barriers for girls to access and use gaming consoles at home. Secondly, mothers, as opposed to fathers, expressed concern over their children’s gaming and reinforced rules around games in our study; however, mothers expressed their concern and reinforced rules around games irrespective of the gender of their children. In fact, it seemed mothers’ attitudes were related to what games they found educational and what they considered to be the best use of time for their children and family.

An important implication of our findings is the need to capitalize on the interest and active engagement of women and girls in gaming in the context of families. The discussions around gender and content of current games have been limited to designing games that involve stereotypically “female friendly” topics (e.g. helping others) and depict female characters in a positive light as a means to turn more women and girls onto gaming. However, as our data shows, games like *Spore* and *FIFA* with neither stereotypically male nor female content can be appealing to women and girls, and have potential to move the gaming experiences of women and girls beyond so called social or pink games. Women and girls spend significant time playing games in the presence of males and interacting around games with them in the family context. Thus, it is important to diversify the design of family friendly games to provide opportunities for productive gaming experiences for both genders, and help women and girls progress through a trajectory of gaming. We believe video games that are enjoyable and challenging for both genders can have a significant impact on sustaining women’s and girls’ interest in gaming.

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CHAPTER 7.

GAMING MASCULINITY

Constructing Masculinity with Video Games

BY BETSY DISALVO

One reason that it is important to think about masculinity in these terms, is the normalization of a certain development in men's experience: it becomes a norm against which others are to be judged and found wanting. (Seidler, 2003, p. 3)

When talking about who plays video games, there is often a type of gamer that is held up as the traditional video gamer. These are generally people that openly identify as “gamers” or “hardcore gamers”. The stereotype of these gamers is that they are young, male, White or Asian, socially awkward, and willing to devote large amounts of time to playing complex first person shooter, roleplaying or strategy video games. Yet, the majority of work on gender in game studies are focused on women and girls (Carr, 2014; Jenkins, 1998). While much of this work is committed toward creating greater social equality, unfortunately this focus positions women and girls as the “other” in gaming. By directing critical attention to masculinity, and the male who identifies as a gamer, we place them outside of the “normal” gamer identity and see them in a pantheon identities among those who play video games – allowing for others who game to be seen as a part of gaming culture rather than aberrant identities in the world of video games.

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which masculinity is performed among a group of people whom self-identify as white male gamers. These men participated in interviews about their play practices, how they socialized around games, and how they interpreted cheating in games. In many ways these typically young males are practicing masculinity in a traditional way since gaming, for them, is often socially removed from feminine influences. However, older men are not part of this socialization; they are not present among these young gamer communities as

potential role modes for masculine practices. As a result, these young male gamers are often merely conjecturing and constructing their conceptions of masculinity alone together.

BACKGROUND

Social Construction of Gender

This chapter is built upon the position that gender is socially constructed (Kessler, 1978; Lorber, 1994). This analysis is based upon Judith Butler's (1988) theory of constructed gender, which recognizes gender as a dynamic identity, not dependent upon biology but rather a changing set of criteria based upon multiple influences. Through a stylized repetition of acts we perform our gender and observe others performances of gender – with each of us contributing to the construct of gender identities (Butler, 1988). This perhaps better understood as “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 2009). For West and Zimmerman, doing gender is the complex socially guided interaction of individuals and the surrounding world, both in terms of acting out and defining what is masculine and feminine. In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity, and there is no “normal” masculinity.

Masculinity and Gaming

Because gender is constructed over time and performed in social environments, previous work has identified video games, a traditionally masculine pursuit, as rich grounds for understanding masculinities. Christensen's (2006) work on online gaming sites identified how gender may not only be performed, but some ideal genders may be exaggerated in play practices. In fact, Christensen suggest the reproduction of masculinity online as aggressive, violent, misogynist and homophobic may be more stereotypical and rigid than that masculinity performed in “real life” (Christensen, 2006). In *From Barbie to Mortal Combat*, Jenkins identified how play and gaming is traditionally been a place for children to experience boyhood, to develop and define their gender. He identifies how contemporary video game culture is situated in similar ways to the way boy culture was characterized in the nineteenth century (Jenkins, 1998). Burrill further identified digital gaming as a place where men, not just as children, can indulge in boyhood (Burrill, 2008).

It is a space and experience where the digital boy can “die tryin’, ”tryin’ to win, tryin’ to beat the game, and tryin’ to prove his manhood. (Burrill, 2008, p. 2)

In these analysis digital boyhood can be a place for regression where males can escape the countenance of feminism, class issues, and responsibilities, in general. In

digital boyhood, they can fantasize about other spaces. It also can be a place to continually refine what it mean to be a man, through male socialization and the complex narratives based around typically male context, such as war, fighting, sports, and hero stories.

Traditional and Hardcore Gamers

Much of the gender and gaming work has made some assumptions about whom traditional, or hardcore, gamers are. Some have made a strong distinction between the hardcore gamer in contrast to the casual gamer. Under this pretense, the casual gamer plays games that do not require intense concentration or devotion of long spans of time. In contrast, the hardcore gamer consistently dedicates long periods of time to playing complex games which gives winning, or “leveling up”, greater emphasis (Bossler & Nakatsu, 2006). Juul identifies this stereotype of what makes for a hardcore player as one that extends beyond play practices:

There is an identifiable stereotype of a hardcore player who has a preference for science fiction, zombies, and fantasy fictions, has played a large number of video games, will invest large amounts of time and resources toward playing video games, and enjoys difficult games.” (Juul, 2012, p. 8)

Beyond the time and interest, another factor that distinguishes hardcore gamers from casual gamers is the type of game they play and how they identify themselves in relationship to gaming. Among those who identify themselves as hardcore gamers, there is also a widespread notion that “casual gamers” are not true gamers because they are not dedicated enough, and don’t play “real” games. (Kuittinen, Kultima, Niemelä, & Paavilainen, 2007)

Multiple Masculinities: White, Geek, and African American

Performance of masculinity or “doing masculinity” in its ideal form has been described in many ways. Indeed it is described in many ways because there are different ideals of masculinity in different cultures and in different context for each individual. Recognizing these as simplifications of complex and ever-changing traits, we can look at previous literature that speaks to the idealized or media portrayal of masculinity in western culture, among geek culture, as well as within African American culture in order to better appreciate the contrasts in what makes someone a “man”.

Western scholars describe the idealized masculinity as rational, in control of their emotions, (Seidler, 2003) athletic, technologically competent, heterosexual and white

(Connell & Connell, 2005; Pascoe, 2007). The masculinity most often associated with gamers is the geek identity. Geek identities have been studied in context of college students seeking computing degrees, hackers, and gamers. Scholars identify different traits for ideal masculinity in geek culture, but they generally include demonstrations of competitiveness, mastery of the machine, (Margolis & Fisher, 2002; Taylor, 2011) risk taking, asocial behavior, and the rejection of the physical body in terms of sex, appearance, and athleticism (Levy, 2001; Turkle, 1984). The idealized performance of masculinity depicted in the media of African American culture has been identified as anti-intellectual, focused on the physical in terms of athletics, hypersexual, heterosexual and at times physically dangerous and imposing acts (Ferguson, 2000; Hoberman, 1997; hooks, 2003; Page, 1997; Richardson, 2007).

These are but three examples of how masculinity is uniquely set within culture. And even among these three American idealized masculinities, there is not one stable position within a culture, or an individual. For example, an individual may at times identify with geek masculinity, committed toward mastery of the machine but in a different context identify with stereotypical African American masculinity and draw attention to his athleticism or sexuality. Within this study of white male gamers, we seek to identify how their play practices within the context of gaming are tied to the process of constructing identity as gamers; however, it is critical to note that for these young men part of the norm for a gamer identity is being male. In this way, the gaming identity is inherently tied to masculinity and part of the process of this practice of “doing gender”.

INTERVIEWS

As part of a larger study exploring interview methods (Dimond, Fiesler, DiSalvo, Pelc, & Bruckman, 2012), participants were recruited through game email lists and through social networks requesting interviews with gamers. We then used snowball sampling, where we asked participants if they knew of anyone else who would be interested in participating, thus producing a convenience sample. Four researchers conducted 50 interviews including 25 with individuals who identified as male.

Of the 25 interviews with males, 20 identified with the label “gamer”. The self-identification of “gamer” has been defined as more important than how much one games, in terms of identifying who is a gamer and who is not (Shaw, 2012). Indeed, most of the 50 participants interviewed were uncomfortable being identified as “gamers,” even when they spent many hours each week playing digital games. The idea that this gamer identity is predominantly a male identity was supported by our difficulty recruiting women for interviews, because several women we interviewed

told us they were “not really gamers”. We also excluded males who played predominantly sports or casual games. Although only five of the male participants were excluded, the overall finding indicates there may be a correlation with those who play sport games, casual games, identify as African American or gay and those who did not identify as “gamers.”

Of the 20 participants identified as male gamers, 16 self-identified as White and among those White male gamers two self-identified as Latino or Hispanic. We did not ask for sexual orientation; however several participants volunteered information that suggests heterosexual orientation by talking about their girlfriend or wives or indicated they identified as gay. The mean age of the 16 White male gamer participants was 26. Participants were predominantly residents in urban or suburban areas. Nine participants were college students and, of those who were not students, 4 worked in computing or information technology fields.

The semi-structured interview questions asked about several different topics including their favorite game genre and the reasons for those choices; questions also inquired about what platform they preferred to play on and why, if and how they like to play games with other people, what they considered cheating in games to be and whether they had cheated (or continue to cheat) in game play; finally, we questioned the time they spent each week gaming. The interviews were conducted using three different media, phone, instant messenger and email, in accordance with the protocol for the larger interview methods study (Dimond et al., 2012). Interview transcripts were then analyzed using an inductive and deductive coding method in three phases.

FINDINGS

Cheating and Modding

While many of the participants expressed distain for cheating, all of them told us they used cheat codes, guides or modifications when playing some games, or at some time during their life. They generally considered these practices “cheating”, and that doing such things “ruined” the game, but they also had a number of justifications for cheating. The most common was the belief that cheating in a single player game is just an option to make the game more fun.

Of course I would not cheat in a versus game (unless we both were), but cheating in a single player game is just another option – Gabe, 24, employed in technology field

They also justified cheating as a response to design flaws:

So one thing that they allowed was teleporting in town because in Diablo, like walking in town, like, actually took a long time. You know, going from one bank to the other you had to like, walk a minute or 2 minutes. So they were like, "Ok screw this, we're just gonna' teleport around town with trainers" so that they could save time and stuff. So is that hacking? Yea, I think it's still hacking, but I think it's more like, they're kind of compensating for the game's design faults. – Robert, 21, student in technology field

And a few participants fully embraced cheating as a strategy or part of the game play experience, when asked, "Have you ever cheated?" Gary responded:

Many times, starting with the Game Genie and Game Shark. I've always had a fascination with hacker and felt like I was doing some of it. – Gary 25, Student in technology field

Cheating can be defined in many ways (Consalvo, 2007), and when we asked how they defined cheating, the participants did not have a rigid definition but instead defined it as open to interpretation. In most cases they felt an action might be cheating but still acceptable when that action was a way to outsmart the game as it was designed. This acceptance of cheating, when it was about mastery over the machine, aligns with idealized geek masculinities (Levy, 2001).

Competition, Trash Talk and Socialization

In general, participants did not talk about competition as a motivator for playing video games. In part this may be related in the type of games they played. While they all played first person shooter (FPS) games, most said role-playing games (RPG) were their favorite genre. Some expressed discomfort with competition with their friends and preferred competition online with people they do not know.

When people are, you know, being bastard. If I don't know them I don't care, but if it's people that I know who are being dicks, then I don't like that basically. – Dean, 27, employed in technology field

Two of the participants who mentioned that competition, in fact, motivated them, actually play video games in competitive gaming leagues. But with these two, and some others, the emphasis in competing was being part of team or group that competes against another group.

When it comes to gameplay I like playing games like Battlefield. I play that game competitively with clans. But yea, it's like, you play as an engineer or you play as a medic so it's kind of like cooperative play. – Robert, 21, student in technology field

In contrast to studies of young African American male game play practices (DiSalvo & Bruckman, 2010), There was little indication of playful trash talk, as most respondents considered trash talk aggressive. The few participants who did mention it were hesitant to identify as someone who participated in trash talk. Dave, who was in his 40s, told us that bragging like that would not be socially acceptable for someone his age.

Yea, but at my age, if I went into the office and told everyone how I rule with the AK47, I'd get fired.
– Dave, 47, employed in technology field

Most participants said they preferred playing with other people. Not only did they prefer social play, they also preferred to play in the same room with people rather than online. However, they had a difficult time articulating why.

It doesn't change it a lot to be in physical proximity, but it just kind of, it's still more enjoyable for a reason that can't really be quantified. It's just yea... – Dean, 27, employed in technology field

I guess just having that physical, like you can just... (pause) I don't know. It feels cool when you're, like playing a game. Like when I was at that LAN party, I think that's when Doom 3 came out, and so they had like, a competition for it. It was everybody's first time playing it and I was... (pause) I ended up being like... (pause) it was me and like the other guy. It was just us two battling it out for first place and everybody is like behind me watching. It just kind of felt like 'Wow this is cool. I'm like the important guy here.' – Robert, 21, student in technology field

This desire for social play defies stereotype of gamers being a-social, or interested in online relationships more than in world relationships. However, the fact that participants had difficulty expressing such appreciation for social interaction aligns with the common description of geek masculinities (S. Turkle, 1984) where real world social interactions are not considered (or at least not expressed) as valuable experiences.

Gearheads

Many of the interviews were dominated by specialized and encyclopedic talk about game titles, game genres, and the histories of game series, as well as specific game developers and trends in game development. In all, participants mentioned over 200 unique games series and indicated that they knew many more. Participants also talked in depth about their gaming technology or what technology they hoped to acquire.

Usually, like we had our own server. So we would just jump in the server also we had voice chat, which we would use, mainly it was Ventrilo. But, you know, I think we've used TeamSpeak in the past also. Also, there was a program called x-fire, which is kind of like AOL instant messenger. You can like, see which of your friends are, like, what games their playing and then you can just, like, click on their name... – Robert, 21, student in technology field

However, a greater focus of their specialized talk seemed to be the opportunity to displayed an encyclopedic knowledge of games mechanics or tactics, similar to the way men frequently display and generate knowledge in a traditionally masculine sports domains around rule and strategies (Davis & Duncan, 2006):

The use of an AddOn to help with repetitive tasks that make the game less fun is acceptable as long as it's a SANCTIONED mod. The community polices this sort of thing, usually. So using a Quest Helper to help level up your second character quickly by giving you the GPS 'coords of the next quest point is not cheating in my book, it just makes the boring second-time through less tedious. Using an auto-targeting system or a "social engineering" attack like "throwing matches" for a ranked arena duel however, would be totally unacceptable. – Steven, 39, employed in technology field

In consumer culture we have seen men practice masculinity through deep investment in particular tools and resources and specialized knowledge related to their interest. The practices of these rational "gearheads" have been explored in the context of hunting (Littlefield, 2006) and cars and bikes (Best, 2006; Tragos, 2009). The vast display of knowledge about gaming is part of their gamer identity and aligns with other masculinities where the display of expert knowledge marks one as authentic to the identity of being a part of that culture.

Dissing Other Games

Another way we saw participants creating distinctions about what is authentic gaming was through derogatory and dismissive talk about games that have a focus on casual or social play, or sports games that would be less tied to geek masculinity. Most participants initially said they didn't play any causal games. However, several participants, after a moment of hesitation or further questions, admitted to playing casual games with a number of qualifiers on why they played such casual games. Some outright admitted to liking them, but then were still careful to note them as frivolous in contrast to the other games they play.

Well, lately my computer has been having issues with graphics-intensive games, so it's been mostly small, silly games on the Internet, like Robot Unicorn Attach. – Mark, 22, student in non-technology field

Some told us they had played, but found them unsatisfying:

You know, I dabbled in Facebook games a while, but I realized that never really satisfied me when I was playing. – Charles, 21, student in non-technology field

In a similar way, a few dismissed games that did not align with a geek masculinity by rejecting games that were tied to athleticism, such as sports games or performing arts, such as rhythm games.

In enjoy most genres of games, except for simulations sport games where they are going for complete accuracy. – Anthony, 23, unemployed

This is similar to the derogatory talk that some car hobbyists have about Asian cars, or as they call them “Ricers” (Best, 2006). It is also reminiscent of how some young men assert their masculinity by derogatory talk about homosexuality (Pascoe, 2007).

“Epic” Narratives and Aesthetics

In contrast to the difficulty in articulating why the social side of gaming was important to them, the participants were almost poetic in describing the narrative and aesthetic aspects of gaming. Nearly all of the participants mentioned narrative and aesthetics as a motivation for like certain games.

I enjoy Metroid Prime because of its deep attention to small details that lent the gamespace an almost surreal level of personality. The flora and creatures all seemed so natural, as did the crumbling Chozo architecture. It isn't easy to make a puzzle game, let alone one where the puzzles don't feel like puzzles at all, but products of the environment. The brilliant soundtrack and set pieces just drove these points home. – Bruce, 19, student in technology field

I like them (games in the action/adventure and survival/horror genre) because of the story line, the action, the ability to use think and solve puzzles, and the epic feel of the game. – Luis, 24, employed in technology field

The complexity of the games, the rich narrative, imagery and sound helps participants become immersed in these worlds. This suggest it is not simply players escaping their other lives, but also an act of constructing values and practices with their friends, the game designers and the medium itself. Exploring these acts through a lens of understanding gender, we can see these games as construction of masculinity similar to the dynamic construction and performance of epic poems of our past.

I like it (WOW) because, it is remarkably immersive, the story is epic and compelling, and the interaction will fellow players is fantastic. – Sean, 23, student in technology field

The word “epic” was mentioned many times during the interviews when participants described their favorite games. The context of epic poetry is an appropriate narrative for comparison. The roleplaying games that participants preferred particularly have strong similarities to epic poetry, both with male hero driven narratives, in richly portrayed worlds full of magic and mythology.

Epic poems of western culture, from the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (Graziosi & Haubold, 2003), Roman *Aeneid* (Martindale, 1997), Icelandic *Njáls Saga* (Jakobsson, 2007) to the British *Beowulf* (Dockray-Miller, 1998), explore masculinity through their male heroes. As oral poems they were public performances, dynamic in their construction and reconstruction, and underpinning a society’s ever changing masculine identities.

Constructing Masculinities

First, though we now know that gender is a central axis around which social life revolves, most men do not know they are gendered beings. When we say “gender,” we hear women. (Kimmel, 2005, p. 363)

For these participants, there was very little awareness of their gender, unlike in our interviews with women who frequently mentioned their gender in opposition to what they saw as normal gamers. It is typical that White males do not see gender or race because they are situated in a position of being the social norm and, consequently, their behavior is considered and extant of the normal. Participants revealed how they were invested or immersed in stories that focus on masculine pursuits and through their play construction masculinity. It is telling that different cultural background and context of play, such as African American students playing sports games with their families (DiSalvo, Crowley, & Norwood, 2008) or White gamers playing epic narratives with male friends, lead young men to immerse themselves in different types of games and with different play practices. These choices are self-regulating acts, reinforcing and reconstructing the masculine identities of their own culture.

This chapter began by seeking a place to deconstruct the identity of what we often assume as the norm in gaming. The goal here is not to critique these gamers in terms of their values and/ or their practices, but to create a space where we recognize that White male gaming practices are unique and that video games, like most play and

narratives pursuits, are used (intentionally or not) to construct gender. If we don't seek to understand masculinity as a specific and unique trait of these gamers, we will continue to perceive the broad spectrum of gender that falls outside of these practices as the "other".

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CHAPTER 8.

“EVERYTHING I KNOW ABOUT THIS GAME SUGGESTS I SHOULD AVOID IT AT ALL COSTS”

Non-Player Perceptions about EVE Online

BY KELLY BERGSTROM

To date, much of the research about games and the people who play them has remained overwhelmingly focused on the study of current players. Very little is known about non-players or former players. Rather than assuming non/participation in games begins and ends with personal interest, in this chapter I argue that there is much to be learned by asking players about what games they *do not* play and their reasons for quitting and/or never purchasing or downloading a particular game in the first place. My goal is to demonstrate that the decision to play or not to play a particular game can be influenced by a variety of external factors (e.g. how the game is positioned by its developers in the marketplace, press coverage about the game, how current players describe the game) and how this may lead to some potential players assuming a particular game is not “for” them.

To learn more about how players come to their particular game of choice and why others leave, my ongoing research has focused on the non/players of *EVE Online* (*EVE*). A space-themed Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) that has been commercially available since 2003, *EVE*'s player population has slowly grown to 500,000+ active accounts. This is a much smaller number of active accounts compared to other popular MMOGs such as *World of Warcraft*, which peaked at 12 million and has since declined to a still respectable 7.8 million subscribers. *EVE* nonetheless has a player base that is fiercely loyal and dedicated to their MMOG of choice. Despite its smaller player community, *EVE* is a game that has developed a notorious reputation for being a difficult community for new players to access and an equally notorious reputation for having an extremely homogeneous demographic

(e.g. almost entirely older white males), making it an ideal case study to begin a discussion about barriers, access, and non/participation in MMOGs.

Rather than focusing solely on current players of *EVE*, throughout my research I ask who does *not* play, and for what reasons. This, I argue, is a necessary piece missing from current research on MMOGs, which to date has yet to substantially ask questions about who does not play and their reasons for opting out. It is perhaps unsurprising that very little work has been done about former or non-players (of *EVE* or any other MMOGs), as it is difficult to locate potential informants after they have discontinued their participation in a particular game. Similarly, at first blush, it may seem odd to ask a participant their thoughts and opinions about a game they have not previously played. And yet there have been illuminating research studies that have successfully searched out and found former players, including Celia Pearce's (2009) investigation of the *Uru* community which found new places to congregate after their virtual world of choice was shuttered, as well as Nathan Dutton's (2007) analysis of forum posts where players announced their intentions to quit *World of Warcraft*. Furthermore, Pearce and Dutton's work are invaluable as they both act as a refutation that players (and their play choices) are static, highlighting the need for game scholars to consider the perspectives beyond those who are the current or active players of a particular game.

While non-participation and quitting has yet to receive widespread uptake from game scholars, these questions *have* been addressed by the adjacent field of leisure studies. Therefore the goal of this chapter is twofold. First, I provide an example about how barriers to participation are theorized from the perspective of leisure studies. The second goal of this chapter is to illustrate that when non-players are queried directly about their reasons for not playing a particular game, they provide answers that fall outside what would typically be classified as "personal choice". This is done through a case study where I present survey responses from non-players to explain why they do not play *EVE Online*.

LEARNING FROM LEISURE STUDIES: MOVING BEYOND "CHOICE" AND PARTICIPATION

Leisure Studies is an area of research and theory-building concerned with activities that fill one's time outside of work and domestic responsibilities. Because of the field's heavy focus on outdoor activities, game scholars often overlook leisure studies literature that is relevant to the study of games and players. To help bridge this gap, I begin this chapter by briefly highlighting the utility of models created to classify and categorize the types of barriers to participation, illustrating how they serve as a

starting point for discussions about former (and specifically in the case of this chapter) non-players.

Crawford and Godbey (1987) offer a framework for discussing barriers to leisure participation that is likewise relevant to the barriers for play. Here, the authors outline a model that articulates the internal and external barriers a potential participant might face when attempting to participate in a particular leisure activity:

Intrapersonal Barriers: Individual psychological states and attributes such as stress, depression, anxiety, religious beliefs, prior socialization into specific activities, subjective evaluations of the “appropriateness” of available leisure activities.

Interpersonal Barriers: The product of interpersonal interactions and/or relationships, such as joint leisure decisions made by a romantic couple or the effects on family size on ability to participate in specific activities.

Structural Barriers: External barriers include one’s work schedule or financial resources. (pp. 122–124)

This teasing out of barriers ranging from the self to societal is important; it immediately refutes the idea that non/participation is exclusively a “choice” based on a particular level of interest in an activity. This model is fairly straightforward, but reality is often far messier. While Crawford and Godbey’s model provides a foundation for which a conversation about access and/or barriers can be more formally investigated, it is important to note how other chapters in this collection demonstrate how gender-based stereotypes can become internalized and “self-imposed” constraints might not be so easily shed.

In updates to this three factor model, Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991) explicitly acknowledge that leisure participation is contingent on multiple factors, accounting for a hierarchy of social privilege (p. 315). Also important in this updated model is that it moves beyond the binary of participation/non-participation and that constraints may still continue to effect the degree to which one feels comfortable participating. Crawford, Jackson, and Godbey point out,

...constraining factors will directly influence subsequent aspects of engagement, such as the person’s frequency of participation, level of specialization, level of ego involvement, and even his or her definition of the situation. (p. 315)

They go on to re-contextualize earlier work on amateurism by Stebbins (1979), describing how one’s social privilege (or lack thereof) will influence whether they imagine themselves as a legitimate participant in the activity, or if they will merely

remain a “dabbler”. The authors define a dabbler as “a person whose active involvement, technique, and knowledge are so meagre as to be barely distinguishable from others in the public at large” (Crawford et al., 1991, p. 317). It is important to note the idea of “dabbling” has a large degree of overlap with public discussions about women’s gameplay, as women’s participation in digital game cultures is frequently derided as being “casual” or not as legitimate as the play of their male counterparts. As the history of feminist literature about digital game play and other chapters in this collection continue to illustrate, an individual’s “lack of interest” is misread as a *choice* to not participate in gameplay and/or gaming cultures. And yet, as chapters in this collection have illustrated, dropping out or disengaging from gaming cultures is often far more complicated than what could be attributed solely due to “personal interest”.

Like the study of gender and games, the study of gender and leisure studies has increasingly paid attention to where and how women face barriers and access to leisure spaces. Karla A. Henderson has spent considerable time reviewing and summarizing the literature pertaining to the leisure experiences of women. She and her co-authors divide this literature into five distinct phases of theoretical development: empowering women through access to leisure time and activities (Henderson, 1990); a shift away from understanding a leisure as some sort of universal experience shared by all women or as the review’s title states, “one size doesn’t fit all” (Henderson, 1996); the introduction of an intersectional approach to the study of women and leisure by integrating studies of race, class, and cultural specificities (Henderson, Hodges, & Kivel, 2002); an increasing complexity to the theoretical underpinnings of the literature allowing for more nuanced discussions of gender performances, as well as deeper consideration of the larger social and ideological forces that shape leisure as a gendered practice (i.e. leisure is political and cannot be bracketed off from the day to day realities of women’s lives) (Henderson & Hickerson, 2007); finally, the most recent review summarizes a turn towards more explicitly feminist intersectional investigations of gendered leisure (i.e. both femininities and masculinities) including where and how leisure participation reinforces norms or provides an opportunity for resistance/social change (Henderson & Gibson, 2013). Henderson and Gibson (2013) conclude that the study of women’s leisure has become increasingly complex, and they are highly cognizant that gender is only a small piece for understanding the intersectional identities that influence each woman’s experiences and her relationship to leisure.

Earlier work in this area found that women often did not feel entitled to a clearly delineated leisure-specific time (Henderson & Dialeschki, 1991). Updates to this literature stress that it is not being *a woman* that leads to a lack of entitlement, but

instead it is the externally imposed social expectations and gender-based stereotypes that lead to women to feel less entitled to leisure than men. This is what Crawford and Godbey (1987) might call structural barriers. Jackson and Henderson (1995) likewise point to the role of gender as a potential barrier to leisure activity, noting,

Gender may be said to be the “cause” of some leisure constraints, not necessarily because of biological sex, but rather because of the social expectations (women are still primarily responsible for childcare in our society) and social controls (women make less money than men) associated with gender. (p. 48)

However, while Crawford and Godbey argued in their original three-factor model that enough personal interest in an activity could be sufficient to overcome structural barriers, research focused specifically on the experiences of women are more in line with Crawford, Jackson and Godbey’s (1991) updated model, demonstrating that in many cases these barriers are multi-layered and not so easily circumvented. The barriers for certain players to effectively join *EVE*’s fiercely guarded community serves as a prime example of how these barriers related to gender and leisure activity are evident with MMOG play.

AN INTRODUCTION TO *EVE ONLINE*

CCP Games released *EVE* in 2003. The game breaks from a few key conventions of the MMOG genre. For much of the game’s history, players were not represented in the gameworld with a humanoid or anthropomorphized avatar, a feature commonly found in other MMOGs. Instead, players interacted with each other and the game world via spaceships. The second way *EVE* departs from MMOG conventions is in regards to how a player’s avatar increases in power and strength. In most MMOGs, killing computer-controlled monsters (frequently referred to as “mobs”) and completing quests to gain experience points are the primary means of advancing in the game and improving their character’s abilities. In the typical MMOG, as players earn more experience points their character will become exponentially stronger until they have reached the plateau colloquially known as the “level cap”. At this point their character will no longer increase in strength or skill; all players (no matter when they started playing) eventually reach the level cap and are on a level playing field. Character development in *EVE* dramatically departs from this convention. In *EVE*, skills are earned as a direct result of the amount of time a player spends training a particular skill. It is not uncommon for an advanced skill to require training times 30 days or longer. Because only one skill can be trained at a time, there is no plateau like in other MMOGs, and skill development is directly related to the amount of time spent training skills, newer players will never be able to “catch up” to others who have been playing *EVE* for a longer period of time.

The third way that *EVE* does not follow MMOG conventions is that the developer, CCP Games, remains relatively hands off when it comes to regulating play. Taking a laissez faire approach to the game world and its players, CCP will rarely intervene in player activities except in the most extreme cases (e.g. attempts to modify the game's software code). Scamming is permitted; if another player double-crosses you and steals an item or in-game currency, CCP will not return your lost items. Similarly, CCP will not intervene in behaviors that would typically be understood in other games as "griefing", such as harassing another player, destroying their ship and escape pods repeatedly, or otherwise engaging in behaviors that prevent others from fully participating in their preferred in-game activities. Griefing is not against the rules in *EVE* and will not result in punishment by the developer.

Finally, it is common for MMOG developers to spread their player populations over multiple servers but *EVE* is played on a single server (commonly referred to as a "single shard"). Most players interact in a single persistent universe, capable of handling over 50,000 simultaneous connections to the server.¹ Unlike most MMOGs where players are divided into multiple smaller servers that house parallel versions of the game world, all *EVE* players are on the same server and can interact with each other. In other games, multiple servers allow players to create "a clean slate" by transferring their avatar to a new server, but that is unavailable to *EVE* players who are unwilling to start from scratch and begin their long training queues a second time.

Taken together, these relatively unique characteristics of *EVE* point towards a game world in which players become heavily invested in a single avatar. As avatar death carries harsh consequences, interpersonal relationships are particularly key to one's survival in this game world. Research to date about *EVE* has shown that while many people may download the game's free trial, very few will become long-term members of the *EVE* community (Feng, Brandt, & Saha, 2007; Paul, 2011, 2016). While Feng et al.'s (2007) study indicates that there is a large degree of churn in this community, and Paul (2011, 2016) argues that this might be intentional on the part of CCP to encourage a sense of player cohesion, little is known about the differences between who plays *EVE* and who opts out. Identifying this gap, my own research has investigated the thoughts and experiences of both former players (people who have previously played *EVE* but since quit), and non-players (those who have opted out of playing completely). The first part of this chapter outlined some of the literature related to leisure studies literature about barriers to participation; specifically the literature suggests that personal interest is not always a sufficient answer to explain non/participation. In the next section, I describe the responses of non-players a

means to foreground the types of barriers that exist in *EVE*, possibly explaining how this community has maintained its conspicuous homogeneity since its release in 2003.

Non-Player Perceptions of *EVE Online*

The data I draw on in this chapter was collected as part of a larger investigation of the *EVE* player community, as well as how *EVE* is positioned in the MMOG marketplace by CCP Games, the gaming enthusiast press, and in academic investigations of the game and its players. In this chapter, I narrow my focus to draw on survey responses of non-players to learn more about how they perceive *EVE*, and to probe further about why they are aware of the game but have made the decision not to play it. These answers, when viewed in light of the leisure studies models of barriers to participation discussed earlier in this chapter, are used to illustrate that a potential player's perception of the game and its community are an important factor in whether or not they attempt to play a particular game; this undergirds my argument that non-participation should not be attributed solely to interest or personal preference.

In the introduction to this chapter, I mentioned the difficulty of trying to locate participants who either don't play or have since quit playing a particular game. In order to identify potential informants, I conducted a survey that was framed as being about MMOGs more generally, and a total of 981 respondents completed it. This survey included a question to ascertain a respondent's familiarity with *EVE*. The responses described and quoted in the remainder of this chapter come from participants who indicated, "I have heard of *EVE Online* but I have not played it" (N=145). A series of open-ended questions followed, where respondents were asked to describe what they knew about *EVE*, what they thought the goal(s) of *EVE* might be, and to provide any reason(s) for why they themselves do not play *EVE*.

EVE, as described in the previous section, is a space-themed MMOG with a variety of unique features that sets it apart from other titles in this genre. Some non-players, indicating that they were familiar with the MMOG, described many of these features, commenting on its robust economy and that it has a heavy focus on PVP gameplay. Others were less positive in their descriptions of *EVE*, for example,

"It is a sucky MMO. Spreadsheet based if you want to do anything significant."

"Heard of it described as something to the effect of "spreadsheets with graphics", seems to have an older player-base and is particularly male-dominated (and I think more hostile to women?)"

In both of these responses, the non-players have described an accurate feature of *EVE*: it is indeed a math-heavy game where players often rely on spreadsheets, leading to its tongue-in-cheek nickname “Excel Online”. The second quote is also accurate; *EVE* is often understood to attract an older male player than is typically found in other MMOG game worlds. Non-players answering this survey demonstrated a surprising depth of knowledge about a game they do not play, and these two quotes are illustrative of a segment of survey respondents who appear to view *EVE* in a negative light.

So why, exactly, do these respondents *not* play *EVE*? Non-players indicated a variety of reasons for not playing *EVE*, such as not owning a computer with the proper technical specifications needed to play the game, a lack of disposable income, a lack of time to play, or that they are currently playing a different MMOG and did not have enough time and/or resources to play *EVE* in addition to this other MMOG. These are barriers that are likely temporary and subject to change if one’s financial situation improves, or if they had a sudden increase in the amount of leisure time available to play a MMOG. According to the self-reported demographics collected as part of this survey, participants providing such responses usually showed a large degree of overlap with the typical demographic makers of current *EVE* players who answered the survey (straight and/or white and/or male).

What was surprising about some of the survey answers was the theme of knowing *too much* about *EVE* and its players turning off these non-players from ever playing the game. Consider the following responses to the question “why do you *not* play *EVE Online*?”

“Cost in real world money not just in game but also computer, Internet bill so on. Too much of an investment in time. Do not want to deal with rude, bullish, or douchebag-like players. Would rather play single player game offline.”

“Because everything I know about the player base suggests I should avoid them at all costs.”

“I’ve heard it’s pretty cutthroat, not kind to newbies, and generally a poor fit for casual players. I have far too little available playtime to deal with any of that.”

In each of these responses, it is a perception of the in-game climate and current players that has turned them off from attempting to participate in this particular game. Furthermore, it is those respondents who *do not* exemplify the demographics of the typical *EVE* player who make mention of the behavior of current players being a constraint, perhaps because they are having difficulty imagining a space for

themselves in this community. These responses also mirror the public perception of *EVE*, as elsewhere I have illustrated how “assholes in space” pervades the reporting about *EVE* by the enthusiast gaming press (Bergstrom, 2015). And yet, PVP is not the only way to play *EVE*. There is indeed a large and vibrant PVE community that focuses on mining, industry, and crafting that can be found in *EVE*, provided that a new player can look past the more visible PVP community, and overcome the steep learning curve (Bergstrom, 2016; Taylor, Bergstrom, Jenson, & de Castell, 2015).

These survey responses from non-players, when viewed in conjunction with previous research about the *EVE* new player experience, show that these barriers to entry are likely intentional on the part of CCP Games. Describing how the tutorial leaves out crucial information required for a player’s success, Christopher Paul (2011) argues that this is done purposefully to drive new players to find more experienced players to act as guides and create inroads to the existing community. Those who are not successful in finding mentors (or choose to go at it alone), Paul claims, are much more likely to quit the game,

Should a new player fail to seek out other people or external resources for help, they are not likely to stay long in New Eden, a decision that decreases the size of the likely audience for EVE, while making the player base more homogenous and stickier for those who fit the narrowed target demographic. (p. 264)

This opens up future questions about this interpellation process, namely who *current* players imagine as the ideal *EVE* player and how this influences who they offer help to, or even who among their peer groups they even think to talk about potentially playing *EVE*.

MOVING FORWARD

EVE Online is a game that has a reputation for being an outlier in the MMOG market, both in its affordances (described earlier in this chapter), but in the type of player it purportedly attracts (older white males). Journalists, current players, and even the game’s developers have all argued that a space-themed game is somehow inherently more interesting to male players, and this becomes the most frequent means to explain this very homogenous player community (Bergstrom, 2015, 2016). By fusing leisure studies literature with the responses of non-players indicating that the game is not something they see as being “for” them, the implication is that “choice” and “preference” for particular games should no longer be used to explain why *EVE* has such a different demographic make up than other MMOGs currently on the market.

The goal of this chapter has been to illustrate the need to account for non-players when investigating who plays particular MMOGs and for what reasons. By turning to leisure studies, an area of research that exists alongside but rarely intersecting with game studies, I have articulated a framework and vocabulary for these nascent conversations about non-participation beyond framing it as personal interest or choice. “Personal interest” alone is not enough to explain the demographics we observe playing particular games and ultimately, my goal for this chapter has been to articulate a different sort of imagined player who may have been neglected by game scholarship to date.

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Notes

1. CCP's expansion into the Chinese market has necessitated a second server that is only open to players connecting from (or emulating) a Chinese IP address. This division is necessary to

accommodate the extra regulations required for a MMOG to operate within China, as well as the technological limitations resulting from the Chinese government's firewall.

PART III.

**PARTICIPATING (OR NOT) IN THE
GAMING INDUSTRY**

CHAPTER 9.

BLACK AND FEMALE IN TECH

An Intersectional Guide for Intersectional People

BY SHANA T BRYANT

Let me tell you a story.

Six. That's how many I counted.¹ It was the Game Developers Conference (GDC), the year was 2008, and it had not gone unnoticed: the lack of Black women in attendance.

"Where are they? And why aren't they here?"

Six. The paucity of diverse faces at even premiere events for industry professionals came as no surprise. At the time, it was not very much different my everyday working in games; and in the years since, change has been slow.

Black women in tech are rare.

And being rare, we're alternatively coveted and/or shunned. It's a function of systems and structures far larger and more complex than I am going to attempt to frame in this piece. Instead, I just want to talk about my experiences as one of those six Black female faces, what I've learned, and well, how to *deal*. Oh, and I want to talk about intersectionality, because my life in tech has been a big ole ball of intersectional dealing.

But first...

OBLIGATORY BACKSTORY

I've been a developer in the games industry for going on 14 years now. From EA to Midway (rest its soul) to Capcom and beyond, I've tested or produced or canceled

games in just about every genre out there (except MOBAs, I haven't gotten to MOBAs yet).

And I've loved every minute of it. Well, wait, no no. That's *quite* overstated. There are some minutes I could have definitely done without. But if we're talking simple majorities, I've loved *most* minutes.

Each developer has its own style, its own culture, its own branding and competencies, its own ways of doing. Your EAs do your big-budget, well-funded, carpet-bomb-marketing annuals. Your Capcoms do your fighting games and have the zombie-infected shooters on lock. It's not complicated.

There are constants. And for me — a game developer who also happens to be Black and a woman — there were certain things I typically could count on regardless of the name on the building.

The desks will have toys. Toys. Toys! So many TOYS! Toys for hours. Toys for *days*. It was a toy wonderland. A perfect justification for the boxes of random figures I'd collected over the years. Now, they had a home on my desk.

Jeans and t-shirts are the (un)official uniform. And *everyone* wears the uniform. There's the occasional regional or seasonal audible (shorts and flip-flops in the summer, maybe hoodies when it's a bit chillier). But by and large, pick any 10 game devs at random, and you'll have at least 5 hipster tees and more than a few stonewashed jeans.

Everyone is white and male. Well, not *everyone* everyone, but I can make this completely irresponsible statement, and it's still more correct than not. (Official numbers support that.) But being *not* white and *not* male, I am remarked occasionally as somewhat of a rare find, maybe even a legendary rare (to extend a nerdy reference).

If there's one thing about being a "girl who plays games," it's that it's common enough to be unremarkable, but not quite common enough to *not* be remarked *upon*. And with the Blackness modifier, I was practically a *unicorn*.

CHAPTER 1: THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

I walked excitedly into the development studio, eyes wide, teeth flashing. This was it! This was my chance. This was my dream — to work in games, to *make games*. I'd certainly been pursuing a game dev career since before game dev programs were

colloquialized into university programs, but I'd had little expectation that a 22-year-old me would find herself a part of production on one of the most recognized franchises of all time.

To many, games were a quote-unquote "boys' hobby." As a kid, my teachers would periodically and somewhat hamfistedly remark on the childishness of this pursuit of mine. It didn't dissuade me. Even though I didn't know particularly much about how games were actually made in the real world, armed with a 4-year-degree, I was now reasonably set up to start learning by doing.

After a week of training and orientation, I met my teammates. A rough and tumble group of gents, clad in caps, sneakers, and t-shirts (or the occasional jersey), quite often sporting sports insignia of one of 32 national teams. They welcomed me to their space, happily, if not a bit cautiously. And I'm careful to say *their* space, as up until my hiring, it had been months since a woman had even walked the floors. My training class had brought the male to female ratio of the department to 300:2. That's three-hundred men and two women.

Now, even new as I was to it, it came as no surprise that my fellow game folk were predominantly male, predominantly white. The same was easily said of most every programming, math, and science class I'd taken over the preceding four to five years. The *same* same was just as easily said of the typical "gamer," at least as the term was stereotypically defined back then. Eighties and 90s marketing materials would conjure to mind the young, rebellious snaggletoothed teen rogue in a typical middle-class white household getting his EXTREME (or X-TREME!) gaming on. There was no room in print ads for me.

So one might say I wasn't exactly expecting some kind of radical shift in the demographic makeup of my new environs, even as I transitioned from enthusiast to developer. That said, I didn't expect the professional landscape to be quite as unbalanced as it would ultimately prove to be. But it seemed as if I would have to do what I always did — which was to simply become accustomed to existing in spaces with increasingly fewer people who looked like me.

Months passed, and the initial shock of letting an outsider in wore down. And we had *some fun*. There was the more-than-occasional "locker room moment," of course (perhaps to be discussed at some future time), but on the whole that space yielded mostly interactions that fell within expectation.

It's here that I have to step back and admit I am terrible with names. In my present day-to-day, I'm rarely seen without a pen and pad, jotting down notes and mnemonic needs to keep all the details neatly arranged. Back then was the same. Even months, years in, I never quite learned the monikers of all twenty-five dozen of my colleagues, but amusingly, they *all* knew me. Now, I would like to ascribe my infamy to the thoroughness of my research or the sharpness of my wit, and those who truly know me might also list those as memorable qualities; but I also know that I was well-known, because simply put, I was easy to pick out. Among waves of masculinely coded faces were only two not so masculine, and even among those, only mine was of a browner complexion.

There was a certain comfort to being so easily recognizable but also a certain unease. I was never allowed the first impression, never permitted the making of acquaintance. Since I was already a "known," many introductions merely skipped my half of the niceties, as though a conversation had already begun without my presence or involvement

"Hi, Shana! I'm Tom. I was told you could help me repro this bug."

"Hi, Shana! I'm Dick. Did you get the builds from TLA this morning?"

"Hi, Shana! I'm Harry. Can you do blah, blah, and blah?"

My introduction was already spoken for and with it, so went a little of my right to self. After all, that first impression is *so critical* in our society. When you don't get the privilege of self-presentation, you're stuck wondering about the margins.

"What do they know about me?"

"Who did they hear from?"

"How did they say it?"

"What are they assuming?"

It's unnerving in a way that is difficult to describe, but basking in the minorest of minor organizational celebrity led me to an assumption of my own – the assumption that knowing my face (or at least knowing the color and dial of my face) was in any way equivalent to knowing my work.

That sense of familiarity is a placebo. It inadvertently hints toward established professional relationships where there are none, and good will where there may be none. That false familiarity can scuttle the foundation on which a professional relationship is built.

So perhaps I was careless. (I *was* careless.) Perhaps I assumed. (I *did* assume.) But all that careless assumption didn't account for what was reasonably noticeable when viewing our management staff all lined up in a row.

Forty+ managers. Zero women.

* * *

Fast-forward two years.

By this time, our ratios were on the order of 350:9. Nine women on a payroll that two years previous had zero was impressive on the curve, but not entirely impressive outside of the vacuum.

I was still young, mind you, in age, experience, and career. So even though I noticed this (and thought it a bit odd), I wasn't yet savvy enough to challenge the logic they used to justify our very homogenous managerial staff.

"We are a meritocracy," they decreed, in words not quite as explicit as those

Meritocracy. You know the word. It is the tech industry's most resilient half-truth, created to combat the existence of a Glass Ceiling.

"If women/minorities aren't making it, it's because they're not good enough. Bootstraps. Bootstraps!"

Watching my male colleagues, some younger, many with less experience and fewer noticeable accomplishments lap my female colleagues in career advancement, finagle their way into career paths for which there was no apparent entry ramp, fail to ever fall in a direction besides *up*, was both disappointing and sobering.

And speaking with my female colleagues, they heard it. They saw it. There was a surgical sameness to all of our review feedback:

"We're afraid you won't be able to give 'the hard message,'" they said.

Put another way, "You're too nice, ladies, you're *too nice*."

Am I alleging some massive anti-woman conspiracy? Nothing so salacious. No, it's more likely a pattern that merely evolved out of common thoughtlessness and convenience. In general, *thoughtlessness* and *convenience* that can be blamed for many a marginalizing event.

Exhibit A: “Katie wants to be a manager...but Katie is SO NICE, and sometimes managers have to be mean. So even though I’ve never seen or examined her work, her niceness would *probably* get in the way if she ever needed to be mean, soooo SORRY KATIE. Time to promote Peter. He’s a regular jerk.”

Since Black women in tech are often simultaneously *invisible* by gender and *highly visible* by race, we ought to consider the effect that intersectional -ism’s have on the career and livelihood of those living at that corner.

But in too eagerly recognizing our differences, mistakes are made...

CHAPTER 2: ON THE MATTER OF KEEPING GATES

“So what do you think about working with all these Asians?” he asked the question somewhat casually (too casually) as he entered the room and sat down, sipping a late afternoon coffee.

“Um, it’s just like working with anyone, I guess,” I stumbled. I stuttered. The question was so bold and so boldly inappropriate that my brain was still struggling to concoct an answer that was equally and righteously bold while also being interview-appropriate.

Oh, didn’t I mention? This was in an *interview*.

My answer wasn’t adequate. No, not at all. And I still occasionally look back and kick myself. Why didn’t I say this? Why didn’t I say that? *Why didn’t I just get up and walk out of the interview room?*

But I didn’t say any of those things. And I didn’t get up and leave. And the interview continued.

“So I want to ask...” he pauses and turns to the side. Under his breath, he whispers to himself and to me, “I need to figure out how to ask this without getting myself in trouble...” He looks back up, newly confident, “Are you going to be able to call me and well, these *guys* on our bullshit?”

I recognize this immediately. This is dog-whistling. This is the “Can you give ‘the hard message’, or will your lady-parts and lady-feels get in the way?”

I know how to answer this one. I’ve almost literally been answering that question in one format or another for more than a decade.

* * *

Ever heard of “stereotype threat”?

I hadn’t either; it’s an academic term, and one I just recently learned (Richard, 2015). That said, it describes well a common occurrence that I didn’t even know had a *name*. *Stereotype threat* (Steele & Aronson, 1995) is:

“...when negative stereotypes of a gender or ethnic groups’ ability in a field or domain is elicited, explicitly or ambiguously, and causes stress, which undermines the stereotyped groups’ performance, regardless of actual skill.”

Understood colloquially, it’s another result of gatekeeping — the old guard protecting their monopolization of the space, challenging your right to dare exist in it. It can be vague or overt, but is often the former, and it causes a constant layer of mental, emotional, and even physical stress that feeds into other well-termed phenomena, like that feeling that you really, really don’t belong (aka, *imposter syndrome*) and more. It’s common among people of color, women, and especially in uniformity-dominated environments.

The tension is not merely self-induced. It’s a symptom clinically cultivated in and induced by tech culture spaces that are intentionally male-centric, some even to the point of being “women-unfriendly” or even “hostile.” Likewise, tech working environments are largely white-centric, some to the point of being “minority-unfriendly,” some to the point of being (racially) “hostile.”

There’s a concept of “culture fit” that drives tech hiring culture. The idea is simple – “If we build a community of like-minded techies, we’ll create a culture where *everyone fits*. We’ll weed out dissent and conflict, and we get to work with people who we also think it’d be cool to hang out with (Bonus!).”

But our system is flawed.

Seeking people who are “just like us” in an industry that is in a shortage of minority affiliation is like crossing your fingers behind your back. At some point, the ideals of “diverse hiring” and “culture fitting” will always come into conflict, because the very idea of diversity implies disruption of the status quo. And disruption of the status quo is the farthest thing away from culture fit.

In our current climate, “culture fit” and “diverse hiring” are not only mutually exclusive, but mutually destructive.

* * *

It's 2010. And I'm still counting.

There are more Black women this time. Not many more, but more. I never lose count, question my numbers or my pace. I walk through crowd after crowd, but never am I once overwhelmed with the task. Never is there encountered a surprise flock of tanner-skinned colleagues who wildly throw off my tally. 24. 25. 26. I'm sure I missed a head here or there, but fine. *Double* my numbers. The result is still embarrassing for an industry so committed to diversity. Perhaps, we're only committed to the *idea* of diversity?

The sessions that year used all the buzzwords, checked all the boxes.

- Inclusive design!
- Diversity!
- Bringing women into the fold!

But as soon as the lights died down and the night life rose up, many of those same companies so committed to inclusion were throwing their annual parties, complete with neon-lit gogos on raised platforms. (I said it was 2010; perhaps, it's 2013.²) There's a saying about words and actions that I don't need to complete, but this was more than a left hand/right hand problem; this was cultural. This was systemic. And cultures and systems are damn hard to change

CHAPTER 3: THERE'S A GIRL OVER THERE...

The day started like any other day. I came in, put my lunch in the fridge. I sat at my desk and tore into checklists. I saw unfamiliar faces milling about, making noise, doing things – unusual for a company where most spoken comments were trade-secrets.

“...there's a girl over there,” I'd heard some producer-type say. “See if we can get her.”

I heard their inquiry. And moments later, it was “Shana, do you have a minute?” as they beckoned me aside. There was a special assignment for me today, if I wouldn't mind just signing this here waiver/release form. I read it, asked questions. I signed. And before I knew it, I was sitting back in my chair, controller in hand, tapping away, faking a pass or calling an audible. A studio-quality camera was aimed directly at my

hands (or rather, my distinctly feminine manicure), and then turned to pan to my face.

Here's the thing about *otherness*. It is *sameness* with a spotlight always on it. It is being ordinary in exemplary ways. It is normalcy treated as though normalcy were *fancy*.

I grew up in the non-diverse nerd-o-sphere of 80s and 90s pop-nostalgia. We weren't far removed from Civil Rights (as a proper noun), feminism was second-wave, and words like *intersectionality* or *political correctness* weren't even words yet. Television was just barely integrated, and our schools still weren't. A little black girl in the South, if I weren't an army brat living amongst other army brats, my playtimes would have been mighty different.

I remember my childhood heroes. She-Hulk and Spider-Man. Claire Huxtable. Atreyu and Artax. Link and She-Ra. The Dread Pirate Roberts.

I looked at my childhood toybox – a bastion of eclectic liberalism curated with very non-liberal intent. I had toys of all shapes, sizes, mechanism, and complexity, and I consumed media of all types of origin – from the nerdy to the spiritual. I remember my sister and I often being the only little black girls in our neighborhood, extracurriculars, and schools. And I remember hearing kids repeat the careless, racist thoughts that they'd no doubt absorbed from parents still resisting a newborn climate of integration and change.

“Hey, Shana, my parents told me that Black people don't have grass in their yards. Do you have grass in your yard?”

Do you have grass in your yard...?

* * *

It's 2009. And there's a line in the bathroom.

I remember it clearly. I remarked on it. The other ladies remarked on it. I'd never been so elated to have to wait for a stall. It was an important (though inconvenient) landmark in our minds.

But a line in women's bathroom is only a line of women. It speaks only to the number of female bodies in attendance, not specifically *Black* females, so it doesn't impact my annual and informal record-keeping. And for the record, my count reached double-

digits that year. Looking forward, that number would stay in double-digits for several years hence.

CHAPTER 4: HAPPY ACCIDENTS

There's something powerful about media. It is escapism and imagination. It is power fantasy. For people in the minority, media is often a place where we can find that fictional release. We can mine the escapist fantasy for characters to fictionally relate to, supplementing our daily lives that can be widely deficient of meaningful cultural interaction.

Television and movies have long faced criticism of their diversity numbers both on and off the screen, but at least where mainstream cinema may falter, there still remain specialized networks and programming, catering to underserved demographics with entertainment featuring largely diverse casts. Games, on the other hand, have no handy analog. Games have no (and arguably need no) BET, but in the current landscape, underserved gaming demographics remain sadly underserved. Our games crudely cast the archetypical jock, the nerd, the slacker, and the girl, while people of color are generally relegated to fringes as NPC roles and/or the comedy relief.

For videogames, there is no happy accident when it comes to inclusion or diversity. Faces on a screen have to be put there deliberately. Faces on a screen have to be *colored* deliberately. This means that diversity must always be a conscious decision, though it's possible to make it a less deliberate one...but again, we're talking about changing cultures and systems, and as already discussed, change is *hard*.

Let's put it this way.

Representation matters. Which is why I signed that waiver. It's often why I've allowed companies to parade my black skin and womanly features about semi-exploitatively. Diversity is important. I believe that to my core. But to companies, it's often only the *appearance* of diversity that is important. The appearance of diversity is valuable. If a company can appear diverse, it can often reap the benefits of diversity without actually being diverse. Look at any employment application, and you'll see the phrase:

An Equal-Opportunity Employer

Some companies incorporate it into their logos, throw it in their letterhead, or even plaster it all over their visitor badges. It's a weird statement to constantly tout, especially when touted at companies as homogenous as any in tech. Diversity is a

buzzword. A two-dollar lark. A lacquered-up showroom with pizzazz and appeal, but once inspected, you see the paint running down the cardboard backdrop and pooling unevenly on the floor.

Your otherness will be exploited (in recruitment, in video, and interview footage), and it is hardly ever to your direct benefit. That said, there's some exploitation that's clear and necessary to evoke any change. Representation matters. Women help attract women. Minorities help attract minorities. Once companies get into the mindset of seeking diversity for its own sake as opposed to optics, it will be a moment when diversity efforts become meaningful.

Until then, capital-D Diversity is marketing, and the underrepresented are its oft-reluctant salespersons. But we are not without the agency to protest. When it comes to matters of diverse intent, no one buys it unless we're willing to help sell.

EPILOGUE

It's 2016, and I still count. There are bathroom lines and diversity lounges, but online spaces are still brimming with hateful slurs, and female characters are still locked behind paywalls. We've made progress in our struggles, but we're *always* making progress, and we shouldn't rest on what's already done.

But I hope that this treatise is somewhat enlightening and encouraging. I love and enjoy this industry, in spite of its faults. I helped to build small parts of it (or at least contributed to its landscape), and I'm holding the door open for anyone else I can encourage in. I hope the next time we chat, it's because I'm losing count of our countless gains.

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CHAPTER 10.

NEED TO SUCCEED

Women Share Their Reasons to Be in Game Industry

BY AMANDA OCHSNER

*“No matter how many reasons we have to hesitate, we have more reasons to succeed.” –
#1ReasonToBe Tweet*

The recent GamerGate controversy has led many women to question whether pursuing and persisting in a career in the game industry is worth the physical and emotional risks that come with being a woman in games. While women have long been in the minority for holding game industry jobs, their numbers have trended upward in recent years. Recent research shows that women are playing games in almost equal numbers, with recent figures showing that 48 percent of game players are women (Entertainment Software Association, 2014). Women have not—and still are not—taking up careers in games proportionally, but their numbers are on the rise. In the latest International Game Developer Association (IGDA) Developer Satisfaction Survey (Edwards, et al., 2014), 22 percent of respondents identified as female, marking a substantial increase from the 2005 survey, on which only 11.5 percent of respondents identified as female.

In recent years, there have been a number of efforts to recruit more women to games, including programs like the Dames Making Games and the Montreal-based Pixelles initiative. However, as researcher Mia Consalvo (2008) notes, efforts to recruit women to game careers will have little long-term impact if the industry fails to retain women in those careers. It is essential for the research community to understand the experiences of women who pursue careers in games.

Extensive research explores the gender divide in technology fields broadly (Barker & Aspray, 2008; Cohoon & Aspray, 2008), and several studies specific to the game

industry reveal that women have complicated relationships with the industry's work cultures (Deuze, Martin, & Allen, 2007; Consalvo, 2008; Johnson, 2013). An ethnographic study (Johnson 2013, 2014) of a mid-size game development studio in the United States revealed how discourses of masculinity in the office create and reproduce a culture that excludes female employees. Other studies on gender in game communities focus on one-time game design efforts with younger girls (Denner, 2007; Denner & Campe, 2008; Kafai, 1996, 1998) or specific industry issues like crunch time¹ (Consalvo, 2008). Studies such as the one described in this chapter can help to unpack the pathways and expectations of women in games, further informing researchers and educators about the resources that women need to persist in the face of challenges they may face while navigating careers in the game industry.

WHY WOMEN ARE AND AREN'T IN GAMES

In late 2012, the social media platform Twitter was home to a conversation centered around why so few women choose to pursue—or remain in—careers in the game industry. Under the banner of the hashtag #1ReasonWhy, the conversation emerged as a response to Kickstarter community manager Luke Crane asking his Twitter followers why there are so few women making games. See Figure 10.1 for the original Tweet. People from across the game industry and game-playing communities contributed to the resulting discussion about what women experience in online game-playing spaces, at game industry events, in game industry workplaces, and in the media. My recent research examines the #1ReasonWhy conversation, exploring how members of the game industry and game playing communities account for why so few women choose to pursue and stay in careers in game development.

Analysis of the #1ReasonWhy conversation revealed that women are evaluated on a different set of standards than their male colleagues. Women's professional contributions are often obscured by a focus on their physical appearance or their relationships with men in the industry. They also struggle for recognition of their expertise. At industry events, people are likely to assume they are accompanying their romantic partner rather than attending as an industry professional. At work, they receive comments suggesting they were hired because of their appearance or their gender rather than because of their accomplishments. Finally, women's voices are frequently silenced, dismissed, and otherwise made invisible through persistent acts of harassment and a culture where speaking out about negative experiences is discouraged and even punished. When taken individually these incidents might feel like minor inconveniences, easily overcome. However, over the span of a career, they

can be exasperating, disheartening, and humiliating, leading many women to leave games to pursue other career fields.



Figure 10.1. Tweet that inspired the #1ReasonWhy conversation in the Fall of 2012.

Exploring why women leave game careers is critical. But it is also important that we understand why some women choose to persist. Some readers of the #1ReasonWhy conversation felt that by focusing on reasons why women *aren't* in games, the discussion missed the opportunity to discuss another important issue: why women *are* in games. Among these was developer Rhianna Pratchett, who responded by initiating a new thread of conversation for female developers to share reasons and stories about why they choose to stay in games. See Figure 10.2 for the original Tweet. Taking up its own following, this sister conversation gathered under the banner of a new hashtag: #1ReasonToBe. This chapter explores the #1ReasonToBe conversation in greater detail, unraveling what reasons current and aspiring female developers provide to argue that women belong in games and that they can build satisfying, fulfilling careers in the industry.

As scholars investigating gender, race, and sexuality in games and game communities, it is sometimes easiest to see the things that are broken. There is no shortage of stories of sexism, racism, and harassment in games. Game characters and game players alike experience objectification, stereotyping, and both metaphorical and literal violence. My work aims to understand the experiences of women who work in games to support researchers and industry leaders in theorizing how to make meaningful improvements to game cultures and industry spaces. In this paper, I explore women's reasons to be in games. What do female developers love about the games they play, the companies they work for, and the career paths they have chosen to pursue? Understanding why women choose to pursue and persist in careers in games can prove useful to educators looking to engage aspiring female developers, enabling them to incorporate women's interests and values into the design of new curricula and learning programs



Figure 10.2. Tweet from developer Rhianna Pratchett initiating the #1ReasonToBe conversation.

TWITTER DATA COLLECTION

I collected the data for this study using the Twitter search, monitoring, and analytics engine Topsy, a certified platform for Twitter-related data and analytics. Using Topsy and a Python script to pull the data, I was able to collect every Tweet that made use of the #1ReasonToBe hashtag, which at the time of data collection was 10,745 Tweets. Compared to its counterpart, the #1ReasonToBe conversation was relatively small. Its sister conversation #1ReasonWhy had a total of 36,864 Tweets—almost four times more. To reduce the amount of data to a reasonable amount for qualitative coding, I utilized a Python script to strip out duplicate Tweets, called Retweets.

After the initial data filtering process, the remaining data still contained many Tweets that were part of the #1Reason conversation, but which were not useful for answering the study's research question, which specifically aims to investigate reasons for women to be in games. For example, many of these Tweets shared links to articles: "An amazing blog post from a woman VP/Creative Director for the #1reasontobe discussion." Other Tweets were summaries of the conversation, but did not contain content constituting a reason to be. To further reduce the data corpus, I filtered out Tweets that did not contain the word "because," or some variation on the word, since Tweets that did not contain any type of causation clause were much less likely to provide data that can be classified as a reason to be in games. This process reduced the number of Tweets from 10,745 to just 258. Utilizing the same filtering criteria for the #1ReasonWhy conversation reduced the number of Tweets from 36,864 to 1,752. While I used the same processes and criteria for reducing the number of Tweets for both conversations, the process reduced the #1ReasonWhy conversation to 4.8 percent of the total number of Tweets, but reduced the #1ReasonToBe discussion to just 2.4 percent of the total original Tweets. This suggests that a larger portion of the #1ReasonToBe discussion consisted of Retweets²

or resource sharing and contained a smaller percentage of original contributions from Twitter users contributing personal reasons to be in games.

I chose qualitative coding and analysis techniques for this research because I believe that the deeply personal stories and experiences shared through #1ReasonWhy are best analyzed through a lens of close-reading and careful attention to the words of this conversation's participants. Deeply understanding the content of the #1ReasonWhy conversation provides a meaningful platform for understanding the challenges experienced by women in games. Adopting Saldaña's (2013) stance of "pragmatic eclecticism" (p. 60), I approached the data with an open and flexible mind in the initial data collection and coding phases. Using Descriptive Coding to assign basic labels to the data and to generate an inventory of topics (Saldaña 2013), I formed "bread and butter" categories (Turner, 1994, p. 199) to reveal the various contexts that the Tweets centered around before engaging in more focused second-round coding techniques. I utilized the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA for the iterative process of coding and memo writing. See Table 10.1 below for the finalized list of codes paired with code definitions and example Tweets.

Code	Definition	Example
Belief That Women's Voices Matter	Tweets on the importance of discourse and emphasis on the fact that women's contributions matter	Because we are ushering in a heightened awareness of equality that will permeate company cultures and game culture. #1ReasonToBe Better
Better Future For Girls	Tweets about the need for strong role models for girls and a desire for a future industry where girls feel like they belong	#1ReasonToBe a game dev happened to me: my daughter was told, 'Girls don't play games'. She said 'My mommy makes games!'
Change is Possible & Worth Fighting For	Tweets expressing that individuals need to be a part of the change they want to see and encouraging others to keep at it	How can we ever expect change if we can't support each other? #1ReasonToBe
Creativity	Tweets expressing gratitude for being able to work in a creative medium	#1ReasonToBe a game designer is because it's a gift to be able to create a world in your head and have a talented team realize it.
Games Hold Opportunity & Possibility	Tweets expressing that games are a special medium, full of potential	#1ReasonToBe Because despite everything no field has ever seemed quite as fascinating and full of potential.
Great Colleagues	Tweets from women who feel respected and accepted, expressing gratitude for having positive relationships with their colleagues	Because I adore working with the talented intelligent funny quirky outrageously awesome people of this industry. #1ReasonToBe
Love Games & Making Games	Tweets expressing passion for the game making process	Because every day I marvel at how I managed to get paid for doing something I love and working in a medium that is my passion. #1ReasonToBe
Make Players Happy	Tweets about the joy of sharing one's work and have it be appreciated	#1ReasonToBe Because I get to craft experiences that help add joy to the lives of millions.
Role Models, Mentors, & Leaders	Tweets thanking previous role models/ leaders and expressing the desire to be one to others	#1ReasonToBe Because my very top favorite games have had women in leading/ production roles. @amy_hennig @rhipratchett

Table 10.1. Codes, definitions, and example Tweets for #1ReasonToBe data corpus.

THREE KINDS OF REASONS TO BE

The 140 character stories, perspectives, and arguments that comprise the #1ReasonToBe conversation are unquestioningly diverse, but they largely coalesce around three predominant themes. The first category of reasons is motivated by a love for games. These Tweets celebrate games as a magical, creative medium. The second major theme of the conversation has to do with people and support communities. Some women derive their support from the broader games community, while others feel valued by their colleagues. And for many women, the reason to be in games is their fans and players. Finally, a large portion of the #1ReasonToBe Tweets were about changing cultures and building futures. These Tweets express hope for a better future for the next generation of girls and outline what individual men and women in the industry are doing to affect change in their own unique ways.

1: For the Love of Games

“I do what I love and I love what I do.”

50 percent of the Tweets in the #1ReasonToBe conversation are from women who describe being in the game industry because they love games and they are inspired by creating them. For these developers, making games is empowering, exhilarating, and sometimes “freaking brilliant fun.” They tackle Monday mornings with a sense of excitement and anticipation and describe their current work as their dream job. “I have dreamed of doing this since I was old enough to know what an RPG³ was,” one woman says. For these women, conversations about what is wrong in games, like #1ReasonWhy and the more recent GamerGate controversy, do little to deter them from pursuing their passions. “I’ve dreamed of this job since I was little,” says one woman, “and a few sexists don’t cancel out all of the great people in the industry.” For some of these designers, there is no other option but to be in games. “The only way I’ll give up the video game industry,” one woman explains, “is when they pry it from my cold, dead, rheumatoid arthritic hands.” What fuels this unrelenting passion for games? These women love games because they enable them to express their creativity and explore a medium laden with possibility and potential.

Creativity. Nearly 10 percent of the Tweets described games as a means for expressing creativity. These Tweets describe a sense of gratitude for having the opportunity to work in a creative industry. “Every single day I have been in this industry I know I have an amazing career surrounded by creative, inspiring people,”

one woman explains. For these women, the opportunity to write stories and create worlds, and then be able to share experiences, makes all of the challenges of being a woman in the game industry worth it. One woman describes that, “Creativity knows no genders. Diversity makes better stories.” By contributing their own unique creative ideas to games, many women feel empowered by the content and stories they create.

A magical medium. Some women find that their reason to be is because “games are uplifting and magical.” More than 10 percent of the Tweets expressed the feelings of possibility, opportunity, and magic that come from making games. Describing games as “the perfect medium for storytelling,” these Tweets show that some women experience a profound sense of excitement and wonder from making them. Whether it is the potential for games to solve social problems, stimulate new ideas, or their ability to influence culture in positive ways, there is a shared sense of hope and possibility in the medium. “There’s no other medium capable of delivering such exploration, action, adventure, and drama,” shares one woman. For these developers, the magical, exciting properties of games outweigh the trepidation they might feel about working in an industry that so many women struggle in.

2: Great People & Support Networks

“99 percent of the people rock.”

While some women love the creative process of making games, others draw their inspiration from the people around them. Whether from satisfied players, great colleagues, or a supportive community, these women find their reasons to be in games from other people.

Players. 6 percent of the Tweets suggested the reason to make games is to spread a sense of joy and wonder to players. These Tweets express how wonderful it is to “bring a game to life for a player and see them enjoy it.” One woman writes, “If my stories resonate with one person, it’s all been worth it.”

Colleagues. More than 20 percent of the reasons to be in games have to do with getting to work with great colleagues. Though the #1ReasonWhy conversation proves that a supportive work environment is by no means ubiquitous, or perhaps even the norm for game studios, many women cite that they are “lucky to work where women are valued team members.” These Tweets describe teams and colleagues that are smart, intelligent, creative, talented, fun, and even “outrageously awesome.” Having access to male colleagues who serve as allies makes them feel

respected as developers and team leaders. Some of the Tweets even express that fellow developers are like family: “Finding the right company, the right teams, and colleagues, it’s like finally coming home.”

Community. Other Tweets are less about specific companies, teams, and colleagues, but are more about an overall positive experience with broader game communities. Many women describe supportive online communities and amazing friends. These women have found the game industry to be a place where they feel they belong. Of course, this does not mean that these women have had universally positive experiences in games, but overall they find that the positive moments outweigh the negative experiences. They describe having “more people supporting me than in my way.” The overall sentiment is that, “for every sheathed misogynist, there are loads of respectful, funny, and brilliant men and women to work with in game development.”

3: Changing Culture & Building Futures

“You can’t get the pie from the orc if you don’t show up to the party. Or something like that.”

Finally, for some women, loving games and loving the people in their game communities are important, but are not the primary driving force for being in games. Many women desire a change in the culture of games and they are determined to play a part in creating that change. One of the core themes in the #1ReasonToBe Tweets is movement toward change. These Tweets range from game playing enthusiasts expressing their support for change, to developers sharing about how they are implementing changes in their companies, to industry hopefuls who want to contribute to a new era for games. The Tweets express many variations of the theme, “My presence here is changing the industry,” and I am “making an impact to change how women in the game industry are treated.” The predominant sentiment is that “games are evolving toward incredible places” and women want to help “pave the path for a more egalitarian future.” In these Tweets, there is a sense of momentum, with women expressing strong desires to play a part in determining the new direction. For some, that drive comes from a hope for a better future for the next generation of women in games.

Better future for girls. For many women, their number one reason to be in games is not about their individual trajectory or personal gain. It is more about their little sisters, their daughters, and their nieces. 14 percent of the #1ReasonToBe Tweets are about helping to build a brighter future for the girls in their lives who love games. Some of these Tweets are even for daughters who have not yet been born. “I want to show my hypothetical daughter wonderful games where girls can be the hero and not

the damsel in distress,” one woman writes. The common theme is that many women want to serve as a source of inspiration for the future generation of creative young women designing new universes and play spaces.

The lack of role models for girls in games is a source of exasperation for many women. Parents “have to hunt to find strong female role models for their daughters,” one Tweet describes, “and they’re not finding them here.” Women who grew up hearing that games are not for girls do not want girls of the next generation to be burdened with these same kinds of discouraging messages. Wanting “little girls to know that they too can be epic and strong,” many of the Tweets about the future for girls are hopeful about the possibility of change. “I want girls of the next generation to have amazing game experiences where they aren’t told they’re sex objects,” one Tweet shares. By working to change the culture now, these people hope that girls will “never have to face the dark side of gaming culture” that they themselves have had to navigate. “The best solution to the problem,” expresses one Tweet, “is educating and nurturing the future generation of game developers.” The #1ReasonToBe conversation reveals a plethora of different ways that women are finding to contribute to the future of games. Many advocate for hearing women’s voices and others find unique ways to speak up.

Hearing women’s voices. One of the changes that drives women’s reason to be in games is a sense that women’s voices are finally being heard and that their contributions are being recognized. More than 20 percent of the Tweets in the conversation draw on an emerging sense of empowerment caused by the attention that the #1ReasonWhy and #1ReasonToBe conversations have garnered in the game press and mainstream media. The perception is that this momentum will “help people think about another perspective” and give women a voice that is louder and stronger than ever. One woman draws her inspiration from “knowing that as I sit at my desk plugging in each word, other women I admire are doing the same thing.” These Tweets express that “everyone should have a voice in games,” and the hope is that #1ReasonWhy and #1ReasonToBe will help provide the platform for women to finally have their voices heard. But those voices are only heard when women voice them in the first place.

Speaking up. One of the ways that women are working to drive the change in games that they want to see is by speaking up. A woman shares, “I just quietly pointed out inadvertent sexism online, and it changed. Simple apology and edit, no shouting.” While some women have found games culture to be hostile and laden with harassment, others have had more positive experiences where speaking out about

sexism leads offenders to reevaluate their words and behaviors. Throughout the #1ReasonWhy Tweets there is a feeling that change is possible. “We can change the status quo and we will,” one person shares. These Tweets are not mired in the same beaten down discouragement that permeates through much of the #1ReasonWhy conversation. Many members of gaming communities hold on to their hope that change is possible and that if gamers and game developers are willing to continue to fight for it, it will come.

DISCUSSION

Throughout #1ReasonToBe, there is a belief that everyone has a role to play. For some, that role is being an ally and helping to support the cause. These people are not necessarily developers themselves, but nonetheless use their voices to show their support for women in games. “I welcome more women in games because they are awesome and they bring new things to the table,” one person shares. Another argues that female game developers are an essential part of growing a healthy industry: “We all need them if we want this industry to grow and evolve.”

Among the #1ReasonToBe Tweets, there are a variety of ways that women are finding to contribute in personal, meaningful ways to the growth and evolution of the game industry. A student shares her belief that as one of three women in her game design program, she has the ability to make a difference in the classroom culture. Female developers have a variety of ways to contribute. Some share how they approach the design process in ways that affect change. “Make a few avatars be something other than white male or porn stars,” one woman shares. Another plays her part by working to “catch at some of the bizarre sexist crap that creeps into projects I work on.” Over time, these small changes add up. “Every time you speak up and stop unintentional sexism,” one developer shares, “you made a game better.”

For some developers, contributing to change is not about contributions to game content, but is about fostering a better workplace or online culture. To have her voice heard, one developer explains, “Sometimes you need to drop a passionate f-bomb in a meeting.” Another Tweet is from someone who has worked with their company to develop more productive ways to have a positive discourse with fans. By making these changes, the hope is that these efforts will bring “a heightened awareness of equality that will actively permeate company cultures and game culture.”

Change never comes easy. As game communities have seen in recent months with the GamerGate movement, things may get worse for women in games before they get better. Pervasive throughout the #1ReasonToBe conversation is a determination to

persist and a widespread belief that changes to game cultures and communities are worth fighting for. “Nothing worthwhile is ever easy and nothing easy is ever worthwhile,” one Tweet expresses. “I live life at the point of the spear and not from a cozy corner,” another shares. “It’s just who I am. And wow, is this ever pointy!” Game culture can indeed be pointy for those advocating for change, but #1ReasonToBe shows there are game developers, game players, and other industry advocates that find diversity and inclusivity in games to be worth fighting for.

Placing this conversation in context with its counterpart, #1ReasonWhy, it seems that one of the primary goals of #1ReasonToBe was to make this case that the fight for diversity and inclusivity is worth the effort. The #1ReasonToBe conversation emerged as a direct response to the #1ReasonWhy conversation, serving to counterbalance the discouraging experiences that many women reported. By starting #1ReasonToBe, Rhianna Pratchett fostered a conversation to address the positive experiences that women have had in games.

CONCLUSION

It might initially seem like the #1ReasonWhy and #1ReasonToBe cancel one another out—one conversation paints a bleak picture of what it is like to be a woman in the game industry and the other implies that it is a wonderful industry with fulfilling work and supportive colleagues. The truth is, of course, that they both present accurate depictions of real women’s experiences in the game industry. The findings of these two studies taken together do not cancel one another out, but rather they show that there is no singular or universal experience that all women have in games. Just as women themselves are diverse in their interests, skills, and talents, so too are their experiences. Some women are fortunate enough to find fulfillment in their work that justifies the long hours and have colleagues that they feel at home with. Others are in positions that are more demanding and even grueling and others struggle to fit into office cultures and environments that are not welcoming or accommodating. Some women have experiences and opinions to contribute to both conversations—having stories to share of moments where they have been victims of sexist comments or workplace discrimination but also speaking about how they love making games and have had many supportive colleagues. Both conversations have been productive in engaging game playing and game development communities in dialogue about important issues in the game industry and both conversations ultimately reveal that there are many reasons to work for change.

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Notes

1. The term "crunch time" refers to a common practice in the gaming industry when the development team is perceived as being behind on the development timeline and the developers are encouraged or required to work over-time hours. Some development studios have reputations for planning crunch into the development cycle, essentially expecting that all projects will reach a point where the team is required to put in crunch hours.
2. Retweets are duplicate Tweets that are similar to forwarding an email. One user posted the original content, but another user may want to share that Tweet with their network and therefore Retweets to their followers.
3. An RPG is a role-playing game, a genre of game where players take on the role of a fictional character in a fantasy or otherwise fictional setting.

CHAPTER 11.

A GAME INDUSTRY BEYOND DIVERSITY

Systemic Barriers to Participation for Women in South Korea

BY FLORENCE M. CHEE

Digital gaming has become a prominent part of mainstream culture. However, as one may observe in the public exhibitions of this form of play, the multitude of reasons for participation in the games industry are especially divided along gender lines. This paper is an analysis of themes emerging from the critical ethnographic examination of South Korea's¹ online game culture that, upon closer and iterative analyses, point to additional socioeconomic complications and systemic barriers to women's equitable participation in the game development and production. Using South Korea's national context as a point of reference, the findings from this case study offer a synthesis between educational policies and industry practices that implicate how labor originating from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) disciplines may include crucial systemic barriers to women's participation in the aspects of game culture contributing the most to upward mobility. The findings illustrate that factors (such as compulsory military service) that are typically overlooked in policy research are imperative to understanding how specific structural systems serve to reinforce existing gender norms. These factors go beyond gender disparities, pipeline issues and problems of representation that preclude female's substantive involvement in the game industry.

My original research objectives included forming a comprehensive idea of the factors contributing to the prominence of online gaming culture in Korea, along with illustrating the importance of analyzing local dynamics in a globalizing industry such as games. My ethnographic research on gaming culture has focused primarily on the field site of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) and its globally infamous online game culture, which has been simultaneously lauded and derided by local and international media. The swift growth of online gaming in the global public

consciousness has served to point out the economic miracle that modern Korean society represents (Kim, 2011), as the country is one of the most sophisticated in terms of commercial and consumerist hardware. In the years since the Korean War (1950-1953), the southern half of the “world’s last divided country” has managed to transform from a feudal agrarian society into a flagship knowledge/information society.

An ethnographic approach has proven valuable (Boelstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012) for developing insights into how people create meaning amidst their technological artifacts and everyday culture. Over the last decade (2004-2014) of conducting research on Korean online game culture, I have engaged in 3 distinct phases of fieldwork inquiry, with each subsequent visit building upon insights of the last in an iterative manner. The initial phase focused on data gathering at the grassroots level, engaging with the game players and members of online communities (Chee, 2006). The next phase, years later, I focused upon broader political and economic factors in Korea, (Jin & Chee, 2008) to provide a more comprehensive picture of how online games have come to occupy a prominent role in Korean mainstream popular culture. Results from the first two phases helped to precipitate an inquiry into the field data using a gender lens, carefully crafted to the specific circumstances and findings appropriate to the Korean context. In this third phase, the focus of this chapter, my goal was to examine some of the gendered themes emerging from the field research that began 10 years ago and to contribute greater nuance to the ways in which we may understand who plays games, who produces them, how this process occurs, and why.

UNDERSTANDING PRACTICES AND POLICIES AS BARRIERS TO FULL PARTICIPATION IN THE GAMING INDUSTRY

Through documenting the factors that contributed to the rise of online gaming in South Korea to its current state of prominence, I want to underscore how evaluating games and their platforms represents only a partial assessment of a complex system. The popularity of online gaming in Korea especially can be attributed to key technological policy decisions and events, though these wider issues of policy are rarely discussed in games literature. Deliberate choices in international relations and restriction have likewise influenced the domestic trajectory of opportunities available to participate in the online game economy. Insights discussed here emerged from long-term ethnographic engagement in South Korea, where games represent not only a celebrity “e-sports” industry, but also a dynamic and robust environment for developers. Korea is a leading game market in the world, with an impressive USD 3.36 billion in revenue (Newzoo, 2014) which represents a significant part of the

global economy accounting for over 100 billion USD in revenue (Gartner, 2015). My findings offer a perspective of how industry practices and government policies, such as education goals and military service, also influence how and why people may choose to pursue certain career paths over others. The findings also implicate how labor originating from STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) disciplines may include crucial systemic barriers to the representation of women in roles contributing the most to upward mobility.

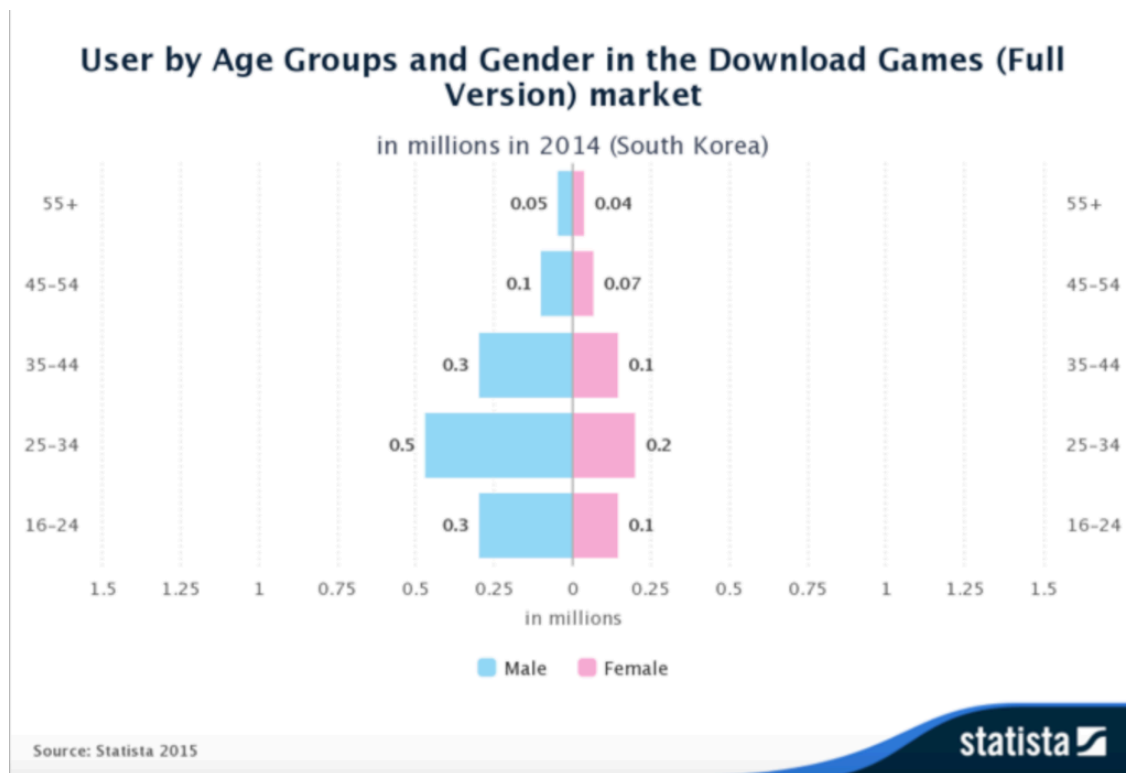


Figure 11.1. Breakdown of male and female users by age group in the “Download Games” market in South Korea. Of note is the disparity in the ages 25-34 bracket

The unprecedented development of the gaming industry in South Korea draws from the national emphasis placed on an “education culture” that favors STEM and the goals of national institutions such as the Chaebols, a South Korean form of business conglomerate, also called “money clique” in Hangul. South Korea’s extraordinarily large investment in education (Seth, 2002) as compared with other OECD countries (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development), and its emphasis on STEM fields, along with (to a lesser extent) military exemption policies have facilitated the nationwide growth of the now-pervasive online gaming. However, one

cannot underestimate the role that the corporate entities, the Chaebol, Samsung, LG, and Hyundai, among others, play in almost all the affairs of South Korea along with its sense of nationalism/nationhood. Therefore, it is imperative to mention the nature of the Chaebol, government science and technology initiatives, in how these have shaped and continue to shape the landscape of Korean communications (Larson 1995) and, in turn gaming.

There are, however, some assertions that require critique in this context for a fuller understanding of the dynamics at play and these reiterate longstanding stereotypes. It is assumed that the game industry is male-dominated because females from an early age biologically and socially are predisposed to a lack of interest in STEM (Science, Technology Engineering, and Mathematics), the disciplines which primarily feed into the game industry. Therefore it is assumed that the game industry is naturally (and correctly) male-dominated. Left unchecked, these assumptions reverberate into popular discourse, which then get reinforcement and support at all levels. But in South Korea, even if women are interested in STEM, I posit that they are systemically excluded from positions of power in the game industry because the deck is stacked against them from the very beginning for many reasons. While many reasons account for the prominence of games in the sociocultural and economic media landscape in South Korea (Chee 2012), I will focus and discuss here the military service, and exemption from it, as crucial and unique factors determining the Korean IT workforce dynamic from the perspective of those involved with the games industry.

INDUSTRY PRACTICES: CHAEBOLS AND CORPORATE CONTEXT IN SOUTH KOREA

As far as technology is concerned, South Korea has outdone most countries in the world. It is a global leader in the production of semiconductors, cars, ships, and gadgets (Hira, Morfopolous, & Chee, 2012). At first blush, a discussion of Korea solely in terms of being a contemporary economic “miracle” (Amsden, 1989) is in line with the celebration of technology being solely responsible for emancipating nations from poverty. In a classic case of what Mosco calls the “digital sublime,” (Mosco, 2004) in the collective vision and belief in digital lifestyles, Korea’s embrace of the information economy as national panacea has indeed been remarkable in every aspect. After all, as Deleuze is noted for saying, “Technology is social before it is technical” (Galloway, 2004 p. 79). South Korea is a country that must be examined within the boundaries of its national circumstances. As a whole, the investigation of the Korean context best shows that games and platforms are not the sole explanatory measure of success.

South Korea has participated in an extraordinary moment in global communication history, as well as in its own right. Subject to what Nancy Abelmann (2003) calls a “compressed modernity,” the nation has propelled itself into becoming the bona fide networked information society that many countries aspire to be, yet continue to find such an elusive goal. Notions of modernity (Feenberg, 1995; P. Kim, 2011) were adopted and reworked to the geopolitical and social realities on the Korean peninsula through a discussion of Japanese colonization, the Cold War, Korean War, and subsequent political and economic ramifications that framed the workings of Korean life on the peninsula. These events set the stage for the institutions that emerged from those times of creative destruction.

The Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 was a catalytic moment that created a perfect storm of conditions for the online games scene in South Korea to flourish. At the time, the country had just realized the implementation of a nationwide broadband policy, thereby enabling high-speed Internet access throughout the country to its 50 million inhabitants. As Stewart (2004) points out, there were various educational obstacles to achieving a sophisticated level of literacy in these technologies for the average person, even if the infrastructure was a positive step. The financial crisis, termed the “IMF Crisis” (International Monetary Fund Crisis), served to upend much of South Korea’s extant wealth and power structures that had asserted themselves over the nation’s affairs up to that point. With international auditors throwing open the books and reforming the Chaebols, there were many casualties in job loss. This destabilization in salaried employment structures shifted longstanding ideologies regarding gender and power structures, including a wider challenge to the country’s hegemonic masculinity and the prevalence of male-dominated single income households (Maliangkay, 2013). However, this economic catastrophe in the established realm of big business gave rise to a slough of new entrepreneurial activity by some business savvy individuals. This series of events turned entrepreneurs towards many start-up activities, including running Internet cafes or, as they are termed in Korea, the PC Bang (PC Room).

As I have discussed in Chee (2006), the PC Bang was a cornerstone of social interaction online and offline, near and far. Such locations served as de facto community centres all over the country, and they were often the flashpoint of social interaction, especially for youth, in the hyper-urban capital city of Seoul, where more than 10% of the Korean population resides. The creation of these gaming centres, to the number and extent that they now occur, would not have happened were it not for the particular reverberations of the Asian economic crisis of 1997. There were many under-documented side-effects to the economic downturn as well: PC Bangs

provided a refuge for the jobless, youth were able to earn money through games, and sometimes that sum could amount to more than a part-time job (Chee and Smith 2005). Moreover, games that took advantage of broadband access were also on the rise, such as the originally North American real-time strategy game made by Blizzard: StarCraft – the playing and professionalization of which has manifested as eSports, serving to catapult gaming into mainstream culture. It is this confluence of factors that are part and parcel with the prominence of gaming in South Korea, as it currently exists as a communication medium.

Due to Korea's colonization by Japan in the early 20th century, as well as its longstanding concern with Japanese cultural invasion, the country's government had banned Japanese cultural products until 1998, which included console games, films and music. With the ban lifted, Korea gradually opened the market to Japanese culture, phasing in previously black market products, with console games from Japan making their public appearance in the Korean marketplace by 2002 (Lee 2002).

As explicated in my past work with Dal Yong Jin (Jin & Chee 2009; Jin & Chee 2008), the historical tension between the two countries has proven persistent and difficult to surmount, as those who anticipated large profits through access to the South Korean game market were disappointed to find a negligible amount of revenue. With Japanese console makers such as Sony, Nintendo and Sega experiencing such difficulties in penetrating the South Korean game market, the country utilized the opportunity to develop its own domestic online game industry.

Over the years, ethnographic data and historical analyses have directed me to investigate the linkages between particular watershed moments in Korea's history and their influences on science/technology policy decisions. For example, the Korean ban on Japanese products served to hold the development of console gaming platforms at bay, while online PCs with their ability to access broadband internet had a chance to gain a foothold. The past and present tensions between Japan and Korea have and continue to shape Korea's game culture and continue to reverberate into present day (Oh & Larson 2011; Jin 2010 Larson 1995;). These histories have indeed informed and mediated their understandings of life in Korea. With this similar approach applied to other contexts, it would be fascinating to investigate how the interaction of culture, social structure, infrastructure, and policy would facilitate differing manifestations of inclusion in game culture.

GOVERNMENT PRACTICES: HOW EXEMPTIONS OF COMPULSORY MILITARY SERVICE: FEED THE PIPELINE INTO STEM AND GAMING INDUSTRY

As games have grown in prominence, government and industry alike have regarded this cultural activity as a potential economic panacea for South Korea's economic re-development. In order to improve the country's economy, the government prioritized STEM disciplines. This prioritization occurred at the expense of investment in the critical social sciences and humanities (Seth, 2002), yet these initiatives contributed to the growth in the industrial and informational capacities of South Korea's domestic workforce such that the nation is a global contender in STEM training and achievement, has a strong export economy, and is a veritable hotbed of technological activity due to its domestic talent. As Michael Seth in his book on Korean education notes, "No nation spends a larger share of its income on education" (Seth, 2002, p. 5). According to the 2010 Business Higher Education Forum STEM report (BHEF, 2010 p. 4), 15.6 percent of Bachelor's degrees in the U.S. were awarded in the STEM disciplines, compared with 37.8 percent in South Korea. Given the country's significant push to prioritize STEM via gaming and game development, I will discuss various under-examined factors that lead to systemic barriers to full participation in the game industry.

The military is an inextricable part of life on the Korean peninsula; military service for males in Korea is compulsory. At some point in the late teens or early twenties, all males are expected to give up over two years to this service, which is highly regarded and looked upon as a major transition from boyhood to manhood. This is so much the case that that in job applications one receives advantages over other candidates in the form of extra "points" for having completed military service. Though I did not have explicit questions regarding military service in my interview guide, my informants would broach the topic of their own accord. Their perspectives were always slightly different from one another and immensely fascinating. It showed me how very much military service was a fact of living life in Korea, and as someone who was studying an industry dominated by men and steeped in a patriarchal culture, it made sense to embrace a study of this important phenomenon as it pertains to how people make sense of their social roles.

Even celebrities are officially not exempt from military service, and in my interviews and informal discussions I would hear the saying echoing common a common sentiment, loosely translated, "Only a god can escape military service." While compulsory military service for Korean men only has been regarded at once a geopolitical necessity and a burdensome disruption, there are specific provisions for

young men in STEM fields. For talented programmers and engineers accepted into competitive university programs, there is a policy that exempts them from military duty, provided they stay in the country for five years. This policy makes majoring in these STEM disciplines quite attractive. Though such a provision is not solely responsible for the prominence of game development talent, they add to the luster of South Korea's pervasive game culture. The classification of companies also received different treatment years ago, with "IT" having such broad meaning to include internet industries of many types, such as online games. Thus while military service presents an expected and sustained break in non-military life and career progression, this particular situation has implications for role online games play in their lives as a medium of communication.

My ethnographic studies in Korea and interviews with those who have experienced both the pros and cons of their compulsory military service serve to shed some light on some of these pipeline issues. Upon hearing about some of the structural and cultural points brought up by my informants with regard to this link, I delved further into this question of how women's participation in the game industry, despite training in STEM fields, be influenced starting from post-secondary schooling. First off, a major difference between two concentrations exist for students: 1) Arts – *Mungwa*, and 2) Sciences – *Igwa*. Those who went through Arts were not eligible for military exemption in principle. Some grey zones did exist, however, in that there were niche technology service requirements that could be fulfilled by those who were not necessarily programmers, but Business or Literature majors who happened to be enrolled in qualifying courses. Those young men, who were consequently exempt from military service would instead allow those trained in STEM related disciplines to spend 3-5 years in an IT company. In speaking with industry executives who themselves started at nascent companies such as Naver and NCSoft (now titans in the game industry), I learned that were considered small-medium IT enterprises and eligible to retain this specific type of talent in a young workforce. This initiative has been lauded for allowing young talent to populate mid-sized companies in Korea, which have been typically short of skilled knowledge labor. As older generations employed in the large Chaebol companies could not typically fulfill these roles, this was a major opportunity for early career mobility in the Korean IT industries that would not have existed for youth otherwise.

If the military service requirement is fulfilled by men working at a games company for 3-5 years, which then results in networking opportunities and skill building for those men, it means that women are systemically typically shut out of this specific process entirely despite their possible training precisely because of their gender.

Women would then enter into the game industry later, if ever, or participate in the industry by other means and specializations. As a result, the prevailing notion that women do not become game developers because they are not interested in STEM and/or games is entirely over simplistic. Even if, hypothetically, girls were not socialized away from STEM and games as they are in other countries like the United States, they have been and are still in this case turned away from opportunities for participation in a growing proportion of the Korean information economy at the crucial junctures of educational, friendship, and business networks at their nascent and founding stages. Given that the reasons for gaming and getting into the games industry to begin with are so very divided along gender lines already, in the Korean context these policies serve to reinforce existing gender norms beyond that of just the military. Rather, the perspective for which I have advocated is that games do not exist in a vacuum. Instead, the current online game culture includes a number of inextricable dependencies in a national media ecology.

REFLECTIONS ON DIVERSIFYING A GLOBAL INDUSTRY

My research, to the extent outlined here, has sought out a sociocultural explanation for the oft-celebrated success of South Korea's gaming industry and correspondingly frenetic mainstream online gaming culture. From global and local industry standpoints, the dynamics between Korean business and technology policy has presented some fruitful outcomes as well as challenges. On the one hand, state-guided infrastructural initiatives have been instrumental in providing the conditions for success of the Korean online games industry (Jin, 2010/2011; Oh & Larson, 2011). On the other hand, further systemic factors regarding gender that intersect training and workforce diversity continue to present underarticulated challenges to equitable participation and innovation.

As discussed, these findings offer a synthesis between educational policies, military service, and industry practices that implicate how labor originating from STEM disciplines may include crucial systemic barriers to the representation of women in roles contributing the most to upward mobility. It is crucial to understand how specific policies serve to reinforce existing gender norms. It is important that attention to gender issues go beyond stop-gap solutions with the laudable goals of getting more women into STEM fields, to move toward more equitable participation beyond schooling. I point here to very real gender issues and analysis of this case within a global industry. The negotiations of what comprises game culture does not exist in a vacuum, but includes a number of dependencies such as policy.

Mobility in the games industry encompasses a mere sample of career challenges that are important to consider because they point to yet more subtle and systemic factors affecting how the online games industry attracts and retains talent. As in the case with North America, women are not typically streamed into gaming, as they are not into STEM disciplines. The same systematic barriers to participation exist in South Korea, with the added complexities inherent in the present demands of patriarchal and militaristic rigors. While this paper primarily explored reasons why women in South Korea may not fully participate in one of the nation's most lucrative industries, it may be worthwhile examining alternatives to the STEM pipeline argument through gender and other national game industry contexts. Beyond various ad-hoc attempts to 'increase female participation' in an industry that is anecdotally unappealing to women, one must also consider some of the more subtle barriers to participation in the games industry, such as gender and the role of compulsory military service for men, which has become an inextricable part of everyday life.

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Notes

1. South Korea may be referred to here as Korea hereafter.

PART IV.

PROMOTING PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS

CHAPTER 12.

DESIGN FOR THE MARGINS

Creating an Inclusive Space at the Different Games Conference

BY SARAH SCHOEMANN AND MARIAM ASAD

Different Games is a gaming conference and as of 2015, a collective organization by the same name. The conference, founded in New York City in 2012 was launched for the purpose of creating an inclusive space in which to celebrate the work of diverse members of the independent and DIY games community, including designers, artists, academics, critics and players. With the guidance of faculty from the Digital Media Program at New York University's (NYU) Tandon School of Engineering and the NYU Game Center at Tisch School of the Arts, our annual conference has now celebrated four years of being hosted on NYU's campus in downtown Brooklyn at the university's Media Art and Games Network (MAGNET) research center.

As a rapidly changing and scaling project, *Different Games* has changed over the past four years, evolving from our standalone Spring conference to a collective organization that operates year round programming, from monthly events run by our members in Atlanta GA to onetime workshops at public events around the US and an IGDA sponsored scholarship program which supports underrepresented community members in attending the Game Developers Conference. We've seen our student and volunteer-led organization grow from just a handful of friends to a collective of more than fifteen organizers from across the country. Despite change and growth, however, our organizing team has remained committed to the same mission since 2012 when we set about creating a event to address the need for greater inclusiveness in games and tech spaces. We sought to effect change not only through the curation of public programming but through critically approaching the design of an event itself: from interrogating the barriers attendees and speakers might navigate to access our space, to negotiating alternative ways of structuring ourselves as an organization.

Four years of collaboration have shown us why this space was approach was needed a desired proven that it is the dialogic voice of our community of diverse participants and organizers that has articulated that vision and allowed for the most meaningful and radically inclusive vision to emerge.

In this chapter we'd like to share with a bit about the inspiration behind *Different Games* conference and the iterative process of designing an event that centers on those at the margins of the broader games community. We want to offer practical strategies for inclusive community-building that we've developed through our work on *Different Games*, but we also want to suggest that this conference might be seen as one example of how organizers can facilitate more inclusive spaces by remaining accountable to event participants, to speakers, and to each other. Through our role as organizers, we've come to recognize that spaces, which aim to privilege under-recognized voices, must continuously invite critique. The story of our work as an organizing collective is a testament to the fact that inviting participation across differences and welcoming the expertise of the community will allowed for the most meaningful and radically inclusive vision to emerge.

BACKGROUND

If there ever were a year for fomenting feminist dissent in games, 2012 felt like "it". Media critic Anita Sarkeesian launched her Kickstarter campaign for *Tropes Vs. Women*, her video series unpacking representations of women in videogames, and met a vitriolic backlash of online threats, denial-of-service attacks, and doxxing. Women in the games industry staged a social media based consciousness-raising in the form of a Twitter hashtag known as "#1ReasonWhy", sharing stories of struggling within a male-dominated industry steeped in casual sexism and job discrimination. Along with other incidents involving threats, harassment, and abuse against women, 2012 saw a sudden chain reaction of public interest in and mainstream media coverage of the experience of women in games (Kocurak, 2013). It suddenly felt like the whole internet was watching and that as this ugly facet of gaming culture was exposed.

But late in 2012, things started to take a more hopeful turn. The Kickstarter total for *Tropes Vs. Women* began a meteoric climb, blowing past its "stretch goals". #1ReasonWhy grew from a burst of righteous anger to a site of solidarity for women, with new hashtags like #1ReasonToBe and #1ReasonMentors emerging to connect to marginalized professionals with each other and with allies. This was also the same Fall that Bay Area game designer Anna Anthropy released her now iconic manifesto,

Rise of the Videogame Zinesters. The book, which threaded together the anti-capitalist media production practices of DIY artists and activists, with the tools and aesthetics of lo-fi indie game design, was hugely influential to a generation of younger queer and marginalized designers, empowering us to take up game creating and to see our work as a site for social and political critique, as well as for personal expression. It was in this milieu that the first *Different Games* conference was created.

While the problematic representation of women in games had long been acknowledged both in and outside of the games community (Salter & Blodgett, 2012), the conference was also direct response to the personal experiences of its creators and contributors, many of them local New York City women who had come to rely on each other as allies through informal discussions of the marginalization and casual discrimination we saw in our own games scene (Benedetto, 2012). We traded stories about the alienation of finding ourselves in straight, cis, White-male dominated spaces so often that it had become a joke. We acknowledged that despite the fact that NYC had been home to a robust independent games scene for decades, it was not immune to the discrimination and hostility to difference that plague mainstream games culture.

Although initially organized by a small team of cis, women, *Different Games* was responding not only to years of our personal experiences, but to ongoing conversations about the need for greater inclusivity in games and game culture. Parallel to the attention on women and games in the public eye, we were also keenly aware of the need for more visibility for other equally underrepresented groups in games and—more broadly—technology-based communities. We wanted to create a space that would privilege and amplify marginalized voices that we saw as missing: women—yes—but also people of color, queer and trans folk, differently abled folks, and people of varied socioeconomic classes and educational backgrounds. We actively sought out calls for intersectional politics, radical critiques of faux feminism (hooks, 2013), and takedowns of seemingly subversive labor practices (Kane, 2012). We wondered at the lack of diverse representation and of critical discourse around identity in our own game scene and were inspired by conversations happening in other kinds of spaces than what we had experienced in games. Events such as skill-shares, housing co-operatives, and activist media conferences, inspired us to develop a space where games culture could be explored with the same commitment to political and social awareness we had experienced elsewhere.

CREATING A NEW KIND OF SPACE

Committed to the idea that we wanted to engage with emancipatory frameworks beyond feminism alone, our organizers in the first year of the conference, were conscious of ensuring that that we were not just paying lip service to anti-oppressive principles, but trying to actively practice them. It was important to us that striving for inclusivity be imagined as a process, something that must be constantly reaffirmed, rather than an end goal to achieve, or a quota to be met. We discuss two manifestations of that here. The first is external, the way we used anti-oppressive practices to guide the structure of the event both in form and content. The second is internal as we sought to also cultivate inclusivity within our organizing team, and to make sure that we held ourselves accountable to the same values we were advocating.

In working towards both of these goals, it was crucial that the conference be as accessible as possible to attendees and speakers. The first way we approached this was through the conference programming because we recognized that there were important and legitimate voices in the broader community of game designers and writers that were not being heard and empowered through their participation in existing conferences or spaces. While students provided leadership in creating the conference, it has never been an event designed specifically for academics nor one aimed at the commercial industry or a space focused solely on those that create games. Rather, *Different Games* drew participants from these spaces and many more, bringing together diverse stakeholders invested in seeing our respective fields become more inclusive. In doing so, the event has created an ongoing opportunities for critique, dialogue, and community building across the borders of these various communities of practice (Wenger, 1998).

We acknowledge that while several industry events and interdisciplinary conferences exist which bring academic designers into conversation with the games industry and indie development scene, it is also rare for academic scholars and researchers working in the humanities and social sciences to be invited into conversation with independent designers (and certainly not in spaces that are likely to amplify marginalized voices). To challenge the “silo-ing”, by disciplines and professional credentials we worked to actively recruit a variety of speakers with diverse backgrounds and forms of expertise. This resulted in a highly interdisciplinary program, including scholars, artists, students, designers, critics, and journalists, who engaged participants with topics ranging from the pragmatic, coping with sexism in the workplace, for example, to theoretical and abstract questions, like what it means to create “queer games”. Sessions were also offered in a variety of formats as an

intentional strategy to weave together the broad range of conventions that might be expected by various segments of the audience. In addition to panels and keynotes, there were also hands-on workshops, discussion-based breakout groups, and an arcade to allow direct engagement between presenters and players in a safe space for sharing ideas, offering feedback, and simply playing together. We also tried actively to encourage the slippage between various professional demographics in our speaker pool, curating panels that placed DIY creators alongside industry professionals and first-time student presenters. Our call for proposals even specifically prompted academics who might be submitting under the papers section to consider the broad audience for their work and invited them to imagine whether their subject might translate to a more interactive format like a workshop or discussion session. By bringing diverse audience members together in a less traditional and staid format, we hoped to break down the unidirectional relationship between presenters and attendees and to engage an audience as diverse as our speakers.

MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS: DESIGNING A MORE ACCESSIBLE SPACE

It was not enough for us as conference organizers to engage with inclusivity through the programming of the conference, though. We also wanted its underlying structure and design to reflect the same values. One of the more concrete and significant ways this was realized was by strategically reducing financial barriers that might impact participation. There was an intentional decision to waive any mandatory registration fees (sliding-scale and free tickets were made available online), as well as to make the event open and accessible to the public, despite its being hosted at a private university. This practice is in contrast to most commercial gaming and tech industry events, which have prohibitively expensive fees to attend for independent game designers, students, artists, and general enthusiasts. Consider E3 and GDC—two of the largest industry events for games—which cost hundreds and thousands to attend, respectively. By offering the greatest possible financial access to the conference, we hoped to create an event that would be diverse in its attendees as well as its speakers, whom we by offered travel stipends to. As of years three and four, we were able to offer funding to all speakers who requested our support.

This funding model was made possible by an intensive fundraising campaign across educational institutions, as well as through private tech companies known for supporting progressive causes. While it would have been significantly simpler to host a conference with less financial assistance by passing the financial burden onto our speakers and attendees, we wanted to avoid replicating the self-perpetuating cycle of privilege that economic barriers create. Fundraising independently as well as

working with a university that generously donates resources in terms of space, money, and administrative support means that it is possible to provide guests with offerings like free food and printed programs. It also means we are able to create a conference experience that is as legitimate and professional as any other gaming or technology event.

Other measures to support inclusivity involved paying particular attention to the space itself, like hosting the conference in an ADA compliant building, offering gender-neutral bathrooms (a logistically a minor change to make, but one that had a huge impact on creating a safe and more welcoming environment for participants. The organizing team is constantly considering strategies for facilitating a safer space and stronger sense of community during the conference. With the support of a volunteer consultant, a *Different Games* Inclusivity Statement was crafted to communicate expectations and educate guests who might be unfamiliar with certain language or identities and might need resources to guide them on what kinds of behavior and speech to be mindful of. Our *Different Games* Inclusivity Statement, has since become somewhat of a hallmark. While it was created as a straightforward resource for attendees and speakers it was also intended as an answer to boilerplate “harassment policies”, which focus on disciplinary actions and assume the inevitability of disrespectful and unsafe behavior, rather than articulating what kind of participation is desirable and appropriate. The Inclusivity Statement set an intention for both the space and the participants to be respectful and inclusive at the start of the conference, and, in the years since the initial conference, the Statement has continued to be adapted and changed by successive volunteers and organizers as a means of gathering buy-in and re-affirming our team’s shared beliefs and intentions (Nooney, 2013).

INCLUSIVE ORGANIZING PRACTICES FOR INCLUSIVE EVENTS

As organizers we are not only committed to inclusivity at *Different Games*, but we try to utilize inclusive and just practices within our team as well. This has been a challenge, particularly as the labor demands of the conference and our attendee numbers increase, while our collective and conference remains volunteer-based, and made up of students, early career academics, tech professional and non institutionally affiliated community members. Members of our team balance their work on the conference around coursework, adjunct teaching, unrelated day jobs in tech and with freelance and service industry work. The variety of professional backgrounds represented in our collective distinguishes us from other organizing bodies in important ways, but it also leads to different kinds of stresses. Those of us who are

young academics cannot expect to recognition for contributing to what might be deemed a “service” project by our institutions (unlike contribution to a more traditional conference) and all of our members without salaried jobs find themselves sacrificing waged hours to contribute to our collective’s work.

To resist the capitalist and hierarchical structures that might rank us based on traditional credentialing or professional titles outside the collective, we work at balancing the elective distribution of conference labor in a way that reflects our differing skills and levels of organizing experience while, at the same time, allowing as many members as possible to participate in leadership and decision-making conversations. This results in a consensus-driven approach that calls for perpetual self-reflection and the regular evaluation of roles, responsibilities, and tasks to make sure that the conference runs successfully, but also that we take care of each other as a team. These processes in and of themselves are labor intensive, as its much easier to rely on traditional structures of management and leadership we’ve learned from our working lives. However, we feel that this model represents the choice to practice different organizational values and to resist falling into an exploitative top-down labor structure out of familiarity.

Practicing non-hierarchical collaboration happens in a few different ways. The first is that we invite volunteers to identify what they have to offer as well as what projects they are interested in supporting. This way we can help each other in identifying tasks that match the skills we already have (from graphic design to conflict mediation) but also allow each of us to think about the experiences we want to get out of the organizing process, professionally or otherwise. Because our work is volunteer-based and unpaid we try to compensate by making the organizing process as rewarding as possible, budgeting travel support for out-of-town collective members and volunteers to attend the conference and mentoring one another in taking on new tasks and projects. While we acknowledge that not every assignment can be particularly rewarding—some of the work of organizing is taking on rote tasks and operational mundanities—we allow everyone in the collective and those that volunteer at the event itself, to choose their responsibilities based on what that they prefer and make a point of acknowledging that even smaller, seemingly insignificant tasks are important contributions to the that are genuinely appreciated.

We also try to be sensitive as to how we determine roles, by resisting stereotypically assigned responsibilities and having transparent accountability measures (e.g., point person). Here, the challenge becomes how to manage and respond to ingrained power dynamics, since, contrary to conventional organizational structures, roles are not

necessarily assigned based on experience or seniority, but again, based on personal interest. One concrete example of this is our curatorial process, in which we invite all our volunteers to be a part of. Given our varied experiences with game design and criticism—including formal, informal, academic, or industry-based—it can be difficult to assess what games would be appropriate to include in the conference arcade, as we are all evaluating the submissions using different criteria than a commercially or academically oriented event might. A student game made in Twine as part of day long game jam or workshops might be assessed alongside a VR games created by a team of developers over a period of years. From our vantage as an organization that seeks to amplify underrepresented perspectives, either work could prove invaluable and both are equally worthy of consideration. While making decisions based on group di is not as efficient or streamlined as some approaches, this is by design. We believe enforcing overly strict guidelines has the potential to exclude work based on arbitrary factors like the creators lack of technical expertise or polish, which from a structural perspective, is often the of a result of lack of access to expensive development tools or technical knowledge. Differences in opinion about curation are often resolved through group conversations to facilitate a shared understanding of our values with attention to the fact that we are interested in offering a space that empowers new voices, rather than scrutinizing them.

LISTENING: INCORPORATING FEEDBACK AND DIALOGUE INTO THE ORGANIZING PROCESS

We do not put on airs about having an organizing process that does not involve dissent or arguments—on the contrary, many of our conversations include a plethora of perspectives that require extra time and effort to work through and resolve. We do this by trying to maintain a safer environment where we can address interpersonal issues and conflicts through an introspective lens, acknowledging that we all maintain varying degrees of privilege, which must be examined and negotiated (Crenshaw, 1991). While many companies and organizations (particularly in technology fields) tend to romanticize flat hierarchies, we contend that this is overly idealistic and, in practice, can sometimes reinforce oppression rather than resist it (Freeman, 2013). Instead, we try to work as a fluid hierarchy. Collective members can assume a leadership role if they so choose, though this is typically in conjunction with another group member, so that organizational knowledge is both learned and shared while resisting the oppressive social structures that dominate our social and professional lives in games, technology, and broader contemporary culture (Smyth & Diamond, 2014).

It is crucial that we acknowledge that we work through inclusivity as an ongoing, collaborative process, rather than a static state or end goal. It is a constant, imperfect process during which we make mistakes and do our best to learn from them. But in many ways, this is the point of *Different Games*: to break down false barriers—gamer from non-gamer, academics from activists, players from designers. The inclusive approach of our conference is meant to suggest that these artificial distinctions are often stifling potential progress by reproducing long-standing barriers to diversity, equal representation, and shared power, rather than exposing them and even dismantling them.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED FROM FOUR YEARS OF *DIFFERENT GAMES*

As a space that intentionally mixes methods borrowed from DIY organizing practices, academic conferences, and professional tech and game development events, *Different Games* has succeeded most as an exercise in trust that functions as a learning experience for both organizers and attendees. Our goal of creating an inclusive space, highlighting diverse creators, and fostering interdisciplinary dialogue has remained steadfast over three years of organizing. Perhaps though our most unique characteristic as an organization has been our ability to learn with and from our community, and remain flexible and responsive as the event and organizing team has grown and expanded into a long-distance collective.

Different Games was, at first, an event planned and organized in Brooklyn by a team of NYC- based grad students and volunteers that could be counted on one hand. We considered the event a wild success when it drew less than a hundred people. In four years, it's grown to a collective of fifteen organizers across the country. It has built an audience of hundreds of attendees a year and thousands more viewers via Twitch and Ustream. Confronting our own limited resources of time and energy has allowed us to more fully embrace idea that “collective” does not mean “structureless”.

As we grow into a larger operation, with a larger community to serve, we've specialized our roles, assembling smaller teams to tackle individual aspects of the planning process— from fundraising, to reviewing categories of submissions, crafting press materials, and doing community outreach. While this atomizing of responsibility might be seen as antithetical to consensus-building within an organization, we, on the contrary, have found it to require more—not less—transparency and trust among our members. Working on specific, chosen areas of the project means that volunteers are able to exercise choice and agency in how they carry out their work, while remaining accountable to the larger group as a

whole, through report-backs and shared documentation of our processes through simple tools like Google documents.

Welcoming more voices to our organizing staff has not only added diversity of expertise, but having a larger team has also been immensely beneficial in terms of knowledge transfer. Now, after our fourth year of organizing the event, there is a wealth of distributed knowledge among our returning organizers which allows them to share the responsibility of integrating new volunteers. As knowledge has become further decentralized, it has allowed for more equal peer-to-peer relationships to emerge, even amongst organizers with different levels of knowledge and expertise, but particularly between the most senior members of the project and the group as a whole, now that everyone sees skill-sharing and task management as their shared responsibilities. In tandem with the way that growing our team over time has led to changes in our organizational processes, the public-facing operation of the conference itself has also changed as part of a process of learning and reflection. In the same way that our own assumptions need to be constantly re-evaluated to strive for greater awareness as organizers, our operating procedures must evolve to reflect the needs and concerns of attendees and community members as they are raised.

Audience feedback over various backchannels, Twitter in particular, has proved invaluable when it comes to quickly responding to the community. While we offer mediation and support to conference-goers who are experiencing speakers or other attendees as marginalizing, and encourage face to face interventions rather than “calling-out” (Goldberg, 2014) individuals publicly on online, we still see enormous benefits to the way past participants have used social media to make their concerns known, before, during, and after the event. Experience has shown us that these critiques are, in fact, a vital form of contribution to the conference as a whole.

In the weeks leading up to the first conference in 2013, it was a series of Tweets from a trans game developer that galvanized us into action. Voicing frustration and concern at the security requirements listed on our ticketing page, the developer’s Tweets led us to work more closely with the university security staff to ensure that our security policies were not discriminatory. Originally, we had deferred to the university’s boilerplate visitor policy, which required the use of government issued IDs. This however could have potentially forced trans attendees to identify themselves using misgendering credentials. We realized that while we had been congratulating ourselves for working with campus administrators to temporarily designate a set of bathrooms as gender-neutral in the hopes of being more trans-inclusive, we had unthinkingly created a (literal) barrier to entry for our trans friends

and speakers. Being “called out” publicly on Twitter was and continues to be a humbling experience, but it is in fact a study in exactly the kind of dialogue that is essential to a project like *Different Games*. By having our ignorance of day-to-day trans experience exposed (ignorance born undoubtedly out of our privilege, as we were at that time a small group of only cisgender organizers), we were forced to re-evaluate the trans-inclusiveness of the event and to gather input from the community to improve our policies.

Live Tweeting during the conference has under some circumstances been a direct challenge to problematic behavior. In 2013, audience members called attention the fact that casually ableist language like “crazy” or “lame” had been slipping into a speaker’s presentation unacknowledged. It was decided (with permission from the parties involved) that the best way to move forward was for organizers to respectfully acknowledge these transgressions and encourage better awareness and accountability going forward. This meant one of our organizers took the stage between sessions to offer an impromptu reminder as to why we had all promised to avoid ableist language when symbolically signing the conference Inclusivity Statement at the event’s opening. We were encouraged to be thoughtful about our word choices but also (crucially) not to fear misspeaking but by simply acknowledging or apologizing for our use of certain words. It is these efforts, these extra steps to acknowledge our positions and make ourselves accountable, that we believe constitute the real labor of inclusivity that is so vital to *Different Games* as a conference and collective organization.

As academic Alison Harvey noted in a thoughtful write up of the first conference, these kinds of reminders and moments of self-awareness are crucial to the ways in which “...we, in our pursuit of inclusivity, must be ever mindful of how every single day our ally card expires and we need to actively work to earn it again...” (Harvey, 2013, p. #?). While it might seem easier to let an ableist gaffe fall by the wayside, in the hope that it won’t matter or won’t be noticed, those at the margins of the games community know that it does very much matter. It matters that we see each other and know that we are seen. It matters that we refer to one another other by the right pronouns, that we check that there are no stairs in the space and don’t assume we can all afford plane fare. To build the trust required for mutual aid we must allow ourselves take on a deep sense of responsibility to one another, not to flee or minimize it as we’ve been taught.

It is this active process of working towards the goal of inclusivity, but accepting that it is a constantly moving target, that makes *Different Games* vital for us as organizers,

and meaningful to those who inhabit the space together for a weekend. Dr. Adrienne Shaw said the conference “...embodied a coalition politics I always felt game studies and game design needed” (Harper, 2014). Like Shaw, we as co-organizers recognize that while the struggles we and other members of our community endure have often served to isolate us, they also hold the power to bring us together through building shared understanding of our experiences and our differences. Through *Different Games*— both the collective and the events we produce, we strive to create a space in which to build that understanding together. We hope you’ll join us.

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CHAPTER 13.

GAMER-HATE AND THE “PROBLEM” OF WOMEN

Feminism in Games

BY JENNIFER JENSON AND SUZANNE DE CASTELL

In mid-August 2014, Twitter, Reddit, YouTube, 4chan, and numerous gaming websites exploded with allegations of “corruption” in games journalism. The phenomenon was named “Gamergate” (see Twitter hashtag #Gamergate). Since that time, nearly every major English news outlet and game-related journalistic website has reported on Gamergate (Collins 2014; Dockterman 2014; Farokhmanesh 2014; Schulten 2014; Southey 2014; Stone 2013; Thier 2014; The Stream 2014; Weinberger 2014). Women (critics, game players, game makers and journalists) are at the center of the controversy, and many have received threats that, as games journalist Auerbach put it, are “so egregious” that a prominent female journalist (Jenn Frank) publically announced that she would no longer be writing on games (Auerbach 2014a,b). This situation further escalated into a public threat of a “massacre,” forcing games critic and executive director of *Feminist Frequency* Anita Sarkeesian to cancel a public address at the University of Utah (Robertson 2014; Wingfield 2014).¹

Nearly every major English speaking news outlet has run a story on Gamergate including the BBC, CNN, Forbes, *The New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, the *Globe and Mail* and *Rolling Stone*, to name just a few. The particularities of the Gamergate phenomenon (alternatively, and not ironically, #Gamerhate), including how it began and why it is still very much present, is beyond the scope of this paper. Its origins and aftermath have already been well-documented and detailed by mainstream media and in numerous blogs as well as Tumblr and Storify accounts (c.f. Alexander, 2014; Cross, 2014; de Boer, 2014; Doctorow, 2014; Douville, 2014; Hathaway, 2014; Johnson, 2014; Kain, 2014; O’Neil, 2014; Parkin, 2014; Roller, 2014; Simcoe, 2014; Steadman, 2014; Wingfield, 2014).

To better understand what feminist/s frameworks and approaches might offer games scholars and game makers is the explicit focus of this paper. We first rehearse some of kinds of “gender trouble,” to borrow from Judith Butler (1990), that the games community has been facing for many years. Then we reference events that reach much further back in time than this most recent episode of vitriolic and aggressive behavior towards women, and we show where and how interventions in the hegemonic masculinist order of play are indeed possible. To that end, we describe the origins and development of an explicitly feminist project, Feminists in Games (FiG), which brought together makers, players and researchers to work on the “gender troubles” of digital games industry and culture—and the kinds of opportunities that project created.

GAMES INDUSTRY: MARGINALIZATION, HOSTILITY, MISOGYNY

For well over three decades, it has been evident that women do not choose education pathways that lead to careers in the technology industry in numbers similar to their male counterparts (see, among many, <http://www.usnews.com/news/stem-index/articles/2015/06/29/gender-racial-gaps-widen-in-stem-fields>).

Computer science and engineering programs, with a few exceptions, remain predominantly male enclaves well into the second decade of the 21st century and despite the fact that those degrees lead to some of the most lucrative pay checks world wide. For those women who do pursue education in programs that most directly point to the tech industry, many will not enjoy a career in that industry (Beninger, 2014; Fairchild, 2014; Reyes, 2014). As has been pointed out over the past 30 years, the technology industry has been notoriously unsuccessful at attracting and sustaining female employees (Fidelman, 2012; Gibbs, 2014; Griswold, 2014; Huhman, 2012; MacMillan Portillo, 2014; Parker, 2014). One recent statistic estimates that almost 58% of women leave the industry after 5 years and never return, which leaves few women in positions of power and/or authority, let alone ‘on the ground’. Recently, large tech firms— Google especially, but also Microsoft, Facebook and Apple—have publically stated that they are committed to a more diverse workforce in the future, and Google has set aside millions of dollars to support that effort (Griswold, 2014). In the games industry, however, although very much part of this larger tech industry, women remain significantly under-represented in the design and development of mainstream games, with estimates of 11% (in the U.S.), only 3% of those being game programmers (Burrows, 2013; Gedeon, 2013; Nayak, 2013). Other jurisdictions support even lower numbers of women (Serrels, 2013), including just 6% in the UK working in the games industry (Weber, 2013).

There is no empirical research to date that accounts for the deep gender divide in the games industry, but it is at least anecdotally clear that one reason for women's underrepresentation is that it is an actively hostile and misogynistic space for female game designers and programmers. Over the past three years, women working in the industry who have been subject to intense and vitriolic harassment include Jennifer Hepler (Winter 2012), who at the time was lead writer for Bioware on the popular *Dragon's Age* series, and received harassing phone calls and tweets threatening her with rape and death (Polo, 2012); Zoe Quinn, an independent game designer (Fall 2014) whose ex-lover posted intimate details of their relationship online (Lee, 2014); and Brenda Wu, a game developer (Fall 2014) whose home address was published publically online along with threats to kill her and her husband (Wofford 2014). Those more singular accounts of misogyny and outright threat were reinforced in late November 2012, when the Twitter hashtag, "#1reasonwhy" went viral in answer to the question of "why there are not more women in the games industry". Responses revealed the extent and kind of sexual harassment, misogyny and discomfort to which women who work or have worked in the industry have been subjected. Women tweeted, for example: "Because conventions, where designers are celebrated are unsafe places for me. Really. I've been groped. #1reasonwhy" or "Because I was told I'd be remembered, not on my own merits, but by who I was or was assumed to be sleeping with. #1reasonwhy". That hashtag generated backlash against women, with men commenting that they should "just get over it" and "work harder". One up and coming male game designer tweeted: "I look at #1ReasonWhy and I laugh at all the feminists who think they matter. If you were good in your field, you wouldn't be misrepresented" (Weber, 2012).

There are, of course deep historical roots to this contemporary problem, which extend back to preliteracy.² Mary Beard, a feminist and classics professor at the University of Cambridge, and a public intellectual in the UK who appears regularly on BBC TV and radio, illuminates that link. For her efforts she has been publically and viciously harassed on Twitter, and, in 2014, enjoyed significant public cover of a lecture she gave at the British Museum titled "Oh Do Shut Up Dear!". The long history of violently silencing women has been documented since the days of the ancients. Beard explains that very near the beginning of the tradition of Western literature, we find the first recorded example of a man telling a woman to "shut up", that her voice was not to be heard in public, that only men had the right of public speech, and that she who dared to violate this speech right would be silenced by rape, by murder, or by having her tongue cut out. She focuses first on a moment immortalised at the start of the *Odyssey*, in which the young Telemachus "disciplines" his mother Penelope who dares to speak in public:

'Mother,' he says, 'go back up into your quarters, and take up your own work, the loom and the distaff ... speech will be the business of men, all men, and of me most of all; for mine is the power in this household.' (Beard, 2014)

In fact, as Mary Beard puts it: “The more I’ve looked at the details of the threats and the insults that women are on the receiving end of, the more some of them seem to fit into the old patterns of prejudice and assumption that I have been talking about.... It doesn’t much matter what line of argument you take as a woman. If you venture into traditional male territory, the abuse comes anyway. It’s not what you say that prompts it—it’s the fact that you are saying it” (Beard, 2014).

Most of what Gamergate has been doing is precisely that kind of boundary policing – reacting against women speaking in public. And it is precisely that public speech which comes under fire, not just in games but in many other aspects of a now public social media. The above “walkthrough” of misogyny and violence in games industry and culture, though far from exhaustive, illustrates the context within which a research project, Feminist in Games (FiG) was first imagined, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, completed in 2014, then became the foundation of a federally funded 5-year cross-sectoral partnership to transform the games industry, games education and gamer culture. We describe FiG here as one concrete example of how it’s possible to “speak up” against a pervasively misogynist games industry and culture—and from there, how to help build political and practical tools to achieve diversity in games.

FORGING A FEMINIST ALLIANCE: FEMINISTS IN GAMES

Researching the persistent misogyny that women face in the games industry and culture is an important project. As a *feminist* project, though, the further goal must be to actively engage, to effectively intervene and to successfully transform that situation. There are four related questions here. First, from the standpoint of a massive cultural entertainment industry that continues to drive substantial job growth, how might we better understand *and change* the conditions through which game design and development remains a technician (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006), and unmistakably masculinized (Fron et. al., 2007), domain, despite the fact that the industry involves much more than the typically male-dominated field of programming (art, music, writing, etc.)? Second, from a cultural and educational standpoint, how and what are girls and boys, as well as men and women playing, and how do those differences matter for developing the digital literacies deemed necessary for participation in a globalized society, (ISTE, 2007; Jenkins et. al., 2009; OECD, 2009). Third, how can education provide women and girls more equal

foundations and entry-points to participate in game-focused production, whether as players, scholars or as developers? Fourth, what might be the impact of women's increased participation on innovation in games?

The challenge is not only to better understand what is supporting the ongoing inequities in digital game design and play, but to work to transform these conditions. The FiG project, taking up that challenge, was designed to develop not just a research partnership but also to build a feminist alliance. In the face of widespread cultural, academic and political repudiation of the term "feminist", often seen as a divisive and indeed adversarial label more likely to lose than engender support, we explicitly embraced both the terminology and the historical, theoretical and methodological resources feminism offers. The FiG project brought together social science and humanities researchers from a variety of disciplines, community organizers and activists and games industry employees (both from large/mainstream companies and Indie developers) to build meaningful research, but also to build an activist alliance around what has been and remains today a hugely resistant problem. Our aim was to help create the conditions for more equitable participation of women, both as consumers and as producers, in an industry that has gained increasing social, cultural and economic importance for 21st century work, education, communication and play, not only in Canada, but globally. In the service of that work, we invited researchers and others interested and invested in games industry, community, education and culture to begin a conversation about what feminism could offer the above "problems" of and for women in games.

We began from the premise that both educational opportunities and activist work and support were needed to support the creative potential of women working in and around the industry. We wanted, given the harassment women faced even before Gamergate, to galvanize an explicitly feminist agenda to intervene in changing those conditions for women and to demonstrate in action what feminism had to offer to *all* those who participated in our events. To assemble feminist researchers, educators, industry and grass-roots activists, we held 3-day workshops in Toronto and Vancouver as well as ten community-based "game design" opportunities across three locations (Bristol, UK, Montreal, and Toronto). At each of these three locations, multi-session women-only workshops were developed that supported women as they created games (most for the first time) and literally "skilled up" as they acquired game design and technical skills.

WHAT IS FEMINISM ANYWAY AND WHY SHOULD IT MATTER?

In the first FiG workshop, junior and senior feminist scholars joined feminist activists, game designers, community organizers and games industry professionals in Toronto in May 2012. This invitational workshop was international in scope, making it possible for those who were interested and made a pitch to attend the workshop to think alongside us as we attempted to map out directions for work over the next 18 months. We began that workshop (which included people from Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Australia, the U.S., the U.K. and Germany) with a discussion of the principles and practices of a feminist approach. We understood that many of the younger people in attendance would not necessarily have experience with feminist organizations nor would the more junior academics identify as “feminist” in their approaches, ethos, theories or methodologies.

Over the three days, there were up to 65 people in attendance. We wanted to construct a space wherein the participants could “find themselves” in a feminist agenda. We did so through a two pronged approach: First, we had extensive conversations about what feminism could offer games and game culture, what some of the practice and principles were that participants might well want to adopt and how to bring the vision we were developing into conversation with a feminist activist agenda committed to enacting change from the ground up. Among our allies at this first event included one young woman who ran a website entitled “Fat, Ugly or Slutty” (<http://www.fatuglyorslutty.com>), designed to “out” the (mostly) males who harass women, by publically posting their text-based chat comments to that website. Others included a representative from a major game company, local grass-roots organizers *Dames Making Games*, and a feminist activist-academic who works with marginalized women who have been incarcerated. All addressed the challenges of an inclusive feminism and explained its importance from their own different perspectives. Next, we asked participants in small groups to describe and to pitch to the whole group proposals for projects explicitly oriented to addressing “gender trouble” in games, projects that FiG would then seed fund.

The outcome from those three days was that eight explicitly feminist interventionist projects were funded: 1) a feminist game, *PsXXYborg*; 2) 6 female-only game jams in Toronto hosted by *Dames Making Games*; 3) 2 female-only game jams in Montreal hosted by the FiG-enabled organization, *Pixelles*; 4) 1 female-only game jam in the UK (*XX games*); 5) 2 local workshops in Toronto, including a midway presentation of work; 6) an online survey directed at game developers, asking specifically about workplace harassment; 7) interviews with women in the games industry in Germany,

including how they got there and why and if they stayed and 8) a series of 20+ interviews with female Canadian and U.S. developers. The specific outcomes of many of those projects are detailed in a special issue of *Loading: The Journal of the Canadian Game Studies Association* (<http://journals.sfu.ca>), a book length manuscript published in German (Ganguin & Hobilitz, 2014), several articles published elsewhere (Harvey & Fisher, 2013; Jenson & de Castell, 2013; Westecott, 2013), many FiG-sponsored female only game jams that are continuing to run in Toronto and Montreal through Dames Making Games and Pixelles—and the many games developed through these projects. Each of these activities engaged a still-expanding circle of people, building connections which, as a Pixelle-generated infographic illustrates, soon becomes populous and extensive (<http://www.gamesindustry.biz/articles/2014-11-14-pixelles-game-incubator>; Short, 2015). Pixelles has now received IndiGoGo funding supporting its ongoing efforts to provide opportunities for women to participate in its events, leading many of its participants to jobs in the games industry. In just under two years, then, FiG had demonstrated that a cross-sectoral explicitly feminist alliance CAN be built, and that its reach can be both broad and deep, matching the scope and scale of the problem we set out to address.

For the final invitational workshop held in Vancouver, B.C. in June of 2013, we invited everyone whose project had been funded to report on their findings. We also supported the attendance of scholars and students from France, the U.K. and the U.S. to present their feminist/gender focused work. To further ground the conversations around gender and equity we invited local feminist activists who were working in the very difficult local conditions of the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver with disaffected and highly economically and socially disadvantage communities. In attendance at the second workshop were local game developers from small and large game companies, academics, researchers, students, and public audience members. At any one time there were approximately 100 people in attendance, and well over 150 at the public showcase event in which PsXXYborg was shown, along with games developed in the women-only game jams. We invited Feminist Frequency (Anita Sarkeesian) to give a talk, and, as she put it, she “brought the trolls,” meaning our Twitter hashtag #FIG2013 was in effect “hijacked” by people not in attendance who were both hostile and disruptive. One Twitter user “dildo faggins” took such offense to what they thought might be going on at the gathering that they opted to make a counter video, accusing the workshop participants of participating in a “feminist circle jerk”.

This second workshop, even with and partly perhaps because of the online harassment, catalyzed for participants a very interesting trajectory. At the first

workshop we had spent a lot of time and effort discussing what was, for some, real discomfort with the term “feminism”, whether that was because they understood it simplistically as “man hating” and/or because they persisted in the resilient belief that the misogyny they experienced in game cultures and industries was not a structural feature of those contexts, but was directed individually at them. The focus of our discussion was “intersectionality”, how gender is just one intersecting point for oppression along with ethnicity, sexuality, ability, class, and other historical bases for subordination. This discussion included explicitly addressing “feminist failures” (Westecott, 2015) along with the critiques that have been leveled at feminism in the past, most especially its tendency to speak for all women while being led predominately by white women who tended to essentialize “all women”, decentering race and sexuality from feminist concerns. FiG’s first workshop had assembled an enthusiastic, if somewhat reticent, group of scholars and activists who were committed to “Feminists in Games” but still were unsure of whether or not they were committed to feminist principles and practices more broadly. Its second workshop had participants report on the trajectory of work (both individual and collective) to develop the projects pitched at FiG’s startup meeting, and attracted a larger and much more diverse set of participants and audience members, including trans, gender queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, more ethnically diverse (though still predominately Caucasian) participants, as well as increasing representation from the development sector—all evidence that FiG had built, over its two-year lifespan, a broader and more diverse base of engagement. At the close of the second workshop, participants left with a commitment to enacting change in game cultures and industries, and to working towards that through the growing network of allies that now composed the FiG network.

Two years later, and in the wake of Gamergate, those connections and commitments remain in place, and indeed have increased exponentially. Determined to keep FiG alive, we developed a major international collaborative research initiative that could deepen and extend the reach and impact of the FiG network, and in 2015, that proposal received federal funding of 2.5 million dollars. “Re-FiG” is now able to support far more projects, organizations, educational and cultural initiatives and trajectories of research. Today a far larger and better organized alliance is actively working together to support people who have been attacked by and found themselves very much vulnerable to Gamergate’s hostilities, to advance new policies and practices that support inclusion and improve working conditions for women in the industry, to re-mediate educational programs in games putting gender squarely on both curricular and pedagogical agendas, to intensify and expand indie and non-profit incubators that support women in both learning and building games,

innovating in character creation, narrative frameworks, and game mechanics, as well as expanding the conceptions, uses and purposes of games in society. We have acquired the resources to build a sustainable infrastructure capable of supporting a well-defined set of practical tools and methods that promote diversity and equity in game culture, community, education and industry—and we have done so as feminists, and explicitly in the name of feminism.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND RE-FIGURED PROJECTS

There are two primary points to emphasize by way of a conclusion. First, Gamergate is part of a larger, systemic problem in games industry and culture, and whose history is far longer than either; and second, feminist approaches and practices can and do provide a means to initiate a broad-based, grassroots transformation, with a powerful cross-sectoral infrastructure.

What is new with Gamergate and the ongoing sexism and misogyny that characterizes game cultures and industries is that *nothing is new*. What matters most in the deployment of tropes of “surprise, dismay, shock and awe” about Gamergate is that extreme angst makes it look like this has not always happened and that something new and really different is going on. The real shock should be that it is “same ol’, same ol’”, and we need to name that significant fact. Otherwise it’s as if we had no understanding of how social situations are made and can be re-made, as if we had no power to change this somehow “natural” order of things, as if, to borrow from the law of the conservation of matter, violence against women is neither created nor destroyed—it just changes its shape. Violently silencing women, whether in *The Odyssey* or in *Call of Duty*, is as old as the hills.

Our point in writing this is to say that there is much we can do, and the Re-FiG alliance described in this chapter illustrate one concrete way forward. We want to conclude by noting—as we haven’t seen this point made before—that the women getting the most media attention are **not** those who are “on the far side of established modes of intelligibility”, nor do their individual subjectivities, their embodied “personalities” mostly challenge, openly or otherwise, established norms or gender stereotypes. These targeted women have, therefore, relative to others, social power and a legitimate speaking position. But simply as women in public space, they are also “il/legitimated” speaking subjects who, knowing their own history, just might be able to deploy that agency to open up the misogynist world of videogames to gamers and non-gamers, and from that enfranchised speaking position they might have, *as others less centrally located have not now nor ever had*, the power to speak and act to

change the deeply entrenched masculinist status quo which has defined—and limited—the field for too long.

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Notes

1. Using Montreal Massacre shooter Marc Lepine’s name, as well as his words, the warning read “Feminists have ruined my life and I will have my revenge”—chilling reminders of the obstacles still very much in play for women.
2. For a superlative overview of this tradition, see also: “Whistling women: Reflections on rage and rationality” by Dorothy E. Smith, in *Fragile truths: Twenty-five years of sociology and anthropology in Canada*. Edited by William K. Carroll, Linda Christiansen-Ruffman, Raymond E. Currie.

CHAPTER 14.

CURATING FOR DIVERSITY

Works, Spaces and People

BY CELIA PEARCE

When you decline to create or to curate a culture in your spaces, you're responsible for what spawns in the vacuum. —Leigh Alexander

This single sentence from Leigh Alexander's now-infamous *Gamasutra* article (2014) is perhaps the most salient point to be drawn from the ongoing and vocal debate surrounding the so-called "Gamergate" maelstrom. Alexander's assertion cannot be overstated: It is necessary to deliberately and consciously curate your community at every level in order to affect sustained progress towards diversification. The emergence of Gamergate and other game-related hate groups was not a surprise to any of us within the gaming community. It is the direct outcome of over thirty years of neglect and in some cases outright hostility which created the "perfect storm" to incubate a culture of harassment. To counter it with a more positive, inclusive environment will take the collective effort of both individuals and institutions, and it is important to acknowledge that our work will never be done. Just as with the civil rights of marginalized groups, there will never come a moment when we can entirely wash our hands of these troubles and say: "We're done." Although we can certainly make progress, this is not a game that can never be "won," and we do well to take up our eternal mission in a spirited, persistent and well-humored fashion.

This essay began as a talk at IndieCade East in 2015, building on a number of prior keynotes, panels, and programs surrounding diversity. It presents the current status of an iterative blueprint that I have been developing in collaboration with others in a variety of professional contexts for over 30 years. These principles and techniques have been applied across a range of domains and roles—as a game designer in the theme park industry and the girl game movement of the 1990s; as a college professor

and feminist scholar; as a co-curator and organizer of conferences, festivals and exhibitions, such IndieCade (IndieCade.com) and *XYZ: Alternative Voices in Game Design* (XYZGameExhibition.com). This is not an academic paper presenting research results. Rather, it serves as a compendium of collectively generated folk practices aimed at the enterprise of diversifying through community building. Very much a work-in-progress, this chapter provides a snapshot of the current state of these principles and techniques, which I invite others to continue to appropriate, improve upon, and share.

12 STEPS TO CURATING FOR DIVERSITY

As the title implies, the overarching theme of the principles below is the notion of *curating*. If you fail to curate, you leave your community entirely up to chance. In a context where chance has produced many baleful results, it behooves us to be conscientious, to imbue inclusiveness in every aspect of what we do, and to do so in a proactive and persistent fashion. These steps contain actionable techniques that can be used to inch towards progress.

Step 1: Admit there's a problem

- Problems don't go away just because you ignore them
- People in a position of privilege do not have to think about people who aren't
- Employ empathy as a starting point. If you can't, think about someone you care about who is being mistreated or marginalized

We do not live in a post-gender, post-racial, post-homophobic society!

One of the biggest obstacles to progress is the false belief that the world continues to progress to a higher level of fairness and equity. In some ways, things improve, but in others they actually worsen, ranging from global violence against women to the disproportionate incarceration of people of color to the backlash against increases in lesbian gay bisexual transsexual (LGBT) rights. Specifically in the realms of IT and games, female participation was actually at its highest during the 1980s (Henn, 2014). The first game studio I joined in 1983 had an even female-to-male ratio. In contrast, surveys indicate that as of 2015, the game industry was 22% female (a little under half that of the US population), 22% disabled (roughly comparable to that of the US population), and 3% of game developers are black (in contrast with 13% of the US population) (IGDA Developer Satisfaction Survey 2014, 2015, 2016; US Census, 2012).

The problem of the sometimes-willful ignorance characteristic of the industry and wider gamer culture is exacerbated by the fact that the problems of the marginalized are typically entirely off the radar of people with the most power to address them. It can be hard for those in a position of influence to even notice there is a problem, let alone have the motivation to effect change.

Step 2: Care

- Care about people who are different from you
- Even if you don't care, understand that diversity is not only good for everyone, it's good for business
- If you have the power to change things, do it!

With privilege comes responsibility.

As a white woman in an academic job in a male dominated industry, I encounter a variety of iniquities associated with living in “The Patrix,” *The Matrix* of patriarchy as depicted by comic artist Tatsuya Ishida (2011). But I also hold a position of privilege in some respects. While gender-based discrimination is an ever-present reality, I don't, for instance, have to be concerned with unfair incarceration or homophobic bullying. So why should I care about people who are different from me?

There's one simple reason: Math. Even if you don't espouse to the notion that compassion and empathy are important human values, diversity should be embraced as a purely practical matter. Study after study has demonstrated that diversity produces better ideas, more innovation, broader audiences, and, ultimately, increased revenue. (Weiner, 2014) Promoting diversity is therefore actually quite self-serving. It's beneficial to you, to your organization, and to your shareholders or stakeholders, whoever they may be.

“Allies” is a word we use to describe those who care about people different from themselves. Allies have the power to use their privilege and influence for the betterment of all. I try to be conscious of whatever privilege I may hold in a given context and use it whenever possible to benefit those who are marginalized. By no means do I do this perfectly. But I try.

An example of an allies-driven initiative is the pledge that many men are signing boycotting “manels,” or male-only conference panels (Barder, O., 2015; Johari, 2016; Sreenivasan, 2016). Another is the International Game Developers Association

(IGDA) Women in Games SIG Allies Initiative, driven by indie developer Josh Samuels. Allies are vital to success. No equity initiative has ever succeeded without them.

Step 3: Be willing to make a sustained effort

1. Just caring isn't enough
2. You need to be willing to:
 - Make the *effort*
 - *Change* fundamental things about the way you do...well...everything
 - Ask for *feedback* and constantly *reassess*

Change only happens with sustained and repeated effort.

Caring is not a passive enterprise. It requires effort to actuate. How often have we heard excuses like “We didn’t get any qualified female applicants,” or “I don’t know any minorities to invite to this panel”? Could it be that your idea of “qualified”—which many game companies still define as having three years experience and shipping a commercial title—is limiting? These requirements may only serve to maintain the status quo, posing a barrier of entry for, say, recently graduated students (30% of whom are female) (IGDA Developer Satisfaction Survey 2014), who may have worked on multiple games and even been in festivals, or seasoned professionals making a lateral move from successful careers in other software development or media fields. The biggest enemy to progress is laziness. Passively waiting for the problem to self-correct is highly ineffectual. *If what you’re doing isn’t working, then change what you’re doing.* Redefine “qualified;” expand our advertising outlets; change the language in your job ads; form partnerships with universities which are making headway with diversity; go to diverse events; visit advocacy roundtables; do research and find out what has worked for others. *Ask for advice from experts.*

Change can be as simple as adopting the word “they” as a gender-neutral singular pronoun. Notwithstanding that this usage has been officially sanctioned by a board of linguists (Guo, 2016), many people (especially academics) are still hesitant to use the term on the grounds of “grammatical correctness.” Isn’t it worth it to sacrifice grammar to the cause of inclusiveness?

Step 4: Communicate

1. Ask questions, listen, and converse
2. Don't take things personally, but be open to doing better
3. Get feedback from people from diverse communities; give feedback to people who care but may need some guidance

Don't shame people. Provide loving guidance.

I wish I had a raise for every time someone in a position of authority asked me what I thought could be done to improve diversity, and then ignored or outright dismissed what I had to say. From an executive at the arcade company who told me in 1993 that “our job is to take lunch money away from fifteen-year-old-boys,” to the client who told me “We don't need protect women in our virtual world from harassment; we don't have enough women to bother with that.”

It seems like a foregone conclusion that communication is a good thing. However, our tendency to respond with anger, defensiveness, or stonewalling can ultimately sabotage our best intentions. Calling people out is important, but if you are giving feedback, private, one-on-one communication always works better than public shaming. In the age of pervasive social media, it seems easier to Tweet your grievances to an anonymous public than to speak directly to the person involved. If you can't do this, then it is best to speak to someone close to them and let that person carry the message. I've seen people who've devoted their lives to diversification of games be brought to tears by uncharitable Tweets. Social media has been an important discursive tool but as I frequently point out, Twitter is the devil's playground.

If you are the one receiving feedback, listen and take seriously what people of diverse backgrounds and their allies are saying. As much as it can hurt to hear criticism, without taking it and acting on it, there can be no progress. Don't cut people off or try to “mansplain” or “whitesplain” away their concerns. Instead, apologize and ask them what you can do to improve in the future. Here is a scenario that I've experienced more than once. A friend and ally gives a presentation that neglects to include women or minorities. A third party points this out to you privately. You go to the individual, again privately, and mention the oversight, beginning with the phrase “I'm sure this wasn't intentional, but...” followed by an offer to point them to examples. More often than not, the individual will welcome your suggestions and take it upon themselves to do further research. It's understandable to be angry about

oversights like this, as I've learned from my own missteps, public shaming benefits no-one.

Step 5: Educate

Educate yourself and others

- Learn what terms like “microaggression” and “intersectionality” mean
- Learn from other domains such as race studies, feminism, and queer studies
- Borrow from others who have been successful

You can never be too educated!

As a college professor, festival and exhibition curator, conference speaker and organizer, and author, I have a unique opportunity to pass on what I have learned to others. Early in my academic career, I realize that the vast majority of my students would be male and mostly white. So I resolved to raise a generation of male feminist game designers. I introduce my students to feminist readings in games, diverse designers, and a basic vocabulary for thinking about difference. When they go forth into the game industry, they bring these enhanced sensibilities with them. Over time, alongside their female classmates and colleagues, they will make a difference.

“Microaggressions,” described colloquially as the “death of a thousand paper cuts” can be one of the most insidious operators in marginalization. They often go unnoticed even by their perpetrators, but they can be extremely harmful. Examples include boys not letting girls handle game controllers, press people neglecting to interview female collaborators, or racist “backhanded compliments” such as being told you “speak well for a black man.” Akira Thompson’s powerful empathy game *&maybetheywontkillyou* explores the impact of racist microaggression. The mechanics of the single-player live action roleplaying game revolve around your building frustration as you attempt to complete simple day-to-day activities while being subjected to a series of degrading indignities such as car doors being locked as you pass, and police following you down the street. (RainBros, 2015; Harrison, 2016) In a guest talk to my class, developer and activist Charles described both microaggressions and macroaggressions he had been subjected to as a black man, including being thrown against a car, frisked and threatened for no apparent reason. These revelations were a real eye-opener for my students, mostly white and Asian males, who had never experienced this type of treatment.

Another useful term is “intersectionality,” the principle that types of marginalization combine to form complex dynamics. For instance, as in the prior example, being cisgendered and male may be an advantage if you’re white, but not so much if you’re black. Race or ethnicity can intersect not only with gender and sexuality, but also with class and even age. In the 2014 IGDA survey I co-authored, after sexism, ageism was cited as the second biggest discrimination problem. (IGDA Developer Satisfaction Survey, 2014)

“Imposter syndrome,” the belief of successful people that they are frauds, is particularly prevalent among individuals from marginalized groups. This can be the root of the low minority or female applicants to a job or university program, conference, or festival. This is why encouragement is such an important factor in supporting marginalized individuals, including giving them opportunities to present and to lead.

Step 6. Be careful what you privilege

- Privileging certain skills or genres automatically privileges certain people over others, e.g., Coding vs. Art, Entertainment vs. Serious Games, Industry vs. Academia
- Language can unwittingly exclude certain groups and practices

Watch your language. Words encode messages.

We often inadvertently marginalize certain skills, practices or groups by privileging one over the other. Even in independent games, coders are given higher status than visual artists through salary disparities and overall treatment. If you examine this phenomenon more closely, you discover that art is one of the areas where we see a higher percentage of females. Thus, privileging coding can result in discrimination against women.

One of the most insidious ways of reinforcing privilege is through policing language. For instance, using the highly subjective speaker requirement of “rock star” only serves to perpetuate the existing culture of exclusion. As event organizers, instead of reinforcing the status quo with “the usual suspects,” we have the power to confer “rock star” status onto those whose voices are not as often heard.

Another example of linguistic gatekeeping is the use of the words “game” and “gamer.” In *The Hegemony of Play*, co-authored with my collaborators at Ludica, we discussed the ways in which defining something as a “game” served to marginalize

genres and games that were popular among women, such as casual games and *The Sims* (Fron et al, 2007). We also critiqued academic community for unwittingly reinforcing this by focusing heavily on taxonomical definitions of the word “game,” and becoming mired in a debate as to whether games were “ludic” or “narrative.”

Similar patterns emerged within the indie community. Artgames, text-based games, interactive narrative, and games made with development tools such as Twine or RPGmaker, were frequently couched within this “not a game” rhetoric. Some artists side-stepped this by describing their own work as “anti games” or “not games,” or even distancing themselves entirely from the words “game” and “gamer” due to their negative associations in the post-Gamergate world.

At IndieCade, we realized early on that works that were particularly innovative often transgressed this “game/not game” definition. We set about putting this rhetorical tactic to bed by explicitly stating in our review guidelines that we do not debate whether or not a submission is a “game.” Thus, an individual’s perceived definition of “game”— often very subjective and situated—has no bearing on the quality of an interactive work.

The second major change we implemented was to redefine the term “independent”. Early on we noticed a pattern: When we attended conferences and festivals, we found that there were often separate tracks or areas for “serious” or “educational games,” mobile and casual games, none of which “counted” as indie. While student games counted (usually within their own sub-category), games created by their professors did not. Artgames, an area of fruitful innovation, were often excluded entirely. However, to our minds, all of these subgenres, most of which had significantly higher representation of both minorities and women, were also, technically, “indie.”

When we launched our first call for submissions, we distilled the definition of “indie” to one simple constraint: Any interactive work not funded by a major publisher. This provided a straightforward, objective delineation that did not rely on subjective or stylistic gatekeeping criteria. It allowed for a games that were self-funded, funded by grants, or created in unconventional contexts. It also gave us the flexibility to be responsive to emerging trends, such as explosion of mobile platforms and crowdsourcing, before the App Store (2008) or Kickstarter (2009) had become such powerful components in the game ecosystem.

As we received inquiries over the years as to whether we accepted submissions of new genres, such as ARGs (alternate reality games), big games and “new sports,” installation and “new arcade” games, and so forth, our answer has always been an

emphatic YES! Embracing these new and emerging genres has also broadened our demographic.

Step 7. Inclusify your systems

- Use game design principles to integrate diversity into the fabric of your entire community, product or organization
- Design inclusive systems and mechanisms
- Test and iterate

Instead of gamifying, inclusify!

I find it really amazing that game designers—whose entire oeuvre revolves around the idea of designing systems and challenges—can become so flaccid and ineffectual when faced with social problems. Instead of using the “systems thinking” we are so famous for, we try to cure diabetes with a band-aide. Putting your only minorities on a diversity panel, or designating, as one major fan convention did, a designated “safe space” where people could enjoy a harassment-free experience, is absurd. These kinds of tactics only serve to institutionalize exclusion and ghettoize those who already feel left out. Instead, in the same way people are trying to “gamify” everything under the sun, we might want to apply those awesome game design skills to “inclusifying.”

So how do we “inclusify” our systems? In Ludica’s chapter for the second book in this series, we talked about ways of cultivating a female-friendly workplace. (Fron et al, 2008) Ways to inclusify may vary depending on your context. There is considerable and excellent research on diversity in computing and games, some of which can be found in this volume and its antecedents, (e.g., Margolis & Fisher, 2003; Kafai & Peppler, 2009).

Here are a few examples “folk techniques” for inclusifying your culture and systems:

- Gender-neutral bathrooms: Easy and low-cost and can be applied in any domain.
- “Talking Stick:” Designate an artifact, such as a microphone, projector cable, or doll that allows the holder to speak without interruption.
- Assignment parameters: A few that I use: 1) Create a game that someone other than you would like; 2) No killing; 3) No overused tropes such as post-apocalyptic scenarios, medieval fantasy, or zombies. Another is to brainstorm verbs in video games that are common, and verbs that are uncommon.

- Stay analog: Paper and pencil prototyping and board game modification are two low-tech onramps to game design. I also incorporate Mary Flanagan’s *Grow-A-Game Cards*, which are part of Mary Flanagan and Helen Nissenbaum’s Values@Play project, designed to help students learn about values in game design (2014).
- Use relatable cultural references: Nettrice Gaskins, Director of the Boston Arts Academy STEAM Lab has written extensively about the importance of culturally-situated knowledge in engaging underserved youth with technology. She often starts with popular culture or folk practices, such as hip hop’s contribution to music technology, or the geometry of quilts and cornrow hairstyles, and then introduces fine artists who explore STEM principles in their work. (Nettrice.us) She told me a story about playing music by the rock musician Prince shortly after his death to inspire students who were inventing their own Arduino-based musical instruments.
- Create inclusiveness guidelines: Most people in games are familiar with the now infamous assertion by Ubisoft that they left female characters out of *Assassins Creed: Unity* because it would “double the cost” of production. (Connolly, 2014) But the truth is, many animation and graphics students are never taught to design, model or animate female characters in the first place. Some schools are now adopting guidelines that include designing a range of character genders, ethnicities, orientations and abilities.
- *Support, support, support.* People in marginalized groups need more encouragement. They are more inclined to experience “imposter syndrome” and its commensurate anxiety and depression. They are less likely to submit their games to festivals or apply for graduate programs or grants. I’ve twisted the arms of people to who thought their work wasn’t good enough to submit to IndieCade, only to see them win awards. In addition to mentoring people myself, I facilitate matchmaking between people with similar experiences and have my students mentor each other, which is a great way to reinforce skills and build team cohesion.
- *Nothing succeeds like success.* The more success people have, the more they are motivated to progress. You can optimize the chances of success by providing assignments well suited to the skills and personality of the individual. This is not to say give up on them if they are struggling with something. But it’s important to scaffold the development of new skills with resident knowledge and ability. If an artist is having trouble with programming, use art as a bridge.

Step 8. Invite communities and practices that are already diverse to yours

- Seek and find communities that are already diverse and invite them into yours
- The term “indie” has evolved to include serious games, casual games, art games, educational games, academic research games, big games, as of which bring diversity to the table.

Diversity of genre + practice = diversity of people.

In one of my academic positions, in which I was charged with bringing together people across the campus involved in games, I paid a visit to the Education Department to playtest work by students in a Learning Games class. I was astonished to discover a roomful of women and people of color. When I returned to my office in engineering I told them “I think I found where all the women and minorities are hiding.”

The IndieCade team noticed something similar with events such as Games for Change and Come Out & Play, and more recently Different Games and GaymerX, as well as artgames exhibitions and academic events. We realized that inviting these communities to be part of ours would automatically expand our diversity. Rather than thinking “How do we get more minorities?” or “How do we get more women?” or “How do we get more LGBT people?” we asked ourselves “Where are these people already?” We went to their events, invited them to be part of ours, partnered with them and recruited them into leadership roles. Through this approach, we have been able to quickly expand and diversify, as well as continually redefine the notion of “independence.”

Over the years, IndieCade has grown into an amalgam of sub-communities, each of which has its own events, as well as being a vibrant part of ours. This is important for three reasons: First, nobody wants to be a token isolated from people with shared backgrounds and interests. Second, it expands our network to include a wider range of creators. Third, this intermingling of genres, practices and ideas creates an “all boats rise” effect, enabling different subgroups to learn about the innovation and artistry of others. Thus the community writ large celebrates new sources of innovation and inspiration to the benefit of all.

Step 9: Diversify leadership

- Put diverse people and allies into leadership roles; you can never diversify enough
- This avoids creating “inclusiveness ghettos,” e.g., panels comprising “people of gender”

If you diversify leadership, the problem starts to solve itself.

I use the term “people of gender” to describe the phenomenon of panels with the word “gender” in the title, in which all the speakers are women, as are all the attendees, producing the impression that men don’t have a gender. It’s important to bear in mind that people from diverse backgrounds bring new ideas to the table above and beyond diversity. The “separate but equal” mentality of putting women *only* on panels about gender, or people of color *only* in charge of diversity initiatives is actually a form of microaggression. It also isolates diversity as a stand-alone problem, rather than a larger, systemic issue. Furthermore, it implies that all that people within a marginalized group are qualified to discuss is how marginalized they are. Diverse leadership understands that people of color can talk just as eloquently about game design as they can about race.

It’s interesting to note that diversity initiatives in industry often end up being headed up by white males. And while white males can be allies, placing them in charge of diversity does not send a strong message about your practical commitment to the cause. Within community organizations, diverse leadership will automatically think about ways to diversify that hadn’t occurred to you. The common excuse for exclusion of “I didn’t know anyone...” goes away. Diverse leadership means you don’t have to rely on your personal network and you can expand out into communities beyond your immediate neighbors.

Step 10. Include & acknowledge

- Include diverse:
 - *Designers and artists* when you talk about or present games
 - *Characters* when you make games
 - *Disciplines and Practices* when you discuss skills and domains
- Avoid inadvertently making people invisible

Treat everyone with respect!

I know it seems redundant to add “include” in an essay about inclusiveness. But as we’ve already seen, it’s very easy to unintentionally exclude by *forgetting* to include. We tend to stick to what and whom we know, to what is most comfortable, and to recapitulate what others have done.

In 1998, I served as the Panels Chair for the SIGGRAPH computer graphics conference. Due to the timing, we knew we wanted to do some keynotes on *Titanic*, and after poking around to see who we might invite, I made an interesting discovery. While the vast majority of the *Titanic* effects team was composed of white males, the *line producers* for the key companies involved—major firms like Industrial Light & Magic and Digital Doman—were women. Because SIGGRAPH was considered a “technical conference,” it was very rare to see people on stage from middle management roles. CEOs or programmers, yes. Middle management, no. So we organized a panel of *Titanic*’s CGI producers, thus legitimizing a previously invisible discipline within Computer Graphics.

In response to ongoing issues around gender in the game industry, in 2013, Akira Thompson, John Sharp, Cindy Poremba, Adam Rafinski and I co-curated the exhibition *XYZ: Alternative Voices in Game Design* at the Museum of Design in Atlanta (XYZGameExhibition.com). Instigated by Akira, this exhibition celebrated women’s contributions to game design from arcade classic *Centipede* and forward to contemporary experimental and artgames, and everything in between. Although highlighting people of a given group is a less than ideal solution, it is sometimes necessary to counter popular myths, such as the one that women neither play nor design games.

XYZ helped to address the broader problem of women being systematically written out of tech and games history. A very simple example of this is how academic programs, and especially games professors, including female and minority professors, are excluded from documentaries on indie games, even though game academia has been a major influence on their rise. Another is the reemergence of virtual reality (VR), which appears to be overwriting its earlier history innovation, especially the contributions of women artists.

One of the other myths I’d like to counter here is the “conventional wisdom” of marketers that people in the majority have no interest in the work of minority or marginalized artists. If you think of this in terms of other media such as music, it’s just plain absurd. Exhibits like *XYZ* and events such as *Different Games* and

GaymerX attract many people from outside their core constituencies. In 2015, IndieCade hosted a diversity pavilion called “Gaming for Everyone,” sponsored by Intel and co-chaired by Charles Babb and myself, with help fro GaymerX President Toni Rocca and IndieCade social media manager Ashley Alicea. The Pavilion was packed for the entire weekend, and the majority of visitors were white guys! This further demonstrates that introducing diversity brings new ideas and perspectives and benefits everyone.

Step 11. Encourage your community to monitor itself

- Make sure everyone at every level is on-board with your values f
- Empower people to intervene when they see something inappropriate

It takes a village to raise a festival (or any community for that matter)!

It wasn't until our eighth year that IndieCade introduced a formal inclusiveness policy. It came about because people were asking if we had one. In an email thread on the topic, someone remarked: “We don't have an inclusiveness statement because we don't need one.” This was by design: We set out from the beginning to build inclusiveness into our culture at every level so that no policing was required.

Nonetheless, given the growing climate of hostility in the gaming community at-large, we concluded that an inclusiveness statement would help to reinforce our values, make people new to our community feel welcomed and safe, and also to let members of the general public know where we stood. We decided to adopt a threefold approach. 1) Open with a short and succinct Statement of Values to express that the idea that inclusiveness was and had always been part of our culture; 2) Collaborate with a group with a track record, in this case GaymerX, to adopt their inclusiveness statement with minor modifications; 3) Designate a group of trained volunteers to steward these guidelines and intervene if they were not respected.

Below is the Statement of Values that we posted on our web site and at the registration booth. The policy and procedures that followed can be found on our web site.

IndieCade Statement of Values

IndieCade exists to celebrate the unlimited creative potential of independent games. In order for this potential to flourish, gaming must welcome, encourage, and empower participants from all backgrounds and walks of life. Together, we choose to

create a culture of respect, openness, and engagement, by maintaining a positive space where we honor our diversity, knowing it makes us stronger. While you are a part of our community, we ask that you join us in creating this welcoming environment. If you observe or experience anything that makes individuals feel unsafe or unwelcome, please reach out to one of our NPCs or a member of our staff for assistance.

For more, visit www.indiecade.com/values/

Step 12: Don't be an asshole.

'nuff said.

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PART V.

**SUPPORTING DIVERSITY IN GAME
DESIGN**

CHAPTER 15.

SHIFTING IMPLICIT BIASES WITH GAMES USING PSYCHOLOGY

The Embedded Design Approach

BY MARY FLANAGAN AND GEOFF KAUFMAN

We know the drill: video games don't do a good job on the diversity front yet. They don't, for example, excel in representing female characters fairly. Case in point: *Grand Theft Auto V* simulates sex with prostitutes, introduces players to the denizens of seedy strip clubs, and showcases scantily clad vixens wandering the streets; these, the only female characters, have little agency, and exist merely as potential sexual partners or targets of violence. Exposure to such sexualized characters has been shown to produce a number of disturbing effects, including increasing players' acceptance of myths and false assumptions about rape (Fox, Ralston, Cooper, & Jones, 2014). Black characters in games don't fare any better—often they are depicted as gang members and/or criminals. These skewed representations foster negative attitudes and reinforce negative stereotypes toward African American males encountered outside the context of the game (Yang et al., 2014).

Much recent scholarship is uncovering just how potent such oversimplified, homogeneous representations across media forms can be. Stereotypic representations of race, sexuality, and other social identity groups are highly troubling; in games, these limit players' perceptions of members of those groups and their abilities (Sherman & Zurbriggen, 2014). The findings that have emerged from these studies are not surprising, given that there is a continued lack of diversity within the game industry itself. While digital game audiences have been diversifying—in 2014, 48% of US players were female (ESA, 2014) and Hispanic players outnumber non-Hispanic players, particularly in the use of console games (and Hispanic players show an interest in a wider range of gaming platforms than do their non-Hispanic counterparts) (Mintel, 2014)—games are still typically created by

white male designers (IGDA, 2014). Homogeneity among game creators, as well as the repetition of existing stereotypical depictions of characters, cultures, and worlds sets in motion a vicious cycle of implicit bias that pervades game design, game play, and the broader game culture.

Game makers are awkwardly located at the crux of the matter. Imagine if looking at images were so socially out of place, so culturally loaded, that only specific groups made or were empowered to look at images. Game making and games journalism can sometimes feel this way. This is unfortunate, for sales figures, societal practices, and public discourse reveals that games are a key 21st century art form—right now, they *are* media culture. Therefore, not only can designers be mindful of the ways their creations may (often unintentionally and subtly) reinforce implicit bias, but, indeed, designers can (and should) design in ways that can effectively counteract stereotypes and discrimination through play. Can a psychological understanding of bias help designers expand their perspectives to make diverse games for diverse audiences?

There have been relatively few attempts to amass, synthesize, and share what has been learned from psychological studies relating to diversity and apply these to the domain of game design. This chapter begins to fill this gap with an overview of what we currently know—and what we ought to know as participants in, and contributors to, game culture. There are several approaches to promoting ‘diversity’ in games, from increasing the audience for games to attempting to shift biases in games—and in players themselves. What are the ways that we can think scientifically about bias and design to shift biases, both in who designs and plays games and in the content and potential outcomes for that play? Established theories and decades of empirical work in psychology provide an illuminating knowledge base from which to examine issues of diversity in games—as well as an accessible set of techniques and tools for the conscientious design of games to counteract or circumvent social biases.

One key root cause of the imbalanced participation and lack of equity and diversity inherent in game play, game design, and game culture, is the phenomenon of **implicit bias** and the psychological obstacles that it entails. By definition, implicit bias refers to an unconscious negative evaluation or association that gets incorporated into one’s mental representation (or “schema”) of a particular concept (be it a person, group, place, event, idea, value, etc.). What’s particularly insidious about implicit bias is that it does not depend on (and often occurs *in spite of*) an explicit endorsement or intention to have a negative attitude toward a particular target (Blair, 2002).

No one is immune to implicit biases. Even those who genuinely and legitimately consider themselves to be non-prejudiced and committed to instilling human values such as egalitarianism at a conscious level could, at the same time, hold a negative association toward individuals of another group at an implicit level (Beattie, et al., 2013; Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014). In fact, it is likely that most biases go unnoticed and even “unbelieved” (Pronin et al., 2002).

In order to craft and disseminate those new messages effectively, we—as serious game designers, researchers, players, and consumers—must have a clearer understanding of how implicit biases manifest and operate in game play, game design, and game culture. While implicit biases emerge from the world around us and alter people’s experiences and ideas about themselves and others, the extraordinary thing about them is that they are not fixed. As we shall explain in this chapter, biases can be countered, and even dramatically reduced. We will show how new messages in games can alter or counteract biases.

Game Play. As the examples earlier on in this paper illustrate, games can transmit and perpetuate implicit biases through their depiction of (and/or their non-depiction of) social identity categories like gender, race, and sexual orientation. But biases may not be so overt in game play. Implicit bias can also affect the types/genres of games that we prefer (or think we prefer) or believe we’d be adept at. Young girls or players of color may shy away from heavy strategy games or games that involve science or math components due to unconscious societal stereotypes questioning their ability to excel in those domains. Implicit bias can profoundly affect the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of players toward each other, particularly behaviors that often go left unchecked or remain outside of our conscious control, such as nonverbal cues (facial expressions, tone of voice, word choice, etc.) and shape differential patterns of expectation or response toward fellow players.

Game Design. Implicit bias can affect the audiences designers envision when conceptualizing and crafting a game. Such bias can affect designers’ playtesting process (e.g., preventing designers from seeking out diverse samples of testers or altering their perceptions of players’ behaviors and responses based on their expectations). These unconsciously flawed practices can trigger confirmation bias and self-fulfilling prophecy, by which designers’ expectations of who would prefer to play a game and/or how different demographic groups would perceive or approach a game influence the way they see or interpret players’ responses—thus unwittingly providing false evidence of their own expectations.

Game Culture. The culture around games and gameplay has its own biases. Games are still largely seen as a male domain, even though adult women constitute about half of all digital game players (ESA, 2014). The percentage of women in the US game industry has doubled since 2009 but still only stands at 22%, and people of color continue to be marginalized (IDGA, 2014). Over half of those working in games report that sexism and violence in games, as well as sexism in the game development workforce, leading to negative perception of games and the game industry overall (IDGA, 2014). In the larger culture, recent articles show that even unexpected audiences such as elderly women are entering the game space in record high numbers (Newman, 2014). Yet the environment for women, racial minorities, and LGBT players in online multiplayer games continues to be challenging, and such communities have not yet evolved to invite and embrace the growing diversity of audiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Unconscious biases originate from a number of sources (Dasgupta, 2013). For example, repeated exposure to stereotypical depictions or prejudicial attitudes toward individuals of another race in one's personal life (e.g., growing up constantly hearing racist views or jokes at home or school) or in the broader culture or media (e.g., seeing caricatured representations of a group's members in films or TV shows).

Implicit bias is a likely culprit that explains imbalanced representations in both game design and game play. It also explains why those who try to improve on gaming diversity often fail. In addition to in-game representation and questions of agency and empowerment for minority and female characters, widespread stereotypes of "gamer" and "game designer" in the broader culture have likely instilled a stronger association between both categories and "heterosexual, white male" than with categories such as "female," "Latino/a," "African American," "gay," or "transgender." Implicit associations have been shown to be automatically triggered by exposure to a target and, as a result, often affect individuals' judgments and behaviors outside of their awareness (e.g., Bargh & Chartrand, 1999). So, for example, implicit bias regarding the proficiency of girls and women in gaming and game design could lead peers, parents, and teachers to form gender-stereotypical expectations, which they likely transmit subtly and unwittingly to girls (e.g., in the level of attention or encouragement they provide to girls versus boys who express an interest in games and game design). This may happen even if parents, teachers, and peers do not consciously endorse these stereotypes (e.g., Jacobs & Eccles, 1992). Even subtle reminders of beliefs about their identity group can trigger *stereotype threat*, by which

the mere activation of a stereotyped identity can elicit performance-debilitating anxiety and preoccupation about confirming a stereotype about their group (e.g., Logel et al., 2009). In other words, implicit bias has a deleterious effect on attitudes held both toward and by members of a group for which a negative stereotype is known or has been propagated.

Implicit biases also manifest in everyday *microaggressions*: the “subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges” (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, & Willis, 1978, p. 66) that reflect and transmit one’s unconscious associations toward a group. Such responses are often overlooked or glossed over for their unintentional and seemingly innocuous nature, but research has shown that “micro-inequalities” have a profound detrimental effect on the motivation and performance of members of targeted groups (Sue, 2010). For example, a number of learning theorists and researchers have described how microaggressions create and perpetuate the “chilly climate” faced by women and other underrepresented groups in game design and game play contexts, just as they have in STEM learning contexts (Wasburn & Miller, 2005).

The significance of understanding implicit bias –and combating it—is eloquently expressed by social psychologist Laurie Rudman, who stated that “for a deep and lasting equality to evolve, implicit biases must be acknowledged and challenged; to do otherwise is to allow them to haunt our minds, our homes, and our society into the next millennium” (Rudman, 2004, p. 139).

PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS FOR REDUCING AND REVERSING IMPLICIT BIASES

Fortunately, though implicit biases are well-ingrained by powerful forces of socialization and inequitable media representations, they are by no means impermeable to change. Attacking implicit bias requires reversing or retraining the unconscious negative or stereotypical associations individuals hold—that is, replacing or overriding existing automatic associations with new associations. Research conducted over the past several decades has revealed a number of psychological mechanisms that have proven to be quite effective at reducing implicit biases and reversing implicit associations, at least temporarily. Empirical work in this space has shown that the most successful of these techniques include the following:

1. **Counter-stereotypical Examples.** Exposure to numerous counter-stereotypical role models (e.g., having girls read about successful female scientists and engineers) helps counteract the abundance of stereotypical exemplars who

occupy existing mental representations of a group or category (e.g., Dasgupta & Asgari, 2004).

2. **Counter-Stereotype Training.** Counter-stereotypic training (e.g., having individuals press a button labeled “No” every time a picture of a group member paired with a stereotypical trait—such as an image of a female paired with the word “weak”—appeared on a computer screen) reduced the automatic activation of the stereotype (Stout et al. 2011; Forbes & Schmader, 2010).
3. **Perspective-Taking.** Guided perspective-taking activities and exercises that encourage simulating the experience of “outgroup” members (e.g., imagining a “day in the life” of a member of another race) effectively reduce biases and stereotypes, in part by forging greater psychological overlap between one’s representation of “self” and “other” (Kaufman & Libby, 2012; Todd, Bodenhausen, Richeson & Galinsky, 2011).
4. **Social Norms.** The fostering of egalitarian norms and motivations, when activated, can counteract or prevent the automatic activation of implicit negative stereotypes (Moskowitz, Gollwitzer, Wasel & Schaal, 1999).

The success of these interventions rests on the assumption that they can change existing mental representations and enable individuals to “relearn” a new, counter-stereotypical association. As summarized by social psychologist Patricia Devine: “inhibiting stereotype-congruent or prejudice-like responses and intentionally replacing them with non-prejudiced response can be likened to the breaking of a bad habit” (Devine 1989, p. 15). Further, sufficient “intention, attention, and time” are required to strengthen new, non-stereotypical responses (Devine, 1989, p. 16). Because implicit biases tend to be firmly ingrained and entrenched, “de-biasing” devices must constantly battle the impact of sociocultural factors (such as the transmission of stereotypical messages in popular media) that, in essence, “re-bias” through their perpetuation of negative stereotypes (Kang et al., 2012, p. 1170).

AN “EMBEDDED DESIGN” APPROACH FOR ACTIVATING PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS IN GAMES

The great news is that there are clear mechanisms that designers can glean from psychology to counteract biases through their work. But how can such direct, explicit, largely instructional mechanisms be most effectively integrated within—or activated by—a game? What our game design and research experience has taught us first-hand is that implementing these mechanisms often requires great nuance and finesse. Just as an “aggressive investment strategy” can lead to great wealth or bankruptcy, employing psychological mechanisms to counteract the effects of bias is

not a foolproof venture and must be employed with proven, evidence-based approaches. Designers of “games for change” largely do not consult the psychological literature for these techniques—and those who do often rely on mostly a superficial skimming of the surface or implement techniques without full consideration or empirical verification of their effectiveness and impact. Implicit biases are challenging, because even those designers who wish to alter this status quo by providing new models can overlook how their own work may inadvertently reinforce or perpetuate biases.

Using a psychological approach can benefit designers as key players in creating both games and the culture around them, but they must be used with care. A major caveat to consider when implementing these techniques is that their effectiveness can be limited by executions that are perceived to be too overt or forceful in their intention to shift mindsets, attitudes, or behaviors. The theory of reactance—one of social psychology’s oldest and most well-established formulations—stipulates that any persuasive attempt that is subjectively experienced as coercive triggers an aversive state of arousal to the belief that one’s freedom to think or act freely is being threatened (Brehm & Brehm, 2013). This aversive state motivates individuals to resist a persuasive message as a means of restoring that freedom—even if they would normally be in agreement with that message. Thus, if players are too cognizant of a designer’s intention to promote diversity or to de-bias players’ implicit associations, then they are likely to be less receptive to such messages (and, indeed, less likely to engage with the toy or game in the first place).

So, for example, when learning that exposing individuals to counterstereotypical role models is an effective de-biasing technique, the temptation might be to throw as many role models at your target audience as possible. When deciding on the cast of characters in one’s game, a designer may err on the side of putting white males in the minority to counterbalance the norms in media representations. However, doing so would likely only put a spotlight on the game’s intention to present positive exemplars from underrepresented groups and, at best, reduce players’ engagement with what they perceive to be an agenda-driven game and, at worst, trigger reactance and make players less amenable to accept or to be persuaded by the game’s de-biasing content.

In contrast to such explicit, overt approaches to presenting persuasive content in games, we have proposed an “Embedded Design” approach to game design that relies on a much higher level of subtlety—and, in some cases, subterfuge—to create games that have a greater potential to be impactful without sacrificing player enjoyment or

immersion (Kaufman & Flanagan, 2015; Kaufman, Flanagan, & Seidman, 2015). In this way, potentially sensitive, controversial, or counterattitudinal ideas or themes in games can be crafted in a way that is less overt and less obviously didactic or “message-driven.” In contrast to explicit instructional strategies for promoting prosocial attitude and behavior change, the Embedded Design approach offers strategies for designing persuasive and impactful game experiences that are not overly explicit in their goal to change players’ attitudes or beliefs. The Embedded Design approach rests on the foundational premise that the persuasive potential of games can be significantly augmented by interweaving an intended message or theme within a game’s content, mechanics, or context of play—rather than making that message or theme an overt and explicit focal point. We believe that the techniques can work across various types of media forms, as well. Our design and research team’s efforts to create and study games for social impact have allowed us to propose and test a set of best practices and concrete design techniques (with empirically demonstrated effectiveness) for increasing the persuasive impact of our games.

First, the “best practices” that are derived from the Embedded Design approach include the following basic tenets backed by empirical research:

- **Combine on-topic and off-topic content.** Interweave playful content with serious, educational, or ‘message-related’ content. When making a game promoting diversity and egalitarianism, designers may be (and often are) inclined to “overstuff” their game with the key pro-diversity message. We found that too much of a good thing—in this case, too much “on-message” content that game creators wish to communicate—can be damaging. To illustrate, in a set of games we designed to combat social stereotypes and biases, we have shown that “overstuffed” versions of the game are not only ineffectual for reducing bias, but players enjoy them less than versions that utilize the “intermixing” method (Kaufman & Flanagan, 2015). Moreover, one of the key reasons for this pattern of results is that game versions that “overload” their content with on-topic materials arouse player’ ire and frustration, rendering them less receptive to the games’ pro-diversity aims and themes (Kaufman & Flanagan, 2015; Kaufman & Flanagan, under review B)
- **Avoid imbalanced representations.** Avoiding an imbalance or overrepresentation of counter-stereotypical examples is another technique we have uncovered through our research. Too much of a good thing can seem unattainable. Female players for example, who were presented with a majority-female science team in a strategy game, versus players who were given a balanced gender team, actually were less immersed and invested in the game, reducing the impact of any potentially empowering messages they might discover through play (Kaufman &

Flanagan, under review A). Over-representations of female role models not only made the success of women in science seem more unrealistic or unachievable, they also likely made the intention of the game too obvious or overt (and, by putting gender in more apparent focus, may have triggered stereotype threat or primed stereotypes related to gender in STEM contexts).

- **Design for repetition.** There's a need for repetition over time to reinforce any potential psychological effects in games (or prevent effects from evaporating), so making sure gameplay is compelling is a key goal. In fact, repetition is a particularly key ingredient to psychological change when it comes to reversing well-ingrained implicit attitudes or associations (Devine, 1989). Most established interventions for reducing implicit bias (e.g., completing a version of the Implicit Association Test that has a respondent repeatedly categorize counterstereotypical stimulus pairs, such as women's names and STEM fields, using the same key) rely on repetition to build new mental connections and/or weaken existing, stereotypical ones.
- **Be less obvious.** In general, we have found that simply making the purpose or aim of a "device" less explicit or obvious increases player's pleasure, interest in repeat play, and openness to change (Kaufman & Flanagan, 2015). In general, this is one of the great benefits of well-designed games: players are motivated to play again and again— and one of the pitfalls of well-intentioned but poorly designed games is that they prioritize the message over the experience of the player.

To provide a more concrete depiction of these best practices of the Embedded Design approach as we have enacted and researched them, the following table 15.1 presents a set of easily implementable design techniques (and illustrative examples of their effectiveness) from our own game creations and accompanying empirical studies investigating the games' efficacy and impact.

Embedded Design Technique	Description of Technique	Example of Implementation / Empirical Evidence of Techniques Effectiveness
Intermixing	Combining “on-topic” and “off-topic” game content in order to make the focal message or theme less obvious and more accessible	<i>Awkward Moment</i> , a party card game for pre- and early- teens that has players reacting to social scenarios on Moment Cards by submitting Reaction Cards to a Decider. The game intermixes “on-topic” Moment Cards pertaining to social biases (e.g. “While stopping at the mall, you see a store is selling t-shirts for girls that say Math is hard!”) with a majority of “off-topic” Cards unrelated to bias (e.g. “While bending over to tie your shoes in the school hallway, you feel your pants split wide open.”) Our research has shown that the “intermixed” version of the game increases players’ association between women and science threefold over a “neutral” version of the game (where all Moment cards present “off-topic” content). An intermixed version of the game, but not an “overloaded” version (with a majority of bias-related Moment Cards, increases players’ perspective-taking abilities. (Kaufman & Flanagan, 2015).
Obfuscating	Using game genres that direct players’ attention or expectations away from the game’s true aims.	Framing <i>Awkward Moment</i> groups as a game that deals with “social stereotypes,” compared to a neutral frame describing the game as pertaining to “social situations,” led youth participants to evaluate the game as less fun and immersive and, furthermore, prevented the game from strengthening players’ association between women and science (Kaufman & Flanagan, 2015). In other words, obfuscating the game’s persuasive aims (by using a description that diverted attention away from the game’s intent” was key to ensuring the game’s impact.
Distancing	Employing fiction or metaphor to increase the psychological gap between players’ identities and beliefs and the game’s characters and persuasive content.	We have compared two versions of our public health board game <i>POX: Save the People</i> , which is intended to promote positive attitudes towards vaccination and concern about those infected with disease: one version (<i>POX</i>) utilizing a more realistic narrative about disease spread, and another (<i>ZOMBIEPOX</i>) sharing the same game mechanics but presenting them in the context of a “zombie plague” narrative. Results showed that players of the zombie-themed version of the game reported higher levels of empathy towards individuals with infectious diseases, and that this outcome was mediated by players’ level of enjoyment and psychological immersion during play (Kaufman & Flanagan, under review D).
Delayed Reversal	Withholding potentially threatening or alienating information until players have	In research on <i>Monarch</i> , a strategy board game that positions players as sibling princesses, with male youth participants, we found that slightly delaying the gender of players’ characters significantly increased players’

Table 15.1. Embedded Design Approach

As these examples demonstrate, the Embedded Design approach promises to revolutionize the ways that game developers tackle serious content issues and make

more effective and more enjoyable games that are remarkably more transporting and impactful compared to games in which the persuasive message or material is presented more overtly or directly.

WHAT CAN DESIGNERS TAKE AWAY TO DIVERSIFY GAMES?

It is finally time for a change in gaming, but the change has to carefully address implicit biases in order to have impact. Designing for diversity means expanding the audience who plays and who is excited about playing—and creating—games. It means improving the social landscape in the development and design of games. Finally, it means making a more equitable and just space for games in popular culture. In this chapter we've outlined some concrete techniques to design to address or combat biases. These are now tangible, evidence-based approaches that designers can create games with diversity in mind from a psychological perspective. We wish to emphasize that these can be techniques used by any game designer in any circumstance—they are just as suitable when designing characters for a learning game about math as they are when nudging the content of *World of Warcraft* to be about science to change conversation to be about women in science). Implicit biases yield stereotypical or non-diverse representations, reinforce categorical dichotomies in game design and marketing, and cater to an unnecessarily limited demographic. The de-biasing devices offered here can – and should – inform both designers and their designs. At the same time, the importance of empirical evidence to test the impact/efficacy of game and the chosen mechanisms and techniques of implementation should not be overlooked. Even the best-intentioned and most well-designed games can unwittingly perpetuate biases—in their representation of characters, their intended audiences, and their positioning in the broader cultural context. In light of this fact, the Embedded Design approach offers key strategies for tackling social issues and including persuasive content in a game in ways that circumvent players' psychological defenses, trigger a more receptive mindset for internalizing the game's intended message, and do so without sacrificing players' enjoyment or the game's replayability. Indeed, the power of this approach is that it offers design solutions that have the potential to be equally effective for both individuals who may already endorse a particular stance as well as those who may initially be opposed or indifferent to it. These strategies can enable games that address social issues, such as issues related to diversity and bias, to have a much broader and more long-lasting impact.

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CHAPTER 16.

PLAYING WITH GENDER

Promoting Representational Diversity with Dress-Up, Cross-Dressing and Drag in Games

BY EMMA WESTECOTT

One attempt to move games towards more representational diversity lies in player-character customization options. Yet often these choices remain constrained and fit rigid social norms for beauty in terms of weight, age and body shape. Another response has been the creation of separate games for particular groups (e.g., “pink” games for girls based on claims that there are gendered preferences in play). More rigorous research from Jenson and de Castell (2010, 2011) indicate that differences in play preference may be more due to proficiency and access than gender. Other entertainment sectors have developed products for a female market. These products often reproduce a rather reductive and stereotypical view of female desire, oriented around sentimentality, emotion, family, and other issues considered to be of interest to only women. There are parallels to be drawn between separate female markets in linear media and the growing casual and social games sector that goes beyond the focus of this chapter, but these too often build off purported gender differences and perpetuate segmentation rather than open up games to a more diverse set of representational practices.

Games hold remarkable potential for experimentation in what, where, and whom is shown, even acknowledging that they are crafted by individuals carrying their own values into game-making practices. Some more experimental games allow one to play as the wind driving petals (in *Flower*, 2009) or as a transgender woman experiencing gender re-assignment (in *Dys4ia*, 2012). It is also possible to see evidence of player-characters without signifiers of gender at all. It is not coincidental that many of these games have been developed in an “indie” setting—a term that describes a certain scale of development (Westcott 2012)—and offer a context for re-imagining gender representation in games beyond the exaggerated, the cute, and the abstract.

In this chapter, I approach gameplay as a performance form in order to connect games to a related historical tradition by focusing on the connection between a player and her player-character during gameplay (Westecott 2015). Performance theory, practice and dress offer rich resources for game design, and this chapter provides a framework for designers of third-person character-led games to re-think how gender is approached in game design. It is probable that other types of game could be studied via performance approaches to productive ends.

A CONTINUUM OF PLAYER IDENTITIES

A key aspect of player identity in games is that the subject is concatenated differently in different forms of gameplay, when I control an onscreen player-character in third-person games our co-joined nature offers opportunity for gender play. It is important here to acknowledge the dynamic of control in gameplay, that the player holds a dominant position in relation to a player-character. Player-characters are not just subjects to negotiate game space, but also act as objects for consumption. In gameplay there exists a temporary binding that both holds expressive capacity and facilitates gameplay; this binding can be seen as layers connecting a player to a game in the following way:

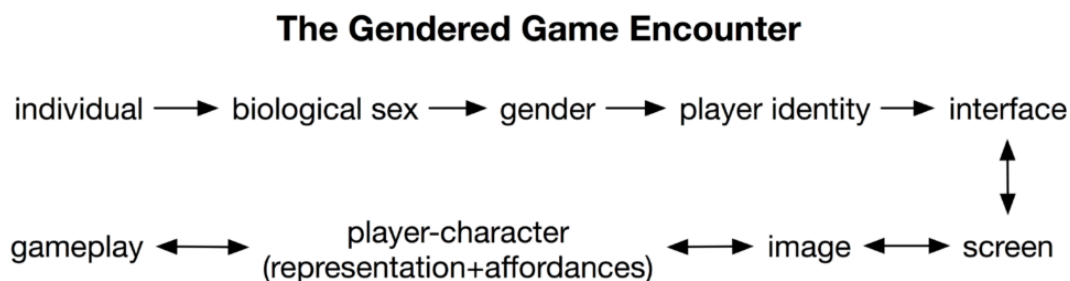


Figure 16.1. The binding of an individual to gameplay.

It is the second line of Figure 16.1 that illustrates one potential to expand game design. The bi-directional arrows between player-character and image, and between image and screen express the potential of the player-character to directly address the player. Theatrical techniques like breaking the fourth wall, alienation effects, revealing apparatus, all offer approaches to create a critical distance between a player and a game and thus allow for a critique of gameplay that in turn could broaden the expressive capacity of the experience at hand. The rest of this chapter is concerned specifically with how representation of gender can be expanded in games.

Introducing a continuum of gender in games, running from an absence of gender markers to the (more typical) hyper-exaggeration of gender, offers a starting point to begin expanding representational practices. The addition of game design approaches that explicitly allow for the player to shift through multiple in-game identities over the duration of gameplay, a phenomena termed “distributed subjectivity” here, provides additional depth to the following framework (see Figure 16.2).

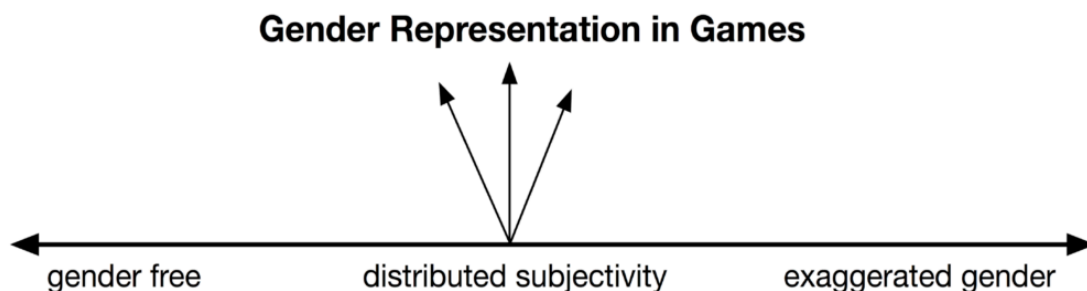


Figure 16.2. A framework for game design

Representation of gender is less fluid in games than in animation. The experimentation in gender play that can be traced across the history of animated form has not migrated with other animation techniques game makers use. The abstraction inherent to all forms of animation opens up opportunities for different narratives beyond the gloss of the mainstream. The tendency in animation to anthropomorphized characters allows for the separation of signifiers of gender from character and thereby builds layers of codified expression that create a space of ambiguity that allows for a heightened fluidity in the showing, and swapping, of markers of gender.

Performance theory allows for an imaginable “as-if” such that as long as a performer plays a role with enough skill, the audience can invest in the presented plot. In gameplay, this consensual illusion is facilitated by the skill of the player as she moves through the game. The types of investment made by the player-as-audience are multiple (for example, acting as if she were the protagonist or alternately, taking an assistive role in helping the protagonist resolve their call-to-action) and different styles of game performance tend to prioritize different levels of engagement. Players can dynamically shift roles throughout a particular gameplay session, allowing for multiple sites of identification, resulting in a type of what I refer to here as “distributed subjectivity”. By designing games to this end, it is possible to shift the ongoing connection between a player and her player-character in interesting ways.

Games offer very specific sites for identification via apparatus (the “how” of gameplay) and diegesis (the “what” of gameplay), and offer the player an opportunity to experience agency and affect whilst enabling her to act as a fictional “other” in a bounded play experience.

Game performance enables a player to enact almost infinite configurations of role and character. We all play, and play with, roles. For example my roles of mother, partner, gamer and teacher—all hold particular pleasures. These roles are held by one individual who shifts role according to context and plays within the role in order to inhabit it. Contemporary approaches to subjectivity center on the fluid and shifting nature of identity. All humans function within ideological frameworks that work to fix individuals into particular power dynamics. Yet even given these very real constraints, human action enables a shift, however provisional, in possibility.

Some existing approaches to building distributed subjectivities in games can be summarized as; switching between different protagonists; switching between camera and protagonist, and, playing with a companion character. This switching places the player in the privileged position of having access to more information than the player-character about the gaming situation. For example playing with a NPC companion in games like *Ico* (2001) adds motivation because of an implied responsibility for the third party. Many of these techniques aim at disturbing representational norms and can be seen as working against immersion. Maintaining a distance between a player and her gameplay experience through the intentional use of stylistic and structural devices holds potential to extend the range of address in game form and the insistence on the fluidity of the subject in games is central to these processes.

Moving forward from this brief discussion of approaches to gender representation in games, I add depth to the discussion by focusing on the specificity of dress to draw forward theoretical approaches that offer potential for future game design practice.

DRESS-UP, CROSS-DRESSING AND DRAG IN GAMEPLAY

The way we dress is central to our sense of identity, community, and culture, as well as being one of the ways that we communicate with other humans. Indeed it could be argued that clothing stands as an interface to wider social engagement. Our clothing is a form of self-representation through which an individual expresses identity. Dress is a central site of play, amongst other things allowing for experimentation in roles. We try on and try out a range of identities through dress-up play. Third-person games offer a specific context for dress-up play, and here I discuss in more detail

three different forms of ludic dress in the context of gender representation and digital games:

Dress-up

Dress-up offers a play between self and other; through costume, an individual takes on the role, and identity, of that costume however fictional or transitory. As a marker of identity, dress is both powerful, perceivable instantly and non-verbally, and fluid, changing with each new outfit. The opaque lens of the game screen offers a significantly wider range of dress-up potential than the embodied encounter. The rise of computational technology has allowed more of us more agency than ever before in how we present ourselves. Beyond visual and ludic representation, digital dress-up lets us try on different experiences and subjectivities and perform in game as another. Game studies activity that makes this connection can be seen in Ludica's (a game design/art collective consisting of Janine Fron, Tracey Fullerton, Jackie Morie and Celia Pearce) 2007 paper which addresses an omission in play theory via performance anthropologists such as Victor Turner, "...who examined how the costume in ritual and theatre create an embodied alternate persona for the wearer." (Fron, J., Fullerton, T., Morie, J. F. and Pearce, C., 2007, p. 1). Ludica claim that extending approaches to "dress-up" as a form of play holds potential for a feminist corrective to game studies. Whilst perhaps the most literal example of this lies in digital avatar customization tools, it is possible to approach playing any game body as a type of digital dress-up in which a player tries out the characteristics of a game character. This is a "trying on" of a fictional other with all the pleasurable elisions and confusing contradictions between the player's sense of self and the representation of a player-character as skewed by the display of 3D space on a 2D screen controlled by hand. The pliable "other" of the player-character in third person gameplay allows the player to experience, at a distance, enhanced capacities and the pleasures of a responsive and controllable digital actor. In games, action tends to the hyper-exaggerated, offering the player super human power. This blend of image and interaction holds potential to challenge the largely passive roles of many non-ludic representations of women. My in-game image may be improbable, but the power I wield as I succeed in game offers a very real feeling of achievement.

Much of the theoretical work on identity online addresses virtual worlds that offer customization options in which pleasure lies in character authoring. It is important to distinguish between these sites for dress-up and games that use pre-created characters. These are both types of ludic dress distinguishable by orientation, by a focus on self-representation as opposed to adoption of a separate persona. When

playing a game, the player is always watching the results of her actions in order to make decisions about future action and this self-display is, importantly, a site of play in which the contradiction between the actions that the player takes and the rendering of these actions on the “othered” game body consist a space of pleasure. This connection does not imply that the player adopts the identity of her player-character, just that she tries it on both in and as an act of play.

Cross-dressing

Western theatre developed practices of cross-dressing as a way to portray women in theatrical form without needing a real woman on stage. Theatre offers a site of ambiguity that allows multiple levels of gender play on stage with the audience fully aware of what underlies the display. Theatre remains a self-reflexive form that “...by questioning its own representational strategies...can also undermine those power structures” (Solomon, 1997, p. 2) and has a long tradition of exposing its own apparatus. Gender roles presented in staged performance are more exaggerated than in every day life, offering both an ideal and a critique of the role portrayed. Gender play in digital environments makes this more accessible to more people thanks to the growth of the Internet and the anonymity it offers. In multiplayer spaces, who knows who is behind the gendered representation on screen, yet rather reductively gender in game form remains a core signifier of virtual identity without any direct link to perceivable actual bodies or identities in physical space.

Academic work has explored some of the dynamics of online cross-dressing that allow for multiple sites of identity play online (Turkle 2005). The term “computer cross-dressing” was coined by Allucquere Roseanne Stone (1991) to describe an instance of a man passing as a disabled woman online. Individuals cross-dress via technology for many reasons, trying on different situations as a form of identity play. The anonymity of online presence allows an accessible and low risk way to play as the other as theorized in the work of Stone (1991), Nakamura (1995), Turkle (2005) and Ferreday and Lock (2007) amongst others. Nakamura (1995) names this activity “identity tourism” and identifies the privilege held by many individuals engaged in this type of play. Ferreday and Lock (2007) describe this activity as “identity traveling” instead inferring a wider motivational drive for computer cross-dressing. Game studies work by MacCallum-Stewart (2008) identifies some motivations for switching genders in games that include ludic reasons (both for different in-game abilities and for special treatment from other players) as well as for aesthetic pleasure. But whilst gender can be selected for gameplay affordances rather than for any

explicit intention to objectify, it remains the case that the controlling nature of the player to player-character connection creates a power dynamic of domination.

Drag

Ferreday and Lock (2007) connect the practices of passing online to Butler's theory of drag and as Butler points out, "...in imitating gender drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself-as well as its contingency" (Butler, 1990, p. 137). Drag is a practice that, for Butler, questions the very construction of gendered identities. It does this by making visible the signs of gender on a performer of the opposite sex that reveals the lack of any purportedly "natural" authenticity to these signs. Butler's view on the performative nature of gender holds that gender is created by unavoidable engagement in processes of socialization. Here, again, it is important to distinguish between Butler's view of performativity as mandatory through social engagement and the view put forward here of gameplay as performance, as a voluntary act, potentially offering a space of greater gender fluidity.

There are traces of a discussion of drag as a mode of engagement in gameplay in game studies (Schleiner 2001; Kennedy 2002) that proposes that the framing between a player and the hyper-sexualized body of her player-character be seen as a type of drag in which the player plays with gender. It is important to this argument to note the discussion of drag by queer theorists and performers as a site of self-empowerment and community activism. Kennedy (2002) suggests that the combination of male player and Lara's feminine game body can be seen as a type of queer embodiment that "...potentially subverts stable distinctions between identification and desire and also by extension the secure and heavily defended polarities of masculine and feminine subjectivity".

Drag fits within the wider aesthetic category of camp, as a specific act of cross-dressing that in Meyer's (2010) view has nothing to do with women:

(T)he goal of a drag queen was to look like a Drag Queen, something beyond Man or Woman, larger than life, fantastic, mesmerizing in her liminality. The aim was not to "pass" as a woman, but to stand out as a Queen, as a category of being beyond the gender binary. There is a big difference between a Drag Queen and a female impersonator. (p. 178)

Contemporary performance theorists (Meyer, 2010; Niles 2004) separate drag from simply a parody of assumed gender and through interviews with drag performers point to the function of the form as critique and self-expression via exaggeration. Whilst drag is not intrinsically politically motivated or empowering per se it has been

engaged as a mechanism of subversion by groups working towards positive change in social attitudes towards LGBTIQ groups. If as I suggest here cross-play in games offers opportunity for drag performances that can function to challenge dominant gender norms, then the hope is that this approach holds potential for game design. Drag as a form creates powerful and parodic images that function dialectically to re-purpose the iconography of different times and places to performance ends. Performance theorists such as Niles (2004) connect the practices of drag to Brechtian alienation techniques. Niles first defines camp by using Dyer's (2006) definition of "a characteristically gay way of handling the values, images and products of the dominant culture through irony, exaggeration, trivialization, theatricalisation and an ambivalent making fun of and out of the serious and respectable" (Location 3083 of 4552). Niles then points to Diamond's (2001) connection of drag to Brecht's alienation theory to make apparent "the ideological construct of gender in a particular time period." (p. 38). Ludic drag makes the experience of drag easier to access for more people and whilst the skill needed to succeed in game requires gameplay competence, dressing up as game characters remains as easy as operating a game interface. An opportunity for critique lies in the systematization of techniques of alienation in the game or game engine to make visible the game's status as a game to its player.

DISCUSSION

Gender in games is inscribed in a range of ways: in a game's system and rules, in player-character (PC) operation and options, and within the broader diegetic frame in terms of what capacity is assigned to which character traits over the course of gameplay. Even when there is a direct correlation between the biological sex of the player and the gender of the PC, there is a different address in operation. The PC has been designed by a third party to fit existent ideals. Player-characters offer an exaggerated set of actions specific to moving through the game scaffold by the acquisition of the player skill necessary to progress. In games then there are always already at least two genders in operation, that of the player and that of the PC. The gender of the PC can be seen as a "hollow" signifier in the lack of any original source and as a representation of a fictional body marked by socially inflicted ideals. Game characters are all gender and no sex. As 3D models or 2D sprites built, textured and animated to run within a game engine, the representation of gender is written purely on the surface layer of the PC without any biology to confuse matters. Player-characters are driven by code written by somebody to respond to player interaction, and as such beyond identification offer the pleasure of control to the player. The creation of fictional women in many games bears no connection to real women

anywhere. Rather, such games feed a mythic view of woman in all her constructed roles as object, subject to the desires of her male audience. It is this approach that allows for the connection of the practices of gameplay to the histories of cross-dressing and drag in performance:

Women are nonexistent in drag performance, but woman-as-myth, as cultural, ideological object, is constructed in an agreed upon exchange between the male performer and the usually male spectator. Male drag mirrors women's socially constructed roles. (Dolan in Senelick, 1992, p. 6)

The act of drag, often seen as part of a wider camp aesthetic, is a type of gender play that holds potential for self-empowerment. Drag is often conflated with cross-dressing which, as Shiller (1999) states, is “the act of crossing over to something “other” than what one “truly” is,” (p. 68) and which is often based on making fun of an original by imitating it. A core aspect of cross-dressing is the ability, or not, to pass—or to be convincing in the imitation. Drag can be seen as distinct from cross-dressing as in drag the interest lies more in the power of the image than in the veracity of the representation on display. This can be seen in the multiple ambiguities presented through drag and in phenomena like the ‘faux queen’ in which women perform drag queens. This approach to drag makes gender into a game, a site for both play that beyond identity offers an opportunity for a wider critique, and whilst the shock value of drag has diminished the sense of playful knowingness evident in these performances is largely missing from the player-to-player-character context and offers one response for game designers interested in a feminist critique.

The drag of much gameplay can be seen in the exaggerated markers of sexualized representation that many games engage. This operates in the visual presentation of the player-character, the orientation and narrative of the game world, and in the options for gameplay. Many game bodies are both super human and hyper-sexualized regardless of which gender is portrayed. Playing these game bodies offers exaggerated physical abilities that exceed any real world capacities. Indeed a core pleasure of digital gameplay is controlling a responsive character that can traverse the environment that it inhabits and provides the player with a sensation of physical mastery as she progresses in game.

One response to the potential for approaching gameplay as a drag act lies in articulating the capacity for a player to inhabit multiple subject positions and framing this as a type of oscillation. The mechanisms discussed above aim to disturb representational practices to trigger a type of oscillation between being immersed in action and reflecting on the results of that action that specific to gender:

...offers multiple pleasures: 1) occupying both gender positions or the fantasy of such a possibility; 2) perceiving both as unfixed or unstable, which is a pleasure certainly to those on the bottom of the gender hierarchy; and 3) destabilizing the hierarchy itself. (Lavin, 1990, p. 69).

The presentation of the interrelationship between a player and player-character as dress-up does not imply that this mode of engagement is inconsequential. Having choice in how and who to play is important. Here it is choice that is the axis of the point. As a young, white, male gamer surrounded by young, white, male player-characters, choosing to play as another age, race or gender is just one amongst many ways of experimenting within a leisure experience. For everyone else, the dominance of the young, white, male protagonist in games not only reinforces existing real world social hierarchies but also forces the player to cross-play as a prerequisite to the pleasures of gaming.

CONCLUSION

Whilst the research referenced above indicates that it is possible to approach gameplay as a type of drag, it remains the case that the dynamic of control evident in the player to player-character connection problematizes approaches to characterization. Games like the recent re-boot of the Lara Croft franchise *Tomb Raider* (2013) opted to present a prequel to the wider franchise in which Lara encounters her origin story as an adventure game hero. This call to arms for a young Lara is one example of how a franchise evolution can challenge the presentation of a powerful female protagonist in games. During an interview with the game site *Kotaku*, one of the game's executive producers stated that Lara's first kill moment was the result of an "attempted rape" (Schreier 2012), after a later retraction what remains is that the thinking behind this approach was to motivate the player to protect her. One problem with this is that it contradicts Lara's history as an action heroine by justifying her character development to abusive originary circumstances and in the re-framing of the role of player as caretaker. The ongoing empowerment of female player-characters is a central part of diversifying games.

The framework outlined above situates gender representation in games along a continuum from gender free to exaggerated to expose a set of opportunities for a feminist, or indeed any politicized, game design without delineating exactly what that approach might be. Conceiving of player-characters as situated along the continuum explored in this chapter suggests ways in which game designers might develop more nuanced ways to represent game characters and gameplay. More broadly (pun intended), the techniques discussed here center on questioning the relationship

between a player and the game she is playing in order to expand game design approaches.

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CHAPTER 17.

ARE GAMERS READY FOR GAY LOVE? IMPROVING ROMANCE IN GAMES

BY HEIDI MCDONALD

The big game of the next five years will be a game where you empathize very strongly with the characters and it's aimed at women and girls. They like empathetic games. That will be a huge hit and as a result that will be the "Titanic" of the game industry, where suddenly you've done an actual love story or something and everybody will be like 'where did that come from?' Because you've got actual relationships instead of shooting people. – George Lucas, June 2013

Video games have become a cultural force and a major source of entertainment revenue over the last 40 years. Romance has existed in games as long ago as Mario rescuing Pauline from *Donkey Kong*. Brenda Romero's 2007 book *Sex in Video Games* follows a history of sex in games over the years. The book thinks about sex, but it also thinks about emotional connections that players feel, as well as those that the developers hope that players feel. The book raises questions about whether romance is its own genre in games and if not, then how should such games be classified? Is a "romance game" the same in every market, or does it vary by market sector? In this chapter, I will share some insights gained through my survey work about romance in single-player role-playing games, particularly relating to how consumers feel about romance content.

ROMANCE IN VIDEO GAMES IN DIFFERENT CULTURES

The Japanese market has defined romance games as Otome games (dating simulators focused toward young girls, which have been largely popular) and hentai (adult titles). According to the *Tokyo Times* in 2012, three companies in Japan who specialize in

Otome (Gree, DeNA and Voltage) saw significant gains in their share values, while Sony and Nintendo both lost around half their value. The article attributed this growth to the popularity of Otome games with Japanese women. Toshihiro Nagahama, chief economist at Tokyo's Daiichi Life Research Institute Inc., remarked, "Dating games became a blockbuster category among women because characters in those games give them what they want from men in the real world." The popularity of dating games in Japan is expected to influence the concept of targeting female market in the global level, opined Tomoaki Kawasaki, an analyst at Cosmo Securities in Tokyo.

But if you ask developers, customers, and think tanks in the West what a romance game is, the answers will vary. The difference between romance in a Western RPG (WRPG) and a Japanese RPG (JRPG) can be understood in terms of its overall mechanics. In a JRPG, which is most often a dating simulation game, the romance may or may not affect the narrative or the world, because the attainment of romance itself is the main object of the game. In a WRPG however, romance is most often presented as a romance system, where the story has a higher chance of affecting the narrative or the world, and where couplehood is a goal that is inherently part of a larger narrative.

When doing a comparison of adult titles in the Eastern market (hentai) and those in the West, there are differences and similarities: Both involve visual consumption of sexual acts, and both cases are more interested in the visual aspects of physical relationship than the empathic aspects of the emotional relationship. Hentai is presented in Anime style and often includes odd or disturbing scenes, while Western adult titles espouse more realism in their art styles and are more concerned with showing typical sex acts between people.

The Western market has a unique opportunity to define "romance game" for Western markets. Vander Caballero employed the term "empathic game" at his 2014 GDC lecture, referring to games such as Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* where the most important part of the gameplay involves making emotionally-driven, grey-area choices rather than simple combat choices, such as when choosing between saving Carley or saving Doug. *The Walking Dead* won numerous Game of the Year awards from developer groups and the gaming media, according to Telltale Games' website⁵, and the *Tech Times* published in July of 2014 that it had sold over 28 million episodes. This represents a change in the market, suggesting that different types of players are becoming engaged with games, or that players of games needing something more from their games—namely something that appeals to their emotions.

The differences between adult/hentai titles and what qualifies as a “romance game” are: first, the adult title is based largely on visual depiction while the romance game is based on emotional connection; second, the adult title sees sex as its end goal while the romance game presents sex as just one manifestation of a deeper relationship. The rise of what is more widely thought of as romance games is tied to the kinds of games that women enjoy—empathic games, or games rooted more in the emotional than in the visual or physical. It is possible that because hentai games have odd themes and tend to objectify characters, they also have a social stigma associated with playing them. This stigma makes these games more difficult to buy or enjoy and likewise inhibits players’ capacity to consider such gameplay as romantic in nature. But both adult games and romantic games represent a very real risk for developers: do they risk alienating some consumers with more explicit content, or, do they risk their game being dismissed by some players as “not a hardcore game” if it’s a shooter that happens to have a romance storyline in it somewhere? It is just a decision between which kind of risk is more palatable.

Recent trends in the Western market suggest opportunities for those who would develop romance games. According to the Romance Writers of America (2015), the U.S. romance book buyer is most likely to be aged between 30 and 54 years, and women constitute 84% of romance book buyers. This demographic presumably exists because younger generations are more digitally inclined and the age of romance readers is going down. Similar demographic statistics can be found in annual surveys from the Entertainment Software Association. One will see that the average age of gamers has remained steady for those in their thirties for the past five years. This will go up however as the gaming industry itself ages. At some point in the near future, due to the dropping age of romance readers and the advancing age of gamers, there will likely be a market sweet spot in the West which allows for success of romance games (McDonald, GDC Europe 2013 and MIGS 2013).

Brenda Bailey Gershkovitz, CEO of Vancouver’s Silicon Sisters, who led the development of a romance game in 2013 called *Everlove: Rose*, explains,

Look at the splash Fifty Shades of Grey made last year. Romance fiction has a huge audience that no one else in the game industry is trying to reach. Video games traditionally explore male fantasies: winning a fight, competing in sports, saving the princess. We at Silicon Sisters love some of those games, as do plenty of other women. But a game that specifically delves into female fantasies—what is that game like? That’s a question we’re trying to answer with Everlove.

Looking at what are considered romance games in the West in terms of core game mechanics reveals four most popular presentations, which are sometimes combined in a game's romance system:

- **Multiple choice:** One of the main ways romance is presented as a game mechanic is through multiple choice and dialogue trees. There may be an invisible stat or chain of dialogue that results in a romance. Sometimes the game will clue you with a little heart or a different color of text, or different positioning onscreen that makes it stand out from other options, so that you know which option the romance dialogue is, and you can be more deliberate about selecting or not selecting it. A good example of a game that uses Multiple Choice as its driver is BioWare's *Mass Effect*.
- **Stats management:** While *The Sims* does require you to choose conversation and actions from a selection of choices to engage in a romance, the stats are always visible to players as a tool to gauge what needs to happen next to further the romance. You can see the prospective paramour's interests and personality, and you can also see the relationship status both now and over time. This allows players to be more deliberate about maintaining their relationships, deliberately managing their compatibility and relationship stats to emphasize their romantic inclinations.
- **Transactional:** Transactional means that if you give your selected paramour enough presents, they will love you. The MMO, *Star Wars: The Old Republic* mixes both multiple choice and visible affinity as romance mechanics, but you can essentially fast-track the whole thing, and skip all of the character interactions and romance dialogue by giving a character enough presents. In the *Fable* series, gameplay especially emphasizes giving your love interest presents so that he or she will love you (continue to love you) in return.
- **Gating:** Some games force a specific romance on all players as simply the way one progresses toward the end of the game. Whether it is saving a princess or having the game suddenly assign a "companion" character, romance is built into gameplay as a way to advance gameplay and the wider story arc.

However the romance is presented, the onus of making that successful emotional breakthrough that George Lucas spoke about is on Western developers to define what a romance game is: Is it an adult title? A dating sim or a visual novel? Is the romance side content that is part of a larger title, such as how it might exist in *Dragon Age* or *Mass Effect*, and if so, does having romance content in a game mean that the game should be re-classified as a different genre? Also, what do customers consider to be satisfying game romances, and what are the pitfalls designers might avoid while

creating these experiences? For the enterprising developer, these are all questions worth asking.

UNDERSTANDING ROMANCE IN GAMES: FINDINGS FROM THE 2014 SURVEY

The first romance in games survey (McDonald, 2012) was conducted in 2012 at GDC using social media promotion on Facebook and Twitter, and using information cards distributed at GDC which invited participation. The survey asked over 500 gamers and game developers to select options that matched their romance behaviors in games, and asked them to name their favorite and least favorite non-player character romances, as well as the single-player RPG games they have played with romance content in it.

The main findings of the first survey were that most players will play romance content, if it exists in a game they are playing. Women will play more for emotional fulfillment and story reasons, while men will play more for the in-game benefits and story reasons (McDonald, GDC 2013). Furthermore, men tend to change and enhance their personalities while playing a single-player RPG, but play romance games more conservatively according to how they would want romance enacted in real life. Women meanwhile tend to role play as characters who are similar to who they are in real life, but then experiment wildly with romance in all its forms (McDonald, GDC 2013). *BioWare* is statistically the Western market's leader in terms of having well-loved and most recognized romance content in single-player RPGs. Finally, various data points were expanded upon and combined with scholarly research and game theory to produce guidelines for narrative designers to consider when developing romance-able NPCs (McDonald, GDC Online 2012).

There were some questions though that arose during this first survey, prompting me to take the research further. The first survey didn't ask participants to define a romance game, to define what makes a game romance satisfying, or to elaborate on why game romances they have experienced have or have not been satisfying to them. One data point from the 2012 survey was that 25% of the female respondents in that survey identified as bisexual, as compared to the 10% of the lesbian, gay, bi, transsexual (LGBT) population in the overall U.S. population (2010 U.S. Census Data). This statistic suggested to me that gaming in the U.S. might have a higher concentration of people outside the hetero-normative space than the wider population at large does.

This realization led to the second survey of romance in games which had 1,572 respondents hailing from 83 countries around the world, though, 87% were of North American respondents were American while 67% of European respondents were German due mostly to the survey's promotion at US and European conferences. The survey, promoted at GDC Europe 2013, MIGS 2013 and on social media, was conducted from August 20, 2013 through December 31, 2013.

More detailed analysis revealed that 46% of respondents were 25 – 34 years; 36.8% were 18 – 24 years; 6.6% were ages 35 – 54, and .04% were over 55. Most people in this survey grew up playing early console games (Nintendo Entertainment System, Atari) as their first gaming experience. There did not seem to be a significant difference in survey answers based on the respondents' location, though Europeans seem to generally be most accepting of alternative sexualities.

The gender makeup of respondents was 54% male, 38% female, and 8% other. In terms of sexual orientation, 57% of respondents identified as some variety of queer, and 43% identified as straight. This large number of queer respondents was due to particular outreach efforts. To further break out the 57% queer category: 19% identified as gay or lesbian, 14% as bisexual, 8% as pansexual, 7% as hetero-flexible, 4% as asexual, 3% as questioning, and 2% as homo-flexible. A separate question asked all non-straight respondents to explain whether or not they are out, or open, about their sexuality. 45% said they don't deny or advertise, 38% are open or out, 13% are guarded, and 4% are closeted. In the following sections, I highlight a few findings from the surveys focusing on how users define romance games, and how they feel about romance content available in the market right now.

WHAT DOES THE TERM "ROMANCE GAMES" MEAN?

The intelligible answers, from 982 respondents, fell into ten categories with 25% mentioning romance in terms of game mechanics, such as dialogue trees, gift-giving, game benefits that happen as a result of the player successfully achieving the romance. Many of these respondents described a romance game as a mini-game within a larger game, for example a side story in an RPG. This was followed by 23% mentioning romance in games in connection with Japan, Japanese products, Otome games, and dating sims. Smaller groups (8%) in connection with sex, pornography, and/or the physical aspects of romantic relationship while others (8%) cited narrative, or a love story, as being the driving factor in what makes a romance game, and another group (7.7%) saw them as visual novels, or romance novels in interactive visual form. Only 8.5% admitted that they didn't know what a romance game is while 5.7% did not believe there is any such thing as a romance game. Right now this might

mean that romance is not its own genre but rather considered a component of games that inhabit other genres, such as a subset of content in an action/adventure game.

To the question, “How often do you romance as your true sexual orientation?” a majority of respondents (52%) say that they only “sometimes” romance to their true orientation while 46% responded always, and 2% responded never. A more detailed analysis revealed that 69% of straight males always play as straight males, as opposed to 32% of straight females always playing straight females and 49% of queer people of any gender, always playing queer characters. Of gay/lesbian, hetero-flexible, homo-flexible, questioning and pansexual respondents, there was not even one case of someone “never” playing their actual sexual orientation. This result might be due to the fact that these respondents don’t get to play their sexual orientation because those options are often not available as a point of selection. Overall 92% of queer respondents and 92% of straight respondents seem to prefer to have the option to play as their actual sexual orientation. This finding is consistent with the work of Nick Yee, on the Daedalus Project (2012), though Yee’s work centers on MMO games rather than single-player RPGs.

To the question, “Do you know any queer game characters?” 85% of the characters listed were from *BioWare* games, followed by 43% of all characters listed were from the *Mass Effect* franchise. Of the top 6 games mentioned in the context of having queer characters, 4 of the 6 titles were BioWare games (*Mass Effect*, *Dragon Age*, *Jade Empire* and *Knights of the Old Republic*) in addition to *Elder Scrolls: Skyrim* (Bethesda) and *Fable* (Lionshead).

This positions BioWare as a pioneer in the evolution of game romance which has been evolving toward more inclusive romance offerings for the past 15 years. It should be noted however, that 22% of respondents couldn’t name any queer characters, suggesting a lack of awareness about the queer characters that have appeared on the industry landscape. Furthermore that 30% of respondents skipped this question, suggesting either boredom with the survey process, discomfort with the question, or that they are not aware of any such characters. Queer respondents remember queer characters’ names. Queer men and women were ten times more likely than straight men to remember the actual names of queer game characters rather than just listing the character in generic terms (ie., “That flamboyant elf guy in *Dragon Age 2*”).

To the question, “Why Might Romance in Games be Unsatisfying?” of the 817 respondents, 26.5% listed as a reason a lack of emotional depth in the romance

material, or a lack of depth in terms of time or detail allotted to the romance; 17% of respondents cited writing issues such as poor or inconsistent dialog, actions that are out of character for certain characters, and / or predictable or cliché story lines.

11.3% reported feeling frustration with the romance not being resolved properly, not having any more progression after the characters have sex, and/ or not having any bearing on the overall story or any recognition in the world. Fewer respondents (8.2%) refer to a lack of appropriate romance options, whether that lack represents a lack of characters that the respondent felt a connection with, or whether that represents a lack of options connected to the sexual orientation that a player would prefer. Heterosexual bias was mentioned among these responses. Smaller groups felt that other factors such as sex as only goal, limited expression for players, or forced romance led also to unsatisfying outcomes.

To the question, “Would you be supportive of romance content in games?” females, whether straight or queer, are more supportive of queer romance content (63%) than males are (55%). It should be noted though that surprisingly over half of the straight males felt this way as well, and overall, more than half of the respondents were supportive to some degree. Straight people were twice as likely to be neutral about this kind of content as their queer counterparts; queer people clearly care about this content and have clear opinions about its inclusion. Examples of respondents receptive to romance content in orientation other than player’s own:

“I’m thrilled about any and all sexual orientation options being available, although since straight options are already overwhelmingly available I don’t really care about straight people getting more representation.” Genderqueer asexual.

“I feel great about it; I’d really like to see lots of options exploring all sorts of perspectives, especially since I myself am unsure of how to place my own sexuality. I like being able to explore how I feel about each romance.” Questioning female.

“I’m not interested myself, but feel it’s important to have a wide variety of sexual orientations available to players who want them.” Straight female.

“The more the better as long as it’s well written and fits with the characters rather than simply being tacked on like the developers are ticking LGBT tick boxes.” Straight transgender (MtF) respondent.

Other considerations raised by respondents focused either on polyamory or experimentation:

“I don’t like that it seems developers have to wait until they have a following to put an option for homosexual into place. More available options to romance more than one character should be

an option as well, without feeling punished for having been romantically involved with a previous character. I love seeing that game designers are opening up their concepts of orientation, but the games seem to slut-shame if you want to be able to romance more than one character. At least in my experiences.” Androgynous pansexual.

“Love it. RPGs are ROLE PLAYING GAMES, e.g. not ME PLAYING GAMES. Sometimes I want to experience being a bisexual man-identifying character, sometimes an asexual genderqueer character.” Straight female.

“If a game claims to be a RPG and offers romances all orientations should be available. Otherwise it is not an RPG!” Straight male.

DISCUSSION

The positive news from this survey is that gamers are ready for romance. I discovered that gender and sexuality exist on spectrums and are much more complex than I expected. Gamers, no matter their gender or sexuality, want the option to play characters that are like them in very basic ways, though they do appreciate the chance to experiment as well. Any conversation about romance in single-player RPGs must contain BioWare games, as they dominate players’ minds and memories as being the most played and the most enjoyed romances (as found in my first survey) and now, in terms of their evolution towards more choice and inclusivity. It also means that as the industry’s leader, BioWare’s products must also be studied and critiqued for the quality of the romances they contain. Even BioWare can improve in certain areas, which I will identify in this paper.

Something I learned which I was not expecting is that gender and sexual orientations can be problematic to categorize. There were mistakes in the survey that I became alerted to, such as, making “transgender” a generalized and separate option from male and female, as most transgender individuals identify not as transgender but as their target gender of male or female as there is more than one type of transgender person (male to female and female to male). The preferred use of term, according to the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) usage guidelines, is also “transgender” and not “transgendered.” I failed to include dual gendered as a choice for gender expression. Fortunately, these are things I can correct in any further survey work I do about romance in games.

Additionally, sexual expression can be complicated and take many forms. In the presentation of my data on sexual orientation of the respondents, “straight” means heterosexual, and for purposes of simplicity, “queer” is meant to mean everything other than heterosexual, including but not limited to: asexual, bisexual, pansexual,

gay, lesbian, hetero-flexible, homo-flexible, and questioning. I understand at the outset that considering different sexualities other than straight together as a group may upset some people; it is honestly not my intention to do that. It nearly goes without saying that queer audiences are not being as well-served as they could be. The queer players remember queer content in games, the queer players were more likely to express bitterness about their dissatisfaction with romance in games, and more likely to mention heterosexual bias in romance content.

The fact that 96% of respondents said they were some degree of out suggests that it is now more socially acceptable to be open about one's sexuality; this supports findings by the Pew Research Center in 2013 that people are viewing alternative sexualities in a more positive light than they were a decade ago. The fact that 17% are either guarded or closeted about their sexuality suggests that there is still some work to do in terms of people feeling safe and comfortable openly expressing who they are; for that 17%, games may be a crucial means of sexual expression if they are unable or unwilling to be open about their orientation.

The answers also suggest that many of the dissatisfactions with romance expressed by respondents are fixable.

- The lack of choice in game romance can be addressed by simply adding more options—queer players were particularly in favor of this based on the survey results.
- Furthermore, issues around the lack of depth, payoff and narrative could all be solved with a greater production resources allocated to romance content. With a larger budget allocation and a longer timeline, narrative designers can provide more extensive and better-developed romance content. Increased budget resources could also satisfy the need for better emotional payoff for romances, whether that is some continued development of the romance after the characters have consummated the relationship, or whether that means that the story and the world are somehow tangibly affected by the romance.
- In addition, the issue of romance feeling forced is a design issue that could be solved by a higher systems budget. Designers could have more time and bandwidth to better integrate a relationship into a game, and pay better attention to whether the romance is forced in order to continue the game.
- Finally, gender representation and relationship toxicity issues could be remedied by vetting the content with a cultural and/or psychology expert.
- While resources are an important part of the consideration as to how developers

can improve romance, financial concerns are only part of the solution. There are some other ways romance in games might be improved. Development companies could increase the number of designers with a background in narrative and storytelling. Development companies could examine their designer base to see that it is diverse with different romance perspectives and experiences. In cases where a company's designer base is not as diverse, narrative designers could show more care and sensitivity when writing for orientations other than their own; in fact, including people of that orientation in the process somehow can only improve the product.

Audiences are ready for more queer romance content in games. This is significant because a majority of straight customers said they were mildly supportive to fully supportive of their queer counterparts having more choices. People like romance, people play romance, and my data shows that across a wide range of demographics, people say they are ready for games to be more inclusive.

Romance in games—as it is currently being defined by the customer base—is a tricky thing. Clearly, it is still evolving and still being defined. Will Western markets allow Eastern markets to define this, or will they seek to define it further for their own customers? Will romance ever break out as its own genre, rather than as a sub-genre, or as film director George Lucas put it, are we ripe for a sweeping romance game that ends up being the next big game that nobody saw coming? Further exploration and industry conversation is necessary. It boils down to this: are developers willing to do what it takes to satisfy audiences with romance content? I look forward to seeing where romance in games is headed.

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PART VI.

ADVANCING SERIOUS GAMING

CHAPTER 18.

GENDER, GAMES AND COMPUTING

Expanding Participation and Interest in Constructionist Gaming

BY YASMIN B. KAFAI

More than twenty years ago a class of ten-year olds set out to make, rather than play, their own digital games to teach fractions to younger students in their school. They met every day for three months to design their games, to develop themes and mechanics, to create characters, to write story lines, and to program interactions (Kafai, 1995). The outcomes of this constructionist gaming project were remarkable for several reasons. For one, it broke with the conventional wisdom of the time: namely, that girls simply were not interested in gaming, much less computer programming. This was not the case. All sixteen students, eight girls and eight boys, who participated in the project significantly increased their skills in writing and debugging code, especially when compared to students who had learned programming the traditional way: once a week in a computer lab for a hour working on small pieces of code rather than an extensive project. Furthermore, none of analyses revealed any significant gender differences, suggesting that girls could be as effective programmers as boys, which itself stood out as minor revelation at that time in the early 1990s. Designing games was successful in engaging all students in gaming and learning programming.

But there was one important difference in how boys and girls approached and realized their designs in constructionist gaming. All of the boys' designs featured violent feedback, were situated in fantasy settings, and assumed a male player. None of the girls' designs had violent feedback and were situated in realistic settings. Girls also made provisions for players of different gender (Kafai, 1996). An alternative interpretation of these findings would propose that the boys positioned themselves in their games as savvy game players by choosing established conventions that reaffirmed their identities while the girls did the same with their designs (Pelletier,

2008). In their choices of game themes and their programming of animation and interactions, the boys and girls offered a glimpse into what they found appealing and unappealing in the digital games and stories characteristic of the mass media. Making a game and constructing their own respective game rules allowed the young game designers to be in charge and to determine the player's place and role within the virtual world. A later study (Kafai, 1998; see also Denner, Ortiz, Campe & Werner, 2014), in which students were asked to design and implement astronomy games, found no such significant differences in game designs, suggesting that context plays a critical role in how students position themselves in relation to game design and subject matter.

The initial constructionist gaming project was launched in the early 90s with the intention to provide a culturally relevant and personally meaningful context for learning programming. But it took on a spin into a different direction when it demonstrated that girls could be interested in making games and learning programming at the same time. While the number of participants in this study was small and difficult to replicate given that very few students in the 90s had regular access to computers in their schools or homes, the study's findings had larger impact because they provided a compelling illustration of girls' possible engagement with computing and gaming. The findings spoke to both gender studies and computing communities perhaps because they not only aligned with the then-popular discourse about gender differences in technology use, but that they also showed a possible way out—namely, let girls make rather than play digital games. This basic—yet, at the time, relatively unheard of—directive became the launch pad for a series of research studies and tool developments that promoted and investigated children making games.

The primary focus of these efforts was to get more girls into computing though ultimately considerations to design more inclusive tools, activities, and communities became also part of this effort (Kafai & Burke, 2014). Yet while the efforts were successful in engaging girls in computing, one underlying question has never been fully addressed: Why did girls have to design and program games in order to become more tech-savvy? Even the feminist side, which mightily and justifiably lamented about the reification of stereotypes in commercial game play (deCastell & Bryson, 1998), has not dealt with this issue. One of the concerns is that the communities and productions of gaming have been reluctant to open up to women, a situation that has remain unchanged for the last twenty years (Kafai, Heeter, Denner, & Sun, 2008). Another concern is that game design itself might not prove to be the enticing road into computing as the outcomes of a recent study by Robertson (2013) illustrated.

While making games provided girls with technical expertise, it didn't necessarily sway female participants into becoming more interested in pursuing computing careers. These two concerns cast a real shadow on the premise that promoted constructionist gaming as both an instructional and outreach effort. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the complicated relationship between interest and values that foster or hinder participation in gaming and computing, as well as what we can learn from this examination to design and support more inclusive efforts in constructionist gaming.

INTEREST AND PARTICIPATION IN GAMING AS PIPELINES INTO TECHNOLOGY

The use of constructionist gaming drew impetus from two separate but interrelated developments in computing and gaming that both hinged on the lack of girls' *interest* and *participation* in these communities. Coding communities have a long history for not engaging and encouraging girls even though in the early days of computing many roles were not as strongly biased (Ensmenger, 2010). The reasons for these exclusions are multiple: On one hand, there is the lack of interest, lack of experience, and lack of skill from females, while on the other hand there is the persistent stereotyping of women in these same areas, compounded also by a lack of female role models. Numerous studies have documented girls' and minorities' lack of interest in and experiences with computing inside and outside of schools (for an overview, see Cohoon & Aspray, 2006). To address these disparities, research has focused on "unlocking the clubhouse" (Margolis & Fisher, 2002) by demystifying the "geek mythology" and accompanying sense of exclusivity that surrounds many STEM cultures but in particular computing.

Likewise, in gaming research many studies have documented girls' lack of interest and experience (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). A large body of research established significant gender differences in various aspects such as interest, experience and performance, related to digital game play (for an overview, see Greenfield & Cocking, 1996) as an explanation for why girls were not playing digital games. One of the reasons noted was the content of digital games, most notably the violence and stereotypical representations that was seen as a critical factor deterring girls from play. Provenzo (1991) who conducted one of the first content analyses of characters in digital games found that most of them portrayed women as victims or prizes, and few games provided any alternative choice for female gamers. More recent research documents that strong female protagonists such as Lara Croft are now prominent in many games but stereotyping continues to exist (Jansz & Martis, 2006).

One of the reasons why these two developments became intertwined in constructionist gaming is that both interest and participation play key roles in the technology pipeline argument and the realization that girls needed to have opportunities to interact with technologies early on if they were to choose and pursue later technical careers. As a case in point, many have argued that boys' early access to video games provided them with exactly this type of home advantage in getting experience and familiarity with digital media (e.g., Hayes, 2008). Consequently, increasing girls and women's participation in gaming has been seen as one way to address the lack of women's involvement in computing. Another reason was the lack of authenticity in learning programming for the sake of programming, which was not very appealing to many students when indeed they wanted to make the games they interacted with on a daily basis. Situating the learning of computational concepts and practices within a context provided students with motivation but also drew on children's informal knowledge with games. It is for these reasons that the initial game design project received such widespread attention and constructionist gaming—namely game making—became a model for promoting programming for girls, and boys, inside and outside of school.

LEARNING BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF CONSTRUCTIONIST GAMING

A review of the existing research literature (Hayes & Games, 2008; Burke & Kafai, 2014) has identified various learning benefits of constructionist gaming for students who participated in these studies. The first benefit, learning programming, is perhaps the most obvious one. There are numerous studies that ground the learning of coding in game play by introducing children to the fundamental concepts of programming while engaging them in a hands-on activity. Like with the initial game design project, the development of an actual “construct” (in this case, a digital game) that has personal worth to the user helps demystify the coding process, making it more real and relevant to the learner. Another benefit is the potential for children to learn content in other academic domains. Just as game-making has the potential to make learning programming more palpable, so too does it offer the opportunity to ground more traditional academic subjects in hands-on activity, be it math, language arts, or history. Finally, understanding design concepts—less traditionally academic in nature—transports digital game-making as simply a vehicle for learning a related subject into the subject of the learning, in and of itself. A number of studies have conducted qualitative research as to how children learn to create games, talk about games, and advance the game-making process both working individually and collaboratively (for a more comprehensive review, see Burke & Kafai, 2014). But no

matter under which premise constructionist gaming was employed, many of the projects resulted in making computer programming more palpable to girls and underrepresented students in the computer science field (Denner, Werner, Bean, & Campe, 2008).

It is clear from this review that there is more than one benefit to engaging all students, in particular girls, in constructionist gaming and these are what gave the movement such a strong backing. Yet some critical questions have not been asked, questions which focus on the underlying rationales for constructionist gaming as a motivator of computing and as a pathway into digital culture. While much of efforts to promote constructionist gaming have been driven by its potential to increase STEM interest, recent research has cast a shadow on this premise. A study by Robertson (2013) had over 900 students ages 11-14 years old in the United Kingdom make digital games. Based on the analysis of 225 available pre-post surveys that assessed students' attitudes towards computing, she found that many girls did not enjoy the activity as much as the boys, and this significantly so. More importantly, Robertson found that the girls' participation in the game design activity actually made many of them less inclined to study computing in the future based on post-activity surveys. The findings from this broad implementation present a more nuanced picture about the motivating nature of game design, tempering previous claims that game making can wholly improve all students' attitudes towards computing. Even when girls have extended experiences with computing—as it was the case in the game making projects—it doesn't overcome a lifetime of accumulated messages about who belongs and doesn't belong into the gaming and technology cultures at large (Vailan, 1998).

There is an even larger question behind the motivation of using constructionist gaming and that concerns its premise as a pathway into digital culture. To re-state the question asked at the outset of this paper—why did girls need to design games in order to demonstrate that they had become tech savvy? Much of what drives this question is throwback of feminist rhetoric from the early 70s that saw benefit in making women equal to men by having them be like men (Bryson & deCastell, 1998). The idea was that if girls just engaged in the same activities as boys did, then they would gain all the valuable experiences and skills, and ultimately they would become just as tech-savvy as many boys are. In this view, making games was to provide the same pathways to girls that boys had already taken. The logic behind this premise, however, is faulty because it sets existing pathways—and by extension boy culture—as the standard by which to aspire.

Furthermore, the numbers behind this premise also have not borne out any real changes. One would have expected dramatic changes in the gaming culture with the increased numbers of female gamers (ESA, 2014). Even now while females are the majority of game players in some genres, equality in numbers does not result automatically in equality in play as the recent #GamerGate incident illustrates (see Chapters 2-4, this volume). Gender is not just a biological marker or a number game but even more so a social construct as feminist theorists (e.g., Butler, 1989) have argued. From this perspective, it is worthwhile to pay attention to both personal interests as well as the cultural values that are promoted in these communities. What these points illustrate is that constructionist gaming needs to be grounded on its own terms, and not primarily as a motivation for and a pathway into computing. Low and behold we know that gaming and computing cultures are heavily biased: Why would we expect girls to come? Why should girls be interested? It might be time to revisit constructionist gaming and consider what it can provide viable motivations and pathways into these cultures and ultimately, leverage the full learning potential that it has to offer.

EXPANDING THE OPPORTUNITIES OF CONSTRUCTIONIST GAMING

Just like the Girl Game Movement (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998) introduced the idea of girls as gamers by designing pink and purple software to female players (Kafai, 2009), the premises behind constructionist gaming helped us think differently about gaming and computing by situating coding in an applied context (Kafai & Burke, 2014). These are contributions that have informed pedagogy for serious gaming and educational programming in significant ways. More than twenty years ago, gaming was considered a niche market, but now it has developed into a worldwide industry. Games are no longer just a medium; they have also become a method to transform learning and everyday activity. What does this mean for constructionist gaming? It means that we have to look at constructionist gaming in its own terms, beyond the technology pipeline and motivation rationale, in how it can become a tool and context promoting inclusive activities, spaces, and communities for learning.

To begin this reconceptualization, it is important to point out that the educational affordances of constructionist gaming were never just about programming because categorizing them distinctly into any one category is difficult, if not impossible, since many approaches often address more than one benefit. Ultimately, even when educators design game making workshops for a singular purpose, the actual construction of the games themselves often entails multiple and mutually beneficial learning principles. After all, can't a workshop on making pong-like video games not

only serve as an introduction to computer programming but also be integrated into a core curricula math class focused on the x/y coordinate plane? And why couldn't this same core math course be for a classroom of all girls whose own subject-based knowledge is supported through modeling and testing their own game designs, opening them up to the potential of computer science as a constructive field? It is here where we might locate the true affordance of constructionist gaming—its interdisciplinary and contextualized nature, reaching far beyond simply a conduit to learning programming and. or raising interest in computers.

Furthermore, educators, researchers, and general enthusiasts now situate game-making in the field of new media literacies, and emphasize benefits such as system-based thinking, and critical engagement with media (Salen, 2007). The push to consider game making as educationally significant enough to be a “literacy” or one of many “literacies” has proved to be a powerful leverage point in terms of reconsidering what skills and content K-12 schools value and instill in their students. Reframing programming from a technical skill into a general literacy will help us recognize programming not just as a skill but also a tool for political and personal expression (Kafai & Burke, 2014). The goal is not necessarily to produce legions of professional game designers but rather give young learners the opportunity to design, develop, and debug their own digital content and, in the process, better grasp the nature of web-based media and the potential to collaborate through such media on project-based assessments.

Constructionist gaming can also adopt a broader scope by focusing on game modding activities (Hayes-Gee & Tran, 2015) that invite players to customize spaces, levels, and characters in their games rather than designing their own games from scratch. For instance, the research by Hayes and King (2009) had girls modding *The Sims 2*, a popular game with female players and because it enhanced community building. While some of *The Sims 2* activities promote existing stereotypes, girls in their play often moved beyond the confines of the dollhouse and engaged in more subversive play. Here game modding provided a safe space for girls to approach and engage with technology that many in the middle school years perceive as “uncool.” Flanagan and Nissenbaum (2014) included particular game mechanics (such as cooperation, sharing and fair representation) in the multi-player game *RAPUNSEL*. The game design tool, aimed at 11-14 year-olds, presented a multi-player game world and lets players choose between two modes of play—battle or exploration mode—thus allowing for cooperation and competition. Such modding activities, as a precursor to programming activities provide a fertile ground to promote computing interest and fluency.

Finally, we need to think beyond making games as separate from playing games and promote a more connected approach (Kafai & Burke, forthcoming). While these two communities of gaming, instructionist gaming approaches that design games for students to learn, and constructionist approaches that have students design games for learning have existed in parallel tracks, it is time to give up this artificial separation. In commercial gaming, players not just engage in game play but also in making whether it is modding characters or levels or even move beyond the game world itself and participate in discussion forums, and create cheat sites. Furthermore, we can think beyond the game itself and think about it as a model learning environment, just like Gee (2003) suggested in his examinations of what video games can teach us about learning and literacy.

In closing, in its initial inception, constructionist gaming assumed that the engineer's world stood as what girls needed to aspire to in order to become truly interested in engineering and computing. But there is no need to step right into a "man's world" to become interested and engaged in computing and engineering. On the contrary, there are many possibilities to leverage the very same activities that always have been part of girls' play and women's communities in the service of designing and expanding participation to address the vexing issues of gender, computing, and gaming.

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CHAPTER 19.

ADMISSION IS THE MISSION

How First Generation Students Approach Learning about College through Games

BY ZOË B. CORWIN AND ROBERT DANIELSON

Secondary schools are tasked with providing the tools and resources necessary to support students in navigating the college admissions process. Unfortunately, many high schools in low-income communities have not been able to overcome the persistent challenges of preparing students for college, shepherding them through complex college and financial aid application processes, and making sure they enroll. Inequitable access to and knowledge about digital resources creates an additional obstacle for students already facing inadequate services in their under resourced schools. The challenges of learning about college are exacerbated when students do not possess the digital fluency to locate and critically evaluate online college information (Goode, 2010).

In 2009, higher education scholars from the University of Southern California's Pullias Center for Higher Education reached out to game designers from USC's Game Innovation Lab (GIL) to tackle the intransigent problem of how to increase access to college. We recognized that the status quo of college outreach was not working effectively and proposed a game-based approach to boosting college aspirations, knowledge, and support. The collaborative partnership embarked on a journey to create a suite of "serious games" to address the challenge of college access. To date, we have created four games; this chapter focuses on the first digital game called *Mission: Admission*. While the games are characterized as "serious games," they offer a playful and upbeat mechanism for fostering college awareness and teaching college-related skills and strategy building. As the collaboration launched, it became clear that we approached the problem from two different perspectives. Education researchers wanted to make sure that the game covered a wide range of concepts and skills necessary when preparing for college. We wanted to make sure the game shared

information, taught strategies, and lent support to players for actual college application activities. The game designers rightfully pushed back on our desired cornucopia of content by insisting that the game be fun, and therefore potentially more engaging. They also explained that with limited funding, our efforts should focus on specific aspects of preparing for college as opposed to attempting to address a wide spectrum of skills and strategies. Education researchers helped inform the design process by sharing with game designers lessons learned from working with our target audience, students from low-income and/or historically under-represented groups and the teachers who serve them.

Mission: Admission is an online game where players role-play a college applicant over the course of one week. Players navigate an avatar around a high school campus, spending energy on actions conducive to meeting the college and financial aid deadlines provided through the game interface. Successful play strategies include managing time and energy, meeting deadlines, applying to a wide range of colleges, submitting applications for FAFSA and scholarships, requesting letters of recommendation early, and striving for balance between academic excellence and leadership roles in extracurricular activities. This chapter highlights the process of developing the game. By discussing the project rationale, development process, and select findings, we aim to provide readers with an overview of the trajectory of creating and evaluating a serious game designed to support first generation college-bound students from historically under-represented groups.

THE RATIONALE AND DESIGN OF *MISSION: ADMISSION*

Mission: Admission is intended to engage students in learning about the college application process. College access literature clearly indicates that academic preparation and achievement are key predictors of college enrollment for students from low-income backgrounds (Adelman, 1999; Perna, 2005; Reid & Moore, 2008). Several studies, however, have added complexity to the college access literature by describing how the actual college application process can serve as a barrier to successful college enrollment. While significant numbers of low-income students hold high college aspirations and have met college admissions requirements, many qualified students slip through the college outreach cracks during the application process. Such students have done well in high school, but lack the support—at home and/or at school—to successfully complete and submit college applications (Bruce & Bridgeland, 2012; McKillip et al., 2012; Perna, 2014; Savitz-Romer & Liu, 2014). By cultivating non-cognitive skills and strategies (Conley 2005; 2012) conducive to successfully completing college and financial aid applications, the game at the center

of this study aims to address this particularly challenging moment in the college going process.

A game-based approach has the potential to be useful in the college choice process because it can facilitate reflective practice (Gee, 2007a). Since a video game's use of cycles of expertise stems from the principle that learners most often practice skills until proficiency is automatic, our assumption was that players could be exposed to new skills and strategies related to the college application process, practice, and subsequently master those skills. Furthermore, games are applicable to the college choice process because they teach strategy, encourage problem solving, and deepen understanding of complex issues (Fullerton, 2014; Gee, 2007b; Jenkins, 2004; Salen, 2014). Because learning and problem solving can transfer from a game to challenges encountered in life — and because players who learn from games often develop positive attitudes toward the tasks and challenges they encounter while playing (O'Neil & Fisher, 2004) — we decided to focus on games as a tool to enhance college access outcomes.

The mechanisms of *Mission: Admission* reflect the potential of games to cultivate problem-solving skills closely linked to the acquisition of information inherent in the search phase of the college choice process. Players assume a character with a particular background, goals, and income status, and then develop ideas about how that character should navigate the college application process based on available college and financial aid opportunities, activities, and limited time and resources. Players then adjust their game play strategy based on mistakes or successes encountered during game play.

As illustrated in Figure 19.1, the game responds to the problem of under-developed college knowledge and skills in the target audience and limited access to high quality support for college going in local contexts. The game intervention introduces a variety of activities and conditions (i.e., problem solving, role playing, repeated play, a risk-free environment, and relevant content) that cultivate reflective practice and strategy development specific to the college and financial aid application processes. We designed the game with the intention of increasing college and financial aid knowledge and efficacy and expected to see improvements in players' college knowledge and understanding of the application process.

Theory of Change Model

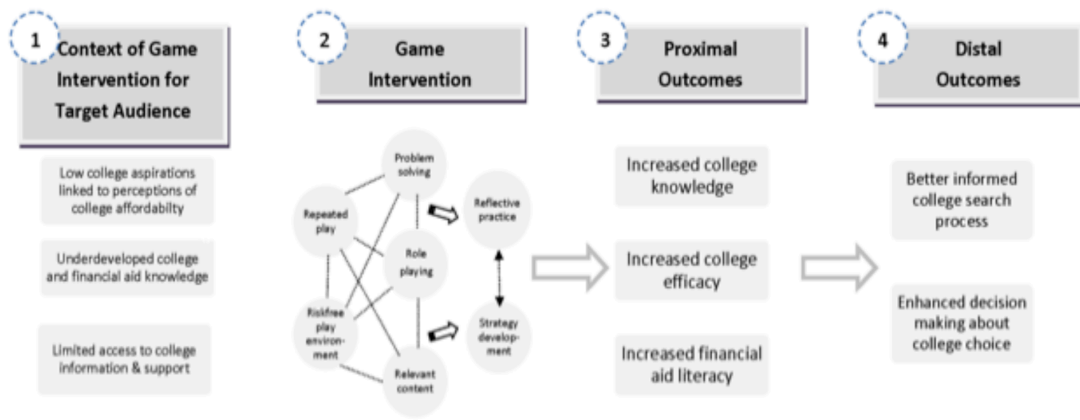


Figure 19.1: Theory of Change Model

In order to accomplish project goals, the design process entailed several key phases. It should be noted that the below phases are described from an education researcher's perspective, the game designers' language would likely vary quite a bit.

- *Game Conceptualization:* As a first step, we needed to learn from the prospective students what they were excited and concerned about with regards to college and career. We needed to learn from them what they knew and understood, what gaps in knowledge they experienced, what they were worried about, and what they felt confident about. Consequently, we held a junior design camp where students from the target audience worked with game designers in designing their own games about college. Game designers then synthesized themes identified through the design camp and prioritized the themes that would be integrated into game play, also drawing from theoretical (see project rationale above) and practical guidance (from teacher/counselor focus groups and experience shared from the team of educational researchers).
- *Prototype Playtesting:* After paper prototypes of each game were built, we played the game with small groups of students, focusing observations on game mechanics. Game designers then revised the games based on feedback obtained through observations and interviews. These playtesting sessions continued with digital versions of the games. As the game development progressed, play sessions moved from the lab setting to the school setting.

- *Look and Feel Designs:* For decisions related to the look and feel of the games, game designers met with small groups of students from the target audience to share images and aesthetic choices. This phase of outreach was integral in creating characters that players from the target audience would connect with.
- *School Playtesting:* A key phase of design and development phases entailed extensive playtesting at school sites. For each game we conducted research on the effects of game play on college going efficacy and college knowledge; results pertaining to the *Mission: Admission* game will be described in the next sections. We also capitalized on the wider-scale research to gain feedback on gameplay.
- *Iterations on design.* Final revisions to the game were made in response to feedback garnered from classes of teachers and students.

After the game was revised and finalized for the more formalized research phase of the project, the research team conducted a mixed methods study to examine the effects of game play on learning outcomes. The research questions we sought to answer were: (1) What are the effects of game play on players' college going efficacy? And (2) What are the effects of game play on players' college knowledge

RESEARCH APPROACH

The data reported below are from a dataset compiled across multiple school sites and visits (see also Corwin, Danielson, Ragusa & Tierney, 2016 Corwin, et al., 2012; Tierney, Ragusa, Corwin, & Fullerton, 2013). A total of 936 students participated in this survey; of those students, 209 comprised the quasi-treatment group of game players. However, not all students answered all questions and because of this, percentages are reported rather than raw numbers to ease the interpretation and allow for a consistent report. The population was fairly split between males (52%) and females (48%), while most of the students reported their ethnicity as either Latino (90%) or African American (6.2%). In terms of educational background, these students reported that many of their parents either failed to complete high school (56% for mothers, 43% for fathers) or completed high school but did not go on to college (30% for mothers, 48% for fathers). Very few parents went on to graduate from college (10% for mothers, 7.5% for fathers). In terms of their technological background, however, most students reported owning a computer (92%), having access to the Internet (88%), owning a cell phone (82% own a cell phone, and of those who do, 80% own a smart phone), owning an iPod (or other mp3 playing device, 72%), and owning a game console (like an Xbox or PlayStation, 76%). In contrast, very few students reported owning an iPad (or other tablet like device, 34%).

In the first analysis, we provide descriptive data about the students who were surveyed and their self-reported ethnicities, genders, familiarity with technology, and parents' educational levels. In the second analysis, we examine if there were differences between those students who played *Mission: Admission* and those who did not play. Did gender or technological familiarity predict greater gameplay? Did game players learn more than non-game-players? Did the number of games played influence learning? To help answer these questions, we created two scales: (1) a "beliefs and knowledge" scale, and (2) a "college knowledge" scale. The beliefs and knowledge scale was comprised of 15 questions asking students how confident they felt across a number of college-related domains (for example, "I believe I will attend college", or, "I know the differences between colleges (private, public, state, community, etc.). Students could respond using a 4-point Likert scale format, with 1 indicating no confidence and 4 indicating high confidence. The college knowledge scale was comprised of 10 multiple-choice questions asking students about the college application process (for example, "What happens if you miss the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) deadline?). Both the beliefs and knowledge scale and the college knowledge scale were given to students one month after the play-tester group had an opportunity to play *Mission: Admission*.

To obtain a more nuanced understanding of the effects of the game on students' college knowledge, we observed and conducted interviews with 50 game players. Of the 50 interview participants, 40 students were interviewed prior to playing *Mission: Admission*, then again after game play; ten students solely participated in interviews post-game play. Student interview participants attended Title I schools in South Los Angeles, all pertained to historically under-represented groups. Interview protocols were designed to learn about students' understanding of their college options and the college application process itself; where they sought support for their college aspirations (in school, family and peer contexts); how they used digital resources for learning about college; and reactions to the game. A team of researchers coded interview transcripts thematically. During the first round of coding, researchers focused on emic coding – or codes that emerge from the data. Researchers then engaged with a second round of coding employing etic codes – codes that are imposed onto the data by researchers. Due to spatial constraints, the discussion below focuses solely on students' responses to game play.

RESULTS: PLAYER DIFFERENCES

Our analysis aimed to discover who played *Mission: Admission*, and whether they differed from students who did not to play. Thirty percent of all the students in the

total sample played *Mission: Admission*. This percentage roughly reflects the percentage of students who were provided the opportunity to play the game in their classroom—and of those quasi-treatment group students, those who had the capacity and desire to play the game. Given the demographic data above, we investigated whether there were any differences between players and non-players.

Regarding the demographic data, the only statistically significant difference we found was that the majority of students who did play were women (58%), significantly more than the number of women who did not play (46%, $t [556] = 2.74, p < .05$). No other demographic differences, either by ethnicity, parents' education level, or access to technology were significant. Looking at how the game affected students, we found that game players felt more knowledgeable and confident in college-related activities than non-players after playing the game ($t [640] = 4.15, p < .05$) and exhibited greater college knowledge as well ($t [632] = 9.05, p < .05$).

Next, we sought to examine a more nuanced effect of the game by analyzing data from only students who played the game. Regarding student gameplay, we found that 25% of students reported starting a game without finishing it, another 10% finished only one game, 18% went on to play a second game, 13% played three games, and nearly 30% reported playing more than three games. These percentages are interesting because students were introduced to the game in class but not required by their teacher to complete a game. Most of these students reported playing at school (70%) rather than at home. We wanted to see if the number of games played affected knowledge scores. Our analysis indicates a significant positive correlation between the number of games played and their scores on the knowledge questionnaire—the more games a student played were associated with a higher knowledge score ($r [209] = .22, p < .05$). Additionally, those who played three or more games scored significantly better on the college knowledge test than those who played fewer than three games ($t [207] = 3.33, p < .05$). See Figure 19.2 below.

Knowledge by Games Played

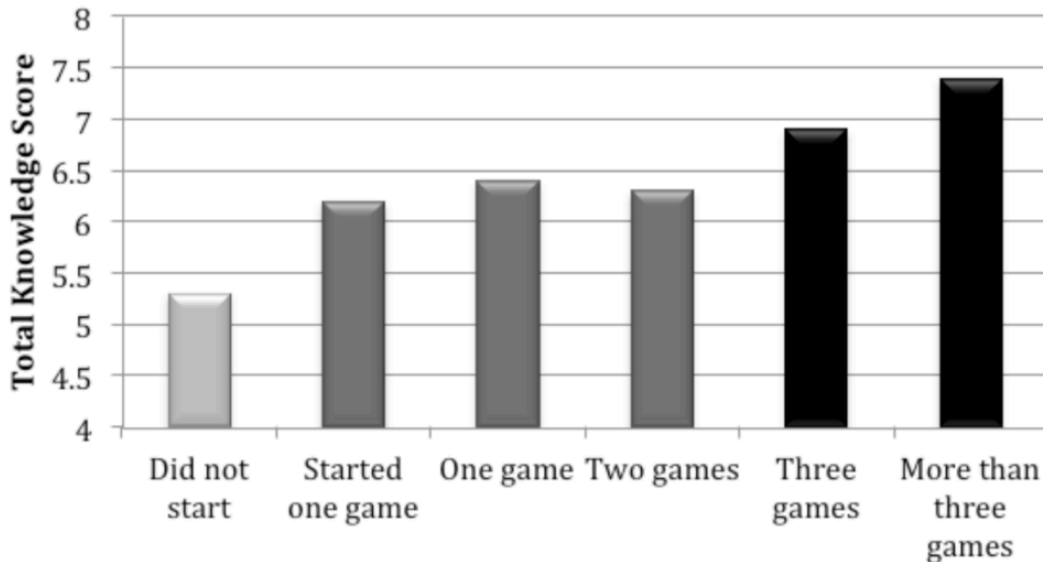


Figure 19.2. Relationship between College Knowledge and the Number of Games Played

WHAT MAKES PLAYERS PLAY?

As mentioned above, interview protocols were designed to gain a deeper understanding of the college and digital contexts of *Mission: Admission* game play. We spoke with students about the support for college going they received from their school, family, and friends. We learned about how they used (or did not use) social media in their daily lives and asked their opinions on playing games. For the purposes of this chapter, our discussion of qualitative findings focuses on responses to questions pertaining to the experience of playing *Mission: Admission*. When asked to describe the game, players' responses tended to focus on styles of game play, new concepts learned, and connections to the actual college application process.

Peer-to-peer play. In the early phases of game play, the overwhelming majority of students played collaboratively, often leaning over and discussing game moves in playful ways. They frequently compared progress in the game and provided help to each other when needed. Many students utilized the socially networked function of asking questions to other peers who were playing the game. For players who completed multiple games and developed mastery of game strategy, their approach to play shifted. They began to compete amongst each other to earn badges. At the end of

a three-week period of game play, a student explains how he and his classmates had shifted their game playing to a more competitive approach. His response highlights the role- playing nature of the game:

Student: Some people are playing competitively, trying to see which person could get into this university or this college faster than others can. And it's fun seeing that, but it also—you can see the smile on their faces when they get into a four-year university and how happy and excited they are.

Researcher: Oh, yeah. Are people saying that in class?

Student: Like, yeah. Like, every once in awhile when they log in, and in the beginning of class, you'll hear someone shout, like, "Yes! I got into a four year university."

In observations of game play, researchers noted frequent instances of students making exclamations about milestones reached in the game. During each play session, researchers also noted multiple discussions between students—and between students and the classroom teacher—about concepts related to topics encountered during game play.

New concepts. When we conceptualized the game with students from the target audience, we asked them to reflect on what their lives were like as they navigated their junior year in high school. They overwhelmingly expressed concern about balancing their time and keeping track of deadlines. Consequently, both themes were integrated into the game mechanic. Not surprisingly, the majority of student players we spoke with mentioned learning about the importance of timing during game play. Responses coded under the concept of timing encompassed managing a calendar of college and financial aid deadlines, the importance of requesting letters of recommendation early, and balancing limited time (i.e. energy) on academics and extra-curricular activities. As one example, a junior-level student reflected on the calendar function in the game:

I learned about the calendar. It shows all of these applications and deadlines and stuff and opportunities that you need to like, go for, and so that's just like, 'Oh, it's true. There are a bunch of opportunities in the world and you need to reach those deadlines.' It's just like having the calendar there just made me realize that it's true, there are deadlines.

A second category of concepts learned pertained to understanding the requirements of colleges. Students spoke about the concept of needing to apply to a wide range of schools and having a fall-back option. In several instances, when describing the game, players spoke about the actual college application process itself. One junior-level

student drew a connection between the game, actual college applications, and the importance of building a competitive application:

I Mission: Admission, that's the only educational game that I play, or that somebody would consider educational. It gives you, like, a sense of how applying to college would be. Like, going for the bare minimum would usually, like, leaves you not being accepted into college.

Gameplay allowed students to role play and practice strategies. As students role-played a college applicant, made mistakes, corrected and practiced strategies, they familiarized themselves with college terms and developed successful strategies for progressing through the game. In the following example, one junior-level student responded to a researcher's question about how she would improve the game. Her response illustrates a lesson learned with the game:

Student: I did like playing it. I guess the only thing that I would—'cause I really wanted to play it and I was interested in it. But and so I would play it here in class and then I would be like, 'Oh, okay, I need—when I get home my letters of recommendation are going to be ready so I can, you know. Pick it up or whatever.' And then but I would forget when I got home. Like I would have soccer practice or something. So I'd be tired and I'd just like do my homework and go to sleep. So I didn't really have—or sorry, it would slip my mind. I guess like one thing I would wish is if it would remind me. But yeah.

Researcher: Like a push notification?

Student: Yeah. And if I started—like I was just like, 'Oh, but that's the thing about college is it's not going to remind you. They're not going to have a little push notification.'

DISCUSSION AND NEXT STEPS

The college application process can be tremendously stressful and complicated. The research we have conducted thus far seems to indicate that a game-based approach has the potential to engage students in learning about college and cultivate college knowledge. Student research participants could clearly articulate lessons learned in response to game play. Analysis of pre- and post-test data also illustrates gains in learning. Due to the fact that the game tools were informed by a collaborative, research-based design and development process and a strong feedback partnership with players from the target audience, we were able to create tools that were not only playful in nature, but effective.

In 2014, our team was awarded a First in the World grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education. The grant enables us to make revisions to the game (the foremost being to take the game off Facebook and create a more easily implementable version of the game), to scale up

implementation efforts across the state of California, and to conduct a much larger random control trial designed to assess the effects of the game on tangible students outcomes such as FAFSA completion rates and college application rates. At time of publication, we are learning much more about the implementation of game-based tools at a schoolwide level and the ability of a serious game to shift college going culture and impact educational outcomes for some of this country's neediest—and talented— students.

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CHAPTER 20.

SEX ED 2.0

A Framework for Positive Sexuality in Serious Games

BY GINA LEPORE AND JILL DENNER

Gaming offers a unique opportunity to educate youth and young adults about sexuality. Unfortunately, many existing popular games include representations of females that are highly sexualized or downright exploitive, offering very narrow, hetero-normative representations of sexual relationships, in general. In recent years, discussions around whether and how games can be used as a vehicle to promote positive representations of sexuality and relationships have increased. Games have the potential to engage players in developing a positive approach to sexuality by allowing them to engage with sensitive topics in a forum that is personal, private, and experimental. Within the constraints they set, games also grant players the agency to explore ideas, attitudes, and beliefs and experience the world as others do, in a way that is unachievable in daily life. In this chapter, we argue that video games have unique features that make them particularly well suited to providing interactive experiences in which people can imagine and play with a variety of sexual identities and relationships in a healthy, productive way. These include the opportunity for a player to experience a sense of sexual or romantic agency, a safe space for identity exploration, and to potentially rewrite existing sexual scripts in a way that is meaningful to them.

Research indicates that sexuality education programming is effective when it is developmentally appropriate, addresses knowledge, skills, and attitudes among youth, and is engaging and interactive, and covers a range of content areas (Future of Sex Education Initiative, 2012; Kirby, 2009). Yet, few students in grades K-12 in the U.S. currently receive such comprehensive programming. Instead, sex education in schools usually reflects and is shaped by the values extant in individual communities and states. These values impact state and local policies, which in turn determine what

sexual health content, if any, is introduced in the classroom. In some states, abstinence education is the only permitted content. In others, content that addresses identified problems, such as sexually transmitted infection (STI) transmission, unintended pregnancy, violence and coercion in intimate relationships, homophobia and bullying is mandated (SIECUS, 2015). Rarely do policies allow educators to engage youth in conversations about pleasure, inclusivity, diversity and agency. More can be done to systematically infuse sex education in the United States with a more inclusive, developmentally appropriate, sex positive approach.

Research on gaming indicates the potential for games as compelling tools for various content areas in education, including health education (Clark, Tanner-Smith, and Killingsworth, 2014; Vandercruyse, Vandewaetere, and Clarebout, 2012). The vast majority of teachers tasked with delivering sexuality education content have little to no specific training in delivering such content; most are Science or Health teachers (Future of Sex Education Initiative, 2012). Many would welcome additional resources that could assist them in the delivery of core content in a manner that is both engaging and educational. This need presents opportunities for game developers.

REVIEW OF SEXUALITY IN POPULAR GAMES

At the heart of the approach to game design that includes sexual content is the belief that certain depictions of sexuality are inherently motivating, and that motivation is a critical component of a successful educational video game (Clark, Nelson, Sengupta, & Dangelo, 2009). Research suggests that motivation to start and continue playing is fueled by an experience of immersion, or being engaged or emotionally involved in the game (Cairns, Cox, & Nordin, 2014). The factors that contribute to that experience of engagement vary depending on the player and the type of game, but they include a sense of accomplishment, curiosity, altruism, and experiencing a story (Schoenau-Fog, 2014).

A key aspect of our analysis of how certain depictions of sexuality and sexual behavior can motivate or discourage engagement is the acknowledgment that gamers do not simply absorb harmful messages—they engage with them, but have limited agency to change them. For example, Schulzke (2012) describes a model of player agency that balances a view of players as in full control of game play with the recognition that games do constrain one's experience. It is the combination of these constraints and the player's choices that offer the potential of games to transform the player, for better or for worse.

For instance, Brathwaite (2007) identified a range of ways that sex is used in popular video games, but only some feature these motivational components. These include sex as a gameplay mechanic, where the player tries to improve the avatar's sexual experience (e.g., *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*), or where players try to bring two characters together to have simulated sex (e.g., *The Sims 2*). Access to virtual sexual acts can also be used as a reward for playing well, or as an aesthetic designed to make the game more appealing to a certain kind of player—typically to heterosexual males (e.g., *God of War*).

Because of their tendency to use sex as an opportunity for dominance or titillation, the majority of popular games continue to perpetuate limiting and even harmful sexual scripts and gender role expectations. Game critic and social justice activist Mattie Brice describes how sexual scripts in video games perpetuate a male heterosexual view of sex as a reward or end-goal of relationships (2012). Even in games where sex with non-player characters is not a primary or secondary goal, females are often portrayed in a highly sexualized manner, with exaggerated proportions and revealing clothing. This portrayal of females in games sends the message that a specific body type and role (sexual object) is necessary to be included as a female character in a game. A few examples of such games include:

- *Custer's Revenge* (Mystique, 1982) featured a male character whose goal was to reach and then rape a Native American woman tied to a pole.
- *Leather Goddesses of Phobos* (Infocom, 1986) was a “sex-farce” game that portrayed sexualized female characters with whom the player character could engage in various sexual acts.
- *Leisure Suit Larry* (Sierra, 1987-2009) is a classic (and critically-acclaimed) example of women as primary quest lines.
- In the *Grand Theft Auto* series (Rockstar North, 1997-present) some female characters are dressed provocatively. Players can pick up sex workers, make them perform sexual acts, and then run over or shoot them.
- *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball* (Tecmo, 2003) features highly sexualized female characters with exceptionally large breasts.
- *The God of War* series (Sony, 2005-present) intersperses seemingly random sex scenes as rewards.
- In *RapeLay* (Illusion Soft, 2006), a male character stalks, gropes, tortures and rapes a mother and her two daughters.

- In *The Witcher* (Atari, 2007), women are treated as quests. After each sexual encounter, the player receives a “romance card” as a collectible prize.
- In *Bonetown* (D-Dub Software, 2008), the player character strives to have sex with as many women as possible in order to increase the size of his testicles.

When gamers and game developers are criticized for playing or creating games with such depictions, they sometimes respond with the argument that games are intended to represent fantasy not reality, and therefore this frees them from the responsibility to address real social problems like sexism, violence against women or homophobia. However, the use and representation of sexuality in these games presents but one version of fantasy—that of a heterosexual male who holds values that fall on a spectrum that ranges from chauvinist to misogynist. This dominant representation found in games can reinforce societal norms that support those same values.

David Gaider (Bioware developer), in his presentation *Sex in Video Games* at GDC, 2013, contends that male privilege is one factor that perpetuates this skewed representation. He explains that,

Privilege is when you think that something is not a problem because it is not a problem for you personally. If you are part of a group that is being catered to, you believe that's the way it should be; it's always been that way. Why would that be a problem for anyone?

If the majority of male heterosexual gamers are unaware of the pervasiveness of sexual violence towards women, they may not understand why sexualized representations of female characters in games are problematic. They may not realize that repeated exposure to sexual messages of any sort can have a lasting impact. Yet studies have shown how having a highly sexualized female avatar increases the player's level of acceptance of violence against women (Dill, Brown, & Collins, 2008; Fox, Bailenson, & Tricase, 2013). Thus, while we agree with Schulzke (2014) that players bring a sense of agency and capacity to critique harmful content, research supports the view that repeated exposure to negative messages about sexuality is problematic, particularly when it sends the message that women lack agency in sex and are sexual objects (American Psychological Association, 2007).

These depictions of sexuality repel players who might otherwise be interested in the games. Although some game developers insist that appealing to these players is not necessary since they already have broad appeal, Gaider (2013) disagrees. He explains,

Consider that we influence the way our audience thinks...and even if you're not engaging in discussion with that other audience you think you don't need, you are talking to the audience you

currently have and you are influencing their attitudes, and those attitudes affect others who may not even be playing your game.

Heidi McDonald's research further supports and expands this argument for increased diversity in gaming. (See "Are Gamers Ready for Gay Love? Improving Romance in Games" in Section IV of this book.)

Game designers and developers who are challenging narrow and harmful representations of sexuality are already exerting influence in the gaming world. For example, Bioware has produced several games noteworthy among the LGBTQ community. The *Mass Effect* series has similarly built upon this foundation, and the progressiveness is visible when inspecting the series as a whole. As an example, one character engages in primarily heterosexual relationships in the first game (2007), but later has experiences with those of the same gender (2012).

Even if not directly addressing harmful depictions of female characters, increased diversity in the game development world should eventually raise awareness of that world as a largely male-dominated space. The more designers include diversity in the gaming space, the more gaming will accurately represent and reflect the experiences of players of all sexes, gender identities and orientations, and drive the market to appeal to a wider range of gamers. Again, McDonald underscores this point in her conclusion that gamers want the option to "play characters that are like them in very basic ways... [and] the chance to experiment as well."

USING A SEX-POSITIVE APPROACH FOR SERIOUS GAMING

Sex-positive is a term that is quickly becoming ubiquitous, despite the lack of consensus on its definition. In reviewing definitions from the field, one finds a specific set of oft-repeated concepts, such as a valuing of mutual consent, pleasure, well being, diversity, and freedom from coercion, oppression and shame (Williams et al., 2015). A sex-positive approach also questions the concept of "normal" as a benchmark for acceptable sexual expressions, behaviors, and desires. Some argue that sex-positive entails engaging in critical analysis of the gender stereotypes, sexual scripts, and relationship narratives that have been socially constructed (Glickman, 2010; Weeks, 1985). Sex-positive begs a shift away from observing human sexuality through a lens of risk and deviancy, toward seeing it as an essential component of human development and fulfillment. One definition that captures many of the components most frequently expressed in articulations of sex-positivity is the World Health Organization's working definition of sexual health (2006),

Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence. For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled.

The sex-positive movement is also a response to socially constructed sexual scripts that are pervasive in Western culture and that can be emotionally and psychologically harmful. Sexual scripts are the overarching cultural stories or narratives about romantic love and sexual interactions; they influence expectations about how sex and relationships occur. These scripts can limit sexual identity, expression, development, and interactions to spaces confined by specific values, beliefs and attitudes, and they get reinforced daily by popular culture, religion, peers, family, media, institutions, policies, and laws. Tolman (2002) describes the often-conflicting messages sent to girls and young women, such as those that demand they be sexually appealing but not sexually empowered, and the impact of these messages on young women's reluctance to take charge of their own sexual decision-making. A sex-positive perspective suggests that instead of protecting females through denial of their sexual feelings, it is important to acknowledge their sexual desire as normal and healthy.

Thus, a sex-positive approach attempts to deconstruct understandings of sexuality and sexual interactions in order to illustrate how much of what we understand about sexuality, and how we express it, has been informed by concepts of *normal* versus *other*, *moral* versus *amoral*, *acceptable* versus *unacceptable*; concepts that undermine a healthy relationship with diverse sexualities. A sex-positive approach to sex education includes not only information about how to prevent potentially undesirable outcomes of sexual activity (sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancy), but accurate and thorough information about anatomy and physiology, and information and discussion on identity and orientation, healthy relationships, communication, consent, responsibility, and decision-making.

The sex-positive approach has important implications for sex education. There is a parallel and well-established field of positive psychology, which has shown the benefits of happiness and the possibility to develop educational strategies that promote such positivity (Seligman, Steen, & Park, 2005). The field of positive sexuality is much newer, but the themes are similar—it is about diversity, empowerment, and choice (Williams et al., 2015). Sex-positive education conveys facts, affirms individual differences, diverse identities and orientations, encourages safer sex behaviors, and addresses healthy relationships and consent. Game

development that adopts a sex-positive approach has the potential to augment sex education both in and outside the classroom.

A FRAMEWORK FOR SEXED IN SERIOUS GAMES

Existing games designed to deliver sex education content address a range of factors, including physiology, STIs, contraception, identity and orientation, decision-making and communication skills, sexual assault and social norms. Many of these games challenge the negative, exploitive, or limited representations of sexuality represented in popular games, yet others perpetuate them. The challenge for parents and educators (who may or may not be gamers themselves) is to know which games promote healthy sexuality and which perpetuate a narrow or negative view of sexuality among certain groups. Discerning harmful from positive sexual content is a task that requires critical analysis skills and a sex-positive framework to guide the process.

To demonstrate the utility of such a framework for content evaluation, we selected a short list of existing educational games with sexual health or sexuality content. The list is not exhaustive but representative of the genre. It includes games by both amateur developers and established studios from the United States, Canada, England, and Europe. The list includes games that are appropriate for middle school, high school or college age audiences; are accessible for analysis through an online free version, mobile app, or online play through video; and address one of the aspects of sexuality or sexual health mentioned above.

Games	Developer	Year	Summary
<i>Adventures in Sex City: Game 1</i>	Middlesex London Health Unit (UK)	2013	Introduces basic to intermedia knowledge of HIV, STI, and pregnancy prevention strategies and uses animated scenes and characters to quiz players on the facts.
<i>Decisions that Matter</i>	Carnegie Mellon University, Entertainment Technology Center (US)	2015	Interactive graphic novel that addresses sexual assault on college campuses. The player is guided as a bystander through varying instances of harassment that can lead to an incident of sexual assault.
<i>Dys4ia</i>	Anna Anthropy (Auntie Pixelate)(US)	2012	Abstract, autobiographical game that conveys one person's experiences with gender dysmorphia and hormone replacement therapy. A series of mini-game help the player explore the cultural and personal challenges of being trans-identified.
<i>Happy Play Time</i>	Happy Play Time LLC (US)	2013	Aims to eliminate the stigma around female masturbation by teaching specific techniques and providing information about anatomy, lubricants and vibrators.
<i>Luxuria Superbia</i>	Tale of Tales (Belgium)	2013	Vivid visuals teach players how to manually stimulate female genitals (represented by flower tunnels).
<i>Play Forward: Elm City Stories</i>	Play2Prevent Lab (US)	2012	Players create an Avatar that is led through various scenarios and has to make decisions that impact future game play. Provides players with opportunities to acquire and practice risk reduction and HIV prevention skills.
<i>PR:EPARe (Positive Relationships: Eliminating Coercion and Pressure in Adolescent Relationships)</i>	Serious Games Institute & National Health Institute (UK)	2013	Addresses attitudes and skills related to relationship pressures and supports Britain's Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) programming. Through simulated situations and role plays, the player is asked to identify coercion or pressure dynamics and develop the skills to respond to them.
<i>Privates</i>	Studio Five Games (UK)	2011	STI prevention game geared towards young male adolescents. Players learn about various STIs that live inside and around genitals by going on missions to find and kill harmful organisms (virus, bacteria, fungus).
<i>Tampon Run</i>	Andrea Gonzales and Sophie Houser (US)	2014	Player scores by hitting her attackers with tampons and picking up bonus boxes of the same. Developed by two adolescents in response to taboos and norms around menstruation and tampons.

Table 20.1. Examples of Sexuality Education Games

Two of the games listed above illustrate the need for an independent tool that game developers, distributors and consumers alike can use to evaluate content from a sex-positive perspective. The British game, *Privates*, won a BAFTA award (British

Academy of Film and Television Arts) in 2011 for its approach to sexual health content (Dailymail.com). The game generates conflicting emotions in other ways: it attempts to capitalize on juvenile humor and the first-person shooter format that appeals to its audience (adolescent males). But its portrayal of genitals and STIs is negative and disturbing. Players voyage into vaginas and anuses to find and kill (with automatic assault weapons) monster-like organisms (bacteria, viruses, sperm) floating around in them. While it may engage adolescent males to portray bodily orifices as ominous harbors of deadly bacteria and viruses to be killed with gunfire, the message sent is hardly sex-positive. The game *Happy Play Time*, on the other hand, promotes female pleasure and masturbation in a youth-friendly format, with accurate information and positive representations of female genitalia. It contains detailed written information on genitalia, arousal and orgasm, but is not graphically explicit; yet Apple banned this game from its iTunes store. Why is it that a game that promotes negative portrayals of anatomy is heralded while another that attempts to provide information about a healthy and safe behavior (masturbation) is banned?

We propose a framework for game content analysis based on the WHO's working definition of sexual health presented at the opening of this chapter. While it is important for games to have accurate sex education information, our focus here is on how the game play is used to present that content. The following set of parameters can be extracted from the definition to evaluate gaming content:

Well-being: Does the game promote sexuality as a normal and healthy component of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being? Does it acknowledge pleasure and intimacy as components of well-being?

Respect: Does the game promote respect by avoiding the use of fear, stigma, shame, judgment, exploitation or sexualization in relation to specific genders, behaviors, and preferences?

*Consent*¹: Does the game depict and promote mutual consent in sexual interactions? Does content avoid the promotion of sexual violence?

Diversity: Does the game include positive representations of diverse identities, orientations, sexualities, preferences, and abilities?

Specific gaming elements that impact engagement and motivation should also be considered:

Agency: To what extent can the player interact with the content, impact game play, and impact outcomes?

Avatar: Does the player have the ability to select avatar characteristics to individualize the experience? If not, are available options diverse?

Narrative: Is dialogue and written narrative or information positive and respectful?

The following table illustrates an initial use of the framework for the games presented above. The ratings here are only intended to illustrate an example of the rating process.

Game	Content				Elements		
	Well-being	Respect	Consent	Diversity	Agency	Avatar	Narrative
<i>Adventures in Sex City: Game 1</i>	0	NA	NA	/	L	M	/
<i>Decisions that Matter</i>	+	+	+	/	M	NA	+
<i>Dys4ia</i>	+	+	+	+	L	NA	+
<i>Happy Play Time</i>	+	+	NA	/	L	NA	NA
<i>Luxuria Superbia</i>	+	+	+	NA	L	NA	+
<i>Play Forward: Elm City Stories</i>	+	+	+	+	M	M	+
<i>PR:EPARe</i>	+	+	+	/	M	M	+
<i>Privates</i>	-	-	-	-	L	L	-
<i>Tampon Run</i>	NA	+	NA	NA	L	L	NA

Table 20.2. Sex-Positive Games Evaluation Framework

Ratings: + = content/element is sex-positive; / = content/element is neutral; - = content/element is not sex-positive; L = low/limited; M = moderate; H = high; NA = content/element not addressed or not included.

NEXT STEPS FOR SEXED GAMING 2.0

Video games hold potential to transform players through high levels of emotional engagement. The most effective video games allow players to experience a sense of agency and accomplishment, and a safe space for identity exploration (Cairns, et al.,

2014). Narratives are particularly powerful strategies to engage and retain players because they promote curiosity and a sense of altruism (Schoenau-Fog, 2014). In this section, we make the case for a new kind of gaming experience that leverages these motivational features to provide the player with engaging educational as well as emotional experiences. These features could provide opportunities for players to challenge their own beliefs as well as those conveyed through the game, and lead them to a transformation of their view of sex and sexuality in a sex-positive direction.

Games that depict youth perspectives and individual experiences also engage players in exploring issues of identity, norms, and diversity. Games that provide a more individualized experience by allowing players to explore their identity and manipulate sexual scripts are more likely to engage players in critical analysis. Collaborative game development between gaming studios or individual developers, youth and sexuality educators is one strategy that has produced some effective, educational and engaging games (i.e., *Schell Games*, *PlayForward: Elm City Stories*).

Another option for game development in the area of sexuality education involves the use of a technology that is currently under development by a group of gaming researchers at the University of California's Center for Games and Playable Media (Mateas, Jhala, Wardrip-Fruin, & Denner, 2014). The Responsive Generation approach is particularly useful for making games about politically or emotionally charged topics because it uses intrinsic motivation to increase engagement and sustain game play by creating dynamic narrative/gameplay combinations, where each game challenge is presented in the context of a story. This technology could be used to create a game that goes beyond what the existing sex education games can offer because it allows players a deeper engagement with a broader range of scenarios and content.

Continued development of a sex-positive framework for the evaluation of gaming content will contribute to the next generation of both educational and popular gaming. Such a framework creates a much-needed bridge between the gaming and sexuality education fields. In the same manner that Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) ratings provide parents with a tool to guide their children's consumption of media, such a framework could provide game developers and consumers with a similar tool for a more objective evaluation of sexuality content in gaming.

CONCLUSIONS

Video games provide a unique platform to present topics that are politically or emotionally charged. As such, they are a particularly promising strategy to augment sex-positive education that goes beyond addressing only aspects of sexuality that pose problems for young people. This is because they offer a strong motivation to engage and persist in learning new information, an opportunity to explore beliefs and identities in a safe space, and experiences that can promote a critical analysis of popular messages. In particular, playable stories that are responsive to the end user's choices and preferences have the potential to raise critical consciousness in a way that leads to a transformation of players' knowledge and intention. Video games also allow for such conversations to happen in a variety of constructs and settings, and thus can be effective educational resources for sexuality education of the future. The development of a standardized sex-positive framework for the evaluation of gaming content can guide the development of future sex education games.

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Notes

1. Children and animals are not, at this point in time in most nations, legally able to give consent for sexual interactions. Age of consent laws vary worldwide, but the average age of consent is 16 (http://www.unicef.org/rightsite/433_457.htm#to_have_sex). Thus, the definition of consent described here pertains to those legally capable of consenting to sexual activity. A game depicting sex with a child character, for instance, even if the character appears to be consenting, would not be considered a game that promotes consent in our framework.

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The idea for this edition followed directly after the publication of the 2008 book *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* when we realized that key topics about race and sexuality were rarely included in conversations about gaming. Brendesha Tynes and Yasmin Kafai submitted a proposal to the National Science Foundation for a workshop that would bring together junior and senior scholars with expertise in gaming, computing and diversity. The proposal was not funded, but when Gabriela Richard joined the University of Pennsylvania in 2013, we decided to revive it. We submitted an updated version of the grant in July 2014 and this time received funding.

This submission of this grant of course preceded the GamerGate controversy and other events that soon placed topics of diversity and harassment on the front pages of major newspapers and other media outlets around the globe. *Diversifying Barbie and Mortal Kombat* became a workshop, conference, and now this book edition taking stock, once again, of issues around gaming and diversity. Our first thanks go to Janet Kolodner, the past director of the NSF Cyberlearning program, who provided crucial feedback and funding. Without her, the workshop, conference, and book might have remained mere ideas.

The workshop took place on April 24, 2015, at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia with a full day of discussions about the past, present, and future of gender, race, and sexuality in gaming. More than thirty participants from academia and industry joined us that day. The workshop closed with a public panel in which workshop members summarized, reviewed and discussed their impressions with the larger public. Many of the ideas from the workshop and panel discussions have found their way into the chapters included in this volume. We also see this edition as charting a way forward for researchers as well as the gaming industry. Jennifer Moore provided editorial assistance with the book proposal. We also thank Drew Davidson in brokering the publishing deal between ETC Press and Carnegie Mellon University Press, the first of its kind.

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