Video Games and Social Inequalities: Understanding Gaming Culture Through Online and Offline Practices

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Abstract

   This dissertation examines gender inequality in video game culture. The domination of "geek masculinity" in this field has resulted in an environment where white women, people of color, and LGBTQ people face persistent hostility and harassment. This project looks at how dominant and subordinated groups who play video games understand their role in the culture and how they challenge and perpetuate social inequalities within it. By considering race, class, gender, and sexualities, this work seeks to understand the connections between media, community, and gender inequality. To answer these questions, I conducted 78 interviews between June 2017 and September 2018 with people over the age of 18 who play video games. I also observed two weekend long gaming conventions as well as eight meetings of a weekly gaming group.

   I found that cisgender heterosexual men typically began playing games at an early age that allowed them to effortlessly develop gaming habitus and gaming capital, making them oblivious to the larger structures of inequality they were enmeshed in. Women with these high-status men in their networks repeated these values to find status for themselves, thereby replicating the barriers that prevent gaming from becoming more diverse. Marginalized players tended to avoid the types of mainstream, competitive games that gave some players status and the opportunity to social connections, which I attribute in part to differences in embodied experiences. I attribute differences in attitudes about representation to differences in trust in gaming institutions, with players typically taken into account by the gaming industry finding industry solutions sufficient if they acknowledge a problem at all. In contrast, players marginalized by the gaming industry tended to be skeptical of industry attempts at diversity, and often did not expect or look

for representation in games at all. These findings show that gaming culture contains many different facets that are often ignored in favor of the most public elements and shows how unnoticed daily practices can accumulate into larger inequalities.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family.

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Introduction

On a rainy Friday in June in a large Western city in Canada, I once again ride the bus for 90 minutes to reach a popular mall in the suburbs. It is my third visit to this mall, and while the lengthy bus trip to get there never gets any easier, my sense of trepidation has decreased and for the first time I find myself looking forward to my visit. The mall, while also a destination shopping center for residents of the surrounding area, is the site of the community gaming group that has agreed to let me observe and participate for the summer.

The first time I visited the group, I was not sure what to expect. Previous sites I had attempted to observe had been less successful than I had hoped. An online calendar of gaming tournaments I found turned out to be a list of games being demonstrated at a computer store that were only attended by a few wandering children looking for distractions while their parents shopped. I had also attended a nerd trivia event at a well-known local nerd-themed bar that had some gaming elements in the bar itself. While the questions were focused on a range of science fiction, space, history, science, and popular culture topics, the event itself was otherwise indistinguishable from any other trivia event. The crowd was approximately evenly distributed between men and women, mostly white, with most attendees being in their 20s and 30s with a few older participants. When people I spoke with about nerd culture described it as mainstream and ubiquitous, this is what they were referring to.

Given my previous experience with events that had ultimately been no different from any other day at a computer store or trivia event, as I ride the bus on my way to the gaming group, I have some concerns that my project will need some significant

reframing. How can I study gaming culture if every gaming-related event I found said more about the neighborhood I was in and the time of day than it did about any potentially distinct gaming culture? Has gaming culture become completely mainstream? While this was an argument I would hear from video game players with high status in gaming terms for the next 15 months, I soon found that gaming culture does in fact amplify patterns of larger inequality in distinctive ways.

When I get to the mall for the first time, I am overwhelmed. The mall is enormous and filled with surprisingly frantic shoppers for a Friday afternoon. When I finally locate the food court where the group meets, I scan the area for any distinguishing signs that one of the groups of people has an exceptional focus on gaming. I finally see a small flag next to a group of 12 or so people and go up to them. I introduce myself and learn that the group of 12 sitting near the flag is actually just one part of the group, and that the six people playing a board game set up nearby are also part of the group. I go up to the leader, who I have been communicating with, and confirm I am in the right place and have permission to stay. He seems happy to have me and hopes I will come back again. When I ask how long the meeting will last, he smiles and proudly says, "We're here until they throw us out." This is a group that prides itself on its tenacity and its numbers. Later interviews with members illustrate how finding a location and recruiting participants has been a struggle, so this mall food court location with enough participants to outlast the mall's business hours is a point of pride.

After confirming my presence with the group leaders, I spend that first day introducing myself to all the other members, explaining my role as a researcher and that I will be participating in the group in order to write about it. At first several of the

members assume I am a journalist and ask when the piece will be published. They seem somewhat disappointed when I explain that I am writing a dissertation that will not be published for several years, if at all. I spend some time sitting with a group of people playing on handheld gaming devices, then go over to the larger group of people talking. This makes me nervous because I know my own gaming preparation has been somewhat lacking, and despite my best efforts to play what I think are popular games, my outdated gaming technology and low skill level have made it difficult to build enough experience to talk about any game convincingly.

However, my relative lack of gaming expertise does not prove to be a problem. One man who says he works as an animator takes the opportunity to teach me about games. He explains why the games I tell him I have been playing are ugly, what he thinks are interesting trends in gaming animation, and his general thoughts on gaming. He talks with me for several hours and seems to enjoy the opportunity to teach someone. At the end of the night, the leaders make sure to ask if I had a good time and tell me to come back next week. By the end of the night, while writing up notes on the bus ride home, I realize I have learned two things: 1) gaming may have permeated mainstream culture to some extent, but when people use gaming as a primary source of identity, it is clear that gaming culture is not simply an extension of mainstream nerdiness, and 2) gender is more salient to gaming situations than either of my two previous sites had led me to believe.

By the third visit, I have become somewhat familiar with the patterns of the group. Everyone gets there around 5pm and eat at the food court before any games come out, ensuring games of all kinds remain free of sticky food residue. Then one group will pull out handheld gaming devices. Despite the widespread popularity of mobile games on

phones, I never see one at this group. These devices are always handheld gaming consoles: a Nintendo DS, sometimes a Switch played on its handheld setting, and the occasional retro Gameboy. While in interviews the leader of this group described his pride at the group's inclusivity and openness to any form of gaming, even in this group mobile phone players did not feel welcome enough to play in the open. The low status of mobile gaming on smartphones was another recurring theme I would find during the rest of the project, and this was my first piece of evidence. The mobile device players sit alone or in groups of two or three. The small groups will show each other each of their games and exchange commentary, but these mostly seem to be groups of friends who have come to the event together. The handheld game players do not seem to be particularly interested in making new friends but do seem to find that being around other people enriches their gaming experiences. For the rest of the study, I find that this is a common practice among players, and I refer to this approach to sociality as the Games First players in Chapter 3.

At the other table, board games are set up. I usually spend some time here at the beginning before moving between the other groups. The board game table is where the participants who are using the group and its shared interest in games as an opportunity to make friends. I later learn that almost all of them also play video games individually, but that this is also a common approach to games. I call these the Social First players. Over the next few months I spend a lot of time with this group, observing the social dynamics and noting the roles the participants seem to fall into. I also win a few games of *Cards Against Humanity* and lose many games of *Settlers of Catan*.

What makes the third visit notable is that this is the first time someone brings out the Nintendo Switch attached to a monitor. A Nintendo Switch is a gaming console that can be used as either a portable device, like the mobile players were doing at the other table, or as a stationary one that attaches to a monitor. Released in 2017, the Switch became the fastest-selling home console in both Japan and the United States, selling over 41 million units by October 2019 (Dedicated Video Game Unit Sales, Nintendo, 2019). In keeping with Nintendo's reputation for making social, family-friendly products, the Switch is intended to allow people to play games with a range of difficulty and time requirements either alone or together. Games like *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* and *Super Mario Odyssey*, well-regarded titles in some of Nintendo's most successful franchises, were made exclusively for the Switch, driving sales and popularity of the platform.

At the gaming group I was part of, a Switch is connected to a desktop computer monitor set up on a table in the middle of the mall food court. Members had brought all the necessary equipment and the sight is unusual enough to gain some attention from mall shoppers. The owner of the Switch claims that he bought it because his friends made him, joking about them being a bad influence. "It cost me $450 and I mostly use it for Mario Kart." He thinks the console is a good choice for collaboration in games, and that the collaboration helps them come together as a community. He starts the game *Snipperclips*. Nintendo describes *Snipperclips* as an "action-puzzle game, [where] paper pals Snip and Clip must cut each other up to overcome tricky obstacles… or just to laugh their heads off (sometimes literally). Partner up with friends or family to cut the heroes in

to the right shapes, interact with objects, and solve a world of imaginative puzzles."
(Snipperclips -Cut it out, together!).

Initially there are four of us at the Switch as we set it up while five others finish a board game, but as the game ends the other five come over to the console. The Switch's owner and another leader of the group play the first game, and after one round they let other people play. Everyone who wants to play gets to play, and when I ask the name of the game, I am given the next turn. Apart from myself, a white woman, the crowd composed entirely of men except for one woman, and everyone in the group is Asian except for one white man. Mall patrons not affiliated with the group occasionally stop by and group members happily answer their questions, but they never stay for very long. The crowd is very friendly, with everyone encouraging the players and offering advice. People refer to the avatars rather than the players when giving their advice, so I hear shouts of "Blue needs to be cut!" and "Purple go left!" rather than anyone's names. This applies to group leaders and first-time visitors alike, so everyone has the same chance to join in. However, this idyllic community scene does not last. The encouragement quickly turns sexual, with exclamations of "Push it in!" "Just the tip!" and "It hurts!" punctuated by exaggerating grunting and moaning. These jokes get a positive reaction from the crowd every time, no matter how often they are repeated. What started as a friendly game designed for families becomes a rough pantomime of sexual assault, and I get a better understanding of why so few women return to this group after their first visit.

When the mall lights start to turn off, the group plays one more game then packs up the Switch and the monitor. As people begin to individually leave, they each get a goodbye from the whole group, no matter their level of participation in the game.

Someone I had not spoken to yet comes over to me and says he noticed me getting information from the new people and asks about my project. The group is making plans to get together to see a movie the next day. It is clear that some of them are very good friends and that only one woman is included in this core group. People disperse in small groups and say they hope to see everyone again next week.

A few weeks later, I am with the core members sitting in the food court while they discuss problems they are having with dating. One of them, Tom, is worried that he is in the "friend zone" with a girl he is interested in, and the others are sympathizing and offering advice. The group is once again composed of all men with the exception of one woman, Nicole, who has been coming to the group for years. The men talk about the difficulties of the friend zone, saying "The friend zone is difficult because they trust you, they just don't recognize your actions as romantic. Then they get mad or you start to resent them." Another of the men tells Tom that he does not want to be the "gay best friend" because that can be "tricky to get out of." Another suggests, "You should stay her friend! Even if she rejects you, maybe she'll have friends you can meet." This suggestion is quickly criticized for being manipulative, the only criticism that occurs of any part of this conversation. Nicole chimes in with a story about a man who she thought she was friends with who bought her things so that she would sleep with him, which all the men agree is gross and see as completely different from their actions. One of the other men has a story about a girl who he thought liked him because she was excited go do things like go grocery shopping with him. He says, "She was lit up like a Christmas tree with signals." When he told her that he was interested in her, she rejected him, and he was confused about what happened. Then the conversation turns to the challenges of online

dating, specifically Tinder. Only one of the men had a girlfriend, and the rest were looking.

This attitude towards women as valuable primarily as potential romantic partners was common in this group. In interviews, one of the men told me that one of the reasons he was so interested in making the group inclusive and appealing to people who play all kinds of games is to make sure they get more women so that the men would have people to date. He quickly backtracked, but Nicole described this as a widespread occurrence in the group. She claimed they used to have more women, but that several left after repeated unwanted advances from other group members. Nicole herself believed that she would "play off that kind of thing" rather than let it bother her, an attitude that helped her survive in this space but that supported the barriers that limited the diversity of the group. This is a position I refer to as the "Honorary Bro" and explore in Chapter 5.

After the friendzone conversation, we start a game of *Splendor*, a card-based board game. I am unfamiliar with this game, so the regulars help me and a man there for the first time with the rules and learning what cards to play. One of them promises me, "I wouldn't steal your cards. I'd do that to us, but not to you." I lose terribly and the game ends. The group talks about their next event, and I get asked twice to make sure I come back. One of them walks with me to the bus stop. He lives nearby and is not taking the bus but follows me so we can continue a conversation about public transit. When we reach the bus stop, he again asks if I will be back next week. I say I will, and I get back on the bus.

My experiences at this group revealed several key issues within gaming culture that I will explore in this dissertation. This group composed almost entirely of men

believed itself to be inclusive but exemplified many of the factors I learned from my interviews with women and non-binary people to be alienating. They did not see themselves as sexist or exclusionary, but their casual invocation of sexual assault, as well as their reluctance to value relationships with women outside of their potential as romantic partners, revealed otherwise. These men were perpetuating many of the mechanisms of inequality that kept women away but were completely unaware of it. This attitude is common in a culture designed completely for men in a such a way that shields their privileged position behind myths of meritocracy and individuality, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

However, this group also highlights some potential benefits and opportunities that gaming can offer. Of the members of the group, different levels of sociality were supported by games. Some wanted to use the games as a container for social interaction, while others enjoyed the opportunity to share games with others in order to enhance the gaming experience itself. Friendships were formed, and some members referred to the group as a family with gaming as the central component tying them all together. However, in order to take advantage of any of these options, women had to withstand objectification and unwanted romantic advances, while men simply had to attend. While this group primarily exemplifies issues surrounding gender, my research shows that gender inequality is not the only social problem that persists in gaming culture.

Dissertation Structure

This dissertation examines social inequalities in video game culture. The domination of "geek masculinity" in this field has resulted in an environment where

white women, people of color, and LGBTQ people face persistent hostility and harassment. This project looks at how a full range of people, including dominant and subordinated groups in this community, understand their role in gaming culture and how they challenge and perpetuate social inequalities within it. It asks three primary questions: How do the experiences of members of the dominant groups in this culture differ from the experiences of members of the subordinated groups? How do all these groups view their position in the gaming community? How do they navigate this community as a result of their position in it? By considering how systems of race, class, gender, and sexualities interact, this work seeks to understand how people's individual practices and experiences with video games have shaped the culture surrounding gaming into one that privileges some while alienating others. To answer these questions, I conducted 78 semi-structured interviews with people over the age of 18 who play video games. I also observed two gaming conventions as well as eight meetings of the weekly gaming group. My goal was to recruit as diverse a group of participants as possible. The world of gaming is complex. Exploring what it looks like and how it benefits some while potentially harming others requires the consideration of as many facets of this world as possible.

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I explore scholarly work that demonstrates the importance of video gaming culture as a site of gender inequality that requires scholarly study. Research has demonstrated the ways in which the domination of geek masculinity in gaming culture has produced an environment in which women are demeaned, harassed, and relegated to marginalized positions. In order to continue to make meaningful progress in the study of gender inequality and its relationship to gaming

culture, I argue while previous work on gender and the marginalization of women has been critical for the development of an understanding of these inequalities, an intersectional approach is necessary for a complete understanding of all of the systems of oppression that collectively produce the persistent social inequalities in video game culture. In the second chapter, I explain the methods I used to determine the findings discussed in the rest of the dissertation.

In the third chapter of this dissertation, I introduce a typology of three different approaches to the social and gaming elements of video games culture. These categories show that there is no one way to play video games, and that the stereotype of the lone gamer in a basement neglects some of the key reasons people love games as well as the factors that contribute to people playing alone rather than engaging socially. The first group is the Non-Social group. These are the players who primarily play games alone and rarely talk about them with other people. They often seek out games specifically that do not require social interactions of any kind, and the key appeal to gaming for them lies in the immersive narrative or the sense of skill development through individual achievement. Many used games in times in their lives when social connections were difficult, such as moving to a new city alone or as a socially awkward high school student. Others preferred the aspects of gaming that this approach prioritizes, but others resorted to this approach due to lack of social opportunities related to gaming.

The second group is the Games First group. This group engages with the social aspects of gaming culture to support the experience of the games themselves. Some of the people playing handheld games in the community gaming group at the mall fell primarily into this category. The game itself was the most important thing to them but having

friends around to share cool parts of the game with or ask for opinions helped to enrich their gaming experiences. People in this category sometimes prefer online multiplayer games because they find other people are more interesting and unpredictable than playing against a computer, because they like the challenge of assembling a team to work together, or because they find beating another person is more satisfying than a computer. This group also will go online or to friends to find answers when they reach a point in a game that is too difficult to overcome, or when they want to find out information about a game they are looking to buy. The priority here is the experience of the game itself, and these players have found ways to incorporate social interactions that will support these gaming experiences.

The third group is the Social First players. These players enjoy how games provide unique ways to interact socially. They use games to keep in touch with friends and family around the world as a way to keep in regular contact while doing an activity together. Games are a way to get together without having to coordinate schedules or meet up geographically. They allow players to spend time with friends outside the stressors of normal life. Other people in this group play games and keep up with news because they enjoy participating in the discussions surrounding gaming. They use community or university gaming groups as a way to make friends in new environments, start twitch channels or podcasts to meet new people, and enjoy the sense of larger community and identity that games bring them. This group likes the social opportunities that games provide that are unique to the medium. While story and progress can contribute to the experiences, for these players the main appeal of games is how they can use them to create and maintain social connections.

The fourth chapter of this dissertation focuses on the experiences of cisgender heterosexual men who maintain a dominant position in gaming culture. For many of these men, the widespread harassment and toxicity in gaming spaces is a feature of the culture that blocks players they perceive as lacking sufficient skills from entering their games. Learning to exist in this environment is a skill most of these men learned from a very young age, as the majority of them began playing video games regularly as young children. This early exposure provides these men with the tools they need to successfully navigate gaming culture, and to understand their successes and failure there as based on their earned individual skill level. Harassment is often dismissed as a hazing ritual towards new players that "real gamers" know not to take seriously. This chapter helps to explain why men are often oblivious to the ways in which the toxicity of gaming culture impacts other players and why they so often frame inequalities in gaming as an individual problem.

The fifth chapter examines one of the primary roles that women are able to fill in gaming spaces: honorary bros. The honorary bros found a way to belong in gaming spaces through a group of men they are friends with. Nicole, the only woman in the core group at the community gaming group, is one example of an honorary bro. These women were often instrumental in reproducing the inequalities that kept most women out of public gaming spaces. These women were all cisgender, mostly white or Asian, and the majority identified as heterosexual. In this chapter, I discuss the women who assume this role in order to find a place in gaming culture, and they show how creating a space for themselves has meant reproducing the inequalities that limit space for others.

The sixth chapter examines the experiences of marginalized people with mainstream gaming spaces. They typically considered mainstream gaming to be toxic, so avoided it or developed a set of strategies in order to navigate it safely. This group was more diverse than the first two I identify. Several gay men, women of various races, sexual orientations and identities, and all the nonbinary and genderfluid people I interviewed fit this category. They never felt like they belonged, and viewed games as primarily made for and played by other people. I connect the experiences of marginalized people in gaming culture to the social construction of the body, arguing that they experience hostility in a different way from the high-status men. As a result, the same strategies the men use would not be effective to reduce the barriers that marginalized people face.

The seventh and final chapter addresses issues of diversity in representation. I argue that questions of representation are mired in anxiety and skepticism in many gaming contexts. There is no one simple answer, nor do people's identities directly cause them to support seeing any particular characters or types of characters in games. In addition, the potentially simple proposed solution to include more diversity in games is more complex than it appears. Those who are deeply invested in fighting for equality in their daily lives do not necessarily look to games as a potential site of future change, just as others have turned to games as a crucial piece of understanding their own identities. Context, gaming preferences, and individual personality all play a role in how people think about and use representation in games, and broad claims that simplify these distinction work to silence a vibrant conversation and the work that it relies on.

With this dissertation, I explore multiple facets of gaming culture. It brings benefits and advantages to some while working to marginalize others. The mechanisms and patterns that I identify in this dissertation show why the problem of inequality in gaming remains persistent in spite of attention from scholars and activists. Games and gaming culture are not a monolithic experience for all involved, nor can they be separated from the broader inequalities that have shaped them in the past and present. I hope that by highlighting the diverse experiences of those who engage with gaming culture, I will show not only why the inequalities are a problem, but also point to ways we can work to reduce them.

Theoretical Approach

In recent years, video gaming culture has begun to attract interest as an important subject for serious social research. The widespread harassment and marginalization of women in particular has led many scholars to examine the various structures and practices in place that serve to perpetuate gender inequality in gaming. However, this emphasis on gender ignores the race, and sexuality dimensions of video gaming culture, and the ways in which systems of oppression interact in order to marginalize some players and privilege others. Much of the previous research has focused exclusively on the gender—and less frequently, on the race—of those who play video games. I argue for an intersectional approach to the study of video gaming culture that centers the experiences of marginalized groups in gaming while also fully analyzing the dominance of geek masculinity. This approach is necessary to more fully understand the ways in which mechanisms of marginalization function within the field and how players navigate this potentially hostile environment.

For much of 2014, the online controversy known as "GamerGate" dominated news cycles and Twitter feeds across the United States. The dispute began when an ex-boyfriend of Zoe Quinn, the designer of the critically acclaimed game *Depression Quest*, claimed that several of the positive reviews of the game were the result of Quinn engaging in sexual relationships with game critics. These allegations quickly spread

throughout gaming circles on social media, where gamers reacted strongly to the idea that the video game press was biased, ideological, or being censored.[1]

While anti-Quinn proponents positioned their attacks as a defense of ethics in journalism, in practice the GamerGate movement was characterized by violent threats and vitriolic sexual harassment against women involved in gaming. Scholars have described GamerGate as "a misogynist claim to games and gamer identity" (Braithwaite 2016, 3). GamerGaters viewed themselves as the real victims, as the so-called "social justice warriors" they opposed were attempting to change gaming by making it about feminist ideology rather than the "purity" of the games. Braithwaite writes, "For GamerGaters, more diverse and inclusive games can only come at the expense of their own sense of identity. This feels less like an industry's evolution and more like an attack" (Braithwaite 2016, 6). According to Braithwaite, this gaming identity is particularly contentious because it has become the site of conflict between the men who have traditionally dominated gaming and the women who are fighting for acceptance and respect in a community they love. The rise in casual games popular with women, such as Candy Crush, and greater acknowledgment within the gaming industry of the diversity of

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[1] As Suellentrop (2014) describes the controversy in the *New York Times*, "After targeting Ms. Quinn, GamerGate widened its scope to include others perceived to be trying to cram liberal politics into video games. The movement uses the phrase "social justice warriors" to describe the game designers, journalists and critics who, among other alleged sins, desire to see more (and more realistic) representations of women and minorities. That critique, as well as more accusations of collusion among developers and journalists, attracted some conservative gadflies to GamerGate, like the "Firefly" actor Adam Baldwin [who coined the GamerGate hashtag] . . . The movement's supporters say they want to improve video-game journalism. But their actions look a lot more like an orchestrated campaign of harassment against women who make or write about video games." For more information, see Suellentrop (2014), Kain (2014) and Dewey (2014).

players have begun to threaten the "geek" masculine identity that dominates gaming (Braithwaite 2016).

While the accusations against Quinn proved to be false, the debate over her legitimacy as a game designer belied broader issues of toxic masculinity in gaming—i.e., male gamers wanting to protect their gamer geek sub-culture and, in the process, reject the feminists who were supposedly ruining it. Anita Sarkeesian, whose video series "Tropes vs. Women in Video Games" critiques games for their sexist depictions of women, became another prominent target of the GamerGaters. Both Quinn and Sarkeesian had personal information released online (a practice known as "doxing"), received numerous highly graphic threats, and were forced to leave their homes. Other women who spoke out about GamerGate, including journalists and game designers, were also subjected to threats and the publication of personal information, with some leaving the industry as a result. While many GamerGaters claimed that they were merely advocating for stronger ethical standards in gaming journalism, in reality these arguments became a way to frame themselves as the real victims of the situation—rather than the journalists and designers being doxed—as well as the true defenders of "real gaming" (Braithwaite 2016).

Although the GamerGate movement itself has largely subsided, the perceived threat to white masculine identity and the sexist language used by GamerGate proponents remain visible. Since the election of Donald Trump, numerous media outlets have drawn connections between the election and the GamerGate movement (Martens 2017; Hess 2017; Marcotte 2016), with one writer calling GamerGate the "canary in the coalmine" for the rise of the alt-right (Lees 2016). Others argue that GamerGate and Trump were

both "responses to the gains that women, LGBT people, and people of color had made in mediums and genres historically dominated by white men" (Rosenberg 2015) and appealing to similar "deep-seated notions of entitlement and privilege–mixing in fear-mongering, racism, and misogyny through the scapegoating of marginalized people" (Sarkeesian 2017). GamerGate revealed several key issues in modern culture that cannot be ignored, and that require further study.

In this chapter, I discuss the existing research that has sought to interrogate the social inequalities present in the communities and culture surrounding video games, beginning with work focused on the marginalized position of women in gaming. While work on gender and the marginalization of women has been critical for the development of an understanding of these inequalities, an intersectional approach is necessary for a more complete picture of the divisions within gaming. I argue that the primacy of men and exclusion of women in gaming culture has always been about more than gender alone, as elements of race and sexuality are central to the geek masculine identity that dominates gaming culture. Rather than white men opposing white women, we can understand this central division as white cisgender heterosexual men performing a specific kind of masculinity that oppresses and opposes all other groups.

Marginalization of Women

Much of the existing research on social inequality in gaming culture has focused on the position of women. This work has shown that women have three possible roles and are punished for stepping outside of them: they are rendered invisible, seen as sex objects, or seen as the enemy (Herring 1999; Taylor 2006; Taylor 2012; Salter and

Blodgett 2012). Three main reasons have been proposed for the marginalization of women in gaming, relating to the rise in popularity of casual games (Crawford 2012; Juul 2010; Taylor 2012) the ownership of gaming technology (Jenkins and Cassell 2008; Crawford 2012; Taylor 2012; Salter and Blodgett 2012) and the structure and content of games themselves (Burrill 2008; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009).

First, women tend to be most associated with casual games which are considered low status in video gaming culture. Women often have more restricted leisure time than men, and so they have fewer long blocks of time to fill and more social and economic constraints on their choices of activities (Crawford 2012). As a result, long hours spent dedicated to gaming are impossible for many women who are disproportionally responsible for the care of others and are more likely to spend time and money on other family members rather than on games for themselves (Crawford 2012). These constraints contribute to the higher rates of women who play so-called "casual" games that can be downloaded onto a mobile device and played for shorter periods of time than the "hardcore" console and PC games that require greater time commitment (Crawford 2012; Juul 2010). While some mobile games have become wildly popular in recent years, such as Candy Crush, Pokémon Go, and Fortnite, casual games have come to be seen as a shift towards the feminine and therefore a perceived threat to the future of dominant masculine hardcore gaming (Vanderhoef 2013). Due in part to their association with the feminine, these games are lower status than the more time-consuming console games, and their players are disparaged accordingly by many in the gaming community (Taylor 2012). So, like women's work and the wage value attributed to it (England 1999), women's leisure is marred by both segregation and devaluation.

The second reason that has been given for the marginalization of women in gaming is due to the perceived ownership of the technology. Computers are coded as masculine technology, a reason marketers attempted to rebrand them for girls through the "girl games" movement of the 1980s (Jenkins and Cassell 2008). During this time, the gaming industry attempted to attract girls by making "pink games" like *Barbie Fashion Designer* that centered traditional values of femininity and "purple games" like *Nancy Drew* games that attempted to mirror girls' real-life interests. While commercially successful, both of these types of games used essentialized notions of the likes and dislikes of boys and girls that ignored what they had in common (Jenkins and Cassell 2008). In their analysis of the "girl games" movement, Jenkins and Cassell (2008) argue that the movement failed to show that computers were not just for boys, which has made it difficult to change gender stereotypes in gaming even with game designers attempting to take a more fluid approach to gender.

Understanding "girl gamers" as having distinct needs and preferences reifies the distinction between male and female players (Taylor 2008). One study found that girls in Australia who enjoyed computer games used that interest alongside other typically masculine interests to develop a Tomboy identity (Jeanes 2011), showing that computers games are still widely considered to be a masculine activity. Even in households where technology is shared by all members and is located in a common space, video game technology is viewed as symbolically belonging to the men in the household—who occasionally allow the women to access it (Crawford 2012). The assumption of male ownership is also perpetuated by the video game industry, which predominately designs gaming technology for the imagined male gamer. One example of this is in the design of

Xbox controllers, which are designed for men and are therefore too large to be easily handled by smaller hands (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). This sense of male ownership of gaming technology has contributed to instances of toxic masculinity in game-related media that share similarities to GamerGate. One recent example is the "Dickwolves" controversy, wherein a comic strip depicted a character saying he was "raped by dickwolves" to mock the common gaming trope that requires players willfully ignore suffering. Games relying on this trope require players to rescue a specific number of prisoners and once that number of rescues has been completed, players are no longer able to interact in any way with the remaining prisoners. The comic received backlash from mainly female critics for its casual use of a rape joke, but these women were quickly met with mockery, harassment, and threats from male fans (Salter and Blodgett 2012).

The third reason for the marginalization of women in gaming is about the types and content of games that are produced. The proportion of characters appearing in games who are not white men is very small. Among all characters who appear in video games, one study (Williams et al, 2009) found that 86% were men and 15% were women, with an even greater difference for primary characters. The same study found that 85% of primary characters were white, 10% were black, 4% were biracial, and 2% were Asian. Hispanics and Native Americans did not appear as primary characters in any of the games (Williams et al. 2009). Another study found that in the Xbox, PlayStation 2, and GameCube games they sampled, 41% of the women wore sexually revealing clothing and 43% were partially or totally nude, while of the men, 11% wore sexually revealing clothing and 4% were partially or totally nude. This study found a similar

overrepresentation of men to the Williams et al. study, with 14% of the characters being women and 86% being men. This shows that in addition to appearing far less frequently than male characters, female characters were also much more likely to be hypersexualized (Downs and Smith 2010). Despite some innovation in representation and game structure in recent decades, it remains a norm for video games to center on a male protagonist in a combative situation, and players are encouraged to identify with this "man of action" (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009). Violence is often central to this type of game, just as it is presumed to be a central experience of men (Burrill 2008). The wildly popular *Halo* series is the perfect example of this form, where gamers are exclusively allowed to occupy the position of a masculine warrior in a militaristic science fiction environment (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009).

In summary, the lower status of casual, female-dominated games compared to "hardcore" male-dominated games, the belief in men's ownership of gaming technology, and the gendered structure and content of games have all been shown to contribute to the marginalization of women in gaming. However, research has shown that 41% of people who play video games are women (Entertainment Software Association 2016), and GamerGate demonstrated that the presence of women in gaming culture and gaming spaces is pervasive enough to seem threatening to some male players. Evidently, there is a substantial number of women who overcome these sociocultural barriers in order to participate in hardcore gaming. However, these women then face an additional persistent problem: widespread online harassment.

Online Harassment

The prevalence of sexism and harassment within online games and in online communication has been well-established by scholars. On average, in games where players communicate over microphones, female voices receive three times as many negative comments as male voices (Kuznekoff and Rose 2012). Additionally, players who conform to masculine norms such as a desire for power over women, heterosexual self-presentation, and a drive to win were more likely to have sexist beliefs about gender and gaming (Fox and Tang 2014). Many players use linguistic profiling, meaning determining someone's identity through auditory cues in how they sound, to identify other players as women and people of color, which causes women of color to be at unique risk for intersecting oppressions in online gaming (Gray 2012). Women who player video games, and women of color in particular, utilize a variety of strategies including camouflaging their gender and aggressively demonstrating their skills and experience in order to manage harassment. While these strategies are at times successful, they require constant work and displace the responsibility of handling harassment onto the victims (Cote 2015).

In order to understand this widespread sexual harassment and the continued marginalization of women even after they overcome initial barriers to playing video games, it is important to understand how game spaces and gamer identity have been coded as masculine. In the following section I examine the specific type of masculinity typically associated with video games—geek masculinity—which has been discussed by Connell (1995) and Taylor (2012).[2] In particular, an understanding of geek masculinity as

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[2] Following Taylor (2012), I will argue that gaming culture is dominated by geek masculinity, but this work is situated more broadly in the Sociology of Masculinities. For example, Halberstam (1998) demonstrates how female masculinity as a queer subject

the basis of gamer identity will further elucidate why women's presence in gaming is seen as a violation of masculine spaces.

Geek Masculinity

Geek masculinity is most fully elaborated by T.L. Taylor in her work on the professionalization of e-sports. For Taylor (2012), geek masculinity is a form of masculinity that provides an alternative to more traditional forms of masculinity linked to athletic culture. Instead of knowledge and proficiency in physical sports, in geek masculinity the mastery of technology, science, and gaming are valorized. In geek culture, boys and men gain status, social connections, and pleasure by performing skills and expertise in specialized areas (Taylor 2012). As Taylor writes, "Facilitating an interest in competition or fraternal relationships but via activities like playing computer games thus becomes a powerful alternative modality for geek masculinity" (2012, 111).

Geek masculinity has two potentially contradictory connections to hegemonic masculinity. The first is the geek as a subordinated identity within the hegemonic project. As defined by Connell, hegemonic masculinity is "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 1995, 77). What this consists of depends on historical context and can shift depending on who is most powerful in society, but it is rarely fully enacted and

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position is able to challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity, which will likely be useful for understanding the positions of many women in gaming. Also, Bridges and Pascoe's work (2014) on hybrid masculinity shows recent transformations in masculinity have incorporated elements associated with marginalized identities while still sustaining existing systems of gender inequality.

remains an impossible goal against which men measure themselves. Within the same framework, other masculinities are subordinated, complicit, or marginalized (Connell 1995).

According to Connell, the "geek" is an example of a subordinated identity that hegemonic masculinity positions itself in opposition to. The most common subordinated masculinity is the homosexual man, subordinated due to the perceived close associations with femininity (Connell 1995). However, some heterosexual men can be oppressed through the labels of "nerd," "dweeb" and "geek." These other identities are linked to femininity, which relegates men to positions at the bottom of the gender hierarchy (Taylor 2012). As a result, geek masculinity can dovetail with potentially subversive constructions of sexuality and identity. "This can range from simple disruptions of the objectifications of women to making room for queer identities or alternate sexual and intimacy practices like polyamory or BDSM" (Taylor 2012, 112). While heterosexual geeks may be just as homophobic as non-geeks, geek masculinity has the potential to be accessible to queer identities and practices that are repudiated by hegemonic masculinity (Taylor 2012).

However, geek masculinity can also be complicit in hegemonic masculinity. It is difficult to fully place in either category exclusively, as "the nerd stereotype includes aspects of both hypermasculinity (intellect, rejection of sartorial display, lack of 'feminine' social and relational skills) and perceived feminization (lack of sports ability, small body size, lack of sexual relationships with women)" (Kendall 1999, 356). Connell (1995) describes complicit masculinity as men who receive social rewards and dividends from their domination over other, typically more feminine groups gained from the

framework of hegemonic masculinity, while failing to fulfill many of the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity. In this view, rather than being more welcoming to marginalized groups, geek masculinity also has the potential to be particularly motivated to reject them. Therefore, in the case of gaming culture and the negative reactions of many male gamers to the rise of white women and people of color, geek masculinity can be seen as a form of complicit masculinity.

Within complicit masculinity, we can understand geek masculinity as generating power and status for men through the rejection of other groups of people. In a study of "nerd" users of BlueSky, an online interactive text-based forum, Kendall (2000) finds a conflicted relationship between nerd masculinity and hegemonic masculinity. The participants rejected and mocked certain elements of hegemonic masculinity, particularly regarding violence against women. However, they accepted the hegemonic gender order that "depicts women as inferior and not acceptable gender identity models [that] nevertheless requires that men desire these inferior (even disgusting) creatures" (Kendall 2000, 267). Many of the participants viewed themselves as being the victims of previous mockery, manipulation, and rejection by women and as a result no longer attempted heterosexual relationships—despite continuing to identify as heterosexual. Also, while homosexual and bisexual men were accepted within the BlueSky community, they were still required to engage in conversations depicting women as sexual objects. This suggests that "at least for some men, distance from women comprises a more important component of masculine identity than sexual distance from men" (Kendall 2000, 271). While the participants challenged some elements of hegemonic masculinity, they ultimately derived the most power from the subordination and objectification of women.

From the point of view of men who have successfully used geek masculinity to gain power and control of gaming spaces, "arguments for inclusivity are understood as attacks on men," (Braithwaite 2016, 6). This is because making video games more accessible to other groups would lead to a loss of their domination over these other groups and would lessen their primary source of social capital and identity. For otherwise subordinated men whose dominance over women in gaming remains their closest tie to hegemonic masculinity (Kendall 2000), ongoing hostility towards women in gaming is a key factor in maintaining their status. While geek masculinity may have initially been a less desirable alternative to more dominant performances of masculinity, it now generates power and status. Salter and Blodgett (2012) write, "For a long time, geeks' mastery of social media enabled them to form and control their own gaming publics. This mastery and technology helped them to turn their isolation into a powerful social network" (413).

Furthermore, geek masculinity is about race and sexuality as much as it is about gender. As a result, it is not only women who are marginalized by these mechanisms, but anyone who does not fit the image of a stereotypical white, cisgender, heterosexual "geek." Burrill connects the popularity of ultraviolent videogames to a backlash "against feminism, non-normative sexualities, economic pressures, racial mixing, the 'weaknesses' of the metrosexual, and so on" (2008, 33). The previously discussed mechanisms of marginalization in gaming are reinforced, reproduced, and made more difficult to eliminate by their ties to—and embeddedness within—a culture of masculinity, and specifically geek masculinity.

Intersectionality

While previous research has successfully identified some important factors contributing to the continued marginalization of women that has become significantly more nuanced since the 1980s, an intersectional approach is necessary for a more complete understanding of marginalization in gaming culture.

An intersectional approach understands that dimensions of identity such as gender and race cannot be separated analytically. This approach means scholars cannot give more importance to one element of a person's identity, or analyze them separately as if systems of gender, race, class, and sexuality-based oppression have additive effects. Instead, these elements "interact to shape the multiple dimensions" of the experiences of women of color that make their experience "qualitatively different than that of white women" (Crenshaw 1991, 1245). Furthermore, an intersectional approach "focuses not just on differences but also on the way in which differences and domination intersect and are historically and socially constitutive of each other" (Zinn and Dill 1996, 74). A key contribution of intersectional feminism has been to contest the universalizing of the white, middle-class, Western woman as the experiences of all women, which allows for a more complex analysis that takes into account intersecting experiences of oppression (Choo and Ferree 2010; Collins 2000; Zinn and Dill 1996). Treating white, middle-class Western women as the universal category of "woman" renders all other groups invisible and prevents their voices from being heard (Choo and Ferree 2010). To render non-white women invisible has been one of the effects of the overemphasis on gender in much of the scholarly work on video games, as illustrated by the focus of the GamerGate movement.

It is well known that supporters of the GamerGate movement primarily targeted women, particularly feminists, and as discussed above, has been seen by many involved with the conflict as being mainly about gender. Richard uses Patricia Hill Collins's work on the intersection of gender and race to argue that the attention paid largely to white women by both media coverage of the controversy and the harassers is the result of the "historical conflation of gender as being embodied by white women" (Richard 2016, 71). The attacks were based on perceived threats against a very specific gamer identity: the "real" gamer, associated with the cisgender, heterosexual man (Evans and Janish 2015). The identity of the "real" gamer "is reified in the overwhelming number of popular games that feature a white, heterosexual, masculine, male protagonist" (Evans and Janish 2015, 130). As Kendall notes, "Women and men of color are excluded entirely from this category, protecting the superior economic and technological status of white men" (2011, 519).

In addition, the GamerGate controversy highlights the ways in which race has been marginalized even within spaces created by women as a response to GamerGate. While white feminists used online forums as a space of resistance against the movement, Gray (2016) found that they were unwilling to engage with women of color who supported the Black Lives Matter movement, resulting in women of color's creation of the hashtag #SolidarityisForWhiteWomen. The white feminists' lack of knowledge of the women of color's lived experiences "originates in the inability to recognize common oppression among women" (Gray 2016, 66). In other words, white feminists did not recognize the racialized oppression faced by women of color as a problem facing all women, and as a result, "essentially replicated" the exclusionary practices they created

the forums to escape (Gray 2016, 66). Even the Entertainment Software Association's annual report on players' demographics ignores race (2016). While it shows data on a variety of dimensions including age (the average gamer is 35 years old), gender (59% of gamers are male and 41% are female) and parental control (91% of parents are present when their child buys or rents a game), it provides no information on race, class, or sexuality.

A limited amount of empirical work has taken an intersectional approach to the study of oppression of marginalized groups in gamer culture. Along with her work on the construction of the #SolidarityisForWhiteWomen hashtag, Gray's intersectional study of the experiences of Black women using the Xbox Live (2014) is pioneering in this area. She finds that these women reappropriate the existing virtual tools and infrastructures of Xbox Live to organize and mobilize in response to the inequalities they face in this space, such as through "resistance griefing," where they disrupt the game in response to oppression, as well as by using forums to advertise their mobilization efforts (Gray 2014).

Other work has also used an intersectional approach successfully. Richard (2016) analyzes the experiences of a diverse group of players and finds that harassment and gatekeeping limit the participation of marginalized players, and that more work is required to dismantle the assumption of the white male player as the norm. Kendall's work on geek masculinity, which she refers to as "nerd masculinity," shows how the hegemonic gender order as well as hegemonic ideals of whiteness create the BlueSky forum as a space that is welcoming to "a few women, nonheterosexuals, and Asian Americans who fit themselves into BlueSky's cultural context through their performances

of white masculinities" (Kendall 2000, 272). Shaw (2012) argues that the question of marginalized people identifying with the "gamer" label is a separate one from if marginalized people play video games. Gender, race, and sexuality can shape conversations about games in the right circles and separating marginalized players into distinct markets is not the solution to the problem of marginalization. Instead, Shaw (2012) argues that the entire gaming market must be constructed as diverse. These examples of intersectional research highlight some of the important questions that remain unexamined when research is primarily focused on gender alone.

Conclusion

In order to continue to make meaningful progress in the field of gender and video games, intersectional research must become the standard approach. To continue to produce work that that draws uncritically on the idea of the typical white cisgender heterosexual "gamer" is to promote the idea that this is an accurate reflection of gaming culture, and that this is a natural and normal state of affairs. Widespread emphasis on gender tends to neglect the race and sexualities dimensions of both the games themselves and communities that develop around them, and the ways in which systems of oppression interact to marginalize some players and privilege others. While the research on gender in gaming has been influential in identifying games and gaming as a site of oppression and harassment towards certain groups of people, it is largely limited by its lack of intersectional considerations of identities and communities. Regardless of what identities seem most salient to players at any given time, the race, sexuality, and gender of players

must be taken into account for researchers to fully understand why video gaming remains such a visibly hostile place for so many diverse groups.

To accept the dominance of geek masculinity as the status quo in gaming culture is to perpetuate the problem. Assumptions about who plays video games need to be challenged at every stage of research if this field is to continue to grow more inclusive and listen to the voices it has historically marginalized. Industry professionals, game researchers, game journalists, and anyone involved in gaming culture's public sphere must consider their own role in perpetuating white male "gamer geek" stereotypes that continue to control the kinds of games that are made and the experiences of those who play them. Despite the sociocultural and technological barriers, gaming culture is already diverse. Outdated understandings of gaming culture—and limited scholarly approaches to generating these understandings—need to change in order for diverse players to finally be heard and accepted as equals.

Overall, my dissertation will fill three important gaps in the literature on video game culture. First, I will develop this growing body of work taking an intersectional approach in this field, but by interrogating dominant geek masculine players as well as nondominant groups. Second, I will examine the experiences of marginalized groups and the ways in which they navigate gaming culture, an area in which the lack of sociological research on gaming means that very few interview and ethnographic projects exist. Third, I will develop an understanding of gaming culture than consists of a broad continuum of practices ranging from private to public, consisting not only of the experience of playing video games or of the public discourse surrounding gaming, but of a combination of both

these practices as well as many others, both online and offline, that all contribute to the creation of gaming culture and identity.

Methods

In order to answer how social inequalities are reproduced in video game culture, I used a combination of semi-structured interviews and ethnographic observations. I selected these methods in order to capture attitudes and values reported by people who play games as well as observe how people use and discuss games in organic situations. Interviews were necessary to get in-depth information about individuals experiences, and as I was interested in how games and gaming culture are interpreted by different groups, the ways in which respondents framed their stories was a key element of this project. Also, interviews allowed me to include the experiences of people who play games but who never participate in gaming-related social interactions. This population is often excluded from projects focusing on gaming culture, but with this project I intended to include the voices of all people involved with gaming, including those who have been marginalized from the core of mainstream gaming. Interviews was a way to ensure those voices were included but required a sample that was diverse in terms of social relationships to gaming as well as in terms of demographics. Including ethnography of public spaces enabled me to directly observe offline social interactions and recruit participants who were engaged with the offline public elements of gaming culture. I collected data about public online spaces through interviews. Online gaming was a common activity, so I collected multiple accounts of it from various perspectives.

Interviews

For the interview data, I conducted interviews with people over the age of 18 who play all kinds of video games. I conducted a total of 78 interviews between June 2017 and September 2018. Most of the interviews took place in a large city in Western Canada, a large city in the Mid Atlantic United States, and a smaller city in the Mid Atlantic United States, but many were done remotely with participants throughout the United States and Canada. To recruit respondents, I initially put up flyers and posted ads on the websites of some community gaming groups. In order to keep the requirements as broad as possible so as not to exclude people who play mostly mobile games, nor to signal to the most hardcore PC gamers that the study was conducted by someone who was somewhat unfamiliar with most games, I chose to include an image that showed a variety of gaming technology on both the flyers and the ads. I also purposefully avoided using the word "gamer," which has various connotations for different people that I did not want to invoke at this early stage.

Despite my best efforts at inclusiveness, my initial round of sampling led me to respondents who were almost all heterosexual cisgender men. As this is an important population for this project, the data from this round of sampling was ultimately very useful in my study of high-status, and especially highly social, players. During this time, I was also conducting a participant observation of a weekly gaming community group, where members met in a mall food court each week to play handheld games, board games, and occasionally a Switch system attached to a monitor they set up. I also attended two fan conventions with significant gaming components. The group of participants present at the sites of my participant observation was also not particularly diverse in terms in terms of gender and sexuality, and the group members who agreed to

be interviewed individually reflected this. However, I did find that the lack of diversity from these sources indicated that the public sphere of gaming is dominated by cisgender heterosexual men, a finding that was confirmed through my interviews.

An additional concern at this early stage of research was that by conducting a study on inequality and gaming, I would alienate the high-status player who often claim not to be interested in this kind of question. I introduced the research as being about all aspects of gaming culture, which is an accurate description of the project as I was looking to understand a wide range of experiences. To support this goal, I began interviews by asking about the participants experiences with gaming and gaming communities, and did not ask about gender, representation, or inequality until approximately halfway through the interview. For the high-status interviews, this created the space for respondents to explain their disinterest or dislike of these questions.

In order to capture as many experiences as possible from all people who play video games, and not just the social high-status ones, I turned to other methods. Snowball sampling through my personal networks was an important step in this research. As I have an established interest in gender among people I know personally, it was difficult to mask to inequalities component of the project to the participants recruited by someone I know in the same way that I did for the first round of recruiting. At this point I had collected a significant amount of data from respondents who were wary of questions about gender. However, perhaps in part because of the ways in which most people think about gaming, this second round resulted in many interviews with high-status men once again, although in this round this was not the only group I was able to recruit for my interviews.

Because my own personal networks have ties to people interested in gender, this method was also particularly fruitful in terms of recruiting women and members of the LGBTQ community who were reluctant to speak about gaming in public. Several respondents told me they never would have responded to an ad like mine had a friend of theirs not convinced them. This was true even of some respondents who played video games for hours every day. The widespread image of how gaming and players are defined made many of them think I was only looking for people to talk about their experiences with mainstream, hardcore games, when in fact I was working with a much broader definition. I continued to avoid using the word "gamer" in recruiting materials and conversations, just as I avoid using the word uncritically in this document, but the connotations remained, and I believe contributed to how many people initially viewed my calls for participants.

Another result of my use of snowball sampling was a sample that was much more geographically diverse than the one I had collected earlier. The community gaming group was based in a large city in western Canada, so many of the interviews I conducted around that time were generally located in a similar geographic area. Once I started using social media and getting suggestions from different people, I also began conducting more remote interviews with people located throughout North America. While I cannot make claims about geographic differences between experiences with gaming, I do think this approach helped me to ensure I was not capturing the experiences of people in one unique city. The western city in Canada where I conducted the first round of interviews is very diverse and has a significant Asian population, so I was concerned my lack of findings regarding race might be related to my location. The use of remote interviews and

then moving to a city in the mid-Atlantic United States helped to ensure that was not the case.

While these strategies provided me with a sample that still comprised mostly white heterosexual cisgender man, it also had more gender diversity than the first round. However, the sample still had a greater proportion of white and Asian participants than reflects the generally population, and I was concerned I was missing important findings about race. To mitigate this problem, I went online to smaller groups intended for people of color who are interested in video games, and I also contacted members of community groups with the same purpose. However, these efforts were not successful. I did not receive any responses from the groups that agreed to let me post, and several groups never responded to my requests to post at all. This is an understandable reaction to a white woman attempting to study spaces for people of color hoping to create communities for themselves. Instead of accessing these groups, I was able to diversify my sample with more snowball sampling.

After 16 months of recruiting and interviews, I conducted interviews with 78 people. Of these, approximately 54 were men, 23 were women, one was non-binary, one was a genderfluid female, and one was a non-binary female. Of the men, five were transgender. Of the women, one was transgender. The other 70 respondents were cisgender. Of all respondents, 58 identified as white, five as Asian, four as Black, one as Hispanic, two as South Asian, and eight as mixed race: one as Asian and Pacific Islander, one as European and Pacific Islander, one as white and Métis, one as Métis and Chinese, three as Asian and white, and one respondent who identified himself as mixed race. The median and mean age of my respondents was 27. The youngest were 18 and the oldest

was 41. The sample included a wide range of education levels, occupations, and levels of income. The sample was also diverse in terms of sexual orientation, with 58 of the respondents identifying as straight or heterosexual, six identifying as bisexual, four identifying as gay, four as queer, one as demisexual panromantic, one as demisexual heterosexual, two as pansexual, one as asexual, and one as a lesbian. Also, 27 wrote N/A or none when asked about their religious views, 10 identified as atheists, and 7 as agnostic. This is higher than the general population, but I do not have the data to make any claims about religion.

Sample

Gender		
54 Men	**23 Women**	**1 Non-Binary**
5 transgender men	1 transgender woman	1 non-binary person
49 cisgender men	20 cisgender women	
	1 genderfluid female	
	1 non-binary female	

Race
58 white
5 Asian
4 Black
2 South Asian
1 Hispanic
8 mixed race

Of the 8 Mixed Race Respondents
1 Asian and Pacific Islander
1 European and Pacific Islander
1 White and Métis
1 Métis and Chinese
3 Asian and white
1 wrote "Mixed Race"

Sexual Orientation
58 straight or heterosexual
6 bisexual
4 gay
4 queer
1 demisexual panromatic
1 demisexual heterosexual
2 pansexual
1 asexual
1 lesbian

During the interviews, I started each one by asking how they first got interested in video games. From there I would ask about difference genres, preferences, and practices depending on the person's responses. Once we had discussed the person experiences with games themselves, I would ask about related practices, such as YouTube channels, podcasts, groups, and conventions. I would also ask about how would typically find out about new games, which often led to a discussion of the gaming reviews industry as well

as their personal social network. Depending on how the person was using or avoiding the word "gamer," I would ask them if they identify as a gamer and what that word meant to them either after talking about the games or near the end of the interview. I also asked questions about if they felt like part of a larger gaming community, their thoughts on diverse representations in games, and if they thought gaming has a problem with inequality. Sometimes I would ask about one game specifically if I thought it would encourage the kinds of responses I was looking for.

As I do not have a long history of playing games myself, to prepare for the interviews I learned what I could about popular games and industry trends. I wanted to be able to speak knowledgeably about games in general in order to avoid creating the impression that I was an outsider judging respondent's gaming choices. I did not pretend to be an expert, but having respondents feel confident I would understand words like "RPG" and "platformer" was important for the interviews to go smoothly. However, the range of games that came up in interviews was so extensive that this preparation was of limited usefulness, but most respondents were happy to describe their favorite games in detail. There were several instances where I asked enough questions about common enough games that respondents, usually men, would ask me if I was a gamer. I would say no but that I had recently gotten into it, although I did find that at times this changed the tone of the interviews somewhat. This was particularly true of interviews with men who met the typical definition of a "hardcore gamer." However, my relative inexperience was sometimes expected by these players who, like the animator from the community gaming group, seemed to relish the opportunity to teach someone about games.

Throughout the interview process, I wrote memos about my impressions and began work transcribing the interviews. Each interview was recorded, with some transcribed by me and some transcribed by a service and then reviewed by me. Using NVivo, I used an open coding method to allow categories to emerge and continued until I found no new patterns. While this data may not be generalizable to the entirety of gaming culture, I believe that I have identified trends and mechanisms that do play a role in the lives of many people involved with video games.

Ethnography

In addition to the interviews, I observed two general fan conventions with significant gaming components as well as a weekly gamer community group. The conventions took place over the course of 3 days, one in a small mid Atlantic city and one in a large city in Eastern Canada. My initial plan was to use the conventions to observe the most public offline elements of gaming culture, and to recruit people who were involved in that side of the culture. This was an important element of the research because it allowed me to observe people in an organic environment. The events were interesting and provided necessary context that helped me to understand some of the stories about them in the interviews.

However, they were not as successful for recruiting as I had hoped. For the larger convention in Canada I reconsidered my approach and adopted the strategy of finding a gaming related event with a long line and using the hours of waiting time to talk to the people waiting near me. The most successful implementation of this strategy was in the line waiting to hear Felicia Day speak. Felicia Day is the creator and star of *The Guild,* a

web series focused on the experiences of a group of friends playing a fictionalized version of a fantasy MMORPG. She is also well-known for gaming content on YouTube and Twitch, making her a prominent figure in gaming circles particularly for those who challenge the dominance of geek masculinity in gaming. The people I met in line confirmed my suspicion, that people attend fan conventions with a group of friends and not to meet new people. The people I spoke with had left their friend group momentarily because the group was at a different even during that time, but they were still not interested in meeting anyone new and no one attempted to speak with me until I approached them first. I did get several people's contact information using this strategy, and other interviews with people who had attended different conventions confirmed this account: that conventions are for groups of friends to experience as a unit.

In addition to the conventions, I conducted an ethnography of a weekly community gaming group over two months. This was another opportunity to observe people engaging with the public, offline social elements of gaming culture, and by returning over several weeks I was able to get a sense of the dynamics of the community and its members. Previous sites I had attempted to observe had been less successful than I had hoped. An online calendar of gaming tournaments I found turned out to be a list of games being demonstrated at a computer store that were only attended by a few wandering children looking for distractions while their parents shopped. I had also attended a nerd trivia event at a well-known local nerd-themed bar that had some gaming elements in the bar itself. While the questions were focused on a range of science fiction, space, history, science, and popular culture topics, the event itself was otherwise indistinguishable from any other trivia event. This led me to question some of the

assumptions of this project, as it indicated to me that gaming culture has become

sufficiently mainstream to make a project focused on its mechanisms of social

inequalities unnecessary. However, I realized that the problem was that those sites were

aimed at a general audience. Once I found groups more specifically related to gaming, I

was able to identify the ways in which gaming culture showcases and exacerbates larger

social trends in a unique way.

Immediately after leaving each site, I would record my observations and initial

reactions and themes. These field notes helped me to develop a sense of what the public

offline elements of gaming culture look like, and they helped me revise and create

interview questions in order to confirm and challenge my finding from these sites. While

most of the visible data in this project draws on the interviews, the ethnography was

necessary to provide the context I needed to reach the conclusions seen here.

A Typology of Gaming Sociality

In this section, I draw on my data to introduce a typology of three different approaches to the social elements of video games culture. These categories show that there is no one way to play video games, and that the stereotype of the lone gamer in a basement neglects some of the key reasons people love games as well as the factors that contribute to people playing alone rather than engaging socially.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the various ways that the social can play a role in gaming culture. It will also decouple essentialized gaming preferences from identity. While the social first gamers tended to be higher status than the non-social group, and therefore more heterosexual, white, and male, I argue that this is because of the different types of constraints lower status players face. They often needed to develop strategies to avoid harassment or lacked the necessary network to play social games. As a result, it was common for lower status players to have adapted their practices over time until they found a way to game without being disrupted.

In contrast, higher status players did not discuss the ways in which their play has been limited in the past by outside factors and were often able to move freely between these categories depending on context. While some people fit only into one of the three groups I identify in this chapter, it was very common for the heterosexual cisgender men to move between categories according to who they were interacting with and what their goals were for the gaming session. They know they belong anywhere in the gaming world, so have the flexibility to move to whatever configuration of practices best suits their preferences at any given moment.

This typology is useful for understanding three broad approaches to the relationship between games and sociality. I argue that these categories would exist in some form even in a more equitable gaming culture. This can be seen through the ways high status men still fall into and move between each of these three categories depending on their preferences. However, given the existing and persistent social inequalities in gaming, this typology also reflects the constrained options of lower status players who would ideally prefer their gaming take a different form.

Non-Social

The first group is the non-social group. These are the players who tend to play single player games alone primarily for the experience of the game itself. Several of these players got involved with gaming or found it most beneficial at times when their opportunities for social interactions were limited, such as when they had recently moved to a new city. Rather than providing the opportunity to meet new people or interact with existing friends, at these times video games provided a solitary but engaging way for them to pass the time.

However, other participants were able to use games to avoid talking with other people entirely. Jason, a 22-year old cisgender heterosexual android developer who was part Métis and part white, played video games at a professional level in high school. He first got interested in games as a way to fill time with when he had few friends: "I guess I got into it because I really like playing. I like the competitive part of it. I wasn't super social, I was kind of awkward, so I didn't have many friends, so I just started spending all my time playing video games." Mark, a 31-year old white cisgender heterosexual

consultant, had a similar explanation for getting involved with video games as a child: "it was something to do. And I was never a kid who was like a social firefly. I [never had] like tons of friends . . . And I wasn't sports oriented. I liked sports as a fan to watch, but I never played them." Andrew, a 40-year-old white cisgender heterosexual professor, also enjoyed video games as an activity that did not require friends: "I mean, I think as a teenager who was maybe a little bit awkward and stuff, the computer games became something to do. It became a non-interpersonal activity, and so it was a way to spend hours and have a good time."

Other non-social players also found games useful for this reason, but in adulthood. Jeremy, a 41-year old white cisgender heterosexual professor, primarily played games non-socially during specific times in his life when he had limited social options: "Like when I moved to a new city by myself, or something like that, and I didn't know a lot of people and in your downtime, playing video games is a good way to do that." Max, a 27-year old white cisgender heterosexual lawyer, also used games as a solitary activity as an adult. He had played Halo in high school as a significant part of his social life. However, during a summer when his friends were all busy, he turned to games as a way to fill the time:

> When I was studying for the bar, I needed something to do, and none of my friends wanted to hang out because all my friends are law students, and all my law students are studying like crazy. And I decided to invoke a strategy that involved studying at the last minute, so I had a lot of free time over the summer. And if your friends are busy studying, I don't know, I went out and bought an Xbox.

Like Jeremy, Max had the opportunity to play socially as well as non-socially. He chose the style that worked best for his circumstances and was able to move between categories seamlessly.

Other non-social players had limited opportunities to engage with any gaming community because of the kinds of games they were interested in. Wesley, a heterosexual cisgender white 27-year-old filmmaker, was interested in arthouse games and was hoping a community would emerge around these games like it has for arthouse film.

> It's a sphere that exists in most of the arts, but there's basically no real community around that for games. There's like Indie gaming communities, but there is no community for art house games. Like just does not exist. I'm saying art house games for lack of a better word. It's really frustrating. With films you can find these art house communities. You can find all sorts of stuff and it's not there for games so everything that I'm impressed with in games, I sort of have to come at sideways. There are one or two people who I think are capable of keying into the things that I'm really interested in games. But even then, either they don't write any more or they never wrote much to begin with.

While he was not as interested in using games to build or support social relationships, Wesley was looking for community into order to engage in formal criticism of a specific kind of game. As he found that this community did not exist, his gaming practices tended to be non-social.

While the previously discussed non-social players had various reasons for preferring to play alone and not engage with gaming's more public elements, I also found some players were non-social because their choices were constrained by outside factors. Lisa, a heterosexual cisgender white 29-year-old law student, had attempted to join a gaming community as a child but had felt unwelcome and ultimately gave up gaming for several years because of it:

> I had a lot of conflicted and alienating experiences with what's now more mainstream but at the time was more of a niche-er nerd kind of community. And I was never fully a part of it, and I often had friend who were kind of part of it, but I felt quite alienated from it and I had a few- this was beyond video games, but I had a few negative experiences with the gaming workshop in my hometown where I grew up. I just felt this need to prove an identity that I didn't actually

have. I felt unwelcome, and then kind of distanced myself as a result. So it was a combination of not really seeing myself in that world, and then coming back to it now I could care less about that.

From this experience, it is clear why Lisa had come to understand gaming as something she had always done alone. She was also dissuaded by a high school boyfriend who she felt would be disdainful of her casual gaming habits:

My social circle wasn't as in to gaming, so I had a couple of high school boyfriends who also played video games, but it wasn't a huge part of our relationship and I think it was actually one of those things where their interests almost dissuaded me, because I would have been more amateurish, less good, those kinds of things, and also very concerned with developing a separate identity.

However, while her circumstances seem to require Lisa to become a non-social player for her to play at all, she also describes the joys of solitary play in detail:

I've always consumed media in a very immersive way where being fully into a world, and video games, now more so then, but even then, there were some really incredible. I played Baldur's Gate 2, Icewind Dale, some of those earlier really great RPG-type games. I was really into the story and the choices that you make and the interactions and the relationships and also just playing them.

In different circumstances, Lisa may have learned a different style of play. However, the barriers she faced did not prevent her from learning to enjoy video games in the ways she was able.

Avery, a Black 27-year-old bisexual nonbinary female graphic designer, was similarly limited in her social opportunities connected to gaming. She was very active online with her other interests, and enjoyed being a part of online communities, but understood that gaming online communities were not open to her:

I avoid gaming circles. Just because I have no desire to do that fight. And I can like it on my own and been a completely separate thing that does not have to be a part of that community. I don't identify as a gamer. I don't identify as a part of that community just because that's not my community. And it's not built for me or for people like me. I'm really passionate about it and I love it. I'm just not a gamer. And I would never... I wouldn't go to a con, I wouldn't cosplay. I have no desire to

put myself through that kind of thing. And so, the majority of other people that I talk to or see or interact with online are pretty much just like me. They've loved anime and cartoons and video games since they were children. They grew up with it. But you do not go out and sort of talk about that kind of thing. Just because it invites entirely too much negativity. I have no desire to be in a place where I am not considered a fully-fledged member.

While Avery was interested in the social elements of gaming and was particularly interested in offline opportunities, she understood that these opportunities were not open to her because of her identity. She had found an online community where she felt she belonged and knew that gaming could never be such a community for her. As a queer Black nonbinary woman, she had experienced harassment and racist sexist language that revealed the barriers in place in gaming culture that kept her out.

Images of who a typical gamer also prevented Vanessa, a 40-year-old Black lesbian database administrator from participating in public gaming spaces. She also enjoyed playing games alone, but also felt that the community was not designed for her, and her personal network had limited options of people to play with. "I do not, it's usually against an AI yes, so the computer. I do not play online games with people I know. Except for Words with Friends. I'm not really putting on a headset and going all out in God of War with some teenage boy." At other times in her life Vanessa had a group of friends to game with, but now she felt cut off from those opportunities:

> There was a time, in my 20s, where I had a group of friends who liked gaming as well, and that was a group experience, but it was in person. And they would actually get mad at me if I lost. They were hardcore gamers too. I do miss those times, and it possibly could be that because I miss those friendships and I'm afraid to get too attached to anybody like that again that I haven't had a shared gaming experience again. But also, at 41, where am I going to find that? If I go visit my cousin, I'll play with him, or if he gets to a hard part, he's like, 'Can you get past this guy for me?' Or something like that. But now he's getting older and he doesn't need me to help him anymore.

While Vanessa was not at all ashamed her hobby, she did find that because she does not

fit the typical description of a gamer that she did not often talk about it:

> I know I'm the odd duck when it comes to the gaming demographic. I'm sure that if you put a call out, you'll get responses from dudes, ages 15 through 35, white male, a lot of them are professional, who probably have a club or something, or some guys who do game alone, but that's your demographic. I'm proud to be a gamer and not be a part of that demographic. I'm glad that I can say that. It's a thing, a quality about myself that I'm actually very proud of. I'm not ashamed of it. I don't hide it. I don't think it makes me immature or anything like that. I will say that I don't like admitting that I play God of War because it goes up against the desire to be nonviolent, but it is what it is. I can't help it. I just like it. I mean, I knew I would enjoy this experience because I don't get to talk about gaming a lot and how much I like it, so I feel good that someone cares.

For others, the lack of social interaction was due to lack of interest, not lack of

opportunity. From a young age, Simon, a 47-year old white cisgender heterosexual

software developer, would visit the arcade for the opportunity to play games, but felt the

social aspects detracted from his experience: "I was totally content to play the game by

myself. There were two player games, but like I said, I don't really remember playing

with a lot of people. I remember wishing everyone would go away so I could just play

games." Mark, a 31-year old white cisgender heterosexual consultant, primarily thought

of gaming as a solitary activity, which he attributes in part to his age and to the available

technology when he was a kid and playing the most: "I guess, maybe that's a way in

which I'm different from like a 23-year-old who grew up with internet gaming and knows

people all over the world. I guess, for me it always has been more of like a toy, or a

pastime. And not a big part of my identity." In this way, video games are used as

solutions to feelings of loneliness in multiple ways, contrasting with the common image

of the lonely gamer.

Most of the other cisgender men in this group played online multiplayer games in some format, but many also enjoyed single player games from time to time as a distinct type of activity from the more social games available. Mitchell, a 19-year old white and Asian cisgender heterosexual student who was very active in other games and a member of a League of Legends group, saw the single player games he enjoyed as a selfish pleasure:

> This is what I like to do. I say it too because it's selfish. This is what I do for myself. This is a purely myself thing. I don't share Universalis IV with anyone, I play EU4 on my own time. I do my own thing, it's my own thing. I get literally nothing from that game. I don't get any reward. The only thing I put in is my time. But it's so worth it.

> Similarly, Connor, a 30-year old white cisgender heterosexual lawyer, who had a wide circle of gaming friends he played with regularly, talked about single-player games as different from his usual gaming experiences:

> It's kind of different because I don't think they really had something quite like that game when I was a kid. It's almost like you're participating in a movie, you know what I mean, more than you're ... so, I play those, too, on my own, and I'll probably get the new Last of Us when it comes out, but I appreciate the effort and storytelling that goes into it. It's less about ... it's almost different than what I would consider a normal video game, you know what I mean? … I definitely spend more time on the other ones, but if I get into it, then I'll probably be like ... I think I beat *The Last of Us* over like a vacation break kind of thing, so it was like I did it and I'm done, and I haven't gone back and played it... The only time I would be like, 'I'm going to go play games,' is if I'm on a vacation or something, you know, like I have more free time, because I look at it more as an activity I do for fun for me rather than something collective I do with my friends. It's like watching a movie.

Like Mitchell, Connor saw single player experiences as something like a guilty pleasure. They were to be enjoyed in unusual circumstances, as opposed to being a regular part of his social life that he considered to be important and beneficial.

The Non-Social group challenges the idea that gaming is a uniquely solitary activity by showing the wide variety of ways in which players can be non-social. Context, gaming preferences, social inequalities, and social networks can all contribute to the development of this type of gaming practice. Some players would prefer to enter public spaces or play with others but know they would not be welcomed. Others turned to individual games during times in their lives when they had limited social opportunities but returned to social gaming once their circumstances changed. Still others moved freely between categories and saw playing alone as a distinct activity from social gaming. Games can provide benefits and solutions to problems even when player alone., but it is also important to note that players do not come to this style of play equally, as some are much more constrained in their choices that others.

Games First

The second set of players was also primarily interested in the games themselves but felt that social or multiplayer experiences enhanced this enjoyment. For some, the feeling of competition and winning over another player was a significant draw of the games, which was impossible with a computer or AI opponent. Eli, a 29-year old Asian cisgender heterosexual clerk, favored strategy games as a genre, and he found that playing against a person provided the best experience even if they never communicated directly:

> It doesn't get as boring easily compared with just playing Mario games when you can just play again. I don't know if you can save games but playing yourself [against] the computer, it gets really boring. You cannot challenge the computer, right?

Similarly, Ben, an 18-year-old half-European, half-Pacific Islander cisgender heterosexual college student, was interested in the human element of beating his opponents, and found that playing against an opponent he could learn from and trick added an additional level of enjoyment:

> So, the challenge for me in those games is outsmarting and outplaying my opponents. Which I enjoy. The challenge in a single-player game would just be to beat the story that was already made. I play a game called *Darkest Dungeon*. The way you get to the end is by fighting and then having to calculate chance and choices. I think that extra layer of playing against another player makes it a lot more fun for me because if I can trick them into doing something, or condition them into behaving a certain way and then punishing them for it, that's to me a lot more rewarding. I feel a much bigger reward by doing that than just completing some single-player game.

> For George, a 29-year old white cisgender heterosexual project coordinator who

played exclusively sports games, the main joy in winning was in seeing the other player's reaction, although that was difficult to organize:

> I enjoy playing against people in the room so when you win you can see a physical reaction. Where you obviously don't get that online, but I like the convenience of playing online because obviously you don't have to make any travel arrangements and you can kind of just do it on the fly… Yeah. I feel beating a person is better than beating a computer. It's kind of twisted, but yeah, I think that's what it is.

While these players enjoyed the competitive aspect and felt the emotional responses from the players they defeated added to the game, others found that the social elements of a game could become part of the game in other ways. Neil, a 33-year-old white cisgender heterosexual law student, was primarily interested in the space game EVE online. While he did not engage in the social functions often, he understood how they could present a new kind of game within a game. "I would say that's what makes a really good game is opportunities. and the social part of EVE is another thing to conquer. I know some people they dedicate their entire gameplay to being like the, you know, social pinnacle." While

Neil himself was not interested in becoming the social pinnacle, he saw the ways in which players could form and manage alliances and rivalries as a game in itself.

For men who were more interested in cooperation in games, the Games First players appreciated how the social aspects made coordination easier and play more interesting. Anthony, a 25-year old white cisgender heterosexual student, preferred playing with his existing friends in part because he enjoyed the opportunity to talk to them about games afterwards, but also because he could communicate more quickly and easily with people he was familiar with: "It's also a lot easier to coordinate doing things together in the game when you're with a person that you actually know." Milo, a 26-year-old white cisgender heterosexual law student, also described how the people he played online first-person shooters with made a difference to his gaming experience:

> I would coordinate with people, sometimes there'd be some angry little kid screaming at me, sometimes it would be a great team of people working together. So when it's really good, it's really good. You're with a team, you have some friends, especially friends from high school. You meet on the server, and you just kick ass. Because you're with your friends, you know what you're going to do, you know what your strategies are, where you're going to defend, where you're going to attack. You coordinate, and especially a game like Team Fortress 2, you can't play like it's a dozen individuals. You have your group, each of which is your own specialist class, and you each do the best thing. There are nine classes in that game, they're all perfectly balanced, they're all beautiful.

For Milo, playing with friends was beneficial primarily because they all understood each other's strengths and patterns, and so were able to work together seamlessly in a way that made for a better gaming experience than if he had to learn to work with strangers.

One game that was cited frequently as an example of how an element of cooperation can change a gaming experience is the game *Journey*. In the game, which takes between 2 to 3 hours to complete, players assume the role of a silent robed figure who can communicate only through a musical whistle sound. The player walks through a

desert landscape, encountering small challenges along the way. The avatar lacks arms but

is equipped with a long scarf that allows them to fly for short amounts of time. The entire

game is without language. Throughout the game, players encounter other figures who are

the avatars of other players, but only one at a time. Players have the option to work

together to help each other through the game but have no means of communicating

beyond the whistle. In spite of this, or perhaps because of this limitation, players often

report developing feelings of emotional closeness as a result of these brief encounters and

miss the other players if they get separated. This game is an excellent example of the

ways in which social elements can support the gaming experience, as this capability adds

a new level of intensity to the gaming experience but does involve or require any kind of

relationship beyond what will enrich the game. Robert, a 29-year old white cisgender

heterosexual lawyer who mostly played games alone, deeply appreciated the cooperative

elements of *Journey* despite his general lack of interest in multiplayer games:

> *Journey* is just the experience of the environment changing, and the beauty of it.
> Coming into contact with a random person along the way in cooperative is
> amazing. That's what that game is all about I think, and it's still enjoyable even if
> you don't play and come into contact with somebody else, but it goes to another
> level when you work with a random person, especially when you're with him for
> an hour of time and there's an experience of you will probably never meet this
> person and you'll never see them again, so you have no incentive to really
> cooperate, but you still cooperate just to enjoy the experience of doing so.

Sheena, a white 23-year old heterosexual transgender woman sales associate, described

Journey in glowing terms: "*Journey* is lovely. *Journey* is beautiful. *Journey* is a game that

is only sort of a game. We can talk about the purely linear narrative. But even then, it's

such a minimalist narrative. But beautiful." Wesley, who was very interested in high level

formal critique of art house games, said that *Journey* is "one game that I would just

absolutely not hesitate to call a masterpiece." This example shows how games can

encourage different approaches to sociality in games. Robert and Wesley were both unaware of the cooperative function of this game before they started but embraced it once they understood the kinds of brief connections it allowed them to make. Even in ways that are not always anticipated, players could find ways that social elements support the overall gaming experience.

Ian, a 28-year-old Black heterosexual cisgender videographer and photographer, was less interested in playing directly with other people, but still felt that social interactions enriched the gaming experiences he preferred. His emphasis was still on the games themselves as opposed to using the games to facilitate interaction, but he enjoyed sharing these experiences with other people. He explained the appeal of sitting in a room with a friend while they play two different games:

> I think that part of it is having an audience who is as interested as you are, so when my friend and I would just take turns playing one game, it was like you were also part of whatever adventure they were having. You could kind of experience all of the excitement that they were going through and be as surprised as they were when things happened. When you're playing by yourself, you have those experiences, but you kind of just have to relay them to people later. Whereas, if it happens right then and the person is with you, they see it as well and it's crazy for everybody. So yeah, it definitely makes it a different experience.

The appeal here is not about what gaming means to his friendships themselves, but about how those friendships allow him to experience the game differently.

Joel, a 20-year cisgender, heterosexual white sales associate, described his approach to gaming similarly:

> Well, that's the way I enjoy the games most is if I'm playing online games. Playing them by myself, yeah, it's fun enough. It's serviceable. But I much prefer the getting together with some friends to play a game, because it's just like I'm there to have fun, and friends make it fun.

The games are still the primary activity for Joel, with the added social element of having friends present enhancing the gaming itself. The game is the chosen activity, and friends are an element that can be added or removed depending on their availability. The game is not simply a vehicle for social encounters, as the options he chooses between are gaming alone or gaming with friends, not gaming with friends or doing another activity with friends.

Most of these men talked about friends as being key to making games a positive experience, either by initially introducing them to games or by improving the atmosphere. Jordan, an Asian 18-year-old cisgender heterosexual student, described how he never would have started playing *League of Legends* without the support of his friends at the beginning, but now he enjoys games for the experience of playing itself:

> I think in the beginning I played with my friends, so they would teach me while I learned. And after that I would start doing games by myself. But, without my friends being there, telling me, like being there for moral support, I don't know how far I would have been for playing the game. Because it was really difficult to learn, because even if you play it for a couple of months, there's still so much to know and so much to do to get better. They helped me learn the game. And then after that you just play on your own and that's the addictive part. When you, after you want to learn how to play the game and get better at it, that was the good part of the game.

While the "good part of the game" for Jordan is the act of the playing the game, not the way games allow him to build relationships, he found that without those relationships he would not have been able to access the "good part." The social elements provided him the tools he needed to play the games. Gaming was his focus, but improved because of his social relationships.

Jack, a 28-year-old cisgender heterosexual Chinese and Vietnamese grocery store supervisor who was a regular at a community gaming group, was similarly appreciative

of how gaming with others could help him to improve his own skills. He was initially

nervous about joining the group because he worried that his skill level would be

insufficient, but ultimately found that playing with others of varying skill levels helped

him to learn:

> I'd never played with any one of them and all I could think of is well, these guys are probably all be better than me at the game I'm good at, so I must work harder to be better. You know what? Sure I'll lose, but it's a learning experience. Maybe I enjoy it. It's the satisfaction in playing with new people. Playing with someone new, whether it be in the same old game or a new game, you'll always experience something different.

For the Games First group of players, the social elements of gaming are

important, but only in the ways in which these elements support, encourage, and enrich

the experience of playing the game itself. Social benefits and moments of social

connection may still occur but are considered secondary for this group.

Social First

The final set of these players were the most interested in social opportunities and

would choose games that would best facilitate social interactions. Many high-status

players would take this position when they were using games in order to keep in touch

with friends who lived far away, which was a very common activity among those who

played multiplayer online games. For others, the social aspects were the key reason they

enjoyed gaming, although many had games they still preferred to play alone. Some

participants who reported experiencing social anxiety talked about using games to

facilitate social interactions because they provided a set of clear rules and expectations

within which to behave. So, while this category explains many experiences, few players

fit into it exclusively.

Connor, who enjoyed playing single player games only on vacation, centered his gaming practices around the friendship networks they facilitated. He chose his console based on what his friends had, and preferred cooperative games because it supported friendly conversation:

> More cooperative, yeah, because it's like, some of them are people that don't live close to me anymore, so it's like a reason to talk to them. It's kind of like hanging out. Cooperative things, I think, make that smoother. I don't think you want to get into a competition. Other people might not be this way, but I don't want to try to beat them in the game. We all want to pretend like we're equally as good, you know? It's like teamwork. You're working together, so it's like you're calling out where other people are, the next objective or whatever.

Connor and his friends would also occasionally allow a stranger to join their online group because they found it interesting to meet a new person in this way:

> We kind of goof around more [when we invite a new person to our group]. It's less of a serious game, usually. I don't know, because you don't expect them. They could be really good, but most of the time, you just expect you're not going to work together with them as good as you would if you had a fourth person you knew, so it's more like a, I would say we do the add-a-person when we're just like, 'Let's goof around. Who knows what they'll do,' and half the time, they just randomly drop off in a weird part of the map anyways and don't follow you . . . That's another reason. I'm like, 'Why are they doing this?' And they'll just be doing their own thing.

Connor understood that allowing strangers to join might compromise the quality of the gameplay, but that it was worth it to have these kinds of unusual social interactions, enriched by the comradery these encounters encouraged within his existing friend group. Once again, the game was useful in that it allowed his group of friends to meet new people in a relatively risk-free way, and then return to their way of interacting primarily with each other.

The social elements were also one of the main ways that players would get introduced to games, so it often remained a key part of their approaches to gaming.

Leslie, a 25-year-old white cisgender heterosexual business manager, was first introduced to games as a way to spend time with her brother and friends. "[I got started with games] because they were fun and my brother, I loved hanging out with my brother we were really good friends, so it was something to do with him and our neighbor." She played a variety of games, including single player games like the Sims, but her introduction to games as a social activity led her to also play online multiplayer games competitively, which she also started doing to play with her brother. This experience was very common for the few women in the Social First group. Most were introduced to gaming, and specifically a gaming network, through a brother, a boyfriend, or occasionally a male friend. The social networks required to be a Social First player were often off limits to white women and people of color, as demonstrated earlier by Non-Social players Lisa, Avery, and Vanessa.

One of the primary draws of gaming for Cory, a white 24-year-old cisgender heterosexual technical support specialist, was the idea that he could meet people around the world he would never encounter in his normal life:

> There's not a whole lot where I can be in Texas and I can be talking to someone in Canada and we can be doing the exact same thing and connecting on a semi-personal level. It's an interesting experience whenever you end up meeting someone, especially just meeting someone solely over a video game. Like whenever I was playing that game Counterstrike, I actually had a couple friends in Germany, and we would end up just talking about our different overall life qualities.

Joel, who typically was more interested in games than in using them to make friends, also used games to keep in touch with friends who lived far away from him. He explained, "I'm good friends with a guy who lives in Missouri, and so when we're playing, we're

mostly just sort of like talking about how things are going and stuff, because that's the only time I really hang out with him."

In contrast to Ian, who felt that the experience of playing a game was enriched by sharing it with his friends, for Cory, the game itself is interesting as the challenge it presents to him and his friends. This is also reflected in how Cory describes the appeal of connecting with friends through video games compared to other types of interactions:

> I've had a couple buddies where they end up moving to a different state and they have their own thing going on, but maybe a couple Tuesdays out of the month we'll end up getting together and just playing different games. And it's nice to be able to reconnect with someone outside of the general, oh hey, how's it going, how are things. And it's just a little bit more substance. There's a little bit of just something that y'all can both interact with and something that you can both connect to.

By giving them an activity to do together, gaming enabled Cory to feel connected to his friends in way that occasionally phone conversations did not. Daniel, a 22-year-old Japanese and Polish cisgender heterosexual college student, also found that online gaming was a good way to keep in touch with friends in different locations.

> But at least from my own experiences, it's just a social outlet. I guess in this time when people are becoming more increasingly apart from each other. For example, a lot of my friends are abroad right now, and definitely, for example with co-op and research jobs and other such things, people in university definitely will be far apart. So, online is definitely becoming more and more relevant in that sense.

Jeremy, the professor who played video games alone when he moved to new cities, would also use them as an alternative to other social activities depending on context, and also to keep in touch with remote contacts:

> So, if you're like, "It's really cold outside, I don't want to go on a hike when it's sleeting and snowing. Why don't you come over?" Watching a movie or something like that is always an option, but that's not very interactive you're not really doing anything with the person. Sometimes we will play board games with people, so a lot of people will come over and we will play board games and that was a really big thing before we had kids. We got out and play board games with

a group, but again, with a child, that's harder to coordinate. You just don't have the time to do it. And so it's more like, "Hey, come over, I got this new game and I think you'll like it." "Oh, you haven't played this one? Cool let's try it together and just hang out." Usually you play, you talk a little bit, that kind of thing. It's very relaxed.

Gaming was one social activity among many to be considered for Jeremy, with the added appeal of being easy to coordinate and more interactive than other media.

Others appreciate the way games helped to introduce them to a wider community. These included through podcasts, streaming over Twitch or YouTube, and online discussions in places like Facebook and Reddit. Peter, a white 32-year-old cisgender heterosexual software engineer, talked about his introduction to streaming over Twitch:

I remember one day a friend of mine was watching somebody stream, so I went and looked into it and I was like, huh, 'Play video games and chat with people. Yeah that sounds like fun.' So I got together with a friend of mine and we started our channel together. And you know we started having people come by and chat with us. We're both pretty social people we like to chat with friends, we like to play video games, we like to chat about videogames. So yes, I love getting to talk and joke and just share these experiences with people, so it really appealed to my desire to do those things. . . For me streaming appeals to my desire for a couple things: one, to play more video games. Obviously. Two: to have friends in the room. So really, it's about gaming, chatting with friends, and making new friends and just getting to share experiences. It's the best thing I think when I play a game in a series I really like or series I'm learning to like, there was actually a game recently that I was playing through for the first time. And like three people wandered in and were like 'Is this your first time playing this?' and I'm like 'Yeah!' They're like 'oh we have to watch you' because they were so excited to see someone else experience it for the first time.

Streaming allowed Peter to recreate the experience of sitting in a room playing and talking about a game with friends, but in a way that allowed him to meet new people and to always have someone available to talk to.

Other men also used the extensive gaming community as a way to meet new people and perform in some way, either through a podcast or a social media debate.

Daniel was very interested in debate and used the medium of games to engage in debate with strangers:

> Debate's really fun, it's probably my second major passion. And definitely makes its way into gaming as arguing is fun with everybody. Yeah, I've been spending less time playing games and more time arguing with people [through] the voice chats, and then I play no more than an hour a day, and I do still have other social obligation, so I can go online and talk to people. Yeah, I mean, I like the honesty, I guess.

Daniel played games in order to access the voice chats that would allow him to start arguments with strangers online. He was dismissive of trolls, who he claimed did not make logical arguments, while he preferred to treat online gaming channels as a debate club and follow the rules of debate. While this approach likely contributed to the hostile environment that kept many other players off online chats, for Daniel this social opportunity was the reason he played some games at all.

While Ian was primarily a Games First player, the online culture he encountered in games encouraged him and his friend to explore gaming's public sphere. Strangers would often overhear them and tell them they were funny, so Ian and his friend John decided to start a podcast about gaming.

> Basically, my friend John and I, we've been friends since like the fourth or fifth grade. We've been playing games together pretty much since high school. We kind of have this funny dynamic between us, and a lot of times when we would play, people would tell us, "You guys should have a show. You guys should record this. This is really fun." Blah, blah, blah. And we never really felt like that was the case. We felt like it would be conceited to just start recording us playing games, because we felt like everyone thinks they're funny. We didn't want to just be another couple of dudes who thought that they were funny, but just were only funny to themselves. So we kind of just logged that idea away and we created a website after a while where we would write about video games. We did that for like a year, and then it kind of fell by the wayside. Then I got into a lot of photography and video production, and I ended up meeting a guy who was into the same stuff and wanted to do podcasting. He was a DJ, so we ended up kind of teaming up and investing in some equipment, and he started doing a podcast with his friend about comic books. I was saying to John, "We might as well try it now.

We might as well try talking about video games." He has a girlfriend who's also very into video games, so we decided we would want to include her, and then another one of our friends that we hang out with a lot, so there's four of us.

Ian was not initially interested in assuming a more public role, but his relationship to the community encouraged him to pursue one. This is in direct contrast to the experiences of the women who encountered enough hostility online to decide to leave those spaces, even if they were interested in the possibilities they offered. While lower status people were often pushed away from the social elements, higher status people were often pulled into them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, these categories show that video games can serve many different purposes, many of them social. The old stereotype of the lonely gaming talking to strangers online only describes a small portion of the people who play video games, and even they often engage in other practices as well. While opportunities for social connections and benefits are constrained for many by the expectations surrounding identity in gaming culture, the potential remains. Some players are trapped in one of these categories while higher status players are able to move fluidly between them according to preference and context, are occasionally encouraged to engage with the social aspects even if they are initially reluctant.

High status players like Jason, the former professional gamer who had a separate character he would use when he wanted to drink and play casually with his lower-level friends, Simon who was primarily non-social but used games to keep in touch with his nephew, Connor who had played online multiplayer games regularly with his friends and

would only play single player-role playing games on vacation, and Mitchell who was in a League of Legends group to make friends but also had games he would play alone that he would never talk about with other people, show the ways in which high status players can make use of multiple approaches to best fit their needs and preferences. Other groups typically did not have the same privilege of moving from public to private gaming spaces at will. It was much more difficult for them to find gaming groups where they would feel welcome, and they typically had fewer options of ways to play. Lower status players sometimes attempted to be more social, but their limited networks and online experiences typically discourage them from pursuing those options. Eliminating social inequalities would open up possibilities for everyone who plays video games.

"It Is What You Make of It:" Perceived Meritocracy and Heterosexual Cisgender Men

Overall, the heterosexual cisgender men I interviewed tended to take a more casual attitude towards many of the issues associated with inequalities in gaming compared to other groups. Of all the people I spoke with, these men tended to characterize gaming as a fun activity filled with light-hearted in-group mockery not to be taken too seriously. For them, most of the problems identified by the other groups around harassment, intolerance, gatekeeping, and diversity could be solved with a more positive attitude, more time spent building up skills in the game, or by remembering that "it's only a game." To them, the people who encounter these problems simply had not taken the time to learn the rules of gaming culture. Furthermore, many of these men identified the real problem as the people who insisted on bringing politics into gaming, who they believed to be missing the point of video games.

This individualistic, meritocratic approach to gaming depends on early experiences with gaming that allow players to develop sufficiently high levels of skill and familiarity with gaming technology to gain a sense of ownership over it. Games, gaming platforms, social networks, and the time required to develop skills with video games are all valuable resources that are only made available to children in higher-status families. However, families must also make the choice to provide these resources to their children, which is why the dominant group is not only predominantly from middle to upper-middle class families, but also cisgender, heterosexual men. These are the men who fit the common definition of people who belong in gaming. By examining early experiences

with gaming, I demonstrate how early exposure to is due to how gaming and identity are linked in society. Those assumptions then perpetuate the existing social inequalities within gaming culture. Because most of these men were so easily introduced to gaming and grew up with gaming, they did not experience any of the barriers or inequalities. By framing their privileged position as a matter of individual skill and masculine toughness, they were able to reframe criticisms against the community they felt so attached to as a mark of pride and masculinity.

Gaming Habitus

In order to understand the skills and social interactions embedded within gaming culture that produce some players as marginalized while privileging others, it is useful to understand gaming as a field in the Bourdieusian sense. Graham Kirkpatrick makes this argument in his study of UK gaming magazines in the 1980s and 1990s (2012):

> Importantly, in Bourdieusian perspective, the modification of perceptions described here goes along with a broader change to the physiognomic dispositions of entrants to the field. Those who play the games acquire a historically specific habitus: they are disposed within their own bodies in such a way that picking up a controller or rattling keys and twisting a mouse in the specific manner associated with playing computer games is natural and obvious to them.

This bodily disposition, developed at a young age and honed through practice over time, is necessary for success in games, but is rarely interrogated by those who have achieved it. Because the physical elements of gaming have come to seem natural and obvious, those who develop this habitus take for granted the amount of time and effort required to acquire it, especially later in life. However, social context is crucial to players' initial introduction to as well as the continuing acceptance by gaming and gaming spaces, meaning that this initial introduction and its facilitation of the development of gaming

habitus are dependent on having a privileged identity and are therefore distributed unequally. Two main reasons have been shown to contribute to early inequalities that advantage cisgender boys and men in the development of gaming habitus: the interpretation of computers as masculine technology, and the importance of social networks in gaming.

Masculine Technology

First, computers are coded as masculine technology, a reason that marketers attempted to rebrand them for girls through the "girl games" movement of the 1980s (Jenkins and Cassell 2008). During this time, the gaming industry attempted to attract girls by making "pink games" like Barbie Fashion Designer that used traditional values of femininity and "purple games" like Nancy Drew games that used girls' real-life interests. While commercially successful, both of these types of games used essentialized notions of the likes and dislikes of boys and girls that ignored what they had in common (Jenkins and Cassell 2008). In their analysis of the "girl games" movement, Jenkins and Cassell (2008) argue that the movement failed to show that computers were not just for boys, which has made it difficult to change gender stereotypes in gaming even with game designers attempting to take a more fluid approach to gender.

Understanding "girl gamers" as having distinct needs and preferences reifies the distinction between male and female players (Taylor 2008). One study found that girls in Australia who enjoyed computer games used that interest alongside other typically masculine interests to develop a Tomboy identity (Jeanes 2011), showing that computers games are still widely considered to be a masculine activity. Even in households where

technology is shared by all members and is located in a common space, video game

technology is viewed as symbolically belonging to the men in the household—who

occasionally allow the women to access it (Crawford 2012). The assumption of male

ownership is also perpetuated by the video game industry, which predominately designs

gaming technology for the imagined male gamer. One example of this is in the design of

Xbox controllers, which are designed for men and are therefore too large to be easily

handled by smaller hands (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009).

In addition to the physical design of the technology, many games themselves are

designed for what the industry considers to be the "ideal gamer": a player who plays the

right kind of "hardcore games" (Hanford) with high levels of knowledge, skill, and

expertise related to games as well as being 'young, male, and heterosexual, with plenty of

disposable cash' (Consalvo, 22, 2007). Games are produced for this intended audience, of

young, white men who play and purchase games intensively (Dyer-Witheford and de

Peuter, 2009), which then reflect what game producers think this audience wants to see.

One way games are created to cater to this audience is by including characters that

resemble the imagined player. The proportion of characters appearing in games who are

not white men is very small. Among all characters who appear in video games, one study

(Williams et al, 2009) found that 86% were male and 15% were female, with an even

greater difference for primary characters. The same study found that 85% of primary

characters were white, 10% were black, 4% were biracial, and 2% were Asian. Hispanics

and Native Americans did not appear as primary characters in any of the games

(Williams et al, 2009). Another study found that in the Xbox, PlayStation 2, and

GameCube games they sampled, 41% of the women wore sexually revealing clothing and

43% were partially or totally nude, while of the men, 11% wore sexually revealing

clothing and 4% were partially or totally nude. This study found a similar

overrepresentation of men to the Williams et al study, with 14% of the characters being

female and 86% being male. This shows that while appearing far less frequently than

male characters, female characters were also much more likely to be hypersexualized

(Downs and Smith, 2010). Despite some innovation in representation and game structure

in recent decades it remains a norm for video games to center on a male protagonist in a

combative situation, and players are encouraged to identify with this "man of action"

(Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009). Violence is often central to this type of game, just

as it is presumed to be a central experience of men (Burrill, 2008). The wildly popular

Halo series is the perfect example of this form, where gamers are exclusively allowed to

occupy the position of a masculine warrior Master Chief in a military science fiction

environment (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009).

Other elements in games not only mirror the demographic characteristics of the

ideal player but draw on elements of masculinity in order to attach meaning and status to

games. As a key element of the gamer identity is tied to the amount of time and

investment a player puts into gaming, Hanford argues that games employ what he refers

to as "gender offense punishments" when players choose lower difficulty levels, which

celebrates and legitimizes some kinds of play while demeaning others. The three kinds of

gender offence punishments he identifies, Menu Embarrassment, Character Attacks, and

Restricting Textual Completion, work to gender levels of difficulty in games. Menu

Embarrassment is when "menus establish a clear pecking order to gamers, providing

them with a hierarchy of presumed or necessary skill" (Hanford, 156, 2018). One

example of this is in the Wolfenstein games, where the levels of difficulty are labelled "Can I play, Daddy?" "Don't hurt me," "Bring 'em on!" and "I am Death Incarnate!" Selecting the lowest level of play infantilizes the players avatar by dressing them as a baby. Character Attacks change an element of the players' character in a way that impacts the game. For example, in the game *Splosion Man* when a player fails at a level multiple times, they have the option to skip the level. The game refers to this option as the "Way of the Coward" and when selected, a tutu appears on the character for the rest of the level. Restricting Textual Completion occurs when players are blocked from finishing the game on easier levels and must being again at a higher difficulty setting in order to complete the game. "Where legitimate gamer masculinity was challenged by lack of effort, the priest in the machine offers reconciliation with a Hail Mary and a few more hours of gameplay" (Hanford, 158, 2018). Easier settings are depicted as alternately feminine or childish, failures of masculinity that are demeaned according the requirements of hegemonic masculinity (Hanford 2018). In this way, games equate effort, skill, and difficulty with masculinity.

Other elements of games have also been shown to gender games beyond traditional understandings of representation. The music created and selected for games is one way that games can reproduce or challenge gender stereotypes.

> When composers of video game music rely on gendered tropes, stereotypes, and clichés in their scores . . . they at best create hackneyed music that derives much of its meaning from -and contributes to -centuries of sexism, misogyny, patriarchy, and hegemonic heteronormativity. This can often undermine even the best intentions of representing and interpreting female characters in non-conforming ways. (Austin, 177, 2018).

Austin (2018) gives the example of Lara Croft, a controversial figure occasionally lauded for subverting traditional gender norms as well as for being one of the first major

playable video game characters to be depicted as a woman. However, Austin argues that despite Lara Croft's subversive performance of gender, the music chosen to accompany her is stereotypically feminine, thus undercutting her subversive potential. "Even the action music in *Tomb Raider* is gendered feminine, rarely using brass as a melodic timbre, and relying heavily on lyrical, melodic music rather than heroic fanfares or epic orchestral cues" (Austin, 178, 2018). The characters, structure, menus, and music all reproduce traditional gender norms and expectations that valorize masculinity while devaluing femininity. As a result, boys and men can easily navigate games in a way that anyone who challenges these patriarchal expectations cannot.

Gaming Networks

The second key element for the development of gaming capital is access to gaming network. Gaming networks are crucial for children to increase their skills and familiarity with gaming. In her study of professional gaming, T.L. Taylor looks at how people first become players, in order to explain why gaming circles are predominantly occupied by men. She finds that while male players are continuous courted and brought into the gaming community where they are told that they belong, women are constantly told that gaming spaces are not for them. Unlike men, women who play games are often isolated. They play alone and never discuss their gaming with their friends. Taylor refers to this as a "closeted gamer identity." Women who play often have friends who often play, but they hide it from each other. Taylor argues that in the face of these barriers and isolation, women who play are often the most dedicated players. Taylor defined play as an assemblage of elements, not just play itself: social context, marketing, technical

proficiency, and understandings of entertainment devices. All of these elements

communicate to women that gaming is not for them, and so they isolate themselves

(Taylor, 2008).

As well as the importance of networks for communicating to players that gaming

is a space they are meant to occupy, networks are also necessary for the development of

skill. Taylor (2012) demonstrates the importance of networks in her work on e-sports:

> We are introduced to games, taught how to play, and skilled up by our engagement with others. Not only do girls and women often face an uphill battle when it comes to choosing computer games as a leisure (not to mention professional) identity, they are often marginalized in their access to communities through which they could develop their gaming expertise. Sometimes this is simply that they don't have a strong network of friends to play with. At the more extreme end, stories abound of women who can't get practice matches if they are known to be a woman because "boys don't like losing to girls." Those who do get regular play opportunities still face additional challenges in being a regular member of the high-end competitive community. Whereas a slightly less talented male player will sometimes be brought onto a team and skilled up (often based on their friendship and other network connections), women are very rarely (indeed I cannot think of any cases of this currently) given similar opportunities. . . If women are locked out of meaningful challenges that allow them to hone their skill, they will not be able to compete at the same level as the men in the scene who, via their access to more robust networks and the easier occupation of gamer identity, are able to develop professional skills.

Taylor is discussing barriers to elite competitive gaming. However, playing with others in

order to build skills and confidence was a common story I heard in my interviews with

players of all levels. From their earliest introduction to gaming, boys have an advantage

in their effortless entry into gaming that supports the gaming habitus that structures their

understanding of gaming as a whole and allows them to develop gaming capital.

Gaming capital is a concept developed by Mia Consalvo. Gaming capital is what

gives players status and esteem in gaming circles. Knowledge about what games are cool,

when they are being released, how to play them in the right way, secret facts, and Easter

eggs form the basis for gaming capital. Not only do players need to play games in order to develop this necessary expertise, but also engage with paratexts such as magazines, conventions, and other gaming-related media. Consalvo (22, 2007) compares the role of gaming magazines to that of teen or women's magazines:

> They instruct the player in how to play, what to play, and what is cool (and not) in the game world. In that way, they function much like teen or women's magazines do, instructing the reader in "how to" achieve a certain role or look. Feminist critics of Seventeen and Glamour argue that such magazines play an ideological role in teaching readers what the important parts of life are: looking good, getting a guy, and being successful at work. Although these periodicals offer different levels of sophistication, their role is the same: selling readers products, based on creating needs that are carefully cultivated.

Also similar to women's magazines is the way that gaming paratexts work to market themselves to one key audience and to exclude others who do not fit that description. She argues that gaming magazines "create an average or perhaps ideal gamer that is young, male, and heterosexual, with plenty of disposable cash" (Consalvo, 22, 2007). The magazines have a readership that is 90 to 95 percent male with the money to regularly buy new consoles and console games. Magazines are aware of this and frame themselves accordingly.

> What results is a product that excludes almost as much as it includes, in part to help define such a small segment of society. That naming of a group also helps define gaming capital— and who is likely to want or possess it. Those excluded by magazines' address are also more likely to be excluded from wanting or possessing gaming capital. (Consalvo, 36, 2007)

In this way, gaming capital is limited to those who have all already accepted as "gamers," and serves to reproduce inequalities and misconceptions about who belongs in gaming.

This body of research has identified the elements of a self-perpetuating cycle of gaming privilege: young cisgender boys are given games at a young age games are linked to youth and masculinity. The boys are then able to develop gaming habitus through

practice (Graeme, 2012). Boys have to opportunity to play with other boys, forming networks that further encourage them to develop skills and the social rules of gaming (Taylor, 2008). In order to contribute and gain status in these networks, they read magazines, attend events, and engage with web sources that are all designed and intended for them. This gives them gaming capital they can use to make new friendships and enter new networks based on gaming, providing them with new places and opportunities to learn about new games and hone their skills (Consalvo, 2007). This entire process is designed and supported by a wide network of individuals, products, and corporations working to bring boys into gaming and keep them there (Burrill, 2008; Evans and Janish, 2015; Jenkins and Cassell, 2008; Crawford 2012; Taylor, 2012; Salter and Blodgett, 2012). Other children who do not benefit from these assumptions about technology, gaming, and belonging need to fight and work for every step of this cycle, and at every step face barriers that the boys are unaware of. Definitions of gamer identity and masculinity inform this assemblage of games, game networks, and gaming practices that together constitute gaming culture, creating a space where boys and men who meet these criteria take being accepted for granted, while everyone else struggles to exist at all.

Some players are skilled and are others are not, but the reasons so why which players tend to fall in each of these categories are rooted in broader social inequalities. By ignoring those larger contexts by focusing on individual skill, these men obscure the root causes of social inequalities in gaming while positioning themselves as gaming's true masters. I argue that the mechanisms that construct cisgender heterosexual men as high-status in gaming culture also serve to obfuscate gaming's inequalities for those in

positions of power, providing them with a replacement narrative of meritocracy that emphasizes earned individual skill and emotional toughness.

Findings

Getting Started

As was true of the majority of people I interviewed, the cisgender heterosexual men I spoke with were all introduced to video games at a young age. Several had a father who had an early gaming system, and recounted memories of being around games for as long as they could remember. The men who received a system through their fathers tended to play with their fathers, while the men who received a system through their mothers were more likely to use the system as an individual activity during long car trips, or other times when their parents were otherwise occupied. For example, Caleb, a white 21- year-old cisgender heterosexual baker, remembered, "I want to say my dad brought home an N64 when I was a lot younger and we just kind of sat there and played just Mario and just whatever games we had on there." Similarly, Anthony, a white 25-year-old cisgender heterosexual student, said, "My dad introduced me to them originally, and then I sort of carved my own path going into like free games on websites, an occasional computer game that he had I would play; stuff like that." Cory, white 24-year-old cisgender heterosexual technical support specialist, discovered a love of building computers through gaming, "That's actually one of the first things that my dad and I were both new at, because he gave me a computer." Joel, a 20-year cisgender, heterosexual white sales associate was introduced to games through watching his father play: "I remember watching my dad play a whole bunch of games, just sort of like sitting around

and watching him. And then of course when we got the N64 we could play too. I'm sure we played on the SEGA Master System, I just don't remember it." Instead of his father, Jack, 28-year-old cisgender heterosexual Chinese and Vietnamese grocery store supervisor, had this experience with his uncle: "My uncle wasn't really fond of kids, so at the start what he did was he purchased the consoles to help hang out with us, keep us company. I guess that we we'd have something to do while just staying with my grandparents."

These early gifts from their fathers show how expectations around gaming are gendered from the beginning. These men were given games and gaming systems frequently because it was an activity that their fathers enjoyed. The fathers would want to pass on that enjoyment to their sons. Many of my respondents spoke about time spent playing video games as some of the best memories they had with their fathers or uncles. Because their fathers understood gaming as a masculine activity, these men learned that association from those first experiences.

In contrast to the men whose fathers bought them game systems to play with them, many of the men whose mothers bought them systems did it to occupy their sons or to allow them to play with friends. It was rare to hear about a mother who played video games with her son. When discussing why his mother bought his handheld games, Simon, a 47-year old white cisgender heterosexual software developer, said," I mean that my mom probably bought them so I would shut up in the car. When we would go on long car rides, she would give me some to play with." According to Greg, white 25-year-old cisgender heterosexual student, his parents were initially opposed to the idea of buying him a console, but his mother changed her mind once they divorced:

Once my parents separated, my mom was like let me get you an Xbox just as a gift which was some consolation, I suppose. I didn't really ask the reason, but she was like, 'You know what your dad never wanted you to have one, I don't care let me go out and buy you one.' So I got an Xbox 360 when I was in junior high.

The console also supported Greg's social life, which was a concern of his mother's:

I think I was the only one in my neighborhood that didn't [have a console] so I was almost the odd man out. So I would go to friends' houses and play at their houses. My mom was finally like, let's just get you one. I think my mom liked having my friends over. It was sort of this motherly, like I want to take care of them, like if they want to come over at least they'll be in my house, you guys are not out smoking the marijuana, whatever people in affluent white neighborhoods do.

Rather than as an activity to do together, these mothers tended to understand gaming systems as a tool. That tool could be used to occupy unruly children, to soften the blow of divorce, or to facilitate a child's social status and networks. However, these accounts show that coming from a mother, gaming systems were rarely understood as a resource the mothers themselves could use, either alone or with the child.

Other men remembered their parents already having a system, or a console or computer suddenly appearing in their house when they were around 6 or 7 whether they had expressed interest in it or not. As Jeremy described, "As we got older it was just always something that we had."

All of these boys understood gaming technology as something they had access to as long as it was in the house. From an early age, they took for granted that gaming was an activity for them. Constantly having access to these technologies may have contributed to their sense of expertise and ownership that many of these men had as adults. They began to develop gaming habitus that allowed them to interact with games seamlessly from a young age. However they got access to the technology, as long as they had that access young enough these men were able to develop the skills that others, who

had to find gaming on their own later in live, would struggle to attain. Men never had to struggle to access gaming technology, and this in part may make it difficult for them to understand the barriers that so many others face.

The men with the least amount of early exposure to games still had a cousin or a friend with a gaming system from a very young age. Although they did not have as constant access to games as the others, these men were still able to start developing skills with the technology from a young age, and most acquired a system of their own by early adolescence. However, not having constant access until that age was still seen as unusual, and some of the men discussed it as a significant barrier to their gaming later in life. Justin, a 27-year-old white heterosexual cisgender graphics and motion designer, was one example of a cisgender heterosexual man who got a comparatively late start to gaming because he did not have his own gaming system until he was nine or ten years old. Before that, he played primarily at a cousin's house. "I believe it was at my cousin's house. They got a Nintendo 64 and that was about the first time I'd heard of video games. I would have been probably 8 or 9." Justin got a Game Boy a year later, and a console in seventh grade. This was unusually late for the men in this group. Justin talked about how his friends took note of this comparatively late start as well:

> I know a big thing my friends bring up is I was actually, I'm kind of a big gamer, but I got an incredibly late start to video games. There could be something said about that. I know I've thought about it a lot where it's just I wasn't allowed to play them as a child, so I think I tried to make up for it in my teen years a lot. But then again, I know people who have been playing since there were five and are completely addicted to it.

Justin's friends were surprised that someone who started gaming so late would become so involved in the community and passionate about games. Justin thinks this

might account for why he played so much later in life, but he also found that it limited him in other ways:

> Looking back, it only really affected me for games I wanted to play competitively because I feel like a lot of people who started when they were young, they just learned very fast. And I didn't really start that kind of thing until I was in college. So it was just like a lot of catching up. But I do feel like, as somebody who's so interested in that kind of medium, starting so late made me miss out on a lot of what people consider classics.

While Justin had the social networks and resources to become a prominent member of the fighting games community, organizing and participating in large-scale tournaments, he found that starting to build skills later than other players made it difficult to play other kinds of games competitively. Although most would consider the age of 8 to be an early exposure to most types of technology, the way Justin describes his struggle to build enough skills in games to be competitive shows the importance of gaming habitus, which is developed very young. The age of 8 may be too late to catch up to other children who began internalizing and embodying gaming strategies much younger, to the extent that they now appear natural.

These stories show that in order to gain their privileged positions in gaming culture, heterosexual, cisgender men benefitted from gendered expectations surrounding the use and ownership of gaming technology as well as social networks that would accept and support their gaming endeavors. Gaming habitus was usually acquired early and was much more difficult to develop later in life. Gaming capital depends on gaming habitus, so these early experiences with games were critical for these men to later have to ability to use games and gaming knowledge to establish status and build social connections. This early introduction appeared natural to most of these men, obfuscating the ways in which mechanisms of inequality in gaming culture were working to position them as high-status

players from a very early age. As a result, these men were also unaware of how these mechanisms served to marginalized others. To cisgender heterosexual men, gaming is often such a taken for granted part of their lives that it hides how other people struggle to enter and be accepted in gaming spaces.

Gamer Identity

Gamer identity is another area where cisgender heterosexual privileged position in gaming can be seen to make it difficult to understand the barriers that others faced. Most of the men in this group agreed that they considered themselves gamers, and many used the word gamer casually throughout the interview. Most of them gave a definition based on an interest in games. For example, "It's a title basically for people who play a lot of games" (Caleb), "Do you like games? Then you're a gamer, simple as that" (Peter). Neil described himself as "someone who could easily be a gamer, by getting to that world if I didn't have a life outside of, because it's something that I would want to dedicate all my time to" but used the word more generally throughout the interview. Many of these men wanted to show they had an open definition of the word, so would define themselves in opposition to the people who do not think console games, mobile games, board games, or tabletop games could be included in gaming. Some gave standards for different types of games or frequency of play, but most seemed to want to broaden the definition from how they expected me to understand it. This shows that they were aware of the way the word "gamer" has been used to exclude others, but later discussions about their definition of games revealed the ways in which even these men attempting to be inclusive were replicating this exclusion.

Most of them also wanted to include "casual players," meaning anyone who plays the typical hardcore games, but not as frequently, competitively, or at the same skill level as the hardcore players, who usually build their own PCs and are dismissive of anyone who does not. For these men, casual games are separate from casual gamers. Casual games are usually mobile games or other low skill games, whereas casual gamers for these men are people who play hardcore games in a casual way. Several of these men identified themselves as casual gamers, meaning they were not at the most elite levels of online play. In their explanation of the continuum of gamers that they often intended to make more inclusive, these men who positioned their own activities at the "casual" end of the gaming spectrum raised the required standards to be identified as a gamer. This redefinition eliminates the games defined as "casual" that would have been positioned under that casual definition, thereby eliminating the players of casual games from the gamer identity altogether.

Community Toxicity

While the heterosexual cisgender men were usually aware of the divisions and barriers within the gamer label, they often took a very individualistic approach to the widely reported problem of online harassment and toxicity in games. Often problems with harassment were attributed to being a new player or a player with lower skill level, issues that were seen as separate from issues of race, class or gender. In addition, the harassers were usually seen as players who had become overly invested and should be ignored. According to Caleb,

> That's the person that just does nothing but play that game. Unfortunately, those type of people can sometimes make the game inhospitable for new players

because when you put those type of people with a newer player, they get angry or just aggressive toward that person, and just a lot of swearing is involved, right. They think that they're bad players that they should quit the game and so don't ever play it again because they've put so much time and effort to it and I guess it pisses them off to see someone who doesn't have the same dedication as them to the game.

This individualistic approach was also reflected in the ways many of these men would attempt to avoid the hostility common in online gaming spaces. Peter said, "I found online is just, for me personally. Just like in real life as long as, you know, you're smart about what you say, and you know are clearly intending to invoke genuine discussion and not just trying to troll or incite you know arguments." According to Neil, "It is what you make of it, you can really enjoy any game if you, I could enjoy like Tetris, um, but at the end of the day it is just a game, and enjoy it for what it is, for fun. They're meant to be fun. they're meant to escape the monotony of everyday life." These men, with their strong gaming skills and social networks they had built from an early age, had internalized the rules and demands of playing a game. To them, the physical actions of moving a controller as well as the social demands and expectations were taken for granted as second nature. With an entire gaming industry developed in order to attract them and effortlessly funnel them into increasingly elite levels of gaming, these men were unaware that the path through gaming culture was not so easy for other groups.

With their high gaming capital, these men were aware of how trash talk and competitiveness could play a role in gaming, and they had the physical knowledge to negotiate most games with relative ease. They were sure of their place within gaming because the industry, as well as broader social expectations surrounding gender and gaming, had communicated to them throughout their entire lives that gaming was made for them. Because this idea was reinforced so early and so easily in most of their lives,

they grew to understood that their experiences were universal. Instead, while these men were funneled through gaming with ease, most other groups faced a variety of barriers from even before they picked up a game.

Conclusion

In conclusion, because they took an individualistic, meritocratic approach to games and gaming issues, even the men in this group who believed that hostility and social inequalities were problems in gaming were unable to solve them and became complicit in their reproduction. Instead of working to solve these issues that some found detrimental to the broader reputation of the field, these men instead worked to reframe these attacks in such a way as to emphasis their own masculinity and skill, thus securing their dominance in gaming spaces while simultaneously limiting possible critiques of the established gaming social hierarchy. Instead of being complicit in a toxic system, through this individualistic approach these men saw themselves as the ones tough enough to withstand attacks understood as equally distributed among everyone playing a game. The white women, people of color, nonbinary and transgender people who argue that this privilege is linked to identity are understood as needlessly political and emotionally fragile, unable to live up to the masculine standards of gaming that these men explained as gender neutral.

Honorary Bros: Women Receiving Patriarchal Dividends

Games have long been considered a masculinized project. In the 1980's, gaming companies made efforts to bring women into games by creating games intended to cater to their interests. During this time, the gaming industry made "pink games" like *Barbie Fashion Designer* that centered traditional values of femininity and "purple games" like *Nancy Drew* games that attempted to mirror girls' real-life interests. While these games were commercially successful, scholars have argued that the girl games movement failed to show that computers were not just for boys, which has made it difficult to change gender stereotypes in gaming even with game designers now attempting to take a more fluid approach to gender (Jenkins and Cassell 2008).

The stereotyped girl games movement seems to suggest that women who overcome stereotypes to succeed in mainstream gaming should be celebrated. For women, to be successful in mainstream gaming spaces is to prove that women have no need for feminized, stereotyped games, and that gaming belongs to everyone, not just the men who have dominated and defined it for the past six decades. However, can the presence of a woman in gaming spaces be subversive if she utilizes the same attitudes, skills, and scripts as men in order to be successful? Is just the presence of women enough to make those spaces more inclusive? In this chapter, I examine women who have achieved high status in public gaming spaces and demonstrate the skills and strategies they employ in order to reach and maintain that status.

In order to understand how women who with high status in gaming culture attain and understand this status, I draw on work from postfeminism and masculinities. I argue

that in order to can gain acceptance in masculine-dominated gaming spaces, women rely on their personal connections to men and echo the attitudes and practices of these men. By performing this role, these women are reinscribing established gender inequalities and reinforcing the barriers that have historically worked to exclude women from gaming spaces. While these women hold no more responsibility for the hostility of gaming culture towards women in general than the men who echo these attitudes, the existence of these women challenges the idea that any amount of gender diversity in gaming spaces is enough to make those spaces more inclusive.

These women found a way to belong in gaming spaces through a group of men they were friends with. These women were often instrumental in reproducing the inequalities that kept most women out of public gaming spaces. These women were all cisgender, mostly white or Asian, and the majority identified as heterosexual. They were similar to many of the cisgender, heterosexual men in terms of their individualistic, meritocratic attitude towards gaming and their characterization of belonging as a matter of game-based, emotional, and linguistic skill.

Postfeminism

I draw on notions of postfeminism to understand the ways in which women reject the need for feminism in gaming spaces while simultaneously benefitting from their position as the only woman in the group. Postfeminism has been widely discussed by scholars over the past few years (McRobbie 2009; Gill 2007 2008; McNair 2002). Douglas (2010), explores what she refers to as "enlightened sexism," which can be seen as distinct from postfeminism, uses the gains of feminism to reintroduce images of

women as defined by their appearance and ability to appeal to men, and as emphatically feminine. Enlightened sexism combines girl-power images with light-hearted sexualized depictions of women to playfully allow for the return of traditional sexism in a way that is difficult to criticize and distracts from the work that remains for feminism to accomplish. This form of sexism is appealing because of its fun, playful nature and how participating allows young women to become "one of the guys" (Douglas 2010, 12). Douglas argues that postfeminism offers actually the same sexism that was opposed by second-wave feminism, but which is now being presented in a way that appeals to Millennial women (Douglas 2010, 12). McRobbie (2007) presents a similar definition of what she refers to as postfeminism: "[In] a 'double movement', gender retrenchment is secured, paradoxically, through the wide dissemination of discourses of female freedom and (putative) equality. Young women are able to come forward on the condition that feminism fades away" (McRobbie, 2007, 720).

Gill and Scharff (2013) argue that neoliberalism, as a mode of political and economic rationality characterized by the withdrawal of the state and the internalization of individual responsibility, fits uniquely well with postfeminism. This is because both are about individualization and active, freely choosing subjects. They argue that because women are called upon to self-discipline more than men, women are neoliberalism's ideal subject. Related to this idea is a new emphasis on choice and empowerment. Women are told they choose how to present themselves in order to please themselves, not men, and that male approval of this choice gives them power (Gill 2008).

Like Gill's understanding of postfeminism, Douglas's enlightened sexism draws on neoliberal ideas of individual responsibility and self-surveillance. "Because the true

path to power comes from being an object of desire, girls and women should now actively choose –even celebrate and embrace –being sex objects. That's the mark of a truly confident, can-do girl: one whose objectification isn't imposed from without, but comes from within" (Douglas 2010, 156). This strategy for engaging with sexist culture is a choice that women claim to enjoy and be making for themselves, making it difficult for feminist scholars who try to respect and understand the experience of women to criticize. For postfeminist subjects, as long as women are making a choice of some kind for themselves, that choice can be seen as feminist (Lazar 2013

Irony is another key element of the postfeminist sensibility. Gill (2007) argues that irony allows women to claim they are engaging with sexist culture in a lighthearted, tongue-in-cheek manner, and so are able to claim that the sexism is not seriously meant. She also argues that irony functions "through the very extremeness of the sexism expressed," (Gill 2007, 160) giving the example of comparing women in 'dumbest girlfriend' competitions to demonstrate how sexism enacted so extremely can be taken as evidence that sexism is not intended. This approach makes attempts at criticism difficult, as it places the critic in the position of seeming to not understand the joke, or to be taking things too seriously (Gill 2007).

Much scholarly work has focused on the challenges of the sexualized postfeminist environment rather than on women's experiences, by examining hook up culture (Bogle 2008), sexual practices (Sarracino and Scott 2009), beauty advertising (Lazar 2013), and 'chick lit' (Harzewski 2011). Other work addresses how individual women experience and navigate these messages, particularly in the area of education. It has been argued that girls now must balance traits of traditional femininity and

masculinity in order to succeed academically (Ringrose 2007), girls interpret experiences of sexism as individual problems rather than as collective acts of oppression (Pomerantz and Raby 2011), and that girls maintain traditionally gendered career expectations although they articulate them in postfeminist terms of individual choice (Baker 2010). In their work on girls' experience with sexism, Pomerantz et al (2013) use the rule of tactical polyvalence to show that despite their experiences of sexism, girls strategically deploy a contradictory narrative of postfeminism in order to maintain a "nice" persona and to distance themselves from victimhood. Postfeminism is useful for understanding how women navigate a sexist media environment by rejecting feminism, playing along with sexist jokes, and disciplining themselves and their behavior rather than attempt to challenge gendered expectations.

Masculinities

While little work on masculinities exists that studies how heterosexual women can reinforce gender structures, the field is necessary for understanding how male-dominated mainstream gaming spaces function. The defining status is hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (Connell 1995 77). What this consists of depends on historical context and can shift depending on who is most powerful in society, but it is rarely fully enacted and remains an impossible goal against which men measure themselves (Connell 1995). As discussed in Chapter 1, in gaming culture geek masculinity attains this hegemonic status. Within

the same framework other masculinities are subordinated. Most importantly in European and American society, homosexual men are subordinated by the dominant heterosexual men. This is not the only subordinated masculinity, as some heterosexual men are also excluded from the dominant hegemonic position, usually due to other perceived associations with femininity (Connell 1995).

Men who do not practice hegemonic masculinity in its entirety but still benefit from it, gaining patriarchal dividends, have what Connell (1995) calls a relationship of complicity with the hegemonic project. The last relationship to the gender hegemonic masculinity is marginalization, which is based on race relations within a white-supremacist context. It is distinct from the first three relations in that while that they are internal to the gender order, marginalization is about lack of authorization of the dominant group. These categories are all fluid and historically constructed and cannot be understood outside of historical context (Connell 1995).

By looking at girls in a school who aligned themselves with masculinity, Pascoe (2007) shows how masculinity can be defined as a set of practice that are associated with women as well as men. These women engaged in gender resistance in their daily interactional processes by acting in ways not usually associated with teenaged girls, and thus revealed the connection between masculinity and male bodies as a construction. However, at the same time they reinscribed gender norms by treating girls as the boys often did, and therefore most of them had little potential for challenging the gender system (Pascoe 2007). One element of this process that Pascoe identifies is ventriloquation, which describes the ways in which the girls adopted the point of views of the boys. Ventriloquation allowed girls "to appropriate the social power that accompanied

masculine identities." (2007 112). Pascoe gives the example of a girl who would

objectify other girls in order to enhance her own status. Pascoe writes:

> [The Basketball Girls] were reconstructing what it meant to be a girl. They
> engaged in practices that looked a lot like "compulsive heterosexuality." Like
> sexist and athletic boys, they were at the top of the school social hierarchy,
> instilling both fear and respect in other students . . . In this sense their "gender
> maneuvering" both challenged the gender order and reinscribed it. They
> challenged the gender order by acting and dressing like boys. They reinscribed the
> gender order by engaging in many of the dominance practices that constitute
> adolescent masculinity, such as taking up space, teasing girls, and positioning
> themselves as sexually powerful. (2007, 113).

By acting like boys and reproducing some of the practices that worked to marginalize

other girls, Pascoe shows how girls were able to attain status for themselves.

Grazian (2007) uses Connell's concepts of masculinities with West and

Zimmerman's (1987) understanding of gender as performance in order to examine the

ritual of the "girl hunt," where young heterosexual men employ a set of hunting strategies

to pursue women as part of urban nightlife. The collective rituals employed in this

activity serve to solidify these men's performances of heterosexuality and masculine

identity. The pursuit of women is part of this public performance, but it is the

homosocial interactions that occur before pursuing a potential sex partner that have the

real value as a collective strategy of impression management and mobilizing masculinity

(Grazian 2007). Here the men express hegemonic masculinity as camaraderie and

competitiveness with their friends, and those who do not participate in the hunt itself

benefit from the patriarchal dividends of complicit masculinity through their passive

performance that supports their friends (Grazian 2007).

Related to this idea of attaining status through social connections is Taylor's study

of the importance of networks for becoming professional esports players. In her study of

professional gaming, T.L. Taylor (2008) studies how people first become players in order to explain why gaming circles are predominantly occupied by men. She finds that while male players are continuously courted and brought into the gaming community, women are constantly told that gaming spaces are not for them. Unlike men, women who play games are often isolated. They play alone and never discuss their gaming with their friends. Taylor refers to this as a "closeted gamer identity." Women who play often have friends who often play, but they hide it from each other. Taylor (2008) argues that in the face of these barriers and isolation, women who play are often the most dedicated players.

Taylor defines play as an assemblage of elements, not just play itself, that contribute to the exclusion of women from gaming: social context, marketing, technical proficiency, and understandings of entertainment devices. All of these elements communicate to women that gaming is not for them, and so they isolate themselves (Taylor, 2008). Other work has focused on these elements that communicate to women that they do not belong in gaming, including the extended time required by mainstream games that women are expected to devote to caring for others (Crawford 2012; Juul 2010), the low status and perceived threat of the mobile games that tend to be more popular with women (Vanderhoef 2013, Taylor 2012), widespread mockery and harassment from men involved with gaming (Salter and Blodgett 2012; Kuznekoff and Rose 2012; Cote 2015), and the popularity of games that revolve around male protagonist in a violent combative situation (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter 2009; Burrill 2008). All these factors contribute to women hiding their gaming practices, which prevents them from building networks.

Findings

  I found that women often assume the role of what one woman referred to as the "honorary bro" in order to succeed in the public sphere of gaming. Many women performed elements of this role, but the only women who seemed to be able to fully embrace it were heterosexual women who were either white or Asian. Women in the LGBTQ community and Black women had limited access to the required gaming networks and when they attempted to enter gaming spaces, they faced additional harassment and exclusionary practices.

  The honorary bros were women who tended to be the only woman in a group of men. This position could be in a leadership capacity or not. It was sometimes precarious and sometimes well-established. These women often needed one strong relationship with a man in order to enter these spaces, usually through a brother or boyfriend. They sounded and behaved like the cisgender heterosexual men in many ways. They would claim that skill and experience was all that mattered for status in gaming culture, and that people making claims about harassment and inclusivity were bringing social issues into a space where they did not belong. Most of these women identified with the "gamer" label and saw gaming as a key part of their identity. They believed that harassment could be overcome through individual toughness, attitude, and the ability to understand harassment as part of the game, usually seen as linked to experience and gaming savvy. In this way they were able to position those who were affected by harassment as irrational, inexperienced, and excessively emotional.

Nicole was a 28-year-old heterosexual Asian legal assistant who loved Zelda and was one of the few women who routinely attended the community gaming group I observed. She often played games alone or with her boyfriend and used the group less as a way to play games and more as a way to meet people. She claimed that the group had allowed her to make some of her best friends, which she attributes to her tendency to get along better with men than with women. The group was composed mostly of men, with a few women who would attend much less regularly or would come to a few meetings in a row and then stop. The leadership of the group and the core attendees were almost all men, with the exception of Nicole. She had initially joined the grouped because she had broken up with her long-term boyfriend who she used to play games with regularly. She said the appeal of the group was that having the shared interest of games made it easier to form friendships:

> [H]aving gaming as a common interest really helped me open up to some of the guys there. Just because when you play games and then you kind of get familiar with each person's personality and how they game, and then suddenly you kind of talk alike and then suddenly you're best friends with this next guy.

Nicole did not remark on the fact that the group was almost exclusively made up of men and took for granted that the people she would meet there would be "guys." When asked about why there were so few women in the group, she responded:

> I heard from some of the organizers that some of the other girls, they were either getting hit on or they felt really... I guess pushed away. Yeah, because apparently some of the guys had been making advances and it was unwelcomed. Personally, I get along a lot better with guys, so even if that happened to me, I wouldn't notice it, I'd probably just play it off. But I know some girls, they do care about that kind of stuff.

For Nicole, the problem in the group is not the men's behavior, but the individual responses of the women to that behavior. She was able to find community in a space that

tended to be hostile to women and sees the treatment of women by the group as insignificant in her overall assessment of her experiences there: "Like I said, they feel like family to me. I've even told organizer, 'You guys are like family.' That's essentially what they're trying to accomplish, is having people feel like they can come to this group and not feel judged or whatever." In order to create this family, she echoed the attitudes that make hostility towards women seem excusable, redefining "people" and "feel judged" to not include women who the group pushed away.

Bethany, a white heterosexual 25-year-old temp worker, shared many of Nicole's opinions about gender in gaming. Bethany had several good friends growing up who played puzzle and action adventure games. She loved games like Sonic, Animal Crossing, and the Sims but as an adult her main gaming circle was composed of her boyfriend and his friends. She identified herself as a casual player but liked to discuss video games. She described her boyfriend as "a huge gamer," and said that because of his intense interest in gaming most of her conversations somehow ended up leading back to video games. As a result, while she personally played few online multiplayer or first-person shooter games, she was frequently engaging with gaming culture. Perhaps because of her limited exposure to gaming culture outside her circle of male friends, she did not report ever having experienced any kind of harassment or discrimination in gaming:

> So speaking from personal experience, I've never had any issues. Like I said, a lot of the females I made friends with have played video games to some kind of degree or can talk about video games. Most of my male friends, the males that come across, no one's treated me any differently because I play games. They're just like, "Oh, you like video games, what kind?" There's never been any challenge or flirting because I play video games. That being said, I have heard stories, unfortunately, about females having that issues of getting looked down upon or people hitting on them just because they play video games, you know? Which sucks, you know. But I've never personally experienced that. No, that's considered cringe-worthy in my circle of friends.

Here, she claims to have heard that sexism can be an issue in gaming. However, she soon began to echo the typical responses from men who claim skill level is the most important factor in harassment:

> From what I've heard and stuff, people don't really care that much, as long as you're good at video games. So it's about speaking through your skill level versus what you look like, what your sexuality is. Because I know there's some transgender people now, in the pro-gaming scene, which is pretty cool, who are insanely good. There's different color of people in the pro-gaming and even just regular communities . . . Unfortunately, there's always racism somewhere, there's always discrimination somewhere, but from what I've heard and experienced, there hasn't been that issue.

Later, she expressed frustration at women who attempt to contribute anything but skill in the name of gender equality:

> I've seen recently some, they consider themselves I guess feminists talking about video games and stuff like that, and it's a little bit cringe-worthy to me . . . At the end of the day, if you play video games, great. But if you try to make it more about a gender thing, it does more damage than it helps, you know? And that should be the only thing that matters.

For Bethany, feminism served as a distraction from gaming and harmed the position of women like herself by suggesting that they may have an interest in disrupting the established order. She went on to describe an example of a time where she thought feminism in gaming went too far:

> A couple years ago, I think, there was this all female League of Legends team. I think it was Team Siren or something, and they made a whole intro trailer and stuff about how they're a whole female team and powerful women kind of thing, and you're just kind of sitting there shaking your head like, this is not the way to go about it. If you're a female and you want to bring more awareness to female gamers, that's great, but speak more with your skill level than anything else. Because that's what matters.

Because so many of her discussions about gaming had been with men, it is possible she believed that the experiences of her friends were universal. Bethany's attitude is

interesting in part because it so closely resembles the typical responses from heterosexual

men, but also because it at times seems at odds with her own experiences. Like many of

the other women, she tended to avoid online gaming because she wanted to avoid

harassment. However, unlike women who had a circle of friends who also recognized

gaming as a contentious space for many groups, Bethany saw this aversion as a personal

failure:

> Online gaming in general. That's another thing, too. You run into d-bags that will
> do insults and stuff, at being a female, but if you're a male, you'll still get the same
> kind of crap. People just say mean things online, right? Yeah, that's just how they
> are. That's part of the reason I don't like online gaming too much, 'because people
> can be d-bags. You kind of have to have thicker skin, which I'm kind of sensitive
> so I'm working on that a little bit, you know. So it depends how you handle it, but
> it's not ... I guess that's the one last thing I want to include too. It's just not
> necessarily about attacking females or that kind of thing, it just really is the skill
> level and sharing just a common interest at the end of the day.

While Bethany herself did not play games with a group of men, her gaming social circle

of mostly men informed the way she viewed gaming culture as a whole. The lack of

diversity led her to believe that diversity is not an issue anywhere in gaming, a sentiment

common among the men I interviewed.

In contrast to Nicole and Bethany, Charlene, a white 19-year-old heterosexual

video producer who played mostly online games and was the leader of a small gaming

group for players of a popular multiplayer online game. She argued that the diversity

within the experiences of white men meant that there is enough diversity in gaming.

When discussing perceptions of diversity in e-sports, she said,

> Some people who don't understand think it's not very diverse because they look at
> e-sports and they see a bunch of white guys and a bunch of Chinese people, but
> what they don't realize is that, yeah, okay, they all look like a bunch of white
> guys, but close your eyes and point at a map and you might find one of them. It's
> so international, and I wish that that was something that more people understood
> because gaming sometimes gets, like professional gaming sometimes gets some

hate for that. They're like, "Oh, I don't see any women." Like "Oh, I don't see any X people." You need to read a little bit more into these people because they're a lot more complex than you might think.

This indicates that she saw concerns about diversity in gaming as unnecessary and unsophisticated, which shows that it is neither a concern nor a priority for her in terms of how she leads her gaming group.

Charlene was the only woman in the group and spoke fondly of the "awesome guys" in the group. This was a situation she was familiar with. Growing up, she started playing games with a group of neighborhood friends:

> Even growing up, I keep mentioning the kids on the street, but there were a group of us who loved to play games together. And also go outside, played a lot of kickball. But it was me, my brother, three guys on the street, and one of them had a little sister, but the little sister just had no interest. So, it was mostly just the five of us.

Charlene was used to being the only girl in a group of boys from a young age, and so she continued to enjoy that position later in life when she started the gaming group. She was used to not encountering women, so even when she did it was not something she thought made any kind of difference to her experiences:

> Definitely, there's a major imbalance for sure, gaming is more popular with men then it is for women. . . There are some. Some girls will want to stick with other girls, and some girls will be like, "Okay, you're another human. Whatever." There's definitely a lot of different types of gamer girls out there. Then of course, there are just ones who want attention. There's lots of different types of gamer girls. [I'm] definitely the, "Hey, you're another human," side. It doesn't really matter to me that much. If you're a girl in a gaming community, you're used to being surrounded by a lot of men. I guess it is a little cool, when you get into a new group, you're like, "Oh hey, there's another female here! That's cool!" But I'm never am the kind of person who can see myself connecting with someone, just because we're both female. Yeah, it's not really a big deal.

She often experienced sexist comments from opposing teams but argued "Every group has 'that guy.' And that's true in real life, too. That guy is always there, or that

girl." While she argued that competition is a normal part of gaming and that her group is

welcoming to everyone, I also interviewed a transgender man from her group named

Keith. He said that Charlene had instructed everyone in the group to tell me about how

positive the group was, but that when he approached her with concerns about being the

only person who was not a cisgender man in the group other that her, she dismissed his

concerns with the argument that anyone can be rude online, not just men. Keith described

his experiences this way:

> I'm in the group, but I think I'm honestly going to leave the Discord and not
> associate. Not because any of them are particularly mean, but everyone there is a
> cis dude, except for me and the president of the club who's a girl . . . I think she
> has a really different viewpoint from me when it comes to gaming communities. I
> don't mean to trash talk her opinion or whatever, but I had a discussion with her
> after the first club meeting and I was kind of worried being A) one of the only not
> cis dudes there and B) being the only trans person there. And I mean she didn't
> seem to have the agreement of men being rude or whatever to her or at least not in
> a different proportion that girls could be rude. And I mean of course girls could be
> rude. But I guess it's just weird that someone who has been gaming all their life
> like I have hasn't really noticed this sort of differences and aggressive behavior
> that men often exhibit when they play video games.

In addition to Charlene's firm opinion that gender plays no role in gaming, Keith was

also discouraged by the group's general coolness towards him:

> I felt a certain disconnect with most of the group members, and none of them
> were mean or anything like that, it was just sort of I don't think any of them
> wanted to talk to me because, well I introduced myself as Keith, and that sort of
> confuses people because I don't pass very well, and sort of like, it makes people
> not warm to you I guess in that sort of way.

As a result of his perception of the group and its leader's attitude towards social

inequalities in gamin as well as the group's transphobia, he felt unwelcome and was

planning on leaving the group, making the group once again composed entirely of

cisgender men and Charlene. Charlene did not mention this incident, and described the

group in the following way:

I'm happy with the way things are going, there's a lot more that I'd like to see happen. The guys are awesome, they ... I don't know. It's a good group. It's a good group, no one's ... You know, there's a pretty heavy stereotype of gamers being jerks, and honestly the group here, those are really nice guys. I think that gamers get a bad rep.

She gave no indication that anyone in the group was feeling excluded or marginalized and would be happy if her group maintained its current levels of diversity and inclusiveness. Charlene, Nicole, and Bethany are examples of the women who assume the role of honorary bro in order to find a place in gaming culture, and they show how creating a space for themselves has meant reproducing the inequalities that limit space for others.

Amanda, an 18-year-old white heterosexual college student, had access to gaming networks but often preferred to play alone. She had a twin brother who she had been playing with sporadically since she was a child. As a result, she had spent a significant amount of time with hardcore gaming networks and had learned the skills necessary to navigate those spaces. She claimed that a significant part of gaining membership is in being able to use and understand the language of gaming:

Because I grew up with it, there are certain aspects of, not the so much like the misogynist gamer culture [or] that weird GamerGate thing, but more of just like the terminology. I can kind of flow with it. So, even though a lot of guys that I've met assume that because I'm a girl I would have no knowledge of any of this. Kind of like art. I know that this is unrelated, but I also really like metal screaming music. Guys will talk about that and will assume that I am listening to Taylor Swift, and they're like "ha ha ha. You child." But it's like I know what you're talking about. So, I'm still able to kind of plug into that if I need to, if my brother's talking about it. Even though I'm not actively involved, I can ... Kind of like a language that you don't speak anymore but you still could. Especially, in those elementary school games when if you were a girl, most, if not all of them, because in elementary school, girls didn't really gravitate towards that as much. So, at that point, it was very unusual for you to be a girl and you kind to had to prove that you knew what you were doing, and you weren't just like someone's sister just kind of like tagging along. I was tagging along, but I also knew what I was doing for the most part.

In this case, being able to fit in with men was a point of pride, even though she herself

was not typically interested in the kinds of games that would make this skill a necessary

one. She claims that this language tended to be easier to learn for men, who are more

likely to be exposed to gaming throughout their lives and from an earlier age. The use of

language to gain acceptance in a gaming community is similar to how Nicole talked

about easily joining the community gaming group and making friends with the men of the

group because they "talk alike." This is similar to how Pascoe uses the concept of

ventriloquation (2007). These women assumed the point of view of men in gaming

culture in order to gain the status associated with men in these spaces. Amanda identifies

this language barrier as an important source of inequality in gaming that few girls she

knew were able to overcome:

> The amazing girls probably grew up [with gaming]. But, most girls, well, my
> school's kind of biased because not that many girls played video games. But, most
> of the girls that I met had not grown up with it. Bu a lot of guys, even if they
> weren't hardcore had to some degree, or at least their friends did, they were
> somehow exposed to it. So they could fit in to the language more. Whereas girls
> were either like, "Yes, I know everything" or, they weren't exposed to it as well,
> so it's harder for them to plug and fit in.

This division she makes is an important one: "most girls" who lack the skills necessary to

succeed in gaming, and the skilled girls who are accepted as boys:

> Because, since there are so many girls that are really bad, or at least the guys view
> them as really bad, kind of reinforces their notion that this is an exclusively male
> game. And then, the girls that are really good kind of take on that identity as a
> bro, as like an honorary boy. It's like there aren't really . . . so essentially girls are
> bad or they're male.

These "honorary bros" have learned and internalized the skills, language, and

expectations of hardcore gaming. They had the opportunity to develop gaming habitus

because of their connection to brothers and boyfriends who play video games, and so also

had the chance to develop gaming capital that helped them to establish further social connections through games.

Discussion

These honorary bros were not attempting to challenge gendered expectations in gaming spaces. Instead, they worked to make themselves into the ideal woman figure for gaming. They were all relatively high status in that they were cisgender, heterosexual, and identified as either white or Asian. Because they were heterosexual and none of the performed gender in a challenging way, they were not seen as a threat to the established gender order. Their discussions of feminism and their rejection of feminist understandings of gender in games demonstrate that they were not trying to make any changes to the gaming spaces they entered.

It is important to note that the performance of female masculinity by queer women is often seen as a challenge to hegemonic masculinity (Halberstom 1998), and that none of the honorary bros identified as queer. By acting in ways traditionally intelligible as feminine and echoing the men's rejection of feminist values, these women were able to distance themselves from the potentially challenging nature of their position in the group. In this way we can see how postfeminism contributes to this environment. These women repudiated feminist critiques of gaming despite their personal experiences that would suggest a need for it, and as a result were able to assume a high-status position. None of the women described their attitudes towards inequality and harassment as coming directly from men. Instead this was a position they maintained through self-

surveillance, imposing attitudes on themselves that nevertheless serve to reinscribe gender inequalities.

I argue that these women were performing a form of complicit masculinity. They received patriarchal dividends in the form of status in a group typically closed to women, but in order to gain this status they had to work to reproduce the existing barriers that keep these spaces from becoming more diverse or inclusive. Because they were women, it is possible that their use of ventriloquation in repeating the men's typical attitudes towards gender, diversity, and harassment worked to solidify those attitudes in the group as a whole. In order to maintain their status, these women had to sacrifice this potentially subversive position in favor of further reinforcing existing inequalities.

The honorary bros resembled in some ways the white feminists who replicated inequalities in spaces designed as a reaction to GamerGate as studied by Gray (2016). While white feminists used online forums as a space of resistance against the movement, Gray (2016) found that they were unwilling to engage with women of color who supported the Black Lives Matter movement, resulting in women of color's creation of the hashtag #SolidarityisForWhiteWomen. The white feminists' lack of knowledge of the women of color's lived experiences "originates in the inability to recognize common oppression among women" (Gray 2016, 66). In other words, white feminists did not recognize the racialized oppression faced by women of color as a problem facing all women, and as a result, "essentially replicated" the exclusionary practices they created the forums to escape (Gray 2016, 66). While the women I studied rejected the need for feminism, the high status afforded to them due to their race, sexuality, and connections to men also prevented them from recognizing the need for making spaces more inclusive.

While I have shown those pattern in gaming spaces, women who maintain their ties to femininity while echoing men's attitudes and behaviors in order to gain status can be seen in other kinds of spaces as well. Sheryl Sandberg's bestselling book *Lean In* advises women to act more like men in order to succeed in the workplace, and other examples of women in high-status positions in industry and in government show that in order to gain access to these positions, women often need the right connection to men and to prove that they do not intend make any changes that might reduce barriers to other women in the future.

Conclusion

In order to gain status in gaming spaces, these "honorary bros" have become part of the barrier to other women attempting to enter those spaces, replicating mechanisms of inequality in gaming culture. However, it remains unclear if there is any other way to survive as a woman in mainstream gaming culture. While these women may have the opportunity to challenge gendered expectations in gaming, it is also possible that the only way for them to gain access to these spaces in any capacity was to adopt this unchallenging position. While they did echo the neoliberal attitudes that the men used to justify the lack of inclusivity in mainstream gaming, it is possible that even their presence did contribute in some small way to increasing diversity. Keith did try to join Charlene's group because she was the leader, and Nicole was only able to hear about women being pushed out of her group because women attempted to join.

However, even if the presence of any woman in a gaming group seems to make the space more open to diversity, it also seems that as these women did nothing to

challenge to attitudes that make so many of these spaces hostile to anyone but

heterosexual cisgender white geek men, and in fact actively worked to reinforce them.

This shows that the mere presence of women is not enough to make a significant impact

on the diversity of gaming spaces, especially if they are high-status women. More work is

required to identify the ways in which women may be able to enter and survive in

mainstream gaming spaces while also contributing to making those spaces more diverse

and inclusive.

Gender and Embodied Experiences of Video Games

Games are often touted as an opportunity for escapism and adventure that allow players to assume new identities and perform actions impossible in the real world. This is commonly accepted as one of the elements of gaming that separate it from other media as well as one of the main sources of appeal for people who play video games. However, is the opportunity for escapism the same for everyone? While game developers utilize a variety of strategies to allow players to split their subjective experience between their physical selves and their gaming avatar character selves, that physical self can never be completely removed from the gaming experience.

As a result, gendered constructions of the body are brought into games in ways that perpetuate the existing social inequalities and hierarchies persistent in gaming culture. While the visceral experience of being immersed in a game is a key reason for the appeal of many mainstream games, I argue that gendered socialization plays a role in how that visceral experience feels to different people. For many women, who have been socialized to experience the world as a constant threat, being immersed in a combat situation was perceived as stressful rather than enjoyably escapist. As a result, many women avoided the kinds of mainstream games that rely on a combat perspective and therefore were limited in the ways in which they could engage with gaming culture.

Scholarly work has shown that women tend to experience the threats and harassment and general toxicity of video games more acutely not only because they encounter them more frequently, but also because of the way they experience the world. In her influential work, "Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body

Comportment Motility and Spatiality," Iris Marion Young (1980) argues that women experience the world as subject as well as object, and so interpret things as happening to them as opposed to around them as active agents. She also argues that threats of violence and objectification are part of women's daily experiences, so women have developed defenses to keep the other at a distance. I argue that these elements of women's relationship to the world are carried with them into game. The ways in which violence and threats of violence are experienced by players in games cannot be separated from the way players experience the world in real life. The same set of gender norms and social conditions that impact the embodied experiences of gender cannot be ignored once that embodied experience begins to include video games.

Gender and the Body

In "Throwing Like A Girl" (1980), Iris Marion Young argues that women's experiences of their bodies are constrained and inhibited by how they perceive its relationship to the world.

> For feminine bodily existence . . . the body is often lived as a thing which is other than it, a thing like other things in the world. To the extent that feminine existence lives her body as a thing, she remains rooted in immanence, is inhibited, and retains a distance from her body as transcending movement and from engagement in the world's possibilities (Young 148 1980).

She connects the physical motion of throwing to this experience of the body, arguing that women have been conditioned by sexist society to feel unsure of their bodies' capacities and to experience the space around them as constricted rather than as space to move within freely:

> The young girl acquires many subtle habits of feminine body comportment--
> walking like a girl, tilting her head like a girl, standing and sitting like a girl,

gesturing like a girl, and so on. The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her. Thus she develops a bodily timidity which increases with age. In assuming herself as a girl, she takes herself up as fragile. Studies have found that young children of both sexes categorically assert that girls are more likely to get hurt than boys, and that girls ought to remain close to home while boys can roam and explore. The more a girl assumes her status as feminine, the more she takes herself to be fragile and immobile, and the more she actively enacts her own body inhibition (Young, 153).

Because of how women are taught to interpret their bodies as a thing like other things in the world in a sexist society, Young argues that the women are prevented from engaging with the world's possibilities:

It was observed, for example, that women have a tendency to take up the motion of an object coming toward them as coming at them. I also observed that women tend to have a latent and sometimes conscious fear of getting hurt, which we bring to a motion. That is, feminine bodily existence is self-referred in that the woman takes herself as the object of the motion rather than its originator. (Young, 148)

While Young addresses gender directly, other applicable work has studied how the body is produced by social conditions. Foucault uses the concept of discipline to explain how oppressive society acts upon the body. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) outlines the disciplinary methods produced in the 17th and 18th centuries that produced "a policy of coercions that act upon the body, a calculated manipulation of its elements, its gestures, its behaviors" (1977, 138). This discipline "dissociates power from the body; on the one hand it turns it into an 'aptitude,' a 'capacity,' which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection" (138). He calls this the "docile body", a body "that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (136).

In her study of preschool children, Martin (1998) argues that schools discipline children in gendered ways, producing docile bodies as well as gendered bodies.

As these disciplinary practices operate in different contexts, some bodies become more docile than others. I examine how the following practices contribute to a gendering of children's bodies in preschool: the effects of dressing-up or bodily adornment, the gendered nature of formal and relaxed behaviors, how the different restrictions on girls' and boys' voices limit their physicality, how teachers instruct girls' and boys' bodies, and the gendering of physical interactions between children and teachers and among the children themselves (Martin 497 1998).

Because this gendering occurs at such an early age, it makes gendered and physical differences seem natural. Martin shows how the institution of schools produce these differences until they become embodied and taken for granted.

Garland-Thomson (2001) also uses the concept of discipline to explain differences in gendered experiences of the body, although she also connects the argument to disability. She argues that women and people with disabilities are the primary examples of bodies subjected to discipline:

Perhaps because women and the disabled are cultural signifiers for the body, their actual bodies have been subjected relentlessly to what Michel Foucault calls "discipline" (1979). Together, the gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and ability systems exert tremendous social pressures to shape, regulate, and normalize subjugated bodies. Such disciplining is enacted primarily through the two interrelated cultural discourses of medicine and appearance. (2001, 10)

Garland-Thomson argues the disabled body and the woman's body the most subjected to expectations around the normal, with normalcy being attained through cosmetic surgery or medical intervention:

The self materializes in response to an embodied engagement with its environment, both social and concrete. The disabled body is a body whose variations or transformations have rendered it out of sync with its environment, both the physical and the attitudinal environments. In other words, the body becomes disabled when it is incongruent both in space and in the milieu of expectations. Furthermore, a feminist disability theory presses us to ask what kinds of knowledge might be produced through having a body radically marked by its own particularity, a body that materializes at the ends of the curve of human variation" (2001, 20).

She argues that a feminist disability studies is needed to understand "disability as a pervasive cultural system that stigmatizes certain kinds of bodily variations" (5).

A second key concept from Foucault for understanding the relationship to the self is self-surveillance. To explain this concept, Foucault draws on Bentham's panopticon, a model of a prison in which a supervisor stands in a central tower from which is the cells contained in an external, surrounding building. The cells are backlight, such that the supervisor in the tower can constantly observe the prisoners but that the prisoners cannot tell when they are being observed. The prisoners are kept alone in each cell and unable to communicate with each other. The major effect of this configuration is "the automatic functioning of power" (Foucault, 1977, 201). Foucault writes,

> He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection. (Foucault, 1977, 202-203)

This internalization of surveillance as a result of constant visibility is especially relevant for analyses of women's embodied experiences in light of the argument that women are positioned in society as objects to be perceived. According to Bourdieu (2001), masculine domination makes the female experience of the body one of constant exposure to the objectification performed by the gaze of others. The power of the gaze depends on the position of the gaze, which depends on the relative position of the perceiver and the perceived. Bourdieu writes:

> Masculine domination, which constitutes women as symbolic objects whose being (*esse*) is a being-perceived (*percipi*), has the effect of keeping them in a permanent state of bodily insecurity, or more precisely of symbolic dependence. They exist first through and for the gaze of others that is, welcoming, and attractive and available *objects*. They are expected to be 'feminine', that is to say, smiling, friendly, attentive, submissive, demure, restrained, self-effacing. And

what is called 'femininity' is often nothing other than a form of indulgence towards real or supposed male expectations, particularly as regards the aggrandizement of the ego. As a consequence, dependence on others (and not only men) tends to become constitutive of their being. (2001, 66).

One effect of being continuously under the gaze of others is that women require the gaze of others to constitute themselves, so they are constantly aware of the anticipated evaluation of their body (Bourdieu, 2001).

Young makes a similar argument about the experience of constantly being observed:

An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as the potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than as a living manifestation of action and intention. The source of this objectified bodily existence is in the attitude of others regarding her, but the woman herself often actively takes up her body as a mere thing. She gazes at it in the mirror, worries about how it looks to others, prunes it, shapes it, molds and decorates it. (154 1980).

Instead of considering her body as part of herself that can support her actions and choices, under the male gaze a woman's body becomes an object to care for, improve, and protect.

Bartky (1990) also addresses this power of the gaze. She asserts that the woman must make herself "object and prey" for the man in the regime of institutionalized heterosexuality. She also draws on the notion of the gaze but uses Foucault's concept of self-surveillance to illustrate it. She writes:

In contemporary patriarchal culture, a panoptical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgment. Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other (Bartky 1990 72).

Bartky uses this concept in a similar way as Bourdieu, but Bourdieu (2001) criticizes her for attributing this bodily anxiety comes from the pressure of the 'fashion-beauty'

complex. Bourdieu allows that these institutions are highly influential but argues that they only reinforce the effects of the relationship to masculine domination. Bartky's (1990) description of how the project of femininity causes women to feel anxiety is very similar to Bourdieu's, but in her theory, women are ashamed of their failure to live up to the standards set by the media, as they feel they could have done more to achieve it. She also adds that poor women feel doubly burdened with this shame and with their economic situations, as conforming to standards of bodily acceptability can lead to economic mobility

Despite the similarities between Bourdieu's work on masculine domination and the work on the production of femininity done by Bartky (1990) and Bordo (1993), Bartky (1990) and Bordo use Foucault's concept of the body instead. Foucault and Bourdieu the conceive of the production of femininity in similar ways, but there are some important differences in their theories of the body. First, they differ on the materiality of the body. For Foucault, the body is socially produced through regimes of knowledge and power. It is not a natural entity. McNay (1999) criticizes Foucault for this, claiming that this aspect of Foucault's work is inconsistent, and he is forced to vacillate between voluntarism, where the subject has complete agency, and determinism, where the body is seen as a blank surface without agency where power relations are inscribed. She prefers Bourdieu's theory of embodiment in that the body is not entirely an object or a subject, but a mutable point of overlap between the physical, the symbolic, and the sociological. This suggests that the ascription of a feminine corporeal identity is never complete.

Bordo (1993) closely follows Foucault's work in her book *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* in that she also rejects the existence of a

natural body. Drawing on Foucault, she argues that the body is constituted by cultural

practices, just as is anything else that is human. The physical body can also be an

instrument and medium of power, such as when 19th century corsets caused physical pain

to their wearers that also acted as a reminder of the ways in which culture has the power

to impose its designs on the female body. Bordo's (1993) theory of anorexia and other

female disorders provides a necessary understanding of the pressures on women and the

production of femininity. She conceives as anorexia, along with hysteria and agoraphobia

in earlier times, as an extreme end of a continuum that goes from normal feminine

practice to female disorder. These disorders can be interpreted as manifestations of, or

even parodies of, the constructions of femininity that dominated during the 19th and 20th

centuries. She writes:

> The symptomatology of these disorders reveals itself as textuality. Loss of
> mobility, loss of voice, inability to leave the home, feeding others while starving
> oneself, taking up space, and whittling down the space one's body takes up –all
> have symbolic meaning, all have *political* meaning under the varying rules
> governing the historical construction of gender. Working within this framework,
> we see that whether we look at hysteria, agoraphobia, or anorexia, we find the
> body of the sufferer deeply inscribed with an ideological construction of
> femininity emblematic of the period in question. The construction, of course, is
> always homogenizing and normalizing, erasing   racial, class, and other
> differences and insisting that all women aspire to a coercive, standardized ideal
> (Bordo, 168-169).

The example of the anorectic especially can be seen as a tragic parody of the ideal of

slenderness that currently defines femininity. However, Bordo argues that this

slenderness must be interpreted like a text, as it is not really about slenderness. The body

of the anorectic can be interpreted in multiple ways, and not all of them are related to

gender, but Bordo focuses on the gender-related interpretations.

For example, she writes that this disorder could be indicative of the other-oriented emotional economy that women must develop, in which they feed all others before themselves and any self-nurturance is interpreted as greedy. In this economy, the female appetite must be contained. Alternatively, Bordo writes that the body of the anorectic could be interpreted as an attempt to practice the 'male' virtues of self-discipline and control, which are needed in a society where women must learn to embody the 'masculine' values necessary to succeed in the professional arena. These interpretations demonstrate how the rules that govern the construction of contemporary femininity can be ascribed on the body of the anorectic.

Bordo's work argues that anorexia is the result of cultural conditions that emphasize a specific construction of femininity and a set of power relations that leave many feeling powerless. The cultural construction of the hungering female who needs to be controlled and the alien body that needs to be destroyed both show how contemporary culture idealizes individual discipline and self-surveillance, and the pressures placed on women to embody a specific construction of femininity in a way that seems detached, effortless, and cool.

Beyond the experience of being constantly surveilled, Young argues that women face additional threats attached to objectification:

> The threat of being seen is, however, not the only threat of objectification which the woman lives. She also lives the threat of invasion of her body space. The most extreme form of such spatial and bodily invasion is the threat of rape. But we are daily subject to the possibility of bodily invasion in many far more subtle ways as well. It is acceptable, for example, for women to be touched in ways and under circumstances that it is not acceptable for men to be touched, and by persons--i.e., men--whom it is not acceptable for them to touch. I would suggest that the enclosed space which has been described as a modality of feminine spatiality is in part a defense against such invasion. Women tend to project an existential barrier enclosed around them and discontinuous with the "over there" in order to keep the

other at a distance. The woman lives her space as confined and enclosed around her at least in part as projecting some small area in which she can exist as a free subject (154 1980).

As part of being under constant surveillance and widely viewed as a passive object rather than an active agent in society, women tend to view their bodies and the space around it as constantly under threat. This threat has become part of the woman's experience of her body, and so plays a role in how she perceives space as well as how she physically moves through space (Young 1980).

Together, these scholars demonstrate the ways in which gendered processes in a patriarchal society impact how women experience their bodies as a result of how their bodies are perceived by the world. Therefore, gender and the social expectations and processes that accompany gender cannot be separated out from studies of the body in video games. In the next section, I will discuss work that has made arguments about how gaming relies on physical embodied experience.

Gaming and the Body

Video games are a medium widely seen as unique because of the level of interactivity they require. However, it has also been argued that rather than interactivity, the physical relationship between game, self, and body is what makes games unique as a medium:

> As an active participant inside the game world, the player-as-character's subjective experience is not passive, but actively co-constructed by the interplay between the player's choices and the game constraints. For this reason, video games -more than any other medium -bring subjective agency to the fore. (Chew and Mitchell, 2017, 215).

The relationship between player and player-avatar, the cognitive demands of gameplay, and the physical designs of gaming technology and mechanics themselves together constitute this relationship.

First, much work has addressed the player avatar and how it functions in the game as well as its relationship to player identity. In the chapter "Walk a Mile in My Shoes: Subjectivity and Embodiment in Video Games", Schröter (2017) writes:

> [The] double nature of the first-person avatar as both a fictional being (whose subjectivity can be represented more or less directly) and as a game piece (which allows for the production of subjective experiences that, in turn, can be attributed back to the character) necessitates a critical examination of the terms and concepts used to describe subjectivity in video games. (196)

Schröter argues that in games, and particularly in games where the player's visual perspective of the world aligns with the visual perspective of the character controlled by the player, players are able to access their characters "corporeal and embodied states of being" (2017, 201). He argues that gaming elements such a visual perspective, control schemes that map bodily action to in-game action, and audiovisual representations "shape the player's body image in action, and thus make salient conscious or non-conscious non-intentional bodily states of characters" (2017, 209).

Chew and Mitchell (2017) use the example of the game *Akrasia* to show how a game can recreate subjective lived experiences for players. The game is meant to recreate the experience of addiction in three phases: the exhilarated addict's high, the tedious grind of sobriety, and the confusion and disorientation of withdrawal. Each phase is represented by different colors as well as visual and interactive design in order to evoke the experience of each state.

> *Akrasia* thus employs a coordinated audiovisual and interactive strategy: Changes in the kinesthetic feedback loop result in reduced or increased player effort to

control the avatar, and, in sync with the accompanying audiovisuals, create an integrated and synaesthetically consistent sense of "how the subject feels" when in the state of addiction, sobriety, or withdrawal. (2017, 219).

For example, during the addictive high phase, the game shows bright and cheerful colors and has vibrant music. The avatar has the option to consume "pills" which award them points and boosts their speed, allowing them to easily consume more pills and win more points. However, the game takes the form of a maze, and the maze is impossible to exit during the addictive high phase. If the player does not consume pills for some time, an exit sign will appear. However, during this phase the colors turn grey and dull, the music becomes slow and low-pitched, and the avatar is able to cover less distance with each movement. This creates a sense of fatigue, as more effort is required to achieve what once seemed effortless. During the withdrawal phase, which occurs when the avatar encounters a demon in the maze, the game controls are reversed, mirroring an addict's sense of disorientation and requiring the player to fight the instinct to use the controls as before (Chew and Mitchell 2017). *Akrasia* is one example of a game that makes use of gaming's unique potential for creating embodied experiences, and it does it in order to replicate a subjective lived experience that may otherwise be more difficult to understand.

Games can be used in other ways to demonstrate different subjective experiences, even ones that seem fictional or absurd. Gallagher (2017) uses the game *Octodad* to show how game mechanics can advance understandings of subjectivity and identity. In the game, the player controls a character who plays the role of a suburban father but is actually an octopus. The goal of the game is to accomplish everyday tasks in order to conceal the truth about the player-avatars cephalopodic identity. The challenge lies in the

fact that such tasks are extremely difficult for an octopus to accomplish, which the game

replicates through the game mechanics. Every tentacle must be moved separately, and no

action occurs as expected in established game logic.

> [*Octodad's]* interfaces that are intended to feel unnatural to habitual gamers. They delight in setting players seemingly trivial challenges (making a cup of coffee, buying groceries) that are rendered fiendishly difficult by the control scheme. . . *Octodad* aims to make them feel awkward, out of place and under scrutiny (if Octodad attracts too much attention from NPCs, a visibility meter will fill and the game will end). These, of course, are exactly the kinds of experience many gamers go to videogames and their agile, hard-bodied heroes to forget about. (Gallagher, 2017, 98).

Gallagher argues that this game reveals gender and identity as performance, and places

the player in the position of a subject for whom the traditional masculinity associated

with fatherhood does not come naturally:

> In many ways the games amount to a procedural elaboration of Butler's celebrated notion of gender performativity, the process of 'doing' gendered identities (in this case, the identity of a doting father) via the iterative citation of a repertoire of gestures, poses and attitudes, a process that proves far easier for some subjects than it does for others (1993, 108–109). While they do so in a comic mode, *Octodad* and *Dadliest Catch* bring home how fraught and failure-prone attempts to perform identities can be. (2017, 102)

These examples show how games are able to produce subjective experiences even

for people who have never personally experienced them firsthand. In order to accomplish

this, games involve the physical senses and gaming mechanics in order to fully engage

the player such that they may physically experience the desired subjectivity. The

interplay between human body and game is what makes this unique experience possible.

Murphy (2004) references McLuhan to discuss how the ways in which a game can extend

the senses also created the possibility for them to modify the body for a time. Keogh

(2018) argues that the embodied phenomenon of playing a video game relies on the body

becoming part of the game:

> Hybridity of player with video games, however, must not begin with the
> assumption that the player's body that fuses with the videogame exists in any
> predetermined, essentialized sense. The body-at-the-videogames is a particular,
> augmented version of the player's body: limbs are wrapped around controllers
> and extended through the screen; senses become heightened or muted; abilities,
> literacies, and perspectives are taken up and put aside; flesh integrates with plastic
> and code in what Martin Lister and his colleagues highlight as a "literally
> cyborgian" phenomenon. To account for embodied textuality, then, is to be
> reflexive; it is to account not only for how the play instantiates videogame play
> but also for how for how the player is incorporated into, becomes part of, and is
> ultimately made by the system of videogame play they instantiate (22).

For Keogh, the game and the body cannot be separated, and games are not the experience

of leaving "the playing body and its pleasures behind" (10). Instead, what makes a game

is the constant shifting between embodied states. Keogh (2018) argues that this

experience is substantially different from that of viewing a film.

> If film experience is, as Sobchack says, a "play of images" that flickers between
> incorporated and resisted, looked at and looking, then video games experience is a
> play of bodies that flickers between present and absent, corporeal and incorporeal,
> immanent and transcendent, actual and virtual, "me" and "not me" (13).

Other media do not make the same demands on the body, nor do they allow such

potential for play with identity and subjectivity. However, this integration of body and

media must be learned. Murphy (2004) compares her own novice experiences playing

games to those of more established gamers:

> Many [gamers] admit to physically 'dodging bullets' or attacks while playing a
> game and one who even destroyed his game controller after a particularly bad loss
> (which he now keeps nearby while playing in the event that if he gets angry or
> upset he can take his frustrations out on a broken piece of equipment rather than
> destroy any working equipment). Gamers don't seem to mind that they enact and
> react to the same character simultaneously, and perhaps this is simply the video
> game moment when willful suspension of disbelief occurs. Yet I, as a novice
> gamer and a not-entirely-novice digital media wonk, find myself wanting to figure

out how this oscillation between watching and doing, identification and rejection works (231).

While other work on games and the body does not differentiate between bodies in the ways that they are able to interact with games, Murphy raises the idea that a body needs appropriate knowledge and practice in order to react to the game in the ways that designers intend. This is similar to Kirkpatrick's (2012) understanding of gaming habitus:

> Importantly, in Bourdieusian perspective, the modification of perceptions described here goes along with a broader change to the physiognomic dispositions of entrants to the field. Those who play the games acquire a historically specific habitus: they are disposed within their own bodies in such a way that picking up a controller or rattling keys and twisting a mouse in the specific manner associated with playing computer games is natural and obvious to them.

Without the required gaming habitus, the experience of difficulty of motion in the *Octodad* example may not be experienced as anything different from a typical awkwardness with gaming controls. The body must become accustomed to typical gaming functions and practices in order to fully engage with some games, while this lack of experience make intensify the physical experience of playing other games.

First Person Shooters

Some games utilize visceral experiences in order to bring participants closer to violent situations. First person shooters (FPS), where the player assumes the point of view of a character in a shooting-based combat situation, use this perspective in order to position to player as a direct participant in the violence. In these types of games, the player is situated close to the action and the game often provides tactile feedback in order to recreate the physical experience of being in a combat situation as closely as possible. According to Woodcock (2019), the successful FPS series *Battlefield* was design

specifically in order to allow players to experience battlefield conditions. The developers claimed that they "wanted the player to see and feel what the characters were going through, rather than just experiencing it from behind their eyes" (117). As previously discussed, it has been argued that games where the player's visual perspective of the world aligns with the visual perspective of the character controlled by the player, such as FPS games, are particular effective at allowing players to access their characters "corporeal and embodied states of being" (Schröter 2017, 201).

The game *Spec Ops: The Line* makes use of this physicality and immediacy of FPS games in order to pose challenging questions about morality in war. The game uses common FPS conventions and resembles a typical war game until a scene where the player is in a position where the game offers no choice but to use white phosphorous on civilians. The rest of the game addresses the aftermath of committing such a horrific war crime, and the first-person perspective creates the sense that the player is complicit in their avatar's actions. (Woodcock, 2019).

While *Spec Ops: The Line* is an example of how FPS conventions can be subverted, in general the genre is extremely popular and represents some of the most successful mainstream games. From 1997's *GoldenEye 007*, which introduced the multi-player "death match" mode, to modern titles such as *Overwatch* and the *Call of Duty* series, FPS games have dominated mainstream gaming culture. Many reasons have been proposed for why they are largely considered a masculine product designed for and by men, but I argue that that perhaps some part of the current gender inequalities in the imagined audience for this kind of game is related to gendered experiences of the body. While many games involve the physical senses, FPS games do so in order to position the

player as close to the threat and experience of physical violence as possible. As gendered socialization in a sexist society tends to produce in women an acute awareness and experience of potential physical threats, this socialization may also prevent women from enjoying games, and especially FPS games, in the same way as men.

I argue that this question of "whose body?" is missing from much of the discussion on games and the body. While the ways in which games and the human senses intertwine to produce a subjective experience have been established, what seems to be less well-established is how people with different experiences may experience those games differently. Earlier in this section I have shown the extensive scholarly work that demonstrates how gendered norms and expectations produce gendered bodies in a particular way that is constantly under threat of objectification. It follows that those same processes would remain even when the body is intertwined with a game. Gender and its associated constructed effects on the body cannot be left out the moment a player begins experiencing a game. Those specific gaming experiences that are informed by gender have wider implications for the role that gender plays in broader inequalities in gaming culture.

Findings

Gendered Experiences of Stress

Young (1980) discusses how women tend to experience objects in the world as coming at them rather than toward them because of how their bodies are produced as passive objects rather than active subjects. She argues that this perception limits the ways in which women engage with the world. I argue that this experience can also apply to

games as well. Several women I spoke with described games as "stressful" in a way that cisgender men almost never did. When games are violent, especially in a particularly realistic or competitive way or presented in a way that positions the player as a direct participant, many women tended to dislike the game or describe feeling conflicted about their participation. Often women described games as potentially stressful depending on the ways in which they engaged the body.

April, a 30-year-old white cisgender heterosexual woman who worked as a researcher, was part of group that together played a popular online role-playing game (RPG). She described how she thought the game could become stressful if played at a competitive level, so made the choice to stay in more casual levels. She compared the low-level way she played a game as similar to playing with a doll, in contrast to the way the body would have be more fully involved at higher levels of play:

> I never really got into the advanced levels of the game. I was always content just to play with the little avatars that feel like our dolls and we were just running around . . . just the little quest to pass the time while we're chatting. It was very light. I never really got into the really high competition, the high stress.

Her comparison of the experience of playing the game to that of playing with a doll is interesting because it shows that she is removing her physical self from the game as much as possible. In contrast to the myriad ways that games can invoke and extend the senses to create a powerful experience, April chose to maintain a firm boundary between herself and her game avatar. Higher levels of game competition would require April to assume the subjective experience of the avatar in a way that would create more stress than she was willing to experience. By treating the avatars like dolls, she is able to keep the game at a distance, just as Young describes way women often keep the Other at a distance in order to mitigate the constant threat of invasion and objectification.

Courtney, an 18-year old heterosexual cisgender white female college student,

also actively looked for games she would not experience as stressful. Like April,

Courtney preferred RPGs, but instead of an online version, she preferred the avoid

stressful situations by focusing on single player games:

> I usually look for a game that's fun and interesting but also has a good story that I can play for a while and especially something that I can put down and come back to, something that's not too stressful. Especially like with school, I will go back to my dorm and I just want to play something for an hour, that's really nice. I don't want to be stressed out . . . It's like if I fail it's fine.

She described RPGs as a good choice for her because of the low stakes and the way she

could pick up and put down the game as she wanted. In her description, the stress comes

from the pressure of playing with other people as well as from potentially stressful game

elements. Her emphasis on fun and a good story indicate that violence is not a priority for

her. The most important element for her was that she was able to enter and exit a game

whenever she wanted. Gameplay would last as long as she wanted, and she was under no

obligation to continue pass that point. It is possible this feature contributed to a sense of

control over her environment that helped mitigate the threat of objectification Young

described. The game is less stressful because she knows she can remove herself at any

time. Games that prevent her from making such a choice would be experienced as more

stressful because they limit her ability to protect herself from them by removing herself.

First Person Shooters

In addition to highly competitive game elements in all types of games, first person

shooter games created a particularly stressful experience for many women. Most games

in this genre are also competitive, so some women described FPS games as uniquely

stressful. Avery, a Black 27-year-old bisexual nonbinary female graphic designer, said

she avoided this genre: "I was never really good at them and it's a really stressful thing to

have things running at you." Instead, she said she preferred "just something slower that I

can take my time as opposed to like frantic paced." Her description of this genre also

indicates the source of the stress in playing these games is connected to the experience of

being under threat as well as a lack of control over the environment. She did not want to

be closely connected to a violent situation where things would be attacking at a pace

determined by someone other than her. Avery's description of "things running at you" is

interesting because it illustrates Young's theory that women's interpretations of their

bodies as an object to be acted upon prevents that from engaging in the world. She found

that "women have a tendency to take up the motion of an object coming toward them as

coming at them" (Young 1980 148). While others may enjoy the opportunities games

present, for many women those opportunities more closely resemble threats.

The experience of shooting a gun as offered by FPS games also introduced moral

dilemmas. Because the games intend to place the player in the position of a shooter in the

game, many women avoided them because that was not an experience they wanted. Lisa,

a heterosexual cisgender white 29-year-old law student, preferred to play RPGs, and

especially fantasy RPGs, rather than more shooting-intensive games:

> I have a hard time really figuring out what the appeal is. I don't like shooting
> things. That said, I was very into both Fallout 4 and now going back to Fallout 3
> and The Last of Us, which are kind of shooting related. But I always feel like
> most of my professional work has been anti-violence type work, and so I feel this
> weird conflict about shooting humans. For some reason hitting them with a sword
> or shooting non-humans is fun, but I don't like war.

While Lisa herself was unsure of why some violent games are acceptable to her while

others are not, from her explanation it sounds as if some games require more physical

immediacy that she cannot separate from her actual self. Games making use of a sword typically do not use a first-person perspective in the same ways that shooter games do, and fantasy elements seem to also create some space between player and avatar.

Vanessa, a 40-year-old Black cisgender lesbian database administrator, shared Lisa's concern about games involving guns: "Those are the kinds of games, like Call of Duty, stuff like that, I can't get with it because it's too close to reality. It's too close to reality. Like, I don't even want a gun in the house." The combination of the position required by FPS games as well as the realistic gun violence leads to reservations that games that allow for more distance from the violence, either through structure or fantasy elements, do not. Playing these games is intended to create the experience of shooting a gun. While that may be appealing to some, many women required more distance from violent subject matter in order to enjoy a game.

Beyond Gendered Socialization

While I have connected embodied experiences of stress to gendered constructions of the body for women, I also found that some other players also found violence in games difficult to experience. One key example of this was Frank, a 19-year-old transgender bisexual mixed-race Muslim man. Like Courtney, he described the pressure to commit specific amounts of times as required by some games as a source of stress, so preferred games he could play for short periods of time. This was part of the appeal he described when discussing Pikmin, one of his favorite games:

> It's almost like a puzzle game, because it's like a little bit strategic, but it's kind of low stress until you have to fight like a giant caterpillar that's rolling over your Pikmin. But it's kind of low stress, so you can play it and not really have to think or really be invested. You can sort of, 'Oh, I'm going to play this for a little bit.

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I'm going to put it away.' It's really easy to save and it'll stop where you are. So, that's nice. . . There's a decent story behind it. The game plays pretty easy. The character design is really good. They're super cute. The idea behind like I'm going to attack this bug, is like hilarious, but it's not distressing. So, it's good.

Another reason he preferred this kind of stylized game is that he preferred to avoid negative representations of Middle Eastern people, which he experienced more intensely than the average white North American player:

A lot of the war games are focused on the Middle East and how that's negative, and how the US is going to come in and save it. Middle eastern people are portrayed as terrorists or untrustworthy. That's just not a thing that I need to see for me. It's nice that I can hop on a Nintendo game and play with some Pikmin characters, and that's a lowkey time for me whereas if I'm playing like a point and shoot game or like a fighter game it's like, oh this has a lot of connotations for me that it wouldn't necessarily have for a standard North American person. I just tend to avoid those. I'm like, 'I don't have time to be angry about this.'

For Frank, the stereotypes he encounters in war games are attached to his own physical life experiences, and so cannot be set aside. By primarily playing cartoon games where the violence is light-hearted and playfully directed at a caterpillar, Frank avoids the stressful experiences associated with the "investment" more realistic violent games require. I found that several other people who had experienced violence in their past also tended to avoid violence in games. Frank's experience, and the experiences of other marginalized players with similar gaming preferences, are not connected to gender in the same way as some of the women. It is possible that for many, the associations between identity, life experiences, and larger trends of violence make the immediate experience of violent games something to avoid rather than to seek out.

Threats of Violence

In addition to the perceptions of violence in games, another way that gender plays a role in the embodied experience of gaming is in the constant threat of assault. Young (1980) argues that this is a threat that women live with constantly due to the ways in which a woman's body is constructed in an oppressive patriarchal society. This threat constrains the ways that women engage with and move about the world. The same is true of gaming worlds, where that threat remains even when the physical self seems less salient. I argue that the ways in which women move through the world constantly expecting and protecting themselves against threats of sexual assault also apply to the ways they interpret online gaming spaces. Violent language and harassment are common in online games and I found that men were more likely to excuse them as integral to online gaming spaces that simply required the right emotional skills to dismiss. In contrast, women tended to view the threat of harassment as a reason to avoid online gaming spaces altogether. It is important to note that on average, in games where players communicate over microphones, female voices receive three times as many negative comments as male voices or no voices gaming (Kuznekoff and Rose, 2012). This discrepancy points to larger patterns of inequality in gaming and also offers one reason why women tend to be more aware of harassment then men. However, the physical experiences of being harassed in a gaming space is also worth exploring in order to create a better understanding of the significant problem of harassment in gaming. I argue that men's ability to ignore harassment is not due to their superior emotional toughness, but rather that the ways in which they experience harassment and violent language is qualitatively different from how women experience them due to gendered socialization.

While men often claimed to dislike the aggressive talk in competitive gaming

spaces, Avery illustrates why this talk is more threatening for women. She gave this

threat as a reason she mostly preferred to play single player games. She said:

> I like playing with a party, it's just really hard to find people so you sort of
> reflectively go back to single player experiences. It's nice to be able to tackle this
> large objective as a team but it's also finding and training together. You're making
> sure you're all on one page. There's a lot of work for someone to randomly make a
> rape joke or randomly tell you to take all your clothes off or randomly trying to
> diminish your experience as a woman. Like, don't let them find out that I'm Black.
> There is an entire other level of problems that I'm going to have.

As a Black woman, Avery had the additional task of hiding her race from the other

players in the game in order to prevent further escalation of the threats of objectification

due to her gender. This additional labor led her to abandon those spaces in order to keep

the threats at a distance.

Other women also described how video games present a unique threat in terms of

opportunities for objectification because of the immersion they often require. For

example, Hannah, a white 27-year-old cisgender heterosexual law student, described

games as a medium where the threat of assault remains exceptionally relevant compared

to other media. She says,

> Because there is a level of immersion in video games that . . . If you someone
> wrote a note to you, "I grope you," that's not going to have much effect. Even if
> you say it over the phone or it's not going to have as much. Just because videos
> games are so experiential, because they are so immersive, they raise a lot of
> interesting questions that you don't get in other genres and other media. So
> identity is important in video games.

Hannah understands that the actual threat of assault is the same if it is presented as a note,

in a phone conversation, or in a game. In that moment, she is physically safe. However,

because of the ways the games involve the senses, to Hannah the immersiveness of

games means that the threat of assault feels like a real threat that she experiences in her body.

Avery also described how language could violently disrupt her gaming experiences. She enjoyed Let's Play videos but was very selective in the channels she chooses to watch. She researched the person and their videos extensively in advance in order to avoid coming into contact with racist and sexist language:

> I'm really selective about people I watch, because it gets really bad really fast. You're spending two hours with them, or if they're 30-minute videos, and hundreds of videos potentially, so I don't want to be using their videos to relax and suddenly someone says the n word, or makes a gay joke, or rape joke, or something like that. I'm suddenly like, 'Oh god, I can't listen to this right now. Let's find something else.' Because you're playing them in the house when you're by yourself, and you just have that background noise on, so it's kind of like radio in that way that you really start to empathize with that personality. So too, especially if you're in the middle of a game, to have something bad happen and you be completely yanked out of that experience, it's really hard to pivot into something else.

Watching Let's Play videos felt like a personal experience to Avery because it is an activity done alone and requires investing time in another person, even if that investment is exclusively digital. The ways she describes the experience of being surprised with violent language shows how disruptive that experience is. She describes hearing that language as having "something bad happen." That is not a casual experience that can be dismissed as irritating but harmless. "Something bad" actually happens to Avery in that moment, in such a way that her gaming experience is disrupted. It is possible that the physical experience of hearing violent language disrupts the embodied requirements of a gaming experience, as now the player experiences violence at odds with what the game demands. Women are constantly working to protect themselves from the world, and so

when they encounter threatening language, in situations where they are immersed in an experience, that language can feel like a physical threat.

Chelsea, a queer white cisgender 27-year-old animal technician, was very aware of the costs of avoiding online public spaces in gaming, but her explanation also points to the power of language in gaming contexts:

> Guys will tell you, "Oh, you just have to deal with it." It's like, "Yeah, nine out of 10 games aren't that bad." But that one game where some guy is telling you, "I'm going to rape you." That's not a good thing and you can just not do that, right? That's such a great option. So solutions, don't go on voice chat or don't play competitive, kind of like find your own people. That's my main strategy is find your own people to play with and hang out with. Or honestly, I have pretty thick skin. If I didn't have as thick skin as I do, I probably wouldn't be as much involved in the community as I am now.

Chelsea had found that men dismissed her concerns about rape threats she received during games. However, even for Chelsea, who is deeply involved in the gaming community, the experience of that kind of encounter is severe enough that she prefers to avoid games than risk being threatened in this manner. For many women, rape is a threat that is constantly present in their lives, so requires defensive action that men rarely consider in the same way. As a result, when a woman is threatened with rape in a game, she will experience that threat differently than the men who pride themselves on their ability to "brush it off." I argue that what the men are brushing off is actually a less severe experience than what the women are encountering due to gendered socialization processes.

Comparison: High Status Players

In contrast to the potential for physical violence and stress that women and other marginalized players found in games, it was much more common for high status men to

experience video games as relaxing rather than as stressful. They often saw online game as a stress-free fun way to spend time with friends and interpreted violent FPS games as uniquely engaging and offering an appealing opportunity to learn about real military situations. Discussions of threat and self-protection were largely absent from their descriptions of their experiences. This lack of concern is demonstrated by Milo, a 26-year-old white cisgender heterosexual law student who played mostly online games, viewed gaming as a healthy alternative to drugs or alcohol:

> I think it'll be important for someone like me, who's in law. Lots of other lawyers, I've read, for many lawyers their big issue is alcohol and drugs, and that's a big thing in the ... especially in the high stress of law and litigation and the courts. Someone like me, being able to come home and just blow away those worries at the end of a long, hard day? That's what I'm in it for.

For Milo, online games not present any opportunity for harm to such an extent that they can be used to reduce the stress he experiences in the rest of his day. Samuel, a 40-year-old Hispanic cisgender heterosexual recruiter, also saw gaming as a healthy alternative to more high-risk stress relief options:

> Work can be stressful. And this is a great way for me to knock off some stress and focus on something that's not work-related. But that's ultimately not going to be a live or die situation for me in the real world, or I'm not going to get hurt doing it. So I can spend 30 minutes, redevelop my focus, and then go on with my life.

Not all the players who used gaming to combat stress were men. Some of the high-status women also saw games as a way to relieve stress. Nicole, 28-year-old cisgender heterosexual Asian legal assistant who was the only woman who regularly attended the community gaming group I observed, said that the period in her life where she played the most games was in her first and second year of university, because that was when she "was the most stressed out" so used gaming as a "break from reality."

In addition, women with high status in gaming spaces also used games to cope with stress rather than finding them stressful. High status in gaming for women meant access to mainstream public gaming spaces, often through their connections with men. Amanda, an 18-year-old white cisgender heterosexual college student who had been playing games with her brother from a very young age, was one example of a woman who used games as a way to cope with stress "For me, it was always like an escapism/coping mechanism. . . Because I was so stressed out at school, I guess, it was a good way to get away from that." This shows that there is nothing inherent in being a women that necessarily informs how women perceive and experience games. These women had a long history with games and had developed both their skills and a strong network of other players. These exceptions reveal the gendered construction of gaming experiences as a construction rather than innate or biological.

For Daniel, a half-Japanese, half-Polish cisgender heterosexual college student, the feeling of stress in games and then the ability to overcome that stress through skill was a main element of his enjoyment of gaming:

> I feel like that developed from when I was a kid, after playing things like Halo it was exciting, flashing lights and lasers and everything. And then going from there I guess it definitely felt empowering to drive something like a tank in Halo where you basically felt very invulnerable. Running around, just all these tiny little guys and you've got this machine gun. It's really fun, because initially you're struggling with all of them at the same level, there's a high level of stress. And then you finally feel rewarded and you go like, 'Yes, I got the tank!'

Daniel experiences stress in the game, but as a positive feeling of excitement that leads to reward. He finds stress empowering and rewarding when he is able to conquer it. This description is in contrast to many of the women for whom gaming-related stress was an entirely negative and occasionally harmful experience.

Scott, a white 25-year-old cisgender heterosexual sales associate, also connected

stress to reward in gaming. He saw stress as an occasionally desirable element of gaming,

although he also wanted to have other options at times:

> For Rainbow Six Siege, it's semi-real military tactics, because you have to use the coordination. You have to know certain terms that the military uses. It's a lot faster saying something like, 'Tango in room' as opposed to 'There's a guy located in this room.' Things like that, and also it's faster. Things like 'Breaching clear,' than, 'I'm going to detonate this and then you charge in.' So, things like that. I do find I enjoy that, but I also don't want to exclusively play games that I find I have to do that, because it's very stressful. It's very rewarding to play Rainbow Six Siege, but I don't always want to be feeling that much stress from playing a video game. Sometimes I'm in the mood to, not necessarily feel the stress, but I'm in the mood to just feel like I'm actually accomplishing something. Because when you win a round in that game, it's very satisfying because you've put in a lot of work and a lot of effort to achieve that victory. So, it's very, very nice to be like 'Yes, I did that.'

Here Scott describes the enjoyment he gets from the game Rainbow Six Siege, an online

FPS game. This is precisely the type of game most women said they actively avoided

because of the potential for online harassment, competitiveness, and realistic experiences

of violence. For Scott, the competitiveness created the opportunity for stress, but he

found that he derived enjoyment from the resolution of that stress. He also described

using FPS games to explore his broader interest in guns. The accuracy of the weapons

was important to him, as the realism added to his experience rather than detracted from it:

> All of the weapon manipulation and handling in that game are accurate, and that's a big thing for me is accuracy, accuracy in video games, of weapons in real life… I have a very big passion for guns. I can learn what the basic one looks like, each different variation of it and then, a lot of video games will use a name of a gun that is actually not the correct title for that weapon. As an example, Call of Duty's done this. They called it, something, an M-16A4, but then it'll actually be modeled after the M-16A3. I don't know why it bugs me so much, but it just does.

The realistic depiction of a violent military situation is part of the appeal, as he enjoys the experience of being put in that position. Ultimately, he finds this type of game satisfying to play, and experiences the game as it seems it was designed.

Discussion

While the differences discussed in this section are important for understanding individual's experiences with video games, I argue they are also important for understanding the social inequalities in gaming culture more broadly. While many of the high-status men describe gaming as a matter of emotional toughness, this attitude dismisses the very real differences in how threats are received by different people. As a result, what some may interpret as empowering, adrenaline-fueled achievement, others may perceive as a kind of real threat. Gaming, gaming practices, and the gaming industry are tailored to the mythical figure of the "real gamer" who is young, cisgender, heterosexual, white and a man (Burrill, 2008; Evans and Janish, 2015; Jenkins and Cassell, 2008; Crawford 2012; Taylor, 2012; Salter and Blodgett, 2012). In this situation, we can understand any body that deviates from that expected body as "disabled" in the way Garland-Thomson describes: "The disabled body is a body whose variations or transformations have rendered it out of sync with its environment, both the physical and the attitudinal environments. In other words, the body becomes disabled when it is incongruent both in space and in the milieu of expectations" (2001, 20). In gaming culture, bodies that lack the expected experiences and skills that contribute to gaming are constructed as disabled.

This helps to explain why so many people who do not meet the standard "gamer" criteria develop strategies that limit their exposure to the threats and violence implicit in gaming culture. Choosing to play only single-player games, playing only with friends and in less competitive environments, and choosing games with limited violence were all common for women. However, as competitive online games as currently the standard for mainstream hardcore high-status gaming, these strategies that people use to protect themselves are also ensuring they never develop the skills and experience to gain status in gaming circles. As Chelsea said, "I know a ton of girls who just don't play because they're like, 'I can't get good because if I'm even a little bit bad I'm immediately harassed.' They don't have any opportunity to grow as a player, right?" Mainstream high-status games are designed for bodies that have not been socialized as most women's have been, creating an additional barrier for women to overcome in order to enter these spaces that men are largely unaware of.

Similarly, people used to or expecting violence may also physical reactions to games than possibly expected in the "ideal gamer." Transgender people, people of color, and people with trauma in their histories all may experience threats and violence differently, especially if it draws on applicable racial or gendered slurs. This may not be as closely tied to gendered embodiment but is similar in how it impacts how people experience violence and at times violent language as intrusive. In other ways, the physical experience of the body itself cannot be left behind by many people with disabilities. Nausea, cognitive and visual disabilities all have a significant impact on the gaming experience in ways that those who fit the ideal able-bodied gamer identity are unaware of and therefore interpret as weakness. More research is required to understand

how different bodies experience games, and how those experiences are related to inequalities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ways in which women experience the intertwining of physical and the digital in order to produce and explore subjectivities in games must be taken into account. The seemingly neutral "gamer's body" that is used in much of the work on gaming and the body needs to be unpacked. Because identity and experiences can have an impact on how people experience the world, they have an impact on how people experience gaming worlds. Women experience threat as more immediate, which is why some choose to stay at lower levels or in less violent gaming spaces than people who are easily able to keep the violence of games at more of a distance.

These findings help to explain why women and other marginalized people tend to avoid so many gaming spaces, and especially high-level gaming spaces. Many high-status men may see violence and violent language as a part of the appeal of gaming that simply requires learning the right level of emotional toughness to ignore. However, for women and other marginalized people, the experience of this violence is completely different from how high-status men would expect. As a result, women are often unable to access the gaming spaces that men use to develop expertise and social status, perpetuating the idea that these spaces belong exclusively for men and therefore replicating the pattern of games being designed not just for the stereotypical gamer, but also for the stereotypical "gamer's body."

"That's Kind of the Best You Can Do:" Limited Expectations and Representation

While the diversity of characters depicted within the games themselves has dominated discussions about diversity in gaming for decades, the debate remains far from settled. It has been argued that games with characters who exclusively reflect the imagined audience of young white males reify this audience by in turn continuing to appeal only to this specific privileged group. This encourages game developers to continue to only represent white men in their games, as this strategy has been proven to sell games. However, questions remain. How do different groups of people interpret this lack of diversity in games? When does representation matter, and to whom?

It is important to note that the proportion of characters appearing in games who are not white men is very small. Among all characters who appear in video games, one study (Williams et al, 2009) found that 85.23% were male and 14.77% were female, with an even greater difference for primary characters. The same study found that 84.95% of primary characters were white, 9.67% were black, 3.69% were biracial, and 1.69% were Asian. Hispanics and Native Americans did not appear as primary characters in any of the games (Williams et al, 2009). Another study found that in the Xbox, PlayStation 2, and GameCube games they sampled, 41% of the women wore sexually revealing clothing and 43% were partially or totally nude, while of the men, 11% wore sexually revealing clothing and 4% were partially or totally nude. This study found a similar overrepresentation of men to the Williams et al study, with 14% of the characters being female and 86% being male. This shows that while appearing far less frequently than

male characters, female characters were also much more likely to be hypersexualized (Downs and Smith, 2010).

However, it is difficult to tell what of the many elements of a person's identity they will view as most salient to a situation, particularly when it comes to representation (Shaw, 2014). There is some debate surrounding how much and in what context representation matters for marginalized gamers, with Shaw (2012) arguing that representation can be read in multiple ways by different players, and that escapism is often more highly valued than accurate representation. Many players want to become someone different and achieve things impossible in their normal lives (Shaw 2014). Taylor (2006) also found that escapism is one of the most appealing elements of playing video games. In her study of women gamers in an MMORPG, she found that many of the women enjoyed playing with identity and gender norms, by combining different elements in a subversive way and assuming a new and different persona for the game (Taylor 2006). Also, Shaw (2012; 2014) argues that while other work focuses on the need for increased representation of non-heterosexual, non-male, non-white players, this emphasis further marginalizes these players by placing them in distinct categories and assuming which aspects of their identity is most important to them in playing.

However, other writers have discussed the dissonance required to play video games where their own identities are marginalized, vilified, or objectified. One describes his experiences as an Arab man in the many games where the shooting targets are stereotypical Arab terrorists (Ibrahim, 2015), while another discusses the compromises required for playing as one of the many African American characters who are based on negative stereotypes and never seem like people the players can actually imagine

themselves as (Narcisse, 2015). Anita Sarkeesian, the target of violent threats by supporters of GamerGate, still loves video games despite her experiences with so many that portray "borderline pornographic images of women contorted and proportioned for maximum stereotypical viewing pleasure" while the male characters are fantasies of power for the male player to imagine themselves as, rather than to imagine themselves as consuming (Sarkeesian and Cross, 122, 2015). In this way, the representation and structure of video games creates a space where white heterosexual men hold a privileged position that marginalizes the experiences of other players and limits the potential of the medium as a space to imagine possible futures not bound by existing mechanisms of marginalization (Shaw, 2014).

This existing work has shown that issues surrounding representation are not as simply resolved as adding more diverse characters to games, but questions remain: How does the structure and content of games that players encounter contribute to their own identities in the gaming community? Do they legitimize the experiences of white men? When does representation matter for how people navigate gaming spaces?

In this chapter, I argue that questions of representation are mired in anxiety and skepticism in many gaming contexts. There is no one simple answer, nor do people's identities directly cause them to support seeing any particular characters or types of characters in games. In addition, the potentially simple proposed solution to include more diversity in games is more complex than it appears. Those who are deeply invested in fighting for equality in their daily lives do not necessarily look to games as a potential site of future change, just as others have turned to games as a crucial piece of understanding their own identities. Context, gaming preferences, and individual

personality all play a role in how people think about and use representation in games, and broad claims that simplify these distinction work to silence a vibrant conversation and the work that it relies on.

This is not to say that position in gaming culture is completely unrelated to attitudes surrounding representation. The games people play and the communities they engage with inform the ways in which they approach representation, and both are connected to issues of status and identity in gaming. In discussing representation, participants demonstrating broader attitudes towards their perceived place in gaming culture and how they felt about larger issues related to gaming. Those who embrace gaming and the gamer identity also tended to embrace industry solutions: strong female characters, customizable avatars, and a general sense of progress. Their concerns tended to be with the idea that representation might be disruptive to a gaming experience when characters deviate from the perceived default category of white cisgender heterosexual military man. Those who generally felt more alienated by gaming culture also tended to be more skeptical of the potential for representation, and it was rare for anyone who rejected the gamer label to unambiguously view representation in games as a source of identity or empowerment. However, beyond this general tendency towards suspicion, I found a broad range of attitudes, preferences, and expectations for representation in games that escape narrow association with any one identity.

I divide this chapter into two broad sections. First, I will discuss those who tend to embrace gaming culture with its associated labels, standards, and approach to representation. These are players who believe in the gaming industry and the way in functions, and their attitudes and expectations for representation mirror this support.

Anxieties about diversity for this group were rooted in fears that a game is deviating from established gaming norms, meaning white, cisgender, heterosexual men in military positions, or what Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter refer to as the "man of action" (2009). Just as this master identity tends to go unchallenged in mainstream games, participants who accept mainstream gaming did not challenge the lack of diversity possible within this main identity.

In the second section of this chapter, I will explore the experiences of those who are more skeptical of the norms of gaming culture related to representation. However, this group shared little beyond a lack of confidence in the gaming industry. Some wanted more diversity in games while others did not expect any representation from games beyond what is currently common. Gaming preferences, personality, and other factors all played a role in what people wanted and expected from gaming, and while these factors are not unrelated to identity, identity alone does not determine how people approach issues of representation.

Part One: Embracing Gaming Industry Norms

The Neutral Man of Action

In this section, I discuss the players who have embraced mainstream gaming and most of its associated norms. For these players, the lack of diversity in games tended to largely be a reflection of what games demanded, and they did not see any problem with the homogeneity of characters in mainstream games. Representation was often dismissed as a question for other people to think about, or as a distraction from an imagined apolitical gaming core. For these players, games are about what they have always been

about: white men in military situations. This is what these players like and expect from their games, and so their concerns related to representation were about changes they saw as potentially disruptive. For these players, there is a core meaning of what gaming is and what gaming can look like, and that core does not require them to think about diversity. While they trust that core and were wary of perceived changes, as a result sometimes this fear of change led to them to criticize trends they identified as interfering with the purity of games.

One way this anxiety was commonly expressed was in the fear of pandering, or games including diversity in order to generate attention. This trend was seen as inauthentic, as if character choices are added to a game at the end rather than being a part of their development. The perception around pandering was often that a game was created by the industry, and then characters were changed at the last minute in order to generate positive media attention. These efforts were seen as shallow and disingenuous by those who did not see a reason for games to change in any way from the typical expected patterns.

For Peter, a 32-year-old white heterosexual cisgender software engineer, diversity was acceptable as long as it was subtle. He was concerned with games including diversity in order to gain publicity:

> You know it's one of the things where it's like you know I've heard some people say like, "They only did that so they could check off the box on their PR." You know, "Look, we have this character." And I would admit know occasionally you will see games that are clearly were just doing that to get a little buzz off of it.

For Peter, games that emphasized the diversity of their games were suspicious. He determines when games introduced diversity authentically compared games with diverse character "to get a little buzz off of it" according to how much a game differed from his

own expectations. Of a game required too much engagement with diversity, it became

suspicious. In contrast, games were acceptable to him where diversity was presented in

such a limited way so as not to challenge or alter what he expected to experience in a

typical mainstream game. Peter's favorite example of diversity in a game in from the

game Mortal Kombat:

> There's a scene where there's this ninja and he's talking to another character and he was like you know maybe you should consider joining the clan. And he said they'll never accept me. And the man looks at him for a second and says you know, and he says, he says it in the most casual way. He says, the clan cares about what's in your heart not who your heart desires. Basically a very super fucking subtle way of saying that guy was gay.

 Peter liked this example because of how understated it was. He said, "I think when it's

done that way that's when I really appreciate it the most because personally speaking I

think that when we reach the point where you know someone being gay is not 'oh my

god he's gay?!' And is just 'oh he's gay.'" Peter's preferred example of diversity in games

was in the least disruptive way possible to his experience. The Mortal Kombat example,

open to interpretation and where the character's identity did not make any difference to

the game, was seen as the ideal way for games to present diversity because it did not

challenge any of the standard gaming norms that Peter has embraced.

Other players also found diversity acceptable as long as it did not disrupt the

gameplay or the story. Justin, a 27-year-old white heterosexual cisgender graphics and

motion designer, was primarily concerned with how certain stories demand particular

characters:

> I wouldn't say I necessarily look for it. Representation wasn't a huge issue for me. My whole thing was, I only like to play characters who are right for, like when I played RPGs. I remember I got into a debate with my friends, like with Zelda. There was a huge thing, what if Link was female? And it was like I understand why people are thinking that. But it was a lot of, "Well, is that right for the story?"

I like when characters fit the story more than they're just inclusive for inclusiveness's sake.

Relying on gendered assumptions about what characters in a game are able to do, Justin was unable to imagine how a game with more diverse characters could look. He accepts mainstream gaming industry standards for what games can be and what different kinds of characters are capable of. He claims to accept diversity, but only as long as those expectations are not challenged. This is an especially interested example because he uses a fantasy game to illustrate his point. There is no reason for creators of a fantasy world to limit characters according to essentialist gender expectations. What if Link was female? According to standard sexist gaming expectations and therefore according to Justin, that would mean she would be out of place in the role of an adventurer. However, Justin emphasized that he did not intend for his comments to mean that he only wanted to see men represented in games. He clarified: "I'm not saying make them male and then if you find a way to make them female, then do that. It's just I want more stories where it's very well thought out, I would say." For Justin, if a character's identity was at odds with what was typically expected from a person with those characteristics, that character would disrupt the gaming experience. Only when characters fit his expectations of what a game should look like would he accept them as a legitimate choice. This attitude limits the possibility for games to use diverse characters to expand what players think is possible in the world. According to Shaw (2014), imagining possible worlds is a main reason representation is important for everyone, not just a few who may like to see characters who look like themselves. If Justin had more experiences with games where gendered expectations were not so rigidly enforced, it is possible he would be able to imagine different people in a wider variety of roles.

While Justin used a fantasy role playing game to demonstrate where he thought it was important for games to fit his expectations for gender roles, others used realism as a reason that diverse characters would appear out of place. Doug, 26-year-old white Jewish heterosexual cisgender law clerk, was also accepting of diversity as long as it did not challenge his existing images of military history. He was very concerned with historical accuracy:

> So [representation] only matters if the game has provided me a reason for it to matter. So I was a little confused when Battlefield 1 was like, we're going to be very representative of the army's that actually fought, and so when people first got mad . . . In the first map I tried was a Sinai camp game, and everyone was like, oh my god they're all men, and I'm like, yes, the game stated that they are going to do it like the armies were composed. In this battle it included Indian expeditionary and the Ottoman Empire, there were no girls . . . So I'm totally fine if the Ottoman Empire, people complain all the Ottomans are male, but it's like yeah, if you look at the Ottoman army that fought in Israel at the time, I'm sure they were. But that's not representative of the people who would have been there for the actual fight. . . It was real. They came out and just said we want to be representative of the soldiers who fought during the period.

For Doug, the measure of a game's success is in how accurately it reflects his understanding of the past. He characterizes criticism of the game as people misunderstanding the intentions of the game and rejecting his sense of historical objectivity. He knows the game was created by people, but he does not see human agency in the choices of what events to draw on in the construction of a game or in the ways in which people choose to depict those events. He is able to quickly construct a set of people who "complain all the Ottomans are male," but has accepted the industry's stated emphasis on historical accuracy and finds that challenging that idea would disrupt his experience playing the game. As a result, he makes an argument that suggests there were no women in this period of history, and especially no women doing anything of sufficient importance to inspire a game. He has embraced the standard conventions of games as

centered on the experiences of military men so that is the only part of history he is

concerned with.

Similarly to Justin, Doug was clear that he had no problem with diversity overall,

just in instances where it would affect gameplay. He described a game that would

randomly assign a gender to the player's avatar, which he had no problem with:

> I forget what the game was, but it was a game where you chose if you are male or female when you created your player, it was a fifty-fifty flip. They were just like, that's how life is, that's how our game works, and I was like okay, I'll buy that. I'm fine with that, like if the game decided that I'm a woman today I'm like, okay, I like your logic, it doesn't affect the game play, let's go.

Once again, Doug was accepting of instances where he did not have to spend any

additional time or energy considering the implication of representation in games. It is

interesting that he believes that in some instances gender has no impact on an experience

but in other cases it can be disruptive. He accepted almost any reason for diverse or

homogenous sets of characters in games as long as it was provided by a gaming

institution, he believed in.

While Justin and Doug criticized diversity depending on the context of different

games, for others diversity became suspicious in any context if they believed it drew

attention away from their expectations for mainstream gaming. Ben, a half European, half

Pacific Islander, 18-year-old cisgender heterosexual student, was one example. He saw

limits on the number of identities they thought could reasonably represented in games. He

saw the appeal of some diversity in games but believed that efforts could become

unnecessary and distracting:

> I was thinking about this a lot because people, especially from LGBT, seem to have really strong feelings about being represented. . . I can get always seeing straight couples. 'I want to see a gay couple once in a while.' Sure, whatever. But if you want every single combination of ... 'Okay, we need to have a white male

who's gay, but a black male who's gay, a black male who ended up having surgery to be a woman, but he's straight, so if he's a woman, but he's straight, but he used to be a guy, then' blah, blah, blah and you can go on forever. Equal representation. Yeah. But really, if what they look like shouldn't matter, what they look like shouldn't matter. Equal representation of sexuality, I think that's fair. Sure. Not necessarily equal, just somewhat representative of real life. You see gay couples, you see the lesbians ... Whatever. But looking for someone that exactly looks like you, and everyone has to be like, 'There has to be someone that's obese, who's white, normal weight, skinny,' it shouldn't matter.

For Ben, some identities warrant inclusion while others do not. The transphobia in his comments suggests that his judgments here are at least related to the identities he finds acceptable in his real life as well. He expects games to look like the world he knows, and his description suggests that his world does not include close relationships with any transgender people. He argues that humanity is what matters most for a character, but is unable to see the humanity in all types of people:

Where I kind of get lost is when I look for a label of the character, I'm not looking for someone that looks like me. I'm looking for someone with humanity. So, if they think it shouldn't matter that a certain character is fat, or thin, or whatever, yeah, I don't think so either. . . So I don't go looking for them to show some 5'11", half Asian, half European skinny guy . . . We look like each other, so we can relate on a few things, but so what? If it's a totally different person, so what?

The argument here is that because identity does not matter, identity should not be considered in making games. Ben can only make this kind of argument because he sees himself as removed from identity questions in games. He argues that the character's personalities and actions matter more than their characteristics, and so arguments for diversity beyond what he deemed acceptable were failing to understand the true purpose of games. While he may not believe he sees himself in games, he is also unable to see himself in all people. Because mainstream gaming is designed for and by people with his experiences, he does not see his own identity as political.

Kenneth, a white 26-year-old cisgender heterosexual lawyer, had similar concerns

about diversity taking away from a gameplay experience that were based on the idea of a

cisgender men as neutral gaming character. but he expressed his ideas more aggressively.

Kenneth is angry that developers are spending time making games diverse instead of

making them good. He uses the example of a recent Star Wars game to make his point:

> Everything that had been done up until that point had made people think that as
> long as we put a fuck pile of violence here, and social justice tokenism, the fact
> that, 'Hey look, we got a whole of violence, the game looks great. And look the
> protagonist is a woman of color.' Everyone, fuck yeah, representation, violence,
> graphics, great game of the year. They thought they could get away with making
> you play 40 hours to get Darth Vader. If I'm buying a Star Wars game, I expect to
> be able to play as Darth fucking Vader.

For Kenneth, making games diverse means taking time away from developing the other

parts of the games. He attributes the poor quality of many games to an emphasis on

politics at the expense of game quality, imagining that games must start with a white man

as protagonist and that designing around a different character must take additional time

and energy. He had similar thoughts about the Assassin's Creed franchise, which

releases games frequently:

> They finally decide in 2016 to really pump the breaks on this shit and say, 'Look,
> we're going to retool after two years because nobody likes our games anymore.
> They think they're by-the-numbers trash.' Because they are, but they kept saying,
> 'Look, now we're including people of multiple gender identities. Now you can
> help Karl Marx. And now there's trans people in the game.' Because there's a lot
> of fucking trans people in Victorian England. None of this changed the fact that
> the games kept getting worse and worse.

This description suggests that Kenneth believes that the games industry no longer

understands what makes for what he considers an objectively good game. He also

believed that right-wing politics were also interfering with games:

> Ubisoft is overcompensating by making Far Cry 5 set in Montana instead of
> Nepal, or where you're gunning down far right religious cultists. And all of my

kooky friends who have deplorable tattooed on them, they're all up in arms about this and I say nobody's going to care, the game's going to suck. Ubisoft's going to take another loss on it, and people are going to go back to playing Far Cry 3 which everyone liked. The politics are getting in the way of good games. Politics in one direction or another, Devolver Digital is trying to play to its audience like, 'Yeah. Fuck yeah. We're going to get strong white male protagonists, so all the Gamergate people like us. Fuck yeah.' Well those games fucking sucked too. Games suck now.

For Kenneth, political concerns are always detrimental to games, and so questions about representation were from people who fail to understand games. Kenneth is very unusual in that he was the only one to strongly reject ideas about diversity. Other players set limits on where diversity was acceptable like Peter, Justin, and Ben, but he was the only one to reject the idea that any diversity at all could be beneficial. He imagines himself as a representative of neutral gaming, and that other people bring politics into gaming. He wants a return to a time he imagines when games did not involve politics, which to him means creating games where all characters are white cisgender military men.

While Kenneth believed that games had strayed from their central purpose, this group together share an understanding of gaming. They believe true gaming to have a core, default center free of diversity that needs to be protected from the political agendas brought by people different from themselves. They were interested in how games were able to align themselves with that apolitical center, and they measured failure as distance from their expectations. This approach relied on an understanding of games and the gaming industry as an entity that can be separated from political concerns. This is only possible if the white heterosexual cisgender man identity that dominates mainstream gaming is understood as a neutral category, with other identities as additions or deviations that begin in this neutral category. A game to be created with other identities

represented from the beginning is still seen as a change because of how firmly these expectations for representation have been embraced by this group of players.

Trust in Improvements

Another way participants embraced the standards of gaming culture was in their support for the ways in which they believe the gaming industry has solved problems with representation. This approach reflected a similar acceptance of standards as determined and implemented by the gaming industry. Like the idea that games centered on white cisgender men are neutral, this trust in improvements relies on the idea that gaming culture is not inherently unequal. A trust in improvements does suggest criticism of the gaming industry in the admission that improvements were needed at one time, but it also suggests that the idea that problems with inequality have now been solved.

A general feeling of optimism and belief in the gaming industry's attempts at diversity was very common. Of all 78 respondents I interviewed, over half the men and only one woman claimed that representation is better than it once was. These respondents believed that representations of diversity were much more common than they had been in the past, which they saw as a generally good thing. Those who took this stance were supportive of the idea of diversity in games. They would often cite some examples of times they had encountered women characters in games, which they saw as a sign that things were improving. However, because they interpreted this perceived improvement to mean that the issue had been solved and that games are already sufficiently diverse, they were not interested in making further improvements. They were ready to celebrate the diversity they saw without being critical of what that diversity looked like. The analysis

of stereotypes and harmful tropes and discussions of the potential costs of these stereotypes were completely absent from their discussion. These participants claimed to support diversity in the abstract and were happy with the changes they saw. However, because of these perceived improvements in representation, they justice in gaming overall as complete.

These players celebrated two key improvements they identified in representation in games: strong female characters and customizable avatars. Max, a white 27-year-old cisgender heterosexual lawyer, shows these characteristics in his answer:

> They're getting better in some respects, a lot of games anyway. I might even venture to say most, but I won't say most. At the beginning of the game you create your avatar, right? You can choose male or female, you can choose your race and choose your eye color, which is kind of fun. In Destiny 2, for example, you can do that. My girlfriend created a character, a girl that looks like herself with electric blue eyes. So, that was kind of fun. So, it's getting better, but it still has room to grow. And Destiny 2 right now the person who is giving me all of the orders is female, which is actually kind of cool right? Ten years ago, I don't think that was commonplace at all. Traditionally it's been awful, but I think it's getting better.

Max, a self-proclaimed feminist, claimed to be deeply concerned with social inequalities. However, he was unable to cite specific ways he thought representation "still has room to grow." He interpreted the presence of any characters who were not exclusively white men as a progress, regardless of the context. Shaw (2014) makes several arguments why custom character choices are largely seen as an ineffective effort in support of diversifying games. They make diversity optional, placing the responsibility of that choice with the individual players rather than with the game. In addition, the differences also tend to make very little difference beyond the appearance of the character, and so may not produce meaningful difference in terms of diversifying gaming experiences or introducing new ways of thinking about the world (Shaw, 2014). However, for Max and

many others, the fact that other people had the option to play as a woman and as a person

of color was seen as evidence that representation is no longer a question that needs

significant discussion.

This appreciation echoes Peter's admiration for the Mortal Kombat character who

could be interpreted as gay. Diversity that does not challenge established norms and

expectations for games are welcomed by many players who tend to support diversity as a

concept. This allows them to maintain a positive view of gaming and of themselves as

participants without having to encounter challenging ideas. Max is able to use the gender

options in a game to support his feminist identity. He noticed it was available, which to

him is enough of a change that the game is not too sexist for him to need to object to.

Similarly, Scott, a white 25-year-old cisgender heterosexual sales associate, was

supportive of diversity as a concept and claimed that he liked seeing the options in

games, but avoided pursuing them in his own experiences:

> The games themselves, though there's always exceptions, but I feel as a general rule they are getting better. I don't know as fact, it just feels like they are. . . Some games that have come out recently that I've been playing have also specifically had gay people in them as side characters or in the case of BioWare, you can always choose, there's always both gay options of either gender. . . It's not something I look for, but if I'm playing a game and it happens to be in it. . . Dragon Age is a good example. There's options to go gay, to be both male and female, and as a player, I don't tend to go for those options, but just knowing they're in there makes me feel a bit better about the game because I know that it's trying to be a bit more inclusive than just appealing to one audience. And I do like it.

Scott supports the idea of diversity in games and has a general sense that it is improving.

This is not a trend his has evidence for or seems to notice very specifically, but like Max

it supports his view of himself that he would be aware of and support the efforts. Also

like Max who saw the gender options as useful for his girlfriend, Scott sees

representation as useful for other people. He sees himself as part of the "one audience"

games tend to be designed to appeal to. He does not view diversity as important for him

to encounter in games. This positions him as the neutral category games are all designed

for, and other people as special cases in need of exceptions to the typical rules.

Tom, a white 40-year-old cisgender heterosexual man who was self-employed,

had similar opinions, and also saw the issue as removed from his own experience:

> As a cisgender male, that's never really an issue (laughs). See I've seen gaming
> made big strides in that department in the last five years or something. We're
> seeing a lot stronger female characters. We're seeing more minorities and you
> know, different sexual orientations. Slowly slowly catching up. It takes a while.
> It's nice to see that.

Tom has little evidence beyond a vague sense of progress that he views positive, but also

as largely positive for other people. Greg, a white 25-year-old cisgender heterosexual

student who also felt this discussion was better suited to someone else, admired the

strong female characters in Overwatch:

> I look at things like Overwatch and I think it's one of those really good video
> games where there's a lot of strong female leads that are playable for video games.
> And I think that's cool, but some of the best characters in the game just from a
> play point of view, that's some of the female characters. So, I think that's really
> also like, "You don't want to play the female characters. They suck." No. Some of
> the best characters, objectively, are the women characters. So, I think that's really
> cool. Again, I can't speak much to it, because it's not my scene so to speak, but it's
> got to be better. I think the representation, at least from a video game industry
> perspective, is definitely much better.

Greg seems relieved that he does not have to avoid playing the women characters in

Overwatch because they are worse, an interesting concern that echoes the idea that

diversity is an additional step that detracts from a game that was a common source of

fear. While Greg is pleased that playing as a woman character does not necessarily

detract from the game, he positions himself as separate from people who would be

affected by representation in games when he says, "it's not my scene." Despite this difference, he still makes a claim that things have improved. He can feel like an advocate for diversity because he has noticed changes, but as no more work is needed, he can continue to play games without concerning himself further. By characterizing representation as an issue that has improved, these men were able to position themselves as allies while also continuing their acceptance of established gaming industry standards.

No Need to Change

Those who embraced the existing gaming industry norms and standards did not always seek to use games to support an identity as an advocate for diversity, so did not always require a progress narrative to justify their support. Instead, it was very common for them to not challenge existing patterns of representation at all. These were the people who prioritized the gameplay experience over anything else. They did not express suspicions related to politicizing an imagined gaming space and claimed to not notice what characters look like at all. They were happy with the options provided by games and did not think any changes in how characters are represented would make a difference to their gaming experiences. They were primarily concerned with the gameplay experience. These players did not have limits on when diversity was acceptable to them. In this way, they were the most accepting of established gaming standards related to representation. Samuel, a Hispanic 40-year-old cisgender heterosexual recruiter, claimed representation was not an element he considered when purchasing or playing a game:

> But people talk about having more women, or people of color, or people from different backgrounds, or whatever. I don't know that I ever really think about it in those terms. I'm not buying a game because of those or not because of those. So for me, it doesn't really come into play . . .   People talk about having more

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women, or people of color, or people from different backgrounds, or whatever. I don't know that I ever really think about it in those terms. I'm not buying a game because of those or not because of those. So for me, it doesn't really come into play.

For Samuel, the way games are currently designed is sufficient. He has a set of games he likes to play and knows what to look for to find a game he likes. Industry changes to representation patterns would not affect that, and he is happy with the way things are currently done.

Jordan, an Asian 18-year-old cisgender heterosexual student, expressed similar sentiments:

I always thought customizing my character was a little bit of a nuisance. I don't know. I just want them to give it to me and I just play it. I don't really care how I look in the game because it's just virtual, and it's not me. It's just like something else. So I would rather it be more focused on the game itself instead of how I look in the game.

Jordan is not interested at all in what he looks like. For him, the value of games is unrelated to representation. Existing standards provide him with everything he is looking for and expects, and the only distraction is when character creation takes too long. Caleb's similar answer, "It's not even something that I really pay attention to," was also indicative of this common attitude. Nicole, a 28-year-old heterosexual cisgender Asian legal assistant, noticed diversity but had a similar attitude towards its importance to her experience:

I've never noticed, in general, very much. I know that [in Left 4 Dead] there's one girl character in the game and one black guy, and an agent So, I think in that sense, they are trying to bring out more of the diversity and culture of the [settings]. haven't ever placed too much meaning on that, because you're making an effort, but really like, as a gamer, I don't care what my competitor looks like. I just care what my character does

One related concern that occurred several times was the emphasis on character options over character identity. These players were most interested in the game options provided by different characters. Anthony said, "I wouldn't say that identifying with a character is essential to me, but if a character blatantly does things that I wouldn't do it can take me out of the game. If they kill a character that I wouldn't kill, or they don't kill a character that I would kill, stuff like that." Greg gave a similar account of what he looked for in a character:

> I think my character is...I think, maybe when I create the characters, they're not always representative of me but what the decisions I make in the game are either, incredibly representative like this is what I do in this situation, or I would never do this ever, let's see what it's like. I think it's very much, it's never that sort of like 'I dabble in one or the other', it's either like I play a character that "this would be me/this would never be me."

For Greg and Anthony, games provide the opportunity to explore new situations as themselves. In order for this opportunity to succeed, it was important that Greg and Anthony's characters have the options to make the choices they themselves would make in that situation. Other men were also interested in the opportunities within the game that playing from different perspective could provide. Daniel, who was half-Japanese, half-Polish and living in Canada was generally interested in the history of his own countries. However, he preferred to play military strategy games as countries he had no affiliation with because he prefers their equipment. He said:

> I'm half-Japanese, half-Polish. So I've definitely invested my time in that. I've read up a decent amount of Polish history too. I don't really play any games that have too much notability about those two areas though... Although to be fair, I'm probably more invested in the American or the Russian tech tree in that game. The aircraft are more fun. The Americans have something called the saber and they have the F2 variant, which has revolver cannons. So it flies well and hits hard, and it is a joy to fly.

The appeal of games is in the opportunity to explore choices. This appeal has been well-established for both these men throughout their experiences with games, and they are consistently able to get what they need from games.

Discussion

The players included in the previous section share a general appreciation and acceptance for established common practices in how games are made. Some of them expressed trepidation at the idea of shifts to those practices that they interpreted as possible threats. However, for the most part this support reflected a wider feeling of acceptance in gaming. These players tended to consider themselves gamers, and gaming a source of joy or excitement in their lives. Just as their overall relationships with gaming culture tended to be positive, so too did their attitudes towards the games themselves that gaming culture is built on. In the next section, I will discuss players who did not share this confidence in gaming standards. Instead, their approach to representation in games is marked by suspicion and distrust.

Part Two: Skepticism

In contrast to the previous section general acceptance of existing gaming expectations, other players were deeply suspicious of games and the possibilities games offer. This skepticism was expressed in a variety of ways. Some did not expect more from games and believed that questions of representation were misplaced because games do not have the potential for positive or meaningful change. Others had such low expectations for games that any amount of diversity was celebrated even while being

criticized as harmful or limited. Overall, those who were skeptical of representation in gaming also tended to reject the gamer label and be ambivalent in their attitudes towards gaming overall. That ambivalence was expressed in a wide range of ways depending on personal preferences and experiences as well as identities.

Presence of Queer Characters

For some, any representation of queerness in games was celebrated. Keith, a white 18-year-old transgender man, explained

> It might sound weird, but if there is a possibility to be gay in a game, it gets a lot of praise from LGBT communities. Even though it's such a small thing sometimes, just the ability to be gay is really important. That's actually one of the reasons I got Stardew Valley, is because you can be gay. Hell yeah.

It is notable that Keith frames his response as if he were used to defending position that any kind of representation of queer identities is worth celebrating. Even though he takes the stance that he enjoys any game with the opportunity to be gay, he has still consider other opinions and has thought about what content matters for him. The choice to accept all gay representations is not one he has come to easily and is aware of other arguments. He does not expect to see gay characters in video games, so every time it happens, he is pleasantly surprised that a game has exceeded his low expectations. He described similar surprise at seeing transgender characters in games done in an interesting and positive way:

> There is a dating sim, where you date gay dads. It's called Dream Daddy. One of the characters is trans. He's like a vampire. He wears a binder and everything. That's really good trans representation. The thing is that there are games with transgender characters, but sometimes their whole thing is that, 'Oh, I'm a transgender person.' It's much nicer [in Dream Daddy]. While it's good to have stories and games about transgender characters, and sort of their transitions and stuff, it's also really nice to just have some casual representation. Especially in a

game like Dream Daddy, where everyone's already gay anyways because you're a dad dating other dads. Having a character that is ... he's trans, but he's also a vampire. He has more interesting things about him than being trans. That's a really good example, I think. As you can tell I'm having issues thinking of many trans characters in games. . . Yeah. I certainly wouldn't mind if there were more trans characters in whatever form. I think it would be nice to see them implemented as well as they are in Dream Daddy. Or as like Tracer is a lesbian, but she's also a fighter and a symbol of hope. That's really cool.

Keith has clearly put a lot of thought into this analysis. He has considered how the character is presented as trans, the context of the game, and common ways transgender characters are represented in ways he thinks are both good and bad. He likes that the character wears a binder and is clearly intended to be transgender, and also that the character is a fully developed character like other characters in the game. Keith did not see the character and immediately accept the representation as a positive thing, like so many participants commented on the presence of women. Instead, the game needed to prove to Keith that it could be trusted with presenting a transgender character. Keith also says he "wouldn't mind if there were more trans characters in whatever form," showing that he does not expect transgender representation to be as successful as the Dream Daddy example.

The other character Keith references as a positive example, Tracer from the wildly popular Overwatch game, was mentioned frequently by participants who played online multi-player games. Chelsea, a queer white cisgender 27-year-old woman who worked as an animal technician, also used Tracer as an example of positive representation although she described her reluctance to take that position. She was not aware of how much she wanted to see representation in games until she encountered it in the game Overwatch:

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Honestly, I'm going to tell you right now, I didn't think it mattered to me a lot until the main Overwatch character of Tracer, the main character, the poster character was gay. I cared a lot about that, and I was like, 'You know what? This does actually matter to me. It really does.' And I can say that's the reason I still play Overwatch, is because their representation is actually really good considering. Over half of the characters are women, and it isn't just like the woman character. It's a variety of characters who are women. And Dragon Age had trans characters in there, and I was just like, 'Shit, yeah, we need more of this.' And now I notice it a lot more. Obviously, as feminists, we all have to change and kind of work through stuff over time, and we're always changing and trying to be better as feminists. So over time, I notice it a lot more now than even when I first identified as a feminist.

Chelsea connects her growing appreciation for representation in games to her growing support for feminism. She way she describes her relationship with games as having "to change and work through stuff over time" suggests that she has had some difficulty reconciling her feminist beliefs with the patterns of representation she has encountered in games. Also, she has concluded that things need to continue to change. Unlike the participants who embrace gaming standards, Chelsea uses feminism to critique the games she sees and think about her own role in their production. This attitude is in contrast to Max, who used his support for representation in games as evidence that he was a feminist.

Chelsea also directly addressed the common opinion that diversity in games does not matter:

And it matters to me a lot that the characters are not all straight, white dudes, cishet dudes, yeah. I think it's important to try and ... And you know what? The community is totally going to say stuff like, 'I don't even see why it matters, and blah, blah, blah.' It's because you're a straight, white dude and because you don't care about that. But somebody like me who is queer, having the main character of the most popular game of 2016 being queer is awesome, and I really like that.

Chelsea expects disagreement for this support from "the community," which she characterizes as "straight, white dudes." Chelsea imagines the gaming community as

different from her, and with different concerns and preferences. She expresses surprise

multiple times that representation matters to her in the way that it does, including in a

story she told that illustrates the power of representation for a friend's daughter:

> Actually, one of my friends was telling me how her daughter, who played a lot of
> Overwatch ... Her daughter, who is 10, decided like, 'It's okay to be a lesbian now
> because Tracer's a lesbian.' So she totally came out after that. Yeah. It was really
> great. Like I said to you, I didn't think it mattered to me as much as it does now,
> but now that I've seen what can be possible with Gone Home and Overwatch and
> even Undertale, where they just had genderless characters, which I really like, it
> does matter to me a lot that.

Chelsea initially felt reluctant to admit to herself how much she valued the presence of

queer characters in games. When she discussed trying to be better as a feminist, it is

possible she meant being critical of representations as well as being aware of the kinds of

characters being represented. It was not until her friend's daughter was inspired by the

Overwatch character Tracer to come out as a lesbian that Chelsea realized she valued

representation in games.

Chelsea indicates the complexity of debates around representation, even within

communities where it might be unexpected. Chelsea, a queer woman, felt that looking for

representation in games was a position that needed to be defended. She referred to

arguments she imagined from "the community" to criticize her and needed to draw on the

experiences of others to justify her own preferences. Despite her clear support for

representation, she stance is not one she has arrived at lightly or easily. Her appreciation

for representation is ambiguous.

Reinforcing Stereotypes

One primary way participants expressed skepticism towards representation in games was in how they were constantly aware of stereotypes. Most participants who felt somewhat marginalized by gaming culture had established a set of criteria they applied to every character in a game. If they felt the character relied or reinforced harmful stereotypes, they would typically not be surprised but the game would have lost all subversive potential. These players were used to playing games they disagreed with, and so encountering stereotypes was rarely a surprise. Some preferred to avoid games where they were more likely to encounter images they preferred to avoid, but mostly players saw bad representation as a part of gaming.

Brendan, a white cisgender gay 22-year-old student game developer, felt that being marginalized in society made seeing his own identity in games even more important, but that it had to be a positive representation to be meaningful. For him, positive representation meant challenging stereotypes. He was very critical at attempts at representation that reinforced stereotypes:

> I think representation is really important. For folks who don't see the identities they have in like media very often, like seeing those in a negative light, that's not representation and that's very frequent. . . So like a lot of people argue that [the TV show Orange is the New Black] is good representation for Black women but, also like, they're all in jail, so it doesn't really go against any narrative that's pre-established, so for me that isn't necessarily representation.

For Brendan, seeing his own identity as a gay man was very important, and he thought that seeing diversity in media was particularly important for people who rarely see themselves represented. However, he was still critical of tropes in representations that he interpreted as potentially harmful:

> I identify as gay. I've seen examples of good representation and bad representation. I'll start with cases of like bad representation. Um, usually over-feminine men, this is not much the case anymore but definitely mid-2000s, there

was a lot of cases for like over-feminine men, villains who were marked as like degenerate, other cases where gay men weren't represented in a positive light. So an example of that is Witcher 3? In the first ten minutes of the game, you ran into this guy who's been exiled from his town, and like you do a quest for him, I don't remember the specifics. But you do like a quest for him, and he's like I was exiled because I was gay. and I was like oh, great, so, dragons can exist in this world, but you know, gay people can't, in a positive light, right? So for me that isn't necessarily representation, or positive representation, so it doesn't go against any pre-established narratives in any positive way, right?

While Brendan did value seeing gay characters in games, he was critical of the limited ways in which he frequently saw them represented. He was not looking generally to see gay characters just to have, or even to relate to. For him, the potential for representation was to show that characters could full, interesting, necessary characters without being heterosexual or cisgender.

I feel BioWare games are a lot better at that, um, Dragon Age specifically has a lot of like LGBTQ+ characters, who are like represented in a positive light. They're well-developed characters, they're relevant to the plot, Krem and Dorian are two really good characters. I feel there's a lot of bad representation, but I feel BioWare is kind of an outlier, not necessarily the rule, when it comes to gaming. It's definitely like, I don't want to say like getting better or improving, but we definitely see a lot better representation than we see 10 years ago.

Brendan went on the describe the two specific characters from Dragon Age, a BioWare game, he thought were good examples of queer representation, Krem and Dorian:

Krem is a trans character in Dragon Age Inquisition. He's not like one of the main characters, he's a secondary character, but he's pretty like visible in the game, and you can have certain good dialogue with him. He's very important to another character and he has his own thoughts and opinions about things, and he's definitely like his own character. And it's definitely going against pre-established narratives because he's a trans character and he's overall in a very good position, and very comfortable with himself and with the people around him and like, the people around him are very comfortable with his existence. As for the Witcher example, where no one around him, the character, was comfortable with him, so he's exiled.

For Brendan, Krem meets the criteria required to be considered "good representation:" a fully developed character who is important to the game and other characters while also having his own personality and characteristics. Good representation for Brendan also requires that a character challenges stereotypes, like how Krem challenges common tropes of cisgender characters being uncomfortable with transgender characters. This shows that for Brendan, relying on the typical standards for representation is not enough. He does not believe that common ways in which queer characters are represented in games is subversive enough to count as representation and is very aware of the few examples that he does consider to be subversive.

KC, a 20-year-old white queer transgender man, was also critical of the representation of queer characters in games. While he thought it was important, he also felt it was also done in an unrealistic way:

> I think it's really important, like, I'm kind of tired of not being able to date the people of like a gender that I want in a game, or like, whatever like that and, like in the very very few times that there have been trans people in games like they're done terribly, and stuff like that, which is just like frustrating to play. So like a recent example was, uh I actually didn't play it, but in Mass Effect Andromeda, there was a trans character, and basically the player can go talk to this person and then immediately she just, like they ask one question, immediately she just says oh yeah I used to go by this name, but now I go by this name, that's why I came to space. It's kind of just weird? Like, it's weirdly put in there, like they're trying to tick off a diversity box.

He did not think the transgender character's identity was addressed or incorporated enough into the story to be convincing. He expected representation to be shallow and stereotypical. The criticism of being "weirdly put in there" may not be very specific, but it fit with KC's expectations for bad representation.

In discussing Dragon Age, Brendan named another character that he did consider to be good representation:

> Dorian is also a really good character. He's definitely one of the main followers in the game, and he definitely has his own character arc. His character arc deals with a lot of like real issues. He has problems with his dad because his dad doesn't accept him as a gay man. So, Dragon Age has this thing called blood magic, which is kind of frowned upon in society, and not generally considered a good thing, and Dorian's dad kind of wants to use Blood magic to make Dorian straight, which is kind of a very akin to like conversion therapy. And you help Dorian go through this whole process, and Dorian is perfect. I feel Dorian is also written by someone who identifies as gay, so also that's pretty good, queer people are writing queer characters.

In contrast Krem, Dorian's storyline does include elements that are related to common tragic narratives for queer characters. However, Brendan feels that Dorian is written by someone who identifies as gay. The character feels real enough to Brendan that he interprets this character arc as addressing an important issue in the world. As he described earlier, Brendan did not like the inclusion of the minor character in the Witcher 3 who was exiled for being gay. However, because in Dragon Age the character is written as a fully developed character who feels like he was written by someone who identities as gay, Brendan sees Dorian as a good example of representation. KC, also discussed Dragon Age:

> But then like in Dragon Age inquisition there's a trans character and like you, like slowly get to know him and he slowly opens up to you and stuff like that, so that's done really well. But yeah, or there's like, other points where, in other games where like it's used as a joke like, oh you thought this character was a boy but it's actually a girl, sort of like that, or like even worse they like, there's some story arc about them like coming to term with actually being whatever, which is just their like gender assigned at birth, which is kind of gross. I like one of the games that I've played that did have that kind of like story arc of person returning to like their gender assigned at birth, it's one of my favorite games but, it's just kind of a weak point of it, I guess? and like I still really love the character, like I guess in my mind it was like, rewritten it (laughs) to like suit what I want.

This shows that simplistic interpretations centered only on the inclusion or exclusion of different characters and story elements does not address the real ways in which players interpret representation in games. The game, the context, and the overall experience all make a difference in how representation can be interpreted, and game must earn the trust of their players for the characters to be seen as challenging stereotypes rather than reproducing them.

For Frank, a 19-year-old transgender bisexual mixed-race Muslim man, race was the area he was most sensitive to representation in games. He had enough experience with games focused on war to know that they would be a harmful experience for him to play. He learned to avoid them in order to avoid the ubiquitous racism in those games:

> I think for me racial representation is a lot more important than sexual orientation or gender representation. I mean like obviously women are underrepresented across the board but that's like, in everything, right? So, it's sort of like, you know the game community is like, not super great about that but I think that's just standard. I think for me, more the reason why I won't play the real-life games or like adapted games from real-life events is that there's a lot of like negative portrayals about things that are my identity. Right? So it's like if there's, a lot of the war games are focused on like, the Middle East and how that's negative and how the US is going to come in a save it and like Middle Eastern people are portrayed as like terrorists, or like untrustworthy, and that's like not a thing that I need to see, you know for me. And so it's like, it's nice that I can like hop on a Nintendo game and play some fictional Pikmin characters, that's like a lowkey time for me. Whereas like if I'm playing like a point and shoot game or like a fighter game, it's like this has a lot of connotations for me that it wouldn't necessarily have for other people.

Frank did not expect to see diversity related to gender or sexuality in games and was not looking for it. He did not expect games to do more or to change. Instead, his main concern was in how he experienced the racism of war and military games. Those stereotypes were stressful for him to encounter. Because he saw them as integral to the

ways in which those types of games are produced, he did not expect change and learned to avoid them.

Tara, a white 20-year-old bisexual transgender woman who worked as a hostess, also had low expectations for representation in media and would rather not see it than see it done in an offensive or stereotypical way:

> As far as trans representation goes, which is something that would affect me, that's something that's like, yeah, that's something that would appeal to me. You can play as a trans character, technically in Saints Row, you can change the character, so it'd be like, yeah, this one is trans. Other than that, I'm pretty sure it's never a thing. There's the whole Nintendo stuff where it got censored, where it's like the character was trans and now they're not, there's the trans character in the Pokémon coliseum and ultimately it's always token and when it's not, it's removed and honestly, I would prefer it stay that way because the alternative would probably be offensive. That's a big bummer. That's not really just with video games, that's kind of my interpretation on trans stuff in media all together. You're probably going to do it wrong so I'd rather you just not do it, but it's still not done, so oh well.

Tara did not work to actively avoid games where she expected to see stereotypes in the same way Frank did but would rather not see a trans character in a game than see one done poorly.

Like Frank, race was also most salient for Avery, a Black 27-year-old bisexual nonbinary female graphic designer, in representations in gaming:

> Villains are usually coded as not straight or sort queer in that kind of way. So liking villains is probably a lot of it, probably unconsciously. But I am more akin to identify with a black character, even if they're straight, than I am with the LGBT character if they're white. Just because it's a drastically different experience. There's very little Black representation. So it's like, if I'm not going to find a good Black representation or a good LGBT representation, I'm definitely not going to find a Black LGBT character that's decent. So, it's sort of like eh whatever. It's sort of like you get tired of being disappointed and there are people who really fight for it. I'm passionate about it, but it's also like there's only so many times I can be irritated by something before I have to stop it from affecting me. So, if it's super bad, then it's just like oh God, but if it's not that bad, I'll probably just ... if the game wasn't interesting before, I'm not going to be interested in it now.

Like Frank, Avery had come to expect representation to mean harmful stereotypes, and so no longer expected to see anything better. Avoiding the worst of the stereotypes was her only goal, and while she was passionate about fighting for equality in other areas, she did not see video games as worth fighting over. Learning to "stop it from affecting" her had become her main strategy in the face of constant disappointment.

Sheena, a white 23-year old heterosexual transgender sales associate, also noticed the use of race in video games to often depict villainy. She understood the reasons this practice is common, and thought that games did have the potential to invoke stereotypes in order to refute them in an interesting way:

> I mean, it's far too easy, and I understand from a game design standpoint, I understand why so many games make the enemy characters all of one foreign ethnicity. Honestly, you can explain that without even needing racism. You just say, well, the immediately recognizability of an enemy is extremely valuable when you're playing a game that's so reflex based. That's true, find a new way. And there are cases where it works. For example, the game Spec Ops: The Line. All of the enemies are ... Well, not all of them, but the vast majority are people of color, but that works because the whole point is the idea of being a white American savior character is inherently flawed, and it's all about the story of how you are actually a war criminal. So, it sets up these tropes, and then it utterly subverts them by saying, 'Yeah. And you're a monster for doing what you did. Oh yeah, you just slaughtered a whole bunch of children. Well done you.' That was horrifying moment for me when I was playing it. You're like, "Oh, okay. I'm awful. Got it. So, it can be justified where it's making a point along those lines, but for the most part no. Find a new route. There's a huge prevalence of making enemy characters be a specific ethnicity as the way to single them out as being the enemy, and that's pretty damn racist in addition to lack of representation, and when you do get the other representation a lot of it's stereotyped.

Sheena noticed stereotypes like other players did, and she had encountered games that proved to her that they could use stereotypes to address societal issues. However, she also recognized these games as exceptional, and understood stereotypes as primarily a harmful

practice that games employ in order to communicate information without additional effort.

Ian, a 28-year-old heterosexual cisgender videographer and photographer, was one of two Black men in my sample. Ian recounted one of the few experiences he had where he had the opportunity to play as a Black character when he was playing the sequel to a game he and his friends had played before, while his friends, both white, watched:

> They were watching me play and they saw my character, and they were like, "Oh, did you design your own character?" I was like, "No, it's just ... the guy is who he is." They're like, "Oh, that's surprising." I'm Black and the character was Black. They thought that I made a character that looked like me because he has a little bit of facial hair, and he has short hair on top, and he wears glasses. That's similar to what I look like, which was a total coincidence… When they saw my character, they thought that I made him. We were talking about how it's funny that they assumed that, that a young black guy wouldn't be the protagonist of a major AAA game. I was saying to my girlfriend the other night how ... I was telling her that story and just saying how, again, it really comes down to who is making the games, and who wants to see themselves represented in them.

This story is notable for the reactions of everyone involved. Ian was not surprised his friends assumed he had made the character because he did not expect to see himself represented. He did not criticize them for assuming that because it fits with his expectations for games as well. Ian also noted other examples of positive and negative representation that he encountered:

He continued:

> Any of these AAA developers, they are looking at their demographics, and their markets, and their sales, and they're saying, "If 80% of our market is white, 20-year-old dudes, then we want to sell them things that white, 20-year-old dudes like." Maybe white, 20-year-old dudes don't want a girl who kicks their ass, or a Black guy that they can't identify with because they didn't grow up with that. Again, it's another one of those really more complicated than it seems issues.

While Ian cared about this issue and had given it a lot of thought, he also was sympathetic to the industry perspective that limited opportunities for positive diverse

representation in games. Like Sheena, Ian was critical of the limited diversity and stereotypes in games but was also willing to consider the reasoning behind them. He understood the gaming industry as deeply unequal, but it was no more than he expected based on his long experiences with games.

Imagined Audiences

A common understanding of representation in games was that games are designed for an imagined audience of young white heterosexual cisgender men. This audience was referred to as "the community" and "gamers" by participants not in this group as if it was understood that games were not designed for them. One way this was seen was in considerations of the male gaze. Joel, a 20-year-old cisgender, heterosexual white sales associate, understood that the was in the demographic most games are designed for, but criticized the fetishization of sex scenes between women in games. He believed that lesbian options in games occasionally seem more like a voyeuristic opportunity for men than a chance for lesbians to see themselves in games:

> As for sexual preference for video games, I find it curious that if you're playing a female character, it seems to be sort of encouraged toward sort of the more voyeuristic of bisexualism or lesbianism. Whereas with male characters, it seems to lean more towards being straight… And sort of like, in the BioWare games, when you're trying to romance a character of the same sex, it's sort of an approach sort of like a more voyeuristic, "this is sort of a forbidden topic" thing, instead of just like if you were pursuing a female character. It feels sort of different. Especially with when there is sexual content in the games. Granted it's very mild. But at the same time, it feels like an even greater step or it's considered more titillating if it's lesbians. But it's considered creepy and weird if it's two men.

Brendan had similar concerns about representations of queer women, citing BioWare's Mass Effect games as an example:

Especially in [Mass Effect] one and two, where they have this race called asari, and they're basically like blue women, and they're all like kind of genderfluid but they're all pansexual so they're attracted to anyone, but the way it was like conveyed in mass effect was very much catering towards straight men. You had like, the romances, straight romances and then you had this like gay women romance, which was, looking at it was very much catered to a straight man, so uh, I don't, it's still LGBTQ+ representation but it's from a very specific lens, right? They do get better, in Mass Effect 3 and Mass Effect Andromeda, but yeah, I don't feel like the queer characters are as genuine as they are in Dragon Age.

Brendan did not see the queer characters in Mass Effect as genuine because he felt they were designed to appeal to straight men, rather than to be actual characters in themselves.

Many participants also referenced the imagined audience of white cisgender heterosexual teenage boys to explain why so many games depicted women in ways they found off-putting or offensive. Lisa, a heterosexual cisgender white 29-year-old law student, found that the depiction of characters sometimes interfered her enjoyment of a game:

Even some of the best of them feel as though they're catering to a very specific demographic. So clear, switching from Dragon Age to The Witcher. And in many ways, I think Witcher 3 is a way better game. But it so clearly felt like a game built for white teenage boys. Cis white teenage boys. And I get really bothered by little things like the fact that everyone is identical in that game, and everyone has the same cleavage. And that kind of thing, which I think are surmountable but alienating, so I really appreciate it when games make more of an effort too. It doesn't take much to not do that. . . So, yeah, I think it like makes it less interesting in a whole bunch of ways. And also perpetuates a world which is: "That's the norm. You will play as a straight white dude. You will have sex with as many straight white women as you can.'

Lisa interprets the lack of variation in the appearance of women characters as evidence that they are characters designed to be viewed by men, not to be experienced as fully developed characters. In contrast, because men are understood as the audience of the game, the men characters are designed to look like unique individuals. In this way,

encountering women characters reminds Lisa that the game is not intended to be played by people like her.

Other participants also addressed the limited options for women's appearances in games. Isabel, a heterosexual cisgender white 26-year-old retail worker, connected this issue to realism in games:

> I do like varied characters. If a game didn't have a lot of representation, I wouldn't not play it because of that reason, but if it had more representation then I would like it a lot more. And when there is a lot of representation, I do really appreciate it. A big one is, I like it when they're girls, when you can play as girls, and not just really thin, sexy girls. I really appreciate it when they're strong, buff women. I love those types of characters because that's probably what they would look like if that was actually a person. Instead of just being super skinny. There's nothing wrong with being skinny, it's just with certain games and certain characters, it's just not realistic. Or just having every character have the same body type, I hate that. I think that's just so lazy and not creative, or it's especially frustrating if the guys have different body types but the girls have the same, that's a really big pet-peeve.

Isabel also referenced Disney-Pixar syndrome to describe women in video games, where in Disney Pixar movies the women's heads are all drawn the same with big eyes, round faces, and button noses, while the men have a much wider range of faces. Like Lisa, seeing limited options for women reminded Isabel that women characters are intended to be objectified by an audience other than herself.

Fan Service

Related to this idea of the imagined audience was the ways in which some participants invoked the idea of "fan service." This interesting way of thinking about the representation of women in gaming came from only two women but is revealing about how players who never see themselves represented navigate the environment and justify the game developers' choices. Charlene, one of the honorary bros and the leader of an

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otherwise all-male community game group, and Isabel, a largely solitary player focused

on art and aesthetics who occasionally play with her brothers on alternative servers

designed to be friendly, both refer to the sexualization of women in games as "fan

service."

Charlene uses the "fan service" framing as a way to justify the depiction of the

characters:

> There are games like League of Legends where it seems like everyone is either…
> They definitely have very different art style. A lot of their girls are very large
> chested. There's always going to be fan service. If you go anywhere on the
> internet, if you watch any TV show, it's always beautiful, if you watch any anime
> ... fan service is fan service. That's definitely there, and it bothers some people a
> lot and to other people, it doesn't bother them at all. Me personally, I mean yeah, I
> like to make fun of it. I'd be like 'Oh, hardy har, you just played this character
> because she's hot.' It doesn't really bother me that much because they're
> animations. It really depends on the game. Some games are super heavy in fan
> service and some are not. I think that there are some games that are completely
> shameless and make me cringe. Definitely, there are some games that push those
> boundaries a little bit to where it's just 'I don't know if I would want to play that.'
> It's personally not my thing. But hey, it sells so I can't really say too much about
> that. If that's what people want, that's what people are going to buy. Those kinds
> of games are not marketed towards me. I am not their demographic, so I'm not
> going to speak too badly about that. I guess there's definitely a range of fan
> service.

Charlene used the term in a way that showed it was a common way for her to frame the

depiction of women. Because she is such an intense fan and so involved in the

community, it was surprising that in this instance she framed herself as outside the "fan"

category. This is the only time she indicated feeling marginalized by gaming in any way.

Here she shows that she does not feel that games are made for her and takes for granted

that they are designed for other people to enjoy.

Unlike Charlene, Isabel was wary of mainstream gaming and largely saw it as a

space for other people. It was more consistent with her overall approach to gaming that

she would talk about fan service in a way that excluded her entirely, but she still used the word "fan" to mean people different from her in such a casual way that once again it seemed like a common way she discussed these issues. She talked about fan service as the reason that the depiction of women in games can be too sexualized for her to comfortably play the game:

> I would like a game a lot more if it had [diverse character]. If it's too fan-servicey, then I won't enjoy it. I don't like hypersexual games, so if it's like super sexy and stuff, I'm like, 'Oh, that's a little weird.' Like *Bayonetta* would be a good example. It's very fan service-y. It's not a bad game at all, but it's just so fan service-y, and her outfit is so ridiculous. I don't know, it's just a bit much for me. I'm not a big fan of the super-revealing outfits, so. They can get it wrong for me, and it'll make me not enjoy the game. If it's done to an extreme, then it will make me not want to play the game.

Like Charlene, although Isabel is a fan of games, she uses "fan service" to refer to elements of a game that act to push her away rather than draw her in as fan service is intended to do to fans. Both these women, with very different positions in gaming culture and experiences playing videos games, understood the gaming industry as catering so specifically to people other than themselves that they used "fan service" to describe the gaming elements they experienced as repulsive.

These players had no expectations of representation in games because they imagined that mainstream games are created for and by other people. While many were critical at the representations that this system produces, it was also widely accepted as a part of gaming. However, as a result of imagining themselves outside of gaming's main audience, many players saw limited opportunity for change in the future. They did not expected to see more diversity and they had found ways to play games without the representations they encountered being too much of a detraction from their experiences.

No Expectations

While many participants were critical of the representations they encountered, it is also important to note that people interpreted these stereotypes and limited diversity differently. While some were interested in more diversity, others did not look to games to challenge inequalities and so were not concerned with change at all. Logan, a 27-year-old queer white transgender graduate student, was not impressed by the introduction of more diverse gendered elements in the Sims. He had found the same-sex romance options very important as a teen, but was not particularly interested in improving the possible options for sims to be transgender:

> They did that gender thing where the clothes work for any gender or any sex I guess. And, I don't know, I'm a little disappointed in the way that they did it. They didn't really remake the clothes for the different body types. So, they look kind of bad. If you put a man, a male body in Sim in a woman's shirt, it will have breasts even if you don't want him to have breasts. Because they did not actually completely remake all those clothes. Also, the clothes will look super baggy on women, and they won't have breasts even if you want them to have breasts. So there's some issues with that. You can make Sims be transgender, I guess. It's kind of weird the way it works because you have to go in and edit them. It would be better if it were something that could be more identity-based. You could be like my Sim identifies this way and maybe you could select a box about that instead of having to go in -because it actually makes it more like, oh I can give a Sim, I can have a Sim have a male body, but the way works is just kind of weird. It kind of almost is more like cross dressing or more whatever than actually being transgender. So I'm myself, I'm transgender and I don't create any transgender Sims, because I don't really like the way that they implemented that. It's okay, I mean, I don't really look to the Sims to be socially conscious at all. I don't have any expectations. So that's, whatever. People made a big deal about it and I was, they basically just made it so you could check a box so that your Sim either can get people pregnant or can get pregnant themselves and they have it so you check a box if they pee standing up or not, and then you can put any clothes on anybody.

Logan continued to play and enjoy the Sims, and the fact that he disliked the way the game depicts gender identities is not a detriment to that enjoyment. He does not turn to

the Sims in order to explore gender, and he does not expect it to provide him with anything more than it does.

Similarly, Vanessa, a 40-year-old Black lesbian database administrator, was generally very passionate about gender equality but did not look for it in games. She did not expect to see any women or people of color in video games and was not interested in looking for more. When asked if she was looking for diversity in video games, she responded:

> No, not at all. For example, I'm very, you know, woman-centered, obviously. In my life, in my being, you know, in the company I keep and my philosophies. Am I looking for women in video games? No, I'm not. In fact, would be more inclined to believe that if they did show up in video games more, it would be in some offensive ridiculous manner. I'm not really looking for that. I'm not looking for African Americans to show up in video games. I'm pretty clear on the fact that just in by me identifying as a gamer, that I'm identifying with a set of privilege. You know, there are lots of people in my community who are not thinking about a freaking video game right now. You know? They're thinking about they're going to get to college, or you know, how they're going to pay for that. So, no. Gaming, as with reading, for me, is about escape. And about, you know, relaxation and leisure. With those things, I don't necessarily want to have to be prompted to think about social cues, or the social implications, or the financial implications, or whatever. As an intellectual, sometimes, I can't help it.

Vanessa turns to games to escape, and her previous experiences with games have taught her that any diversity in games will be presented in an offensive way. She prefers to keep games as an escape.

Another reaction to limited expectations of games themselves was in how some players would creatively re-interpreting of games in order to see themselves represented. Avery and Keith otherwise had little in common, but both engaged in this practice. Avery was disappointed by the lack of Black characters in games, so created her own:

> But there also wasn't a good expectation that there would be representation, really just because almost there would be no reason to. Not in a negative way in that I'm not probably every going to be represented, so I'm not looking for . . . seeing a

Black person on the cover period would be a huge surprise unless it's Madden or something, but on the cover of a fantasy game, Black people aren't really in fantasy. So, with a lot of Black gamers, they would take people . . . with Dragon Ball there's this player called Piccolo who is a green alien, but a lot of Black people around my age have taken him as a Black icon just because of his mannerisms. That's kind of like the best you can do. There's very few times where you can just sort of ... unless it's like a hugely racist caricature of black skin, huge lips and things like that. You just take what you can get and don't really pay too much attention to the rest of it. I've done it, too. What character do I like? I'm trying to think. It was mostly liking villains a lot just because those were the characters that were coded less overtly white or overtly straight. So, really liking Kid Buu or Majin Buu just because they were really fun and really interesting and sort of out there. Or taking any character that sort of had a tan, like oh they're ours! I'm claiming them or that kind of in a joking way, but also because there's no other real representation.

Limited options meant that to Avery needed to create her own characters to reflect her experiences. She did not expect games to make actual characters she could relate to because they never had, so by claiming existing characters she was able to make space for herself in a community that rejected her. Similarly, Keith playfully created transgender representation in the games he played:

Overwatch has really caught my attention with it. Actually one of the NPC's who is considered the party girl, can actually be summoned by the king statue, which only summons male characters. So that's another one. I don't know if there were trying to imply something with that, or if it was a coding mistake, but it's something I think about sometimes when I'm playing it. It's like, "Yeah. This character could be trans, reasonably." It's also sort of a joke. A semi-joke. People assume that all characters are cis until explicitly stated. A lot of trans people will be like, "Okay every character is trans, until explicitly stated as cis." So I mean, I could reasonably say that I think all characters are transgender. It's just sort of a fun thing. Everyone in the group I'm in, they're either gay, non-binary, or trans, or all of the above. We have a lot of fun being like, "This character's gay, because I said so." Or, "This character's trans because I said so.' There's definitely a lot of that. Even though it's not confirmed, or not even likely, it's so comforting. Especially talking about it with others, it's fun.

Not only did this playful reinterpretation help Keith find characters to relate to in games, but it also contributed to aspects of community among his friend. It became a shared joke

among them, with part of the enjoyment coming from being able to center their own experiences together as a community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, representation can be a complex question for many people who play video games. The common ways they have encountered and experienced diverse characters in games has discouraged them from attributing subversive potential to games. They expect harmful stereotypes, shallow characters, and objectification. They do not expect to see themselves or their communities, and often they would rather not see any attempts. They develop strategies to reframe and avoid the most egregious examples y avoiding certain game genres or reimagining characters' identities. They consider the demographics of the gaming industry, and many are aware of reasons why representation looks the way it does in games. After years of experiencing representation this way, many players have no expectations for change and do not believe the gaming industry to be capable of more. Encounters with good representation are carefully tracked and often appreciated, but never expected.

This section shows that games need to do significantly more work than adding diverse side characters or body sliders. Players do not trust the representations the game industry currently produces and notice a character seems out of place or relies on harmful tropes. Fully developed characters with rich personalities and development arcs do exist in games, and when those characters are not white cisgender heterosexual men, players notice. It is possible that if representation were to improve in more, and more mainstream, games, players would begin to interpret games as having subversive

potential. Until then, questions of representation tend to mean a list of things to avoid rather than a list of things to celebrate.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have attempted to assemble the fragmented, disjointed pieces that together constitute gaming culture. The experiences of the people I interviewed show accounts of experiences that at time contradict each other, but together demonstrate how some voices are highlighted while others are silenced, skewing popular opinion of what games and gaming look like today and have the potential to look like in the future. While high-status players are obscured from the reality that marginalized players face, they gather friends effortlessly and use gaming to their advantage as they see fit. Marginalized players are imagined as the irrational other, making demands based on emotion and unable to come to terms with the competitive nature that makes for true gaming. Meanwhile, the actual marginalized players are rarely given space to speak for themselves.

I have attempted with this document to reveal some of the misconceptions in gaming that have contributed to the state of things as they are now. I have built a typology of configurations of gaming and sociality that describes how people play and experience games, showing how inequalities have shaped people's online and offline gaming practices while also showing the potential for the options that may become available to everyone in the future. I show that the stereotype of the lonely person playing games in isolation at the expense of the potential for social connection is a myth. Games offer a range of valuable social opportunities for people with a variety of interests. People use them to make new friends and stay in touch with old friends. Games can give social occasions meaning, purpose, and structure. Several people who claimed to have poor

social skills relied on games to allow them to interact with others in a structures, rule-bound way, allowing them the opportunity to meet new people and form friendships that may have been otherwise difficult to form.

At the same time, games can also provide a refuge for those in the position where social opportunities are limited. People who move to new cities or need a source of entertainment away from their busy social life often play games alone. They enjoy the story, immersiveness, skill-building, and sense of achievement they can get from single-player games. Playing games alone does not always mean the player is isolated or lonely, any more than the solitary act of watching a movie alone indicates loneliness.

By showing the different relationships players enact between gaming and sociality, as well as the ways in which some players are able to move between these positions according to their needs and preferences, I hope to expand common understandings of what gaming is. All the players in my sample played and enjoyed games. The range of social and nonsocial options games present is part of what has made them so important to so many people. This is also it is so important that people outside the common definition of "gamer" can gain access to gaming spaces. The opportunities there are rich and diverse.

In the next section, I highlighted the ways in which cisgender, heterosexual men reach their harmful understanding of gaming culture as individualistic and meritocratic. With the gaming industry and related spaces and products all designed for the imagined audience of a young, heterosexual, white man with significant amount of money to spend on games, those expectations have become widespread in society. Young boys are given games almost without a thought by their parents and relatives from a young age. They

often don't ask for them or even remember how the games got there, they were just always assumed to be part of their lives. The same taken-for-granted attitude follows boys as they grow up and often start playing games with other boys. Later as adults they continue to understand the entrance into gaming spaces as effortless. The ways in which masculinity structures gaming spaces is welcoming to men and often goes unnoticed, and so serves to prevent these spaces from becoming more diverse. Many men in my sample were hardly aware of the barriers faced by others, and so were limited in the ways in which they worked to reduce those barriers.

I have also shown the high-status women who share their view due to their connections with men, arguing that these women show that the mere presence of women in gaming is not enough to contribute to more diverse and inclusive gaming spaces. I often found in my research that the women with high status in public gaming spaces, meaning gaming groups both online and offline, or with a wide circle of online gaming friends, often attained that status through their networks of connections with men. These networks usually consisted of brothers at a young age and a boyfriend later on, but they consistently led to women developing the same understanding of gaming as the men it privileges.

As a result, these "honorary bros" often repeated the same values and attitudes towards gaming as the men did, reinscribing the barriers that lower status women and non-binary people faced. The honorary bros were able to use their connections to men, who entered gaming easily, to learn the language and skills needed to game at high levels. People who stumbled over gaming terminology or were unable to play challenging games at high levels of difficulty were unlikely to be taken seriously in hardcore

mainstream spaces. Honorary bros learned these skills from the high-status men they knew and used them to keep others from entering these spaces without these skills. This section highlights that efforts to make gaming spaces more inclusive cannot rely on the addition of women to these spaces. High status women are often unaware of or unsympathetic to the challenges faced by lower status people trying to enter gaming, so inclusion efforts require broader changes to the ways in which gaming spaces operate than simply a change in leadership.

Next, I connected the experiences of marginalized people in gaming culture to the social construction of the body, arguing that they experience hostility in a different way from the high-status men. Video games are designed to place players in the embodied subjective experience of the avatars, and use a variety of physical, visual, and musical tools to create this effect. First person shooter games are particularly effective in creating embodied experiences by giving players the point of view of an avatar. As first-person shooter games are among the highest status mainstream games, their mastery is crucial for entrance into mainstream gaming and to access to gaming capital. Iris Marion Young (1980) argues that women experience threats of violence more directly than men because of the ways they are socialized. Women are constantly aware of the threat of objectification, bodily invasion, and rape. Therefore, the ways in which they physically experience these types of games is different from how men who have not been socialized in this way.

I found that women tended to avoid these types of games specifically for the reason that they experience them as stressful, and that they use other strategies to create distance between themselves and their game avatar in other genres as well. The violence

and violent language that is common in mainstream gaming seems like an integral part of gaming culture to men, but many women experience this virtual violence as real physical violence. I argue this means that the same strategies the men use would not be effective to reduce the barriers that marginalized people face.

Finally, I argue that questions of representation are tied to people's confidence in the gaming industry and its associated norms and practices. People who reject those standards do not expect more from their games, while those who embrace them consider representation in games to be beyond reproach. These attitudes are connected to status in gaming and in how different players are considered by the gaming industry. The high-status players, often the white cisgender heterosexual men, are the main audience for most games and therefore often see themselves reflected in games. Statistically, cisgender white men are by far the most commonly represented group in games. As shown in an earlier chapter of this dissertation, cisgender white men also tend to be embraced by gaming culture at an early age, making invisible all the mechanisms in place that encourage them to play games while discouraging others. I argue that as a result, white cisgender men and other players who feel accepted by gaming culture tend to embrace industry norms related to representation as well. They are reluctant to criticize any inequalities and tend to view industry efforts to address any inequalities as enough of a reaction. They are content with how things are and trust the gaming industry to make any changes that might become necessary in the future.

In contrast, players who tend to be wary of gaming culture and of the gaming label also tended to be suspicious of any attempts at representation in games and tended to not expect gaming to be a potential source for positive representations. They often did

not look to games to see diversity, and when diverse characters were present, they were often critical. Underrepresented players would often analyze the characters, looking for harmful tropes and stereotypes. Some players had found a few examples of what they considered to be good representation and were ready with long analyses of what made that character different from others. They would not take diversity, or increases in diversity, for granted. Instead, they saw representation as fraught, with many saying they would rather see only games with typical white male characters than see diversity represented in a harmful way. As they did not feel represented by other elements of gaming culture, they did not expect the representation of characters in games to be any different.

I hope that this document shows the high-status people in gaming, as well as the general public who only know about games from a son or a boyfriend, that removing themselves from questions of inequalities is in itself a way to reproduce them. Understandings of gaming that rely on ideas of geek masculinity, individual responsibility, and emotional toughness are what create the barriers to diversity. Large groups of people who claim to oppose inequality opting out of doing the work are what keeps these mechanisms in place. Taking established patterns of inequality for granted only serves to reproduce them. Gaming is a small daily practice that over time contributes to a person's life, and so attempts to mitigate the problems I identify here should be the same.

First, people who buy games and gaming technology for boys need to do the same for girls. The early gap in skills and knowledge between girls and boys is very difficult to make up later in life. Next, listen to marginalized voices. If you lead a group and the only

transgender member has concerns about its inclusiveness, listen to them. If women in your gaming circle keep leaving because they are constantly being hit on, the problem is not with their reactions. Acknowledge that problems exist, and work with people to make sure they feel included.

Finally, when people say they know about games, believe them. No one needs to be hazed or tested to belong to a group or talk about a game. Understand that conceptions of expertise are rooted in prejudice, and that marginalized people move through gaming spaces repeatedly being forced to prove themselves.

There are some limits to this project that future research may help to address. My sample was not as diverse as I had initially planned, and as a result my findings surrounding race are limited. I found that race tended to be more salient for the few Black and Indigenous people I interviewed than it was for white and Asian people, but further research is required with a more diverse population to make any claims about race. This is an area that is very important, and I hope that research is conducted soon. In addition, my sample tended to be younger and more affluent than the general population, so additional research is needed to exam older and less affluent populations. Finally, to develop a complete understanding of gaming culture, it would be important to include people who used to play games but have stopped because they found it to be too hostile. To me this seems like a key reason public gaming spaces tend to be composed primarily of high-status men, and I was able to hear about people who had stopped gaming secondhand. Studying this population specifically would help generate a more complete picture of gaming culture.

Another final important area to consider is the lasting impact of GamerGate. While GamerGate helped to inspire this project by demonstrating to me that video games are a key site of gender conflict that has often been neglected by sociological study, I found an uneven response to GamerGate from my respondents. Some were quick to dismiss it as typical internet trolling, while others were invested in educating others about the events and working for change to come from it. As my research began years after GamerGate, it is difficult to make any claims about using my data alone. However, based on existing research conducted before 2014 as well as conversations with my respondents, I believe the lasting impact of GamerGate has been a wider acknowledgment that gaming has toxic elements for many players. While the high-status players tended to dismiss the toxicity of gaming as a typical part of the games that could be addressed by emotional toughness, attitude, and individual skill, the concept was not foreign to them. The acceptance by high-status players that representation in games has gotten better, as well as the celebration of shallow attempts at representation where players select their avatars characteristics, show that even high-status players often understood that at one time inequalities were an issue. Lower-status players were much more aware of these inequalities and did not believe that significant improvements had been made, but the perception of a problem by high status player is not unimportant. While attitudes and levels of engagement towards GamerGate itself may have varied, I do believe that wider awareness of inequalities, even when they are perceived as largely solvable or in the past, indicates that change is possible.

In conclusion, I hope I have demonstrated not only the problems with social inequalities that continue to plague gaming culture, but also the benefits and advantages

that gaming can offer. The reason the fight for inclusivity in gaming is valuable is because there is so much at stake. Gaming provides technical skills, familiarity with technology, the opportunity to form easy friendships, the ability to maintain relationships around the world, and the potential to imagine the way the world could be. Eliminating the barriers to gaming space would open these possibilities to everyone.

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Methodological Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What year were you born? _____

    a. Marital Status:

    Single____ Married_____ Divorced_____ Separated_____ Widowed_____

2. Please check highest grade completed:

   > Some high school____
   > High school diploma_____
   > Some college_____
   > AA degree_____
   > BA degree_____ (major:_____)
   > MA degree_____ (area:_____)
   > Law, Medical, PhD (indicate which)_____

3. Occupation (and brief occupational history):

   _____

4. Husband's or Wife's or Partner's (if married, divorced, or widowed) educational level completed:

   > Some high school____
   > High school diploma_____
   > Some college_____
   > AA degree_____
   > BA degree_____ (major:_____)
   > MA degree_____ (area:_____)
   > Law, Medical, PhD (indicate which)_____

5. Husband's or Wife's occupation_____

6. Father's educational level completed:

   > Some high school____
   > High school diploma_____
   > Some college_____
   > AA degree_____
   > BA degree_____ (major:_____)
   > MA degree_____ (area:_____)
   > Law, Medical, PhD (indicate which)_____

7. Father's occupation (or former occupation): _____

8. Mother's educational level completed:

       Some high school_____
       High school diploma_____
       Some college_____
       AA degree_____
       BA degree_____ (major:_____)
       MA degree_____ (area:_____)
       Law, Medical, PhD (indicate which)_____

9. Mother's occupation (or former occupation): ------------------------------------

10. Approximately how often do you normally play video games?

    Less than once a month _____
    Several times a month _____
    One a week _____
    Several times a week _____
    Every day _____

11. Household income:

    Under $15,000 _____ $15-20,000 _____
    $21-25,000 _____ $26-35,000 _____
    $36-45,000 _____ $46-55,000 _____
    $56-75,000 _____ $76-90,000 _____
    $91-100,000 _____ $101-125,000 _____
    $126-150,000 _____   over $150,000 _____

12. Sexual orientation:

13. Race/Ethnicity:

14. Religion:

15. Age:

16. Gender:

Methodological Appendix B: Interview Guide

Experiences with Games
1. How did you first get interested in video games?
2. What attracted you to them?
3. Has your experience playing video games changed since you first started?
4. What kinds of games do you usually like? Can you give me some examples?
5. How often do you play video games? Has this changed since you first started?
6. What makes for a good video game? What makes for a bad one?
7. How do you usually play? With other people in the room? With other people virtually? If with others, then who? Alone?
8. What makes for a good playing experience?
9. Do you identify as a gamer? Why or why not?
10. What does representation mean to you?

Gaming-related Practices
11. Aside from playing games themselves, do you do anything else relating to games? Watch YouTube Let's Play Channels? Twitch? Participate in online forums? Attend Gaming conventions? What else?
12. What is that experience like?
13. How did you first start?
14. Do you do that with other people? If so, with who?
15. What does it add to your gaming experience?
16. What do you like about these outside of play experiences? What do you dislike?
17. Do you feel like you are part of a larger gaming community? Why or why not?
18. What are your thoughts on GamerGate?
19. Do you think there are problems with gender or race inequalities in gaming communities? Have you experienced any? If so, tell me about that experience.

Focus on One Game
20. What's a game you really like?
21. Why did you decide to play it?
22. Did you buy this game yourself?
23. What is the experience of playing it like?
24. Do you talk about it with other people? If so, who?
25. Do you talk about it online or in person?
26. Have a lot of people you know played it?
27. What did you like about this game? What did you not like about it?
28. Is it different from other games you usually play? If so, in what ways?
29. What do you think is this game's intended audience?
30. Would you recommend this game to other people?
31. Do you have anything you want to add to your answers of any of these questions?
32. Is there something I need to know to understand your experience better?