

*Make Room* for Video Games: Exergames and the “Ideal Woman”

by

Julia Golden Raz

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
(Communication)  
in the University of Michigan  
2015

Doctoral Committee:

Associate Professor Christian Sandvig, Chair  
Professor Susan Douglas  
Associate Professor Sheila C. Murphy  
Professor Lisa Nakamura

© Julia Golden Raz

2015

For my mother

## Acknowledgements

Words cannot fully articulate the gratitude I have for everyone who has believed in me throughout my graduate school journey. Special thanks to my advisor and dissertation chair, Dr. Christian Sandvig: for taking me on as an advisee, for invaluable feedback and mentoring, and for introducing me to the lab's holiday white elephant exchange. To Dr. Sheila Murphy: you have believed in me from day one, and that means the world to me. You are an excellent mentor and friend, and I am truly grateful for everything you have done for me over the years. To Dr. Susan Douglas: it was such a pleasure teaching for you in COMM 101. You have taught me so much about scholarship and teaching. To Dr. Lisa Nakamura: thank you for your candid feedback and for pushing me as a game studies scholar. To Amy Eaton: for all of your assistance and guidance over the years. To Robin Means Coleman: for believing in me. To Dave Carter and Val Waldren at the Computer and Video Game Archive: thank you for supporting my research over the years. I feel so fortunate to have attended a school that has such an amazing video game archive.

Thank you to the original members of the Fall 2009 cohort, and in particular, Ed Timke. Ed, your friendship and words of wisdom are invaluable. All the brisk walks, weekly trips to our favorite restaurant, and marathons of the *Golden Girls* made grad school life fun. Another fellow graduate student, Sarah Erickson, has been such a supportive friend. I will fondly think of the nights of Red Vines and "chick flicks." To

my undergraduate research assistants: Lindun Lai, Josh Poirier, Nick Millado, and Rachel Haas. Your eagerness and willingness to assist me in this research process has been invaluable. Additional thank you to the Infrastructure Lab for all your feedback and my writing group, PhDs in L.A., for helping me find a regular schedule and structure for writing. I would also like to thank my college roommate and friend, Saiqa Qureshi, for all your moral support. Finally, I cannot emphasize enough how much my family assisted in my success. Thank you, Mom, for being my biggest cheerleader. And last, but certainly not least, to my loving husband, Oded. You make all this worthwhile.

## Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
List of Figures.....	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature.....	17
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	50
Chapter 4: The Construction of Women as Exer-Moms.....	62
Chapter 5: Women’s Game Play and the Hardcore/Exergame Dichotomy.....	112
Chapter 6: Contextualizing Exergames.....	149
Chapter 7: Conclusion.....	170
References.....	178

## List of Figures

Figure		
1	Martha Stewart on the cover of a special edition of <i>Wired</i> magazine (2007).....	11
2	Celebrity model, actress, author, and mother, Jenny McCarthy standing in a kitchen while promoting YSFJMC (Ubisoft, 2009) in a scene from a TV commercial.....	62
3	Screen shot from the “Dear Sophie Chrome Ad” (2011) .....	71
4	Screen shots from the <i>Wii Fit Plus</i> “Working Mom” (2009) TV commercial .....	73
5	Screen shots from the <i>Wii Fit Plus</i> “New Mom” (2009) TV commercial.....	75
6	Print advertisement for <i>Wii Fit Plus</i> , found in various magazines in 2009 .....	80
7	Labor force participation rates, by sex, race and Hispanic ethnicity, 2012 annual averages.....	82
8	Through direct address in the TV commercial, Jenny McCarthy and stay-at-home mother, Claire, explain why YSFJMC (2009) is perfect for mothers.....	84
9	Close up shots from the YSFJMC (2009) commercial.....	85
10	Barbie’s thought bubble found in the introduction in the Barbie (1991) user’s manual.....	90
11	<i>My Baby Girl</i> (2008) for Nintendo DS. ....	91
12	What girls should want to grow up to be, according to various <i>Imagine</i> games by Ubisoft for the Nintendo DS.....	91
13	Girls/women seemingly empowered to undertake what used to be traditional career realms for men (doctors and business owners) ( <i>Imagine Family Doctor</i> , 2009; <i>Imagine Boutique Owner</i> , 2009).....	92
14	Screen shots of Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) playing the <i>Perfect Mom</i> video game in the 2014 film, <i>Her</i> .....	93-94

15	<i>Wii Fit Plus</i> (2009) menu depicting the preset routines that are grouped into different categories.....	96
16	Options to justify weight gain in <i>Wii Fit Plus</i> (2009).....	97
17	Four images of various screens in the in-game world of YSFJMC (2009) .....	98-99
18	Game boxes for <i>Wii Fit Plus</i> (2009).....	101
19	Front and back of game box for YSFJMC (2009) .....	102-103
20	Demonstrating the new feature of <i>Wii Fit Plus</i> , whereby you can weigh a baby while standing on the balance board.....	106
21	“ <i>Wii Fitness Team.</i> ” <i>Southern Living</i> magazine online edition (November 2010).....	108
22	“Hardcore Maleness” article by Rowan Kaiser (2010) explaining the hardcore/casual dichotomy in allegedly simple terms .....	112
23	A dominant narrative that exergames are not <i>real</i> video games.....	121
24	Screen shots from the <i>Dead Space 2</i> (2011) advertising campaign.....	123-124
25	Screen shots from the “Gaming With My Mom” “best of” videos that appeared on the talk show, <i>Late Night With Jimmy Fallon</i> (2013) .....	126-127
26	<i>Beat a Bitch Up</i> game, instructing players to “CLICK TO HIT HER!”.....	128
27	Print advertisement for the <i>Wii Fit U</i> that appeared in <i>Fitness</i> magazine (April 2014) .....	134
28	Healthy, Fit, Happy Mom Prenatal Exercise Routine DVD.....	136
29	Celebrity fitness DVDs.....	139
30	Selecting the silhouette option in GFWMB.....	140-141
31	“Dear PlayStation” commercial titled, “She Smells Like Strawberries” (2009).....	163
32	“Family Time” Wii U commercial (2013).....	164
33	“Work and Kids.” <i>Time</i> magazine online NewsFeed (2014).....	166
34	“Eating and Working.” <i>Time</i> magazine online NewsFeed (2014).....	167
35	“Eating Salad.” <i>Time</i> magazine online NewsFeed (2014).....	167



36 “Are You Mom Enough?” (*Time*, 2012); “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All”  
(*The Atlantic*, 2012); “The Fantasy Life of Working Women”  
(*Newsweek*, 2012) ..... 168

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In September 2014, feminist culture critic Anita Sarkeesian received death threats from the online gaming community. She had been threatened since launching a Kickstarter campaign for her video series in 2012, “Tropes versus Women,” a web series analyzing the depictions of women in video games (Martens, 2014). The FBI took the threats seriously; Sarkeesian had to leave her home and go into protective custody (Martens, 2014).

Even though Sarkeesian was threatened for advocating equal rights for women and criticizing misogynist depictions of and violence against women in video games and against women as game players, women make up about half of the video game playing population. The Electronic Software Association’s (ESA) “2012 Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry” revealed what has been evident to game scholars and those in the industry but still remains opaque to much of the general public: 47% of all gamers are women (ESA, 2012). Women may have achieved numerical parity as consumers, but gaming remains a culture of deep misogyny in which the battles feminists waged decades ago are still being fought. Scholars of game studies and feminism must investigate and question the ways in which misogyny, both overt and subtle, operates within gaming, and how women are constructed as users of video game technologies.

Many game studies scholars have argued that gaming culture is an exclusionist boys’ club dominated by White hegemonic masculinity: a space in which women are

denied equal access and participation and in which they are harassed, particularly when they encroach as participants in online gaming spaces (Everett, 2009; Gray, 2012; Kafai & Heeter, 2011; Kubik, 2012). This scholarship has documented women's exclusion from gaming culture through analysis of overt displays of misogyny, such as sexist statements made in online chat forums and sexist representations of women characters (Consalvo, 2010; Fox & Tang, 2012; Kafai & Heeter, 2011; Nardi, 2010; Pearce, 2011).

If game studies scholars are to understand women and gaming culture fully, they must also pay close attention to *covert* displays of misogyny, for they can help us understand how women, technology, and domestic space are socially defined. In addition, it is necessary to contextualize this within the political, historical, and cultural contexts of the 2000s. This is not to say that others in game studies have disregarded the broader context in which particular games exist. Indeed, this has been largely addressed in scholarship on so-called serious game design—games that are designed for more than just fun and entertainment. For instance, games such as *Fat World* and *Airport Scanner* were created in conversation with political, cultural, and social situations. *Fat World* is strikingly political, and takes on the childhood obesity epidemic through the lens of a child's socio-economic status and in the broader context of urban sprawl. In addition, Huntemann (2010) argued that representations of women in video games and women's minority position in the video game industry are results of the broader historical trajectory of leveraging women's bodies in order to sell a particular item or technology (such as promotional models at auto shows and “booth babes”).

In addition to considering gaming culture, misogyny, and the broader context, it is critical for us to study video games and gender within the long historical trajectory of the

gendered discourses surrounding technology and domesticity, which construct domestic technology for the purpose of women's work and for men's leisure at home, connecting video games to a broader social conversation about gender. This has been emphasized, for instance, by those who study television and the construction of gender (e.g., Holt, 2010; Levine & Newman, 2012; Spigel, 1992), but while television scholars see the gendered deployment of the technology as an attempt to "make" womanhood, this is an element of gaming that game scholars often do not adequately document, leaving game studies to be analyzed as the domain where misogynistic language and stereotypes are prevalent, but not as a place where femininity is built.

Considering the case of contemporary "exergames" (fitness games), or games that are designed and imagined for health and fitness, is a first step toward understanding why video games continue to espouse a complex and contradictory framing of womanhood and gender, how this operates as a covert form of misogyny, and how this constructs womanhood itself. These games, more than any other video games, most vigorously target adult women who are working and/or stay-at-home mothers. Exergames were introduced during the so-called casual revolution of the early 2000s, a time when women and the family were targeted as a video game playing demographic due to the rise of casual video games (Juul, 2010). Casual games, such as *Wii Sports*, *Just Dance*, and *Rock Band*, do not require a long time commitment, the use of complex buttons on a controller, or even a basic understanding of how to play a video game. Casual games can be played on consoles, handheld devices, cell phones, and computers, and come in two forms: mimetic interfaces and downloadable games (Juul, 2010).

Contemporary console-based exergames are a particular type of casual game. Exergames include *Wii Fit*, *Zumba*, *Kinect Sports*, and *Your Shape Featuring Jenny McCarthy* (YSFJMC). Although antecedents of these games such as Nintendo's *Power Pad* (1988) date to the 1980s, the first and most popular exergame was *Dance, Dance, Revolution* (1998), primarily found in arcades. Contemporary exergames have the objectives of improving players' physical fitness, increasing their heart rates, and promoting weight loss, all through physically active gameplay. Exergames are distinct from other video games and other fitness technologies, such as cell phone applications or fitness/activity trackers that users wear on their wrists, because they are imagined solely for game play in the living room of White, middle-class women.

Therefore this study, a textual analysis, examines the social and cultural construction of the hypothetical "ideal woman" in the contemporary exergames ecology from 2006 to 2014. Though analysis is primarily centered on advertisements, discourses found within game boxes, gameplay within the games themselves, and popular and trade press articles are also analyzed. This study answers the following questions: How do contemporary, console-based exergames and related paratexts define what it means to be a woman in video game culture? What does this construction reveal about contemporary cultural ideals about women, technology, and domestic space? How does the socio-historical context inform this construction of womanhood?

### **The "Ideal Woman" Construct**

The aim of the next section is to introduce the historical, social, and cultural construction of technology within women's daily lives. This primarily focuses on the 1950s and 2000s contexts by comparing television and exergames. It also explains some

of the major trends in feminism and how this relates to women's roles in the media and our culture. In addition to television and idealized womanhood, the casual game genre and the emergence of marketing video game technologies to the whole family are explained. Overall, the shifts, similarities, and differences among the decades are discussed in order to explain how and why the complex and contradictory "ideal woman" construct emerged.

Given that TV and exergames are not the same media technology and were introduced more than 50 years apart, it is essential to explain why consideration of the 1950s "ideal woman" is a meaningful lens for understanding the emergence of a similar, but more complex version of womanhood in exergames. There are several reasons why some of the features of 1950s femininity, and specifically notions of women's work at home and maintaining "quality time," reappeared in the context of contemporary exergames. We see this most drastically in advertisements. This is the result of the male-dominated gaming industry affirming men's hegemonic position in gaming culture. Advancing exergame-based notions about women's work at home and women as mothers is a lucrative industry tactic to sell more games. This tactic assumes that women are not already buying games and that they need games specifically designed for them.

The representations of and discourses about women are not sufficiently varied. This is because women are such a small minority in the gaming industry and are left out of the development and design of video games: the images and messages come solely from the male perspective (Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007). Just like the "chick flicks" film genre, many of the stories about women's lives and their interests in video games are told from the male perspective, and actually revolve around men's lives and interests.

This results in caricatures of women's bodies and stories about women in the in-game world spaces and in the promotion of video games, which bleeds over into video game culture at large.

### **Domestic Technology Through the Decades**

Many scholars have studied how discourse defines how families, and particularly women, should use and enjoy media in the home (e.g., Courtney & Lockeretz, 1968; Spigel, 1992). Television was introduced to the American public in the 1950s. Indeed, after World War II, discourses surrounding the new media technology of television presented the ideal nuclear family (mom, dad, and children) as White, suburban, and middle class. At a time when the nuclear family and domestic space were valorized, the TV was designed and imagined to fit into the living room of the nuclear family. Spigel's (1992) *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* articulated how discourses surrounding TV in the 1950s constructed the ideal nuclear family and the "ideal woman." Spigel concluded that the discourses surrounding TV amalgamated and reinforced the social and cultural ideals surrounding family life of that time.

In the postwar period, when women were idealized as domestic caregivers, a role that was not voluntary, scholars such as Holt (2010) and Courtney and Lockeretz (1967) argued that these ideals were reflected in discourses about TV. The rationale behind the widely studied constructions of the ideal family and the "ideal woman" in the post-WWII American era is that this period reflects a key moment in political-economic constraints placed upon women. During this era, not only did media reinforce the domestic caregiver role—society also left little room for women to act in opposition (Holt, 2010).

These discourses reinforced the “ideal woman” construct because TV was designed and imagined to streamline women’s domestic labor: caring for husbands and children, cooking and cleaning, and remaining physically appealing for her hard-working, breadwinning, husband’s pleasure. For instance, a certain make of TV was designed to fit into the oven so that the housewife could enjoy her favorite TV shows while cooking and cleaning (Spigel, 1992). In contrast, for men, TV was conceptualized for leisure and relaxation.

Other ideals were imagined with the introduction of TV, revolving around gender, family, and domestic space. TV was also constructed to defuse cultural anxieties about the reduction in the amount of time spent with the family, or the concern that introducing new technologies into the home would come at the expense of family closeness. For instance, programs like *The Ruggles* (1949-1955) featured apparently naturalistic depictions of nuclear families spending time together watching TV (Spigel, 1992). The discourses surrounding TV in the 1950s aligned with broader cultural concerns, and advocated for certain kinds of gendered participation in the family. While Spigel (1992) and Holt (2010) provided in depth analyses and explanations of this ideal, the role of labor—both inside and outside the home—was largely overlooked.

Since the 1950s, feminists have tackled issues surrounding women’s equality: moving scholars beyond the aforementioned “ideal woman” concept.<sup>1</sup> In the 1960s, for example, Betty Friedan wrote “The Feminine Mystique,” which was critical of the

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, French writer de Beauvoir (1953) explained in *The Second Sex* the notion of women as the other in society.

<sup>2</sup> Identifying as feminist and identifying with the principles of feminism are not necessarily synonymous. It is possible to believe in the tenets of feminism while reject the title of feminist.

<sup>3</sup> In other words, women refusing to identify as feminists, even when they believe in the tenets of feminism, is harmful to the goals of the feminist movement.



mainstream representations of women in the mass media in that the depictions of women's role at home were repressive and limited the possibilities for women (Bradley, 2005; Collins, 2009). As Meyerowitz (1994) noted, Friedan "presented domesticity as a problem" and "demoted full time domesticity to the lower class of a false consciousness" (p. 252). And, although many representations of women on TV and film during this time continued to reproduce 1950s womanhood, this second wave of feminism pushed people to change their social attitudes toward women's roles in society and in the labor force (e.g., Chafetz & Dworkin, 1986; Janeway, 1971).

Between this period and the 1980s, feminists moved from fighting for equal voting rights to a wider range of issues, including family, position in the workplace, sexuality, and reproductive rights (e.g., Jacobus, 1990; Smith, 1989). For instance, the image of women in advertising was a central cause of second-wave feminists. This led to a well-publicized sit-in at the *Ladies Home Journal* office in 1970, during which they gave out awards for the most sexist advertisements and commercials (Bradley, 2005). By the 1980s, a newer movement of *post-feminists* took issue with some of the goals and attitudes of second-wave feminism (Bradley, 2005; Collins, 2009). Specifically, this movement was critical of and challenged some of the theories and approaches used by earlier feminists. Third-wave feminists in the 1990s took issue with second-wave feminism and the perceived failures of this movement (Rosen, 2000). In addition to taking up the legal concerns of women (e.g., reproductive rights and workplace inequalities), third-wave feminists argued for more expansive changes in women's rights (Rosen, 2000).

There are contrasting opinions on the current state of feminism in the United States. For example, Baumgardner and Richards (2004) argued that young women today are taking on what they called girly feminism—in that they can both embrace the girly aspects of femininity, such as listening to boy bands and putting on makeup and nail polish, and maintain a political position. However, McRobbie (2009) and Douglas (2010) argued that there is a problem with the idea of enlightened sexism. Young women today are not identifying as feminists—even if they identify with some of the goals or principles of feminism.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, it has been argued, young women are undoing the many years of hard work and achievements of prior generations of feminists.<sup>3</sup>

### **Casual Games**

Decades after the introduction of television and its redefinition of the family, it is clear that one arena in which the battles of feminism still need to be fought is video game culture. In 2006 the game industry introduced a new kind of video game that addressed the gender politics of gamers directly. At this time, the Nintendo Wii, a casual video game console, entered the living room. It was designed for the family, and especially for women. Since the breakthrough technology of the Wii, casual video games have become ubiquitous in popular culture in the United States and internationally. More than any other form of casual games, though, console-based casual games (e.g., the Nintendo Wii, Microsoft Kinect, and PlayStation Move) were designed for play in domestic spaces. Casual games that are not console-based can be used anywhere within the household (and

---

<sup>2</sup> Identifying as feminist and identifying with the principles of feminism are not necessarily synonymous. It is possible to believe in the tenets of feminism while reject the title of feminist.

<sup>3</sup> In other words, women refusing to identify as feminists, even when they believe in the tenets of feminism, is harmful to the goals of the feminist movement.

outside of the household) and so do not carry the same spatial significance or follow the same assumptions about where they should fit.

Despite the changing family structures of the 21st century, the Wii console, games, controllers, and surrounding discourses promoted this technology as a facilitator of quality time (meaningful interpersonal communication) in the home. As this was a novel technology, the design of the console, controllers, and video games and the discourses surrounding casual games instructed people as to why they should buy and use this technology. In addition, the Wii was designed to broaden the spectrum of game players to include men, women, and children of all ages and socio-economic backgrounds as a truly interactive social experience. The easy-to-use buttons on the Nintendo Wii console and the motion-sensor controls of the Wii mote controller, resembling a TV remote, were intended to be usable by anyone, even those who had never played a video game.

According to the Wii Official Site at Nintendo in 2006,

Wii sounds like “we,” which emphasizes this console is for everyone. Wii can easily be remembered by people around the world, no matter what language they speak. No confusion. Wii has a distinctive “ii” spelling that symbolizes both the unique controllers and the image of people gathering to play. Wii is more than a game machine. Wii is social and active entertainment that brings the whole family together.

This language shows that the Wii, unlike other video game consoles, is intended to be an all-inclusive technology. In addition, the Wii was designed to bring the family together for quality time at home.

Popular culture sources that talked about the Nintendo Wii drew from very traditional ideals of womanhood. However, these traditional ideals are constructed in tandem with the latest technology devices—empowering women as users of the latest technology, while also narrowly defining them. For example, in a 2007 special edition of

the technology-focused magazine, *Wired*, titled, “Martha Geeks Out!” (Figure 1), the magazine cover featured Martha Stewart, a famous businesswoman who professionalized homemaking (Douglas & Michaels, 2004), as the 1950s mother. Stewart is photographed holding a piping bag behind a cake resembling the Nintendo Wii. One of the featured articles is “How to Bake a Wii Cake” (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Martha Stewart on the cover of a special edition of *Wired* magazine (2007).

It is hard to imagine a more gendered representation of this new technology: women’s traditional role within the domestic sphere was being expanded, and the Nintendo Wii was to become something that women were meant to use. The “ideal woman” construct is most apparent, though, in contemporary exergames. Exergames emerged as a significant genre in the 2000s, and were created for video game consoles in the home. For example, *Wii Fit* (2007) and *EA Sports Active* (2009) were designed and marketed as exercise games to be played in the living room. It is clear that “women vary

considerably as a group in playing time, favorite genres and particular interests or reasons for gaming” (Royse et al., p. 557). This construction of a new market by defining gameplay as exercise leaves out the many women who play and enjoy video games for fun, relaxation, and entertainment (Kafai & Heeter, 2011). In other words, within the basic assumptions of exergaming, game play for pleasure is largely ignored. This study argues that this focus on exercising women was more than just a marketing strategy. Exergames carry importance, because they contribute to our understanding of how gender and technology are defined in contemporary culture.

### **Exergames**

Overall, exergames are a microcosm of women’s exclusionary position in the gaming culture at large. Exergames target adult women mothers in ways that are more than just sexist—exergames hail women using imagery that is retrograde (the White, middle class, housewife) while also framing game play as empowering. Misogyny among exergames is distinct from other forms of misogyny. In this case, misogyny is subtle, and specifically it is apparent through conditionally including a narrow and particular segment of the game-playing population. More than any other form of games, exergames conditionally include women, because they invite the population of women to participate in gaming culture, but only a small area of it.

Exergames demonstrate how the definition of women in misogynistic gaming culture is subtle and complex, rather than only overt and monolithic. It is necessary to distinguish the typical way that misogyny is discussed in gaming culture, and how misogyny within the context of exergames has some similarities, but overall is quite distinct. For instance, overt misogyny is apparent among online sites and forums, where

“griefing” and “trolling” run rampant (Rubin & Camm, 2013). As Phillips argued, trolling refers to

disrupt[ing] a conversation or entire community by posting incendiary statements or stupid questions onto a discussion board ... for [the troll’s] own amusement, or because he or she was a genuinely quarrelsome, abrasive personality. (as cited in Mantilla, 2013, p. 563)

These spaces, particularly chat forums and online chats in game play, are dominated by sexist, violent, and homophobic language (Rubin & Camm, 2013; Taylor, 2003). Mantilla (2013) referred to this idea as “gendertrolling” (*sic*)—a form of trolling that targets women (p. 563). Likewise, Phillips (2011) argued,

[this] is an aggressive form of laughter derived from eliciting strong emotional reactions from the chosen target(s). In order to amass the greatest number of lulz (*sic*) [derived from LOL, or “laugh out loud”] possible, trolls engage in the most outrageous and offensive behaviors possible. (as cited in Mantilla, 2003, p. 563)

For instance, it is not uncommon for women to be told to “go back to the kitchen,” and for players to refer to characters and in-game experiences as a form of rape (Mantilla, 2013; Phillips, 2011; Taylor, 2003).

However, the threatening aspects of femininity that have caused male rebellion in the gaming community do not stir up the same controversy within the context of exergames, leading to a partitioned feminine space that is uncontroversial, but is also seen as sub-par by the men who consider themselves real gamers. Actions such as framing exergame play as beneficial for women’s lives are also covert forms of misogyny. While overt forms of misogyny are all about exclusion, exergames invite women to participate for the positive purpose of bettering their health and fitness.

Most broadly, the phenomenon of exergames is part of a longstanding tradition of promoting women’s participation with technology, while also segregating women as a particular kind of technological user. Indeed, exergames reflect the gendered ideals

surrounding the work/leisure divide of time spent at home: a place for women's work and men's leisure. For example, discourses reinforce this ideal through the hardcore/exergame dichotomy, which situates women's games and game play in opposition to men's games and game play. This therefore reveals double standards in the notions of public/private, work/leisure, men/women, and domestic space, because it invites women to play, but only when play is also work.

The "ideal woman" construct is also a symptom of and contributor to the political, social, cultural, and historical contexts of the 2000s. In the case of exergames, the critical analytic point is not so much about selling a particular genre of game as it is a way of maintaining the status quo in the gaming culture. Rather, selling video games to women in this way was necessary, because, unlike the allegedly real male video gamers in male-dominated gaming culture, women needed to be told explicitly why video games were actually good for them. The ideal woman construct is leveraged to sell exergames as a way seemingly to empower women (through the use of positive framing).

There are certainly many alternative explanations for why this is the case, and because there is not a large corpus of work on exergames, the findings of this study are informed by the available evidence, but are not determinative. One such explanation is that exergames are sold to adult women in a way that is framed in a positive light and as redressing the very concerns that the medium of video games have been blamed for creating. Some of the most prominent concerns related to video games during this time period include the childhood obesity epidemic, moral panics about media and violence, the decline of family time, and the current state of feminism.

For instance, widespread concern about combating the childhood obesity epidemic, and specifically Michelle Obama's *Let's Move* Initiative, coincides with the discourses surrounding exergames and health. This also relates to the longstanding concern over video games (and other media at home) as sedentary activities. In this way, exergames step in as a remedy to this epidemic. In addition, the prevalence of school shootings has enunciated the longstanding moral panics surrounding video games and violence. As the FBI struggled to come up with a typology of a school shooter, the blaming finger was pointed at video games. Through the *Brown v. EMA* (2011) court case challenging a ban on the sale of violent video games to minors and the related narratives that deemed the ruling as a loss for the children, exergames were sold to women through positive framing in order to explain to women why these games are a worthwhile purchase.

There has also been significant cultural concern in the 2000s about the increase in use of new media technologies at home, and how that has fundamentally changed time spent with family. In a parallel to the moral panics about media and violence and their effects on the family, new media technologies, such as cell phones, laptops, tablets, and video games, have also been blamed for the decline of the family itself. Audiences are told that people are spending less quality time at home with their families, because family members are far more engaged with the screen in front of them than with the people around them. Just as there was a debate about media and violence, there was also both a popular and a scholarly research debate about quality time (Turkle, 2012).

Finally, the ideal woman construct is part of the climate surrounding feminism in the United States—and in particular the timing of exergames coincides with many



women rejecting the idea of feminism. The ideal woman construct in exergames is an example of how the hard work of the feminist movement is being reversed under the guise that feminism has now been achieved—exergames allow a nuanced version of femininity that blends 1950s ideals with contemporary notions of womanhood which they present as a choice, while the way that exergames merge both work and play together sanctions them as efficiency tools. In this way, exergames are presented in a positive light, as they assist women in attaining the cultural expectation that they should always strive for an ideal, physically fit body.

Overall, this study investigates the way that exergames narrowly evoked only a particular kind of woman gamer, and thus worked to recreate the idea of womanhood itself. Given the misogynistic video game culture, the prevalence of casual video games, and contemporary cultural values surrounding women, technology, and domesticity, there could not be a more crucial time to understand why women have been constructed in this narrow and particular way.

## Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

In order to understand the “ideal woman” who plays exergames, research from several disciplines that examine discourses and the construction of media, gender, and video games are brought into the conversation. First, the ideas of discourse and interpellation in Althusser and Foucault are lenses through which we can understand the relationship between dominant messages about women in video game culture. Because this “ideal woman” in exergames is constructed within the domestic space and in a particular cultural context, we must also understand how others have thought about the complex, historically and culturally specific relationships among gender, family, domestic space, and technology. This includes scholarship on media and the family ideal, and media and women. Finally, we must define what makes console-based exergames distinct from other video games and what the gendered, technological affordances they carry are. Therefore, conversations in technology studies are relevant, and especially the social constructionist and configuring the user frameworks. Likewise, positioning exergames in game studies scholarship, and feminist game studies scholarship in particular, can explain the construction of gender and the gendering of casual games and of exergames. Therefore, it is important to trace the lineage of all of these discussions in order to understand the construction of the “ideal woman” exergame player, *how* she is intended to play exergames in the contemporary exergames ecology, and why womanhood is defined in a particular way.

## **Discourse and Interpellation**

The ideas of discourse and interpellation, as developed by Foucault and Althusser, are essential to understand the construction of the “ideal woman” exergame player and the relationship between the cultural context of the 21st century, women and the media, and women and exergames. Narratives and discourses are not simply written and oral stories: they are told through TV, movies, newspapers, magazines, radio, and video games. As the primary storytellers of our lives, they reflect and are in conversation with the normative ideals of our culture, cueing us in to historically situated cultural messages, norms, and values (Douglas & Michaels, 2005; Gauntlett, 2008).

Some of the features of 1950s femininity re-emerged and reified the hegemonic position of men in the video game industry and in video game culture. The idea of discourse, according to the argument of French philosopher Michel Foucault, is that mass media messages about an issue or topic must be understood and contextualized as a product of the dominant ideologies of that time and place. Discourses about the “ideal woman” in the contemporary exergames ecology, then, are the result of the cultural ideals and values of the political, social, and economic climate of the 21st century. This includes the ideals within gaming culture.

Within a Foucaultian framework, media scholars address and analyze the “processes of rarefaction, consolidation and unification in discourse” that are limited by the norms of a culture and that contribute to the reification of knowledge on that issue (Foucault, 1970). Scholars can thus make substantive claims about what is going on, for they reveal the primary discussions, debates, and contestations that contribute to the received wisdom about that issue. According to Foucault (1970), we must contextualize

a discursive event as part of a “discontinuous series of relations which are not in any order of succession (or simultaneity) within any (or several) consciousnesses” (p. 159). In other words, discourses are products of a broader social, cultural, political, and economic context, and they need to be analyzed accordingly. Likewise, discursive events, such as models of base/superstructure, are not “mechanically causal links or an ideal necessity among their constitutive elements” (p. 159). Simultaneously, though, Foucault argued that it is crucial to consider the effects of discourses on shaping ideologies and contexts. Discourses, therefore, must be understood as culminations of cultural rules and ideals, rather than as simple causes and effects.

However, the notion of discourse is inadequate in and of itself in making a claim about media messages and their impact on our culture and ourselves. We must therefore situate this idea in tandem with Althusserian notions of interpellation in order to understand the construction of subjects. To the French Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser (1971), people are interpellated as subjects—a dynamic process whereby ideologies are prescribed for subjects. When applied to the mass media, as Althusser argues, this is accomplished through hailing, whereby the media calls upon the attention of a population. In this case, visual and textual cues instruct the reader/viewer that this is “for *you*,” and “*not* for *you*.” In another example, the cover of *Seventeen* often features a teenage girl celebrity, such as Selena Gomez, along with taglines for articles about lipstick, fashion, and whoever teen icon Justin Bieber is dating. The teenage girl is hailed through the magazine cover, interpellating teenage girls through the dominant ideals of teenhood in contemporary culture.

Likewise, women are interpellated and defined through the images and messages about exergame players and exergame play. In this case, women are defined as White, middle-class, working and stay-at-home mothers who play exergames for the purpose of domestic labor (cooking, cleaning, childrearing, and maintaining a physically attractive appearance). Therefore, the ideas of discourse and interpellation allow us to understand the impact of our culture and of gaming culture in evoking these messages, and also the impact of these messages upon the understanding and definition of womanhood and femininity.

### **The “Ideal Woman”**

#### **Media and the “Ideal Woman”**

It is necessary to explain the “ideal woman” in detail and within the conversations about media and the family ideal, by drawing from scholarship in several disciplines. Central to this scholarship is Spigel’s (1992) *Make Room for Television* and contemporary work on media and domestic space, such as Levine and Newman’s (2012) *Legitimizing Television*. Spigel’s work is arguably outdated, given more recent scholarship on media, women, and the family. Since 1992, however, there has been a steady increase in those who draw from her work to trace changes in the relationship between media and domestic space, and in definitions of gender in the home (Scopus, 2013).<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> A Scopus reference citation analysis of scholarly articles was done, looking at the years from the publication of *Make Room for TV* in 1992 to 2013. Since 1996, there has been a steady increase in the number of publications that cite Spigel (1992). Although many books also cite Spigel (1992), these have not been included in the analysis, due to the limitations of Scopus.

Still, there are several limitations of employing this work as a theoretical inspiration for understanding exergames. First, there is only a loose tie between the technology of TV in the 1950s and the technology of contemporary exergames, and this is made all the more apparent given the over 50-year gap between these technologies' introductions. The landscape of media technologies for the domestic sphere was far narrower at the time (namely radio and TV), and it was also designed for fewer spaces within the household. Contemporary exergames were introduced in an entirely different media landscape, and in particular, a media landscape covering the entire home. Thus, the relationship between women, family, and technology in domestic space is fundamentally different than media from previous decades and must be understood as such. Second, this study emphasizes the concept of labor and the gendering of labor in domestic space with a view to understanding the construction of the "ideal woman." Therefore, it is essential to diverge from Spigel's analysis, as she does not adequately document the role of labor in the social construction of TV and the family ideal.

The "ideal woman" as depicted in the media, is often discussed in the historical, cultural, social, economic, and political contexts of the 1950s and the early 21st century. While many themes emerge from media and the family literature, few have focused on the relationships among video games, domestic spaces, and the construction of ideas of womanhood. In numerous disciplines, several overarching themes emerge, including media reinforcement of the ideal of the nuclear family (Holt, 2010; Spigel, 1992; Young, 2007), shifting discourses in the media beyond this ideal to include non-traditional families, accounting for historical changes in family structures (i.e., single-parent and blended families) (Hoover et al., 2004; Tinknell, 2005), and inconsistent messages about

the new media's purpose and impact on family life (Hoover et al., 2004; Levine & Newman, 2012; Ouelette & Wilson, 2011). The shifting relationship between media as a domestic technology, domestic space, and gender elucidates why post-2006 exergames stand in stark contrast to other phenomena.

Given the postwar ideals in which women were encouraged to have the primary roles as domestic caregivers (despite their presence in the workforce during World War II), scholars like Spigel (1992), Holt (2010), and Courtney and Lockeretz (1967) argued that discourses surrounding TV reflected these postwar ideals. The rationale behind the widely studied constructions of the ideal family and the "ideal woman" in America since World War II is that this period reflects a key moment in which political-economic constraints were placed upon women. Not only did the media reinforce women's roles as domestic caregivers, but society also made it difficult for women to resist this pressure (Holt, 2010).

In her work on the cultural history of TV, Spigel (1992) concluded that TV entered the home bringing 1950s ideals of the White, middle-class, two-parent household as a way to promote family togetherness. She wrote,

Magazines, television programs, and advertisements give us a clue into an imaginary popular culture—that is, they tell us what various media institutions assumed about the public's concerns and desires. They [media] begin to reveal a general set of discursive rules that were formed for thinking about television in its early period. (Spigel, 1992, pp. 8-9)

In other words, she argues that although advertisements may not tell us the actual, lived experiences of audiences with TV, they provide insight into the way TV was intended and perceived to be used in the household in a certain context.

Indeed, the most meaningful lens through which to understand domestic space, domestic technology, and family are social historicism and social constructionism. Thus,

this 1950s ideal is explained as a response to the entrance of TV in the home and its potential to disrupt domestic life. One manifestation of this concern is found in advertisements for television sets in magazines like *Home Beautiful*, and depictions of TV and its position in the home on TV programs, such as *The Honeymooners* (Spigel, 1992, Chapter 2). Because women were encouraged to be primary caregivers in the domestic sphere, TV was simultaneously constructed as a threat and a solution to women's daily tasks and to family time.

A social constructionist approach also explicates how and why women are expected to use and enjoy a particular form of mass media. Indeed, discourses surrounding TV disseminated a particular type of wife and mother who enjoyed TV. Spigel, Holt, and others noted that the magazine ads disseminated this “uniform picture of women as household-family oriented consumers” (Holt, 2010, p. 1). For instance, Holt argued that since World War II, media images of women have had a lasting impact on how women themselves understand and define womanhood. This has been accomplished through dominant ideological images and messages, such as the White, middle-class, suburban June Cleaver in *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-1963) (Holt, 2010).

In their content analysis of post-World War II traditional women's magazine advertisements, such as *Family Circle* and *Better Homes and Gardens*, Courtney and Lockeretz (1967) contended that the emphasis on women as domestic figures reinforces stereotypes of motherhood, of women's inability to make important purchasing decisions, of their social and economic dependence on men, and of being sex objects for their husbands. Like Holt, they argued that postwar media discourses generalize and reinforce gender roles, and that this is logical given the historical and social context of the time.



What has not been considered, however, is how and why the new media, such as domestic exergames, construct a particular version of the “ideal woman” in the contemporary context. Because others have found that domestic technology, by and large, has presented far more varied conceptualizations of women, it is necessary to understand why exergames have not. In addition, women are pushed out of gaming culture by, for instance, misogynistic language in online forums. Much of the research on 21st-century media views constructions of family as much more varied. Indeed, the findings of other scholars are reasonable given the post-family context since the 1990s, when divorced and blended families increasingly became the norm.

Most studies of 21st-century media do not focus on the role of video games as domestic technology in constructing a particular kind of womanhood. In fact, this work, which deploys textual analysis, content analysis, historical approaches, ethnography, and interviews, argues that, for several reasons, this 1950s ideal no longer holds true in light of the historical changes in family structure and the shifting terrain of how media texts depict families and articulate the varied and various constructions of family and the roles of its members. This points to the need to understand why this complex and contradictory version of womanhood is being revived, in the distinct and controversial gendered sphere of gaming culture. This finding, diametrically opposed to those of other media scholars, asks why exergames are different. Why are women participants in this genre of video games being portrayed and given access to the medium in such a particular way? What makes it possible for video gaming and gaming culture to permit or support this social construct?

Other scholars have contended that we must turn to historical changes in American family structures to understand why we find some mass media messages about gender and the family. First, some researchers argued that historical changes since the 1950s have brought a range of media images and messages about what the family is and what it means to be a family and have a family. This has also resulted in discursive shifts in how family members interact with technology in the home. For example, in their research on the lived experiences of families in the 1990s, Hoover et al. (2004) found that the historical changes have changed the definitions of family and home and how family is represented in media texts—a stark contrast from the ideal of the 1950s. They concluded that as a result of rising divorce rates during the 1990s, the media depicted blended and single-parent families as the new norm. Hoover et al. urged a redefinition of media conceptions of the family: “We defined family broadly, including families that were blended, single-parent families, parents of the same gender, unmarried parents who were living together, unrelated people who considered themselves family, and others” (p. 6). In other words, we must redefine the ways in which families interact with media in the home, either separately or as a unit.

While console-based exergames are designed for the living room, other forms of domestic new media technologies in the 2000s are not as spatially fixed. Today, as traditional and new media forms converge, the constructions of media technology in domestic spaces have moved away from the ideal of the 1950s household and family due to the disappearance of the “digital hearth,” a centrally located medium in the home around which the family gathers (e.g., Flynn, 2003; Levine & Newman, 2012; Turkle,

2012). Levine and Newman (2012) asserted that because people now have a plethora of mobile devices for watching TV wherever they wish, the digital hearth has ceased to exist.

In addition, user manuals reveal the ideals that surround the masculinization of new media technologies (Levine & Newman, 2012). For example, the user manuals for new HDTVs rely on complex (presumably masculine) technical knowledge rather than ease of comprehension and utility (presumably more suitable for women) (Levine & Newman, 2012). Rather, Levine and Newman (2012) suggested that contemporary domestic interaction with technology is far more spatially and temporally fluid than the 1950s construction suggests. However, the contemporary exergames ecology runs contrary to these findings, so it is necessary to bring sources into the conversation that do find these archaic notions of women disseminated in the media today.

### **Video Games and the “Ideal Woman”**

Since 2006, women have gained more visibility as gamers due to the popularity of casual video games (Chess, 2010; Gray, 2012; Vanderhoef, 2013). This trend has narrowcast women as gamers within this video game genre and play style (Chess, 2010; Consalvo, 2009; Kubik, 2012; Sweedyk & de Laet, 2005). Turning to game studies scholarship, and to textual analyses of console-based casual video games, can help us understand how this narrowcasting operates in contemporary exergames.

Few scholars of game studies dispute that there has been somewhat of a revival of the 1950s “ideal woman”, the nuclear family, and the living room space in contemporary video game contexts and casual games (Chambers, 2012; Chess, 2011; Young, 2007). This is frequently explained through an analysis of advertisements for consoles and games. Young (2007) compared 1950s and 2006 advertisements in his argument that

Nintendo Wii advertisements are akin to the imagined, constructed, and idealized nuclear family of the 1950s. He claimed that, like television ads in the 1950s and video game ads in the 1970s, advertisements of the Nintendo Wii revitalize Spigel's family ideal by calling attention to the place of the technology in the home: who is meant to play it, where, and in what space. He argues that this is accomplished through video game advertisements, including those for early video games (e.g., a 1976 *Los Angeles Times* ad for Pong), as well as the Nintendo Wii, that feature real people using the technology in the home in order to sell it, rather than depicting game world content (Young, 2007).

Young (2007) claimed,

By transforming watchers of television into players of games on television, videogames reconfigured the ways in which many Americans would understand the home and created a new discourse surrounding the ways in which consumers interacted with and thought about television. (p. 236)

Thus, he attributes the success of both early video games and the Nintendo Wii to the changing relationships between the way people thought about video games, TV, and their relationship with TV in the home (Young, 2007). This gives us a glimpse into the idealized family and idealized women, but does not explain how advertisements of video games relate to broader discourses and values surrounding women in contemporary video game culture.

Still, others have taken a more holistic approach to studying the construction of gender and video games. Chess's (2011) discourse and content analysis, for example, involves close readings of video game advertisements for a variety of casual games, including those for consoles and handheld devices, in order to argue that these sources are important ways of circulating cultural values surrounding gender and about women's productivity (where time and play are purposive). In the case of discourses surrounding

video games, women's game play is associated with productivity, which means spending time with the family (i.e., *Wii Sports*) or improving one's mental sharpness (i.e., *Train Your Brain*). For instance, she argues that in *Train Your Brain*, the game associates women's game play with self-help/productivity, for game play is associated with women training their brains to be smarter through playing a variety of puzzle-based games.

In addition, she draws from women-centered magazines such as *Real Simple*, whose tagline is "Life Made Easier," and argues that this reveals how products and articles are geared toward the allegedly well-rounded woman, who cares equally about household duties, physical appearance, wellbeing, and career.

Her central argument is that video game consoles, as well as the games for the handheld Nintendo DS, are an important "cultural barometer" for understanding broader issues of gender. As Chess (2011) explained:

Recently, video games have been advertised to broader audiences including women. If advertising can be seen as a cultural barometer, examining these changing advertising campaigns becomes a valuable way of understanding larger issues of gender and video games.... Ultimately, I illustrate how productivity through self-help becomes a major factor in advertising play toward women. (p. 231)

In other words, analyzing advertisements can teach us about the cultural values concerning gender of a particular time period.

Thus, the paradox of women as game players—their inclusion and simultaneous relegation of play as solely for the purpose of productivity—is importantly situated in how gender expectations are embedded in video game advertisements, similar to other realms of advertising tailored to women (Chess, 2011).

Therefore, given the 1950s and 21st century contexts, it stands to reason that limited representations of the ideal family and the "ideal woman" have been so

widespread in the mass media. More varied constructions of women are not found in exergames, due to the boys' club that characterizes video game culture.

### **Media and Women, Video Games and Women**

Because discourses about domestic technology are entwined with gendered values, the literature review must be supplemented by studies of gender and the media, both broadly and within feminist game studies. This section distinguishes *sex* from *gender*; the former is a biological category and the latter is a social construct (Sedgwick, 2008). We must understand media and gender studies in broad terms, as it is foundational to feminist game studies scholarship (Butler, 1992; de Beauvoir, 1952; Sedgwick, 2008). Despite many seminal works in gender studies, this section focuses on the social construction framework, gender play, and representations of women and femininity in the media. The gendering of play articulates how discourses construct women as a type of gendered subject and how women are supposed to enact a sort of gender play.

Simone de Beauvoir's (1952) work is central to the field of gender and media studies for two reasons. The first reason is that de Beauvoir argued that women are relegated permanently to the position of "other," because women live in a man's world. The second reason is her seminal distinction between the biological category of sex and the socially constructed category of gender. She famously wrote, "One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman" (p. 267). Other scholars have taken up this othering framework and the separation of sex from gender.

In a more contemporary moment, Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble* problematizes ideas of sex and gender. She asserts that gender is "an attribute of a person, who is characterized essentially as a pregendered substance, or 'core,' called the person" (Butler

1990, p. 14). Indeed, heteronormative ideals in American culture reinforce the dichotomy between sex and gender. In her later work, she drew from Althusserian notions of interpellation and argued that people are interpellated into their gender from birth (Butler, 1993). Perhaps most significant to the area of game studies, though, is Butler's (1990) notion of *gender play*, whereby boys and girls, women, and men, experiment through play with gendered expressions, which demonstrates how boys and girls are brought up in our culture with expectations of what it means to be a boy or a girl, and how to perform boyhood and girlhood.

Media scholars have used gender studies, and the social construction framework, to explain the relationship between gender and technology. Wajcman's (1991) feminist work on computer technologies argued that "technology is always a form of social knowledge, practices and products" (pp. 38, 162). She contended that by the time technology enters the home, it has acquired a meaning about who has the expertise to use it and who is to enjoy it. In addition, her work is central in its consideration of television depictions of women.

In McRobbie's (2009) *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change*, she makes sense of what Baumgardner and Richards (2004) termed girlie feminism: young women's embrace of consumerism along with political activism. McRobbie (2009) however, questioned girlie feminism, and wondered why "women are currently being disempowered through the very discourses of empowerment they are being offered as substitutes for feminism" (p. 49). Unlike Baumgardner and Richards, McRobbie asserted that girlie feminism is actually anti-feminist because, although it

looks like an empowering, new form of feminism, it degrades the work done by previous generations of feminists.

Lotz (2006) also considered femininity and feminism, though she was more hopeful for the state of women—and their depictions on TV. In *Redesigning Women: Television after the Network Era*, Lotz turned to the multitude of TV texts in the post-network era that centered on women's lives, and to the TV channels that catered to women. By analyzing 1990s programs like *Sex and the City* and *Gilmore Girls*, she argued that this post-feminist era has rendered archaic stereotypes of women obsolete (Lotz, 2006). In addition, she asserted that these representations have redefined media's narratives about women.

However, others were not as pleased with the female characters on television. Douglas (2010) for instance, was troubled by the term post-feminist because she felt that the term implies that feminism has won. She argues that contemporary media representations of women are a form of enlightened sexism—where, because feminism has allegedly been won, it is now acceptable to have sexist portrayals of women on TV.

Still, others have built upon earlier gender studies, branching out to other mass media technologies. Kinder's (1991) book on media technologies, power, and ideology has similar findings. Kinder (1992) asserted:

I have argued that, because of the ideological assumptions implicit in the software and marketing of cartridges, video games not only accelerate cognitive development but at the same time encourage an early accommodation to consumerist values and masculine dominance. (p. 119)

Implicit in the design of video game technologies and promotional materials is that video games are for men. Therefore, we must understand that video games, including



exergames, have gendered messages, ideals, and expectations—especially gender play and gendered games.

A large corpus in gender and game studies builds upon gender studies and gender and technology studies, by trying to understand young girls and video games. Rather than focus on discourses, many have honed in on the positive potential of expanding the video game market to include women, and how that might make girls want to play video games, but also how this could affect women as industry professionals. The concept of gender play, and the socially constructed nature of gender, has affected feminist gaming scholars, as seen in the shift from studying the so-called girl games of the 1990s to broadening the research to view gender as “situated, constructed, and flexible” (Kafai et al., 2008, pp. xv-xvi). Indeed, the ideal woman in the context of contemporary exergames is situated within these terms.

Beginning with *From Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (1999), game scholars tried to understand why girls were not playing video games, and to get more young girls to play (Cassell & Jenkins, 2000). In particular, this research examined video games themselves and their marketing strategies in order to understand how and why they targeted the demographic of young girls. With the “pink games” movement of the 1990s in mind, scholars tried to make sense of the implications of creating games with girls in mind. According to Kafai et al. (2008), “traditional values of femininity” for girls are embedded in “pink games” (p. xiv).

Like the pink aisle in stores like Target, these games were designed and marketed using gender stereotypes and gendered play. Games such as *Barbie Fashion Designer*, with pink boxes, emphasized finding a husband, caring for children, and traditionally

female career choices (Cassell & Jenkins, 1999). These conversations had to do with the economic imperatives of the video game industry and its relation to the broader concerns of feminist academics to open technology careers to women.

Cassell and Jenkins (1999) explained why it is necessary to understand games produced for girls:

It's not just that girls seem to like today's computer games less than boys do, but that these differential preferences are associated with differential access to technological fields as children grow older, and this differential access threatens to worsen as technological literacy increasingly becomes a general precondition for employment. (p. 11)

To them, it is equally important to understand how creating games for girls affects women's decisions to participate in the video game industry. One game developer went as far as to defend designing video games for girls based on biological differences in video game play (Ray, 2004). Contributing to rather than problematizing the longstanding inequality concerning gender, access, and play, Cassell and Jenkins concluded that game developers should create girls' games because boys and girls have different physiological reactions to playing video games.

Other scholars were less critical of the video game industry for creating pink games, and more critical of the social construction of gender and its impact on the types of gendered play in which girls engage (Subhramanyam & Greenfield, 1999). Significantly, this work provides an explanation of the broader cultural definitions of gender and how they relate to the narratives and marketing strategies of pink games. de Castell and Bryson (1999), for instance, found that pink games may simply be a lucrative strategy by the industry, but they are problematic in stereotyping, prescribing gendered games and gendered play. Rather, culturally learned gender expectations play a substantial role in games designed for girls.

Scholars later revisited this issue to understand gender in games, in *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat* (Kafai & Heeter, 2011). The years of attention to girls who play video games have turned our attention away from the population of adult women. In fact, the average video game player is 30 years old (ESA, 2013), as the age of children who started playing video games in the 1970s and 1980s is climbing (ESA, 2013). In this anthology, game scholars argued for a move beyond pink games to understanding gender and gaming as a complex phenomenon, and understanding the benefits of game play for girls and women, different spaces of game play, and the implications for women who work in the game industry. Indeed, it was not until recently that scholars developed a larger body of literature on adult women, rather than girls, who play video games. Still, the focus centers on video games and video game culture on their own terms.

It has taken many years to identify the field of feminist game studies (Huntemann, 2013). This field is essential to understanding the contradictions among women as gamers (e.g., Consolvo et al., 2009; Huntemann, 2011), their limited representations in video games (e.g., Consolvo et al., 2009; Huntemann, 2011; Kinder, 1991), and women's lived experiences (e.g., Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Royse et al., 2007).

However, little research has considered video games as part of a broader socio-cultural context. Indeed, several scholars have taken up video games and women on these terms. Specifically, this research has examined video games and their surrounding paratexts (e.g., game boxes, advertisements, and reviews) in tandem with broader narratives surrounding women and domestic space (Chess, 2007; Young, 2007). Overall, though, what remains to be answered fully is how various discourses in video game culture define womanhood and femininity.

In addition, feminist game studies has pointed out that it is crucial to have an ongoing investigation of the state of women in video game culture. Huntemann's (2012) overview of feminist game studies, for instance, insisted upon the need to understand the continual, problematic gender inequities in video games and in gaming culture. The game scholars Heeter and Winn (2009) likewise contended that it is essential to understand the perceived gamer/user in order to understand what it means to be a gendered gamer. Huntemann explained the focal point of feminist game studies scholarship as "how gender, and its intersections with race, class, sexuality, etc., is produced, represented, consumed and practiced in and through digital games" (p. 1). One of the most valuable ways to understand casual games and the gendering of games, Huntemann asserted, is through application of feminist film and television theory to feminist game studies.

Indeed, this area has considered game design, game play, spaces of play, the video game industry, and video game culture. Scholars have focused on the ever-present and growing misogyny in a "toxic gamer culture" (Consalvo, 2012). Others have drawn our attention to online spaces of play, documenting various in-game world avatars and how online chats contribute to understandings of gender in gaming culture (e.g., Nardi, 2010; Pearce, 2009; Taylor, 2006). Attention has also shifted to women's labor in video game industry events, such as promotional models (booth babes) at trade shows (e.g., Huntemann, 2007; Trefry, 2005; Vance, 2004).

The game studies scholarship reviewed in this study by no means encompasses all of the research in this field—for much work investigates games as texts by studying in-game world narratives, representations of characters in relation to issues of gender and

race, and users' gameplay practices in particular genres of games (e.g., Boellstorff, 2008; Heeter & Winn, 2008; Kafai et al., 2008; Nardi, 2010; Pearce, 2009). Studying the in-game world and game play itself has important implications for understanding such gendered representations, the bifurcation of game players, and the perpetuation of sexualized, gendered, and racialized bodies. In addition, as Fron et al. (2007) and Fullerton, Morie, and Pearce (2007) argued, historically, the production of video games is problematic because it fails to address the needs of women. Thus, they found that many women do not identify with characters and story lines in video game texts, which hinder having an enjoyable, engaging, gameplay experience or even purchasing a game to begin with (Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007).

Feminist game studies scholarship, therefore, offers a valuable lens for understanding the relationship between women and exergames (e.g., Huntemann, 2010, 2012; Taylor, Jensen, & de Castell, 2009), but some questions still remain unanswered. This area centers on issues such as the representations of gender in game texts, marketing of games, and gender inequities and dynamics in the workplace. Kafai et al. (2008) posited, "Although the presence of women and girls in a range of game worlds is encouraging, most games continue to replicate and perpetuate the gender stereotypes and inequalities found in our society" (p. xi). Still, few have considered video games, particularly with the advent of casual games, as drawing from longstanding ideals about women's work and participation in video game play (e.g., Chess, 2010; Vanderhoef, 2012; Young, 2007).

## **The Gendering of Casual Games and the Gendering of Exergames**

It is essential to delve into scholarship about casual games and exergames in order to understand how and why a type of idealized womanhood is constructed in the contemporary exergames ecology. Taking this approach, which bridges the aforementioned scholarship, allows game studies to consider better how the broader socio-historical context informs particular definitions of women in video game culture. Studies of casual games in gendered terms allow us to understand how and why exergames and their surrounding discourses construct a gendered player who plays in gendered ways.

The research on casual games/consoles, and particularly exergames, remains new and developing, largely because casual gaming consoles and casual games did not enter American culture until 2006. Much current research has focused on how to define the term *casual* in the context of game studies. Inherent in this research is consideration of the design of casual games (Kultima, 2009; Kuittinen et al., 2007; Consalvo, 2009). For instance, to Kuittinen et al., casual refers to three things: “types of games, types of game player, play styles, [and] distribution and production (genre) models” (2007, p. 110). In addition, Consalvo has argued that casual and hardcore are not mutually exclusive—it is possible to play casual video games in a hardcore way (2009).

Others have focused on casual video games and sociality. For example, Jones and Thiruvathuskal (2012) deemed casual games and particularly the Nintendo Wii console as games that provide a truly social gaming experience—shifting the ideology that video games are played and enjoyed only by teenage boys in their parents’ basements. They offered a detailed explanation of the development of and revolution that is the Nintendo

Wii. As an insightful companion to Juul's (2010) overview of casual games, Jones and Thiruvathuskal focused on the Wii console as the "revolutionary" factor in the "casual revolution" (Jones & Thiruvathuskal, 2012). By utilizing their computer science and textual studies backgrounds, Jones and Thiruvathuskal (2012) contended that,

The Wii is a social platform not because it's especially good for multiplayer games (it is not) but insofar as it is designed to treat player space as physical social space, designed to afford, or at least create the perceived possibility of, watching others play and playing for the pleasure of social interaction. (p. 23)

Thus, the Nintendo Wii affords players a revolutionary, social game play experience—a fundamental shift in video game technologies, in how they are played, and in how Western culture talks about them.

In addition, game scholars Begy and Consalvo (2011) contended that the casual video game phenomenon allows researchers to understand better how players are conceptualized and also how this may relate to play styles. Begy and Consalvo contended that the casual game phenomenon has drawn a large player base of women—much greater than in other video game genres, such as MMOGs. They asserted:

In contrast to the relatively lower number of female players in MMOGs, casual games have almost consistently featured a strong female demographic for a player base, with that group also older than the typical male console gamer. (p. 1)

Overall, understanding video games on gendered terms allows us to understand how and why casual games have been gendered as feminine. As Kultima (2009) claimed, casual games (targeted at women) are distinct from hardcore games (targeted at men) because they offer more socially acceptable game content and more easily accessible game play, time, and rules.

However, a few have taken a more critical perspective (Chess, 2012; Huntemann, 2012). In the same vein as the widely detailed feminization of particular TV genres, such

as Levine's (2014) work on the association of contemporary soap operas with femininity, Huntemann (2012) argued that the casual game phenomenon has resulted in the feminization of that video game technology. As such, not only did the Wii console become feminized, but also this feminization has problematically associated the presumed casual game player as a woman and differentiated her from (the presumed) male, hardcore player (Huntemann, 2012).

Given the conceptual position of this study on exergames and the "ideal woman" within the social construction, configured user, and feminist game studies traditions, it is necessary to bracket the extensive body of media effects literature on exergames. In general, studies of exergames come from the media effects tradition, and have focused on the beneficial relationships among gameplay, game text, and health (e.g., Christian & Khan, 2012; Daley, 2009; Gobel et al., 2010; Rosenberg et al., 2010; Staiano, 2011). Much of the media effects research investigates the benefits of playing games, like *Wii Sports*, in rehabilitation facilities for increasing people's mobility.

Humanities scholars have focused on the positive potential of exergames. Some research has concluded that lived, performative, gameplay experiences are significant indicators of the positive, health potential of casual games—focusing on games such as *Dance, Dance, Revolution*, *Rock Band*, and *Guitar Hero*. Behrenshausen (2007) focused on the performativity of *Dance, Dance, Revolution* as the central analytic of understanding casual video games. Similarly, Miller's (2012) ethnomusicological work on music games emphasizes casual games and performativity, extending the conversation to musicality and authenticity. Likewise, analyzing experiences of *Rock Band* and *Guitar Hero* game play on YouTube and in public spaces, she argued that such games foster



performativity, engagement with rock music, and musicality (Miller, 2012, pp. 5-8). Furthermore, like the media effects research that finds positive, affective, health benefits from playing such games, her work found that playing *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band* promotes positive affect (Miller, 2012, p. 150). Overall, studies of exergames, like studies of casual games in general, take a utopian vision by focusing on the positive potential of these games on people's health, rather than taking a more critical perspective.

### **Video Games and Labor**

Certainly, exergames prescribe a form of game play that is positive and engaging, and additionally requires players to play for particular, behavioral outcomes. Game studies has explored the relationship between game play and work and has contextualized video games in these terms. It is therefore necessary to situate this study in this conversation, and in particular in the literature on *gamification* and *playbor*. Considering gamification, playbor, and consequently exergames, on historically specific terms has broader implications for the field of game studies, because it accounts for the marketing tactics and the labor of game production that go into constructing the player and game play experience.

There are multiple and varied definitions of gamification. Gamification is a concept that refers to “the use of game-thinking and game mechanics to engage users and solve problems” (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). In other words, gamification applies elements and concepts of video game design, such as points and badges, into particular work activities (Pearce, 2006; Prensky, 2002; Smith-Robbins, 2011). This is distinct from serious games, which are games designed for particular educational purposes (Deterding, 2012). Indeed, some researchers have focused on the idea that

gamification means eliciting the same psychological experiences in work as in game play (Deterding, 2012). Other scholars, however, assert that the implicit affordances used in gamification must be identical to those already present in games (Deterding, 2012).

Thus, the idea of gamification is not to create a game for the purpose of work, but to take and apply elements of games to motivate, drive, and engage game players in settings such as education, the private sector, and the medical and health fields. This includes eliciting behavioral outcomes, such as increasing physical fitness and the monitoring of health (Prensky, 2002; Werbach & Hunter, 2012). In sum, gamification is a way to incentivize play through psychological and motivational affordances in order to elicit a particular behavioral outcome (Easley & Ghosh, 2013; Hamari et al., 2014).

This is more complex than simply defining work and play and work as play (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). Rather, it is part of broader historically specific moments where there is interplay between work, play, and technology (Werbach & Hunter, 2012). As Chesher, Crawford, and Kücklich (2006) argued, it is necessary to understand video games on these terms because there is an “increased interconnectedness [that] is a blurring of boundaries – between real and virtual, private and public, global and local” (p. 1). This notion has been met with resistance and praise from academics (Anderson & Rainie, 2012; Bogost, 2011; Nicholson, 2012). For instance, Bogost (2011) deemed gamification exploitative, and specifically “shit crayons” and “bullshit” in order to challenge the relationship between game developers and game players embedded in this strategy. Likewise, scholars such as boyd (2012) and Suter (2012) deemed the concept “horrible” and “manipulative.” Indeed, boyd argued that gamification “is a

modern-day form of manipulation. And like all cognitive manipulation, it can help people and it can hurt people” (as cited in Anderson & Rainie, 2012, p. 1).

Conversely, research also points to the positive potential and outcomes of gamification in multiple fields, including health, fitness, and education. In the particular field of health and fitness, this can promote better health, through applications like Fitbit and Fitocracy (Przybylski, Ryan, & Rigby, 2010). In addition, gamification in a children’s hospital showed positive results in getting diabetic patients to monitor their blood sugar levels (Cafazzo et al., 2012). Within the field of education, Charles et al. (2011) found a positive relationship between gamification and, in particular, the application of a points-based system, in a college computing class. In this study, they found an increase in pass rate of the students, rising from 85% to 95% passing (Charles et al., 2011).

The relationship between work and video game play has also been taken up by scholars such as Kücklich, who coined the term playbor (2005). Rather than discuss gamification, he talks about modding as a form of playbor, whereby players willingly modify particular elements of video game design. In doing so, he argues that playbor is importantly “closing the loop” between video game companies and players (2005). Modding refers to players doing the work of the industry by modifying game content and releasing code (Postigo, 2003). Players are supporting video games as a lucrative industry, not only in terms of sales numbers, but also in terms of the cost of production labor (Kücklich, 2005; Postigo, 2003). Overall, the notions of gamification and playbor revolve around implicit or explicit motivators of particular behavioral outcomes, similar to the strategies that motivate fitness that are implicit in exergames.

## **Technology and the Configured User**

Because this study centers on the construction of women and exergames within the domestic sphere, it is necessary to situate this work in conversation with scholarship in media and technology studies. Doing so reveals the social construction of women as users of exergames, and provides a framework for understanding *who* exergames are meant for, and *how* the constructed user is meant to use them. Thus, this section turns to debates over whether technology itself constructs our culture, or whether technology is constructed and deeply embedded within historical, social, political, and economic contexts. Contrasting social constructionism with technological determinism helps us understand what social constructionism is and is not, and why it is essential to understanding the “ideal woman” in the contemporary exergames ecology. Though it might be convenient to categorize research on technology and culture as falling into one of two camps, technological determinist (e.g., Heilbroner, 1967; Innes, 1951; McLuhan, 1967) or social constructionist (e.g., Douglas, 1987; Flichy, 2007; Pinch & Bijker, 1987; Williams, 1975), the conversations and debates in this field are much more complex, contested, and contradictory.

Indeed, some scholars have argued that both technological determinism and social construction are insufficient in and of themselves in explaining and historicizing technology. For example, Flichy (2007) and Smith (1994) pointed out the problem of research that positions technology as determining culture, as they are critical of the gap in science and technology studies that focus solely on technical design or users, while failing to bridge the two in the historical, cultural context. Studying technologies through the lens of social construction, and on historical, social, cultural, political, and economic

terms, cues us in to the dominant ideologies of our culture at particular times. We must therefore understand the discourses surrounding exergames and women in relation to these contexts. This has been accomplished, according to Douglas's (2010) review of the broad field of technology studies, by viewing radio and TV, on the macro-level in such contexts. These frameworks have allowed authors to consider technologies' meaning, power, and capabilities.

Rather than solely discussing the problems with these frameworks, it is more useful to think of studies of technology on more of a continuum (Douglas, 2010). Douglas (2010) for instance, detailed the "irony of technology" (p. 301). This concept acknowledges that while technologies have properties that shape their dissemination and utilization in particular ways, the ideological system in which technology exists "always trumps technological possibilities and imperatives" (p. 301). Indeed, the social constructionist approach brackets technological determinism.

Understanding technology as gendered, as it relates to the idea of ideology and technical elements, can also help us make sense of the "ideal woman" construction among exergames. For example, this is apparent in the "ambivalence of technology" that many women, especially engineers, experience (Faulker, 2001). In this argument, Faulker (2001) brought concerns surrounding gendered identity and the relationship between power, technology, and the user to the table. Similarly, Douglas (1987), in her work on the history of radio technology, argued for the centrality of ideology in understanding technology. Winner (1986) likewise argued that it is plausible to embrace technical elements and their ideological context at the same time.

Is it sufficient to understand technology as solely culturally and socially constructed? To some scholars, the social construction of technology model leaves out important questions. Although moments of struggles and negotiation were addressed through this model, some researchers have argued that the role of ideology and gender was left out. As Douglas (2010) noted in relation to the social construction of radio technology,

Press coverage of wireless and then radio was crucial to the social construction process, so I hope one contribution to the field has been to examine how media coverage of technologies—often deeply contradictory and incoherent, by the way—can shape their dissemination. (p. 295)

Indeed, some scholars argue that it is necessary to understand media technologies themselves *and* cultural contexts, rather than one or the other. Studying the technology of exergames themselves, then, does not sufficiently explain the “ideal woman” construction—it is necessary to understand exergames in historical, cultural, political, and economic terms.

Others argue that the social constructionist approach diminishes the technical elements and technological power of particular media technologies. This is a problem to scholars, such as Merritt Roe Smith (1994), for example, whose work revived the agency of technology within a historical, political, and social context. However, these concerns have not been fully addressed, and Misa’s “middle-level theory” proved to be an important intervention in finding “an intermediate level of analysis in which technology is seen as both socially constructed and as society-shaping” (Douglas, 2010, p. 297). Technological determinism remains a central thread in the literature—arguing that technologies themselves determine their meanings in our culture.

Other theoretical models have attempted to take the technological determinist stance head on. As Mackay and Gillespie (1992) argued, a nuanced approach is “a much needed corrective and antidote to technological determinism” (p. 686). For instance, the long-running debate over the historical power, role, and context of technology has been addressed by the social shaping of technology model, which turns our attention to both micro and macro-approaches to technology. Reaching similar conclusions, Winston (1998) detailed the social history of technologies such as the telegraph, radio, television, and computers, in order to understand what he called the Information Age. To Winston (1998),

there is nothing in the histories of electrical and electronic communication systems to indicate that significant major changes have not been accommodated by pre-existing social formation. The term “revolution” is therefore quite the wrong word to apply to the current situation. Repetitions can be seen across this diverse range of technologies and across the two centuries of their development and diffusion. (p. 2)

The social history of technologies analytic suggests that in order to understand technology, the causes, effects, and social histories of technology and uses need be accounted for. The power of technology and cultural, historical, and social context are questions that still perplex media and technology scholars.

Like game studies scholarship that focuses on the gendered player, it is necessary to frame this study within the area of research on how technologies configure users, such as the work of MacKenzie (1990) and Grint and Woolgar (1997). It is arguable that the idea of marrying the social construction and configuring the user frameworks runs contrary to each of these separate modes of thinking; however, they are actually complementary in understanding exergames and women. For instance, MacKenzie’s (1990) “certainty trough” explains the relationship between the production of technology

and people's certainty about the particular technology—revealing that different people have different understandings of how they are intended to use a particular technology. In other words, he maps out the production of technology and people's "distance from production" in their understanding of what the technology is and what it should be used for. Although it might seem obvious that the more people have to do with a technology (whose distance is low), the more certain they will be about its qualities and uses, MacKenzie found that those who are closest to the production of technology, such as those who design home computers, are the least certain, as they can see the potentially endless possibilities in regard to its technical elements and uses.

In addition, considering the technical design of media technologies is necessary to understand the constructed woman as a particular kind of user. Grint and Woolgar's (1997) study on the technical design and technical elements of computer technologies does just that. To Grint and Woolgar, technologies configure "us" as users to know how to use them "properly." By building upon MacKenzie (1990), they show "the user" (the dip in the certainty trough) is imagined, defined, and limited by the production of a technology. They account for both the technical design (i.e., the computer box itself, its user manuals) as well as related texts, (i.e., advertisements) in arguing, "the user's character, capacity and possible future actions are structured and defined in relation to the machine" (Grint & Woolgar, 1997, p. 92). Therefore, it is crucial to consider exergames and surrounding discourses not only in social constructionist terms, but also in terms of how exergames construct a user, and in this case, an "ideal woman" user. As this study demonstrates, women are taught that exergames are for them, and that they are intended to use exergames in particular ways and for specific purposes.



This literature review has covered conversations among several bodies of literature in order to argue that it is essential to understand the “ideal woman” in contemporary exergames ecology as part of the longstanding ideals about gender, domestic space, and technology. Given the trend in game studies that has moved away from girls to women, we must think about women and video games on a larger scale. This entails shifting our attention to their historically situated, political, economic, social, and cultural concerns. As this study argues, other fields in media studies have a long tradition of understanding media forms, such as TV, within a broader socio-cultural trajectory. This study, then, contributes to the area of feminist game studies through the examination of adult women as video game players (users) and industry imperatives, and also as part of much larger issues.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

This dissertation uses textual analysis to examine the social and cultural construction of the “ideal woman” in exergames ecology from 2006 to 2014. Methodologically, textual analysis allows researchers to draw interpretive conclusions from a single text or a few texts. This approach can uncover meaningful and symbolic content: how meanings are constructed and produced, and the nature and significance of such meaning. Taking a textual approach was the best method for answering the larger questions of this study, because it allowed for analysis and understanding of sources individually and as a whole as “discursive cultural products” (Clark, 2005, p. 219). This meant understanding sources on a holistic level—discourses that are part of “the world that produced it” (Clark, 2005, p. 219). Likewise, this method was best suited for understanding a variety of perspectives that construct idealized womanhood, including the video game industry, advertisers, and the popular press. In sum, this allowed for an understanding of a variety of sources and perspectives as complex cultural products that construct idealized womanhood and that are a symptom of gaming culture and the broader socio-cultural values of the 21st century.

Textual analyses of selected sources “clue into an imaginary popular culture—that is, they tell us what various media institutions assumed about the public’s concerns and desires” (Spigel, 1992, p. 8). This study, then, deconstructs and interprets the meaning of

a few, selected, primary and paratextual<sup>5</sup> sources in order to make sense of the construction of women in the contemporary exergame ecology.<sup>6</sup> This includes analysis of exergames as texts, game boxes, game advertisements (e.g., print, television commercials), and items in the gaming and popular press (e.g., articles, cartoons, and video interviews by reviewers).

Themes were developed through triangulation – examining a phenomenon from multiple angles. Triangulation is a meaningful qualitative research methodology because, as Lindlof and Taylor (2002) claimed, “If data from two or more methods seem to converge on a common explanation, the biases of the individual methods are thought to ‘cancel out’ and validation of the claim is enhanced” (p. 240). Through triangulation, this study contextualizes the contemporary exergames ecology within the contemporary cultural, social, and political landscape of America in the 2000s.

### **Exergames as Texts**

The complexities of this study of gaming culture, women, technology, and domesticity necessitated analysis of a variety of robust materials. The first area of analysis examines exergame software (in-game avatars, in-game world content) in particular, selected games (i.e., *Wii Fit*, *Wii Sports*, *Just Dance*), including the graphics, characters, menus, and story lines—addressing the formal aspects and the underlying

---

<sup>5</sup> The term *paratext* is derived from literary studies. As Gerard Genette (1997) explained in *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, “Paratexts are those liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book, that mediate between book, author and reader: titles, forewords and publishers’ jacket copy form part of a book’s private and public history” (p. xi). In regard to this study, this refers to the variety of sources surrounding exergames, such as game box covers, various promotional materials, and popular/gaming press reviews.

<sup>6</sup> This study does not reflect the lived experiences of women who play exergames; nor does it aim to do so. And, although identity and women’s identification is implicit in my findings, it is not the explicit, focal point of this project.

meanings. As others have shown, in-depth analysis of in-game world content can reveal problematic, sexist gender stereotypes (such as hypersexualized bodies) and the subordinate position of women in an exclusionary gaming culture (e.g., Heeter & Winn, 2008; Huntemann, 2010; Nakamura, 2002; Nardi, 2010; Pearce, 2009; Taylor, Jensen, & de Castell, 2009).

Analysis of the game world content reveals the assumed public response to exergames as constructed by the video game industry. As others have argued, analysis of a technology and its technical elements allows for an understanding of what this technology is, what its perceived uses are, and where it should be used (Grint & Woolgar, 1997; MacKenzie, 1990). As elucidated in the rationale for game selection part of this chapter, this included analysis of the following exergames: *Wii Fit Plus* (2009), YSFJMC (2009), *Wii Fit U* (2013) and *Get Fit With Mel B* (GFWMB, 2010).

### **Exergame Boxes**

Exergame boxes simultaneously construct idealized womanhood through coupling the in-game world content and real people (portrayed by actors/models) who are depicted playing exergames in particular spaces. Analysis of these materials allows us to situate these messages historically and understand them as barometers of dominant cultural values. As Murphy (2012) argued in her analysis of the 1982 Atari catalog and the emergence of code studies, video game boxes and cover art place viewers inside the universe of a particular video game. Game studies research has expanded to study the technical components, manuals, and catalogs, alongside broader cultural narratives (Murphy, 2012). Therefore, exergame boxes serve as a cultural narrative—not only in

relation to the video game industry and the construction of players—but also in terms of the broader messages about gender and technology.

Using consumer data, popular media outlets such as *Wired* magazine have found that game boxes are noteworthy, because they are sometimes the only determinant of purchasing decisions (wired.com, 2012). Thus, it is important that companies be as persuasive as possible in the design of their game boxes, in order to explain and justify the purchase of these games. This is accomplished through providing a combination of visually pleasing, eye-catching graphics and ample information about the game's content and constructed purpose (wired.com, 2012). Exergames can be found in retailers, such as Wal-Mart or Best Buy, or online shopping websites, such as amazon.com (wired.com, 2012).

Like early console-based video game boxes, such as the Magnavox Odyssey in the 1970s (Young, 2007), exergame boxes depict apparently real people playing the game in a living room setting. By contrast, contemporary hardcore video game boxes, such as those for *Call of Duty* or *Dead Rising*, depict the in-game material rather than the imagined, lived experience of playing the game. Most of these video games and their boxes were accessed through the University of Michigan's Computer and Video Game Archive and websites that scan and archive boxes, such as vgboxart.com, thecoverproject.net, theoldcomputer.com, and gamescanner.org. These boxes were collected during a prior project in and supported by a research grant from the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Michigan.

## Promotional Materials

Although multiple sources were analyzed, this research is primarily a study of advertising. Promotional materials (such as in print and TV commercial forms) are the most widely circulated and disseminated discourses, particularly through TV, magazines, and newspapers. Marketed to women, advertisements of exergames construct the “ideal woman” by instructing users that the sole purpose of exergame play is for labor. Exergames and game play are intended to streamline domestic caregiving duties, time spent with the family, and staying in shape. Surely, there are alternative motives for advertising exergames in this particular way. Indeed, advertisers are not necessarily only targeting one particular demographic, but rather are targeting multiple demographic populations. For instance, marketing exergames to women within the context of the domestic sphere may actually be a tactic to sell these games to children. As is the case with advertisements of a variety of products and media technologies, advertisers often market to women, as women make purchasing decisions for products for their families.

Kilbourne (1999) argued that it is essential to study advertisements, because they are a ubiquitous and a substantive part of society and everyday life (Robinson & Hunter, 2008, p. 466). In other words, “Advertising is our environment. We swim in it as fish swim in water. We cannot escape it” (Kilbourne, 1999, p. 57). Because they are so embedded in our lives, advertisements offer an opportunity to understand the construction of gender in our culture. As Lippke (1995) argued in his work on masculinity in advertising, advertisements provide an important lens for understanding how gender is constructed:

The ways in which individuals habitually perceive and conceive their lives and the social world, the alternative[s] they see as open to them, and the standards

they use to judge themselves and others are shaped by advertising, perhaps without their ever being consciously aware of it. (p. 108)

In addition, advertising draws up simplistic and often problematic notions of gender (Scroeder & Swick, 2004). Scroeder and Swick (2004) suggested,

As an engine of consumption, advertising plays a strong role in promulgating dualistic gender roles and prescribing sexual identities. Most ad campaigns invoke gender identity, drawing their imagery primarily from the stereotyped iconography of masculinity and femininity. (pp. 21-22)

In other words, advertisements draw from and perpetuate gender stereotypes.

Advertisements also frequently draw from issues and ideals that consistently appear in women's magazines, as "advertisers often [adjust] their sales messages to fit the[se] concerns" (Spigel, 1992, p. 7). Therefore, promotional materials of exergames are important sites of meaning making, because they reflect, on the broadest scale, the conceptualized utilities of the product and the target audience. In sum, advertisements are significant, as they are often people's first introduction to a product, its intended uses, and for whom it is and is not intended (Kilbourne, 1999; Spigel, 1992).

Advertisements are by no means realistic portrayals of our culture—and in this case, women in our culture. Advertisements of exergames provide narrow and emotionally charged depictions of women's daily lives. Lears (1983) described this phenomenon of advertisements through the concept of "therapeutic ethos," whereby consumers find heightened psychic, emotional, spiritual, and psychical pleasure by purchasing an advertised product. In the majority of exergame advertisements, intimate moments of women's lives with their families are apparent. Goldman (1996) called this type of depiction in advertising "paleosymbolic scenes"—or scenes with tender, intimate moments in people's lives (such as a baby's first steps) in order to sell a product (p. 251).

Certainly, women are not simply dupes to these advertising messages. There are many possible reactions to and interpretations of advertising messages. These messages can be rejected, ridiculed, and treated with irony by the intended recipients. Even though they are not realistic, and no matter the response, however, advertisements are important sites of inquiry and of meaning making, because they are a barometer for assessing current values surrounding women in video game culture. And, although this study does not focus on the audience responses to exergames, it is important to contextualize this research within the work that considers the varying audience responses to the dominant messages in the mass media.

In fact, research has detailed the audience responses that run counter to the dominant messages and ideals inherent in video games and gaming culture. For example, Fiske (1992) discussed the resistant uses of and resistant tactics against mass media, specifically as they relate to the culture of fandom. Likewise, Hills (2002) detailed fan cultures and cultures of resistance. This literature has been drawn upon in game studies literature, particularly as it relates to notions of counter-culture and counter-gaming. Therefore, the promotion of exergames may be viewed by women in many ways, such as a remedy whereby women can escape male-dominated gaming culture.

The majority of these materials were readily available and accessible online, through companies' websites and on YouTube. Print advertisements in magazines are widely available through Google image searches and searches on the websites of popular magazines such as *Time*, *People*, *Self*, *Fit Pregnancy*, and *Parenting*.



## **Popular and Gaming Press Articles/Reviews of Exergames**

A large component of the negotiation, circulation, and dissemination of exergames lies in the popular and gaming press. In sources written in the first decade of the 2000s, the technology of exergames was simultaneously lauded as a facilitator of women's domestic role and met with broader concerns about the decline of time spent with family at home. In addition, popular press and gaming press reviews often dismissed such games as not real games and as subordinate to hardcore games. Therefore, reviews of exergames are the fourth area to examine, and a means to uncover broader, gendered cultural assumptions and ideals from the industry's and the consumers' perspective. Reviews were found in online text, video interview, and cartoon formats. These stories were written by video game journalists on reputable gaming sites, such as *IGN*, *GameSpot*, and the *Escapist Magazine*, as well as by popular press writers in magazines/newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Huffington Post*.

### **Rationale for Selection of Exergames**

#### ***Wii Fit Plus and Your Shape Featuring Jenny McCarthy***

*Wii Fit Plus* (2009) and *YSFJMC* (2009) were selected as representative examples for Chapter 4, "The Construction of Women As Exer-Moms." *Wii Fit Plus* was chosen because it is one of the most popular exergames to date. The *Wii Fit* video game line for Nintendo, beginning with *Wii Fit* and its various iterations (*Wii Fit Plus*, *Wii Fit U*), has the second highest, worldwide, life-to-date sales of all video games produced for Nintendo's most popular, contemporary platforms (DS, 3DS, Wii, and Wii U).

As of March 2014, *Wii Fit Plus* (2009) had sold nearly 22 million units. In 2009, *Wii Fit* sales surpassed lifetime sales of the popular first person shooter, *Halo 3*. This is significant for a few reasons. At the time, the *Wii Fit* was a new kind of video game with a new kind of hardware (balance boards). *Halo 3* had a huge fan base and the *Halo* series was Microsoft's flagship first-person shooter powerhouse. In addition, *Wii Fit* was released eight months after *Halo 3* and cost \$30 more.

YSFJMC (2009), in contrast, does not have the volume of worldwide sales; however, it exemplifies a key trend among exergames and related paratexts. This trend is the use of celebrity endorsements to idealize mothers. This game was also innovative because it introduced non-controller based exergaming. While prior exergames required the user to hold the Wii-mote in his or her hand or hands during game play, YSFJMC was the “first of its kind” to have a motion-tracking camera.<sup>7</sup> This non-controller based exergaming has skyrocketed since YSFJMC, as is apparent in Microsoft's Kinect technology and its related games for the Xbox 360, such as *Kinect Sports* (2010) and *Dance Central* (2010).

### ***Wii Fit U* and *Get Fit With Mel B***

The *Wii Fit U* (2013) was selected for Chapter 5, “Women's Game Play and the Hardcore/ Exergame Dichotomy,” because it is the first console-based exergame to respond to the contemporary fitness culture that is obsessed with tracking a user's fitness throughout the day—as we have seen with FitBit, cell phone applications, and other handheld devices. The game's fit meter allows the player to wear a pedometer and track his or her activity no matter where he or she is—both inside and outside the domestic

---

<sup>7</sup> Quote from the TV commercial for YSFJMC (2009).

space. This game is representative of the association of exergame play (how to play the game) with the purpose of fostering time with family and staying fit.

GFWMB (2010), by contrast, was selected because it was designed for the least fiscally successful of motion-tracking technologies for the three major consoles (Wii, Xbox, PlayStation—and their future iterations). Given the initial platform for the PlayStation 3, a console that is associated with men and hardcore games, it represents a significant way that gendered dichotomies operate in video game culture. The exergames for the PlayStation 3 are constructed for women simply to jump in without holding a controller, and therefore dichotomize women's game play from men's by implying that women are incapable of holding a controller.

In addition, like YSFJMC, this game represents the constructed ideal of women's game play with the work of physical fitness. GFWMB accomplishes this by revolving the game around the body of the celebrity and TV personality, Melanie Brown (Mel B of the 1990s girl power band, *Spice Girls*), as well as by emphasizing the necessity of managing a daily diet (recipes and calories burned for specific foods) alongside a fitness regimen. The discourses surrounding *Wii Fit U* and GFWMB construct how women are supposed to play video games by equating game play with labor, and, in doing so, dichotomize women's and men's game play by conditionally including women in exclusionary gaming culture.

### **Remaining Chapters**

The intersections among women, video games, and domesticity are central to the thesis of this study, and are the running thread throughout the manuscript. The study's findings are divided into Chapters 4 through 6, and are concluded in Chapter 7.

Chapters 4 and 5 answer the first research question: how console-based exergames and paratexts define what it means to be a woman in video game culture. Chapter 4 deconstructs and defines *who* is conceptualized to play exergames in order to explain how the positioning of women as mothers who play exergames results in women's exclusion from broader video game culture. Through analysis of *Wii Fit Plus* (2009) and YSFJMC (2009), this chapter argues that women are defined as working and stay-at-home mothers in complex and contradictory terms, and that being a woman who plays exergames entails being a mother (what I term an *exer-mom*). This chapter defines the exergame player and sets the stage for the findings of the study.

Chapters 5 and 6 answer the second research question, connecting the "ideal woman" to contemporary cultural ideals about women, technology, and domestic space. Chapter 5 examines *how* women are constructed to play exergames. It analyzes *Wii Fit U* (2013) and GFWMB (2010), arguing that women's exergame play is positioned in opposition and dichotomously to men's. In other words, women's exergame play is only permissible when it is for the purpose of domestic labor; men's is designed for fun, pleasure, and entertainment. The idea that game play is a form of work blurs the lines between the gendered work and play divide in public and private space. These discourses seemingly expand the visibility of women as video game players, but actually marginalize women in a male-dominated gaming culture.

Chapter 6 also answers the third research question and urges us to understand this construction as a symptom of the broader socio-cultural context of the early 21st century. This chapter discusses the context of contemporary exergames and connects the findings to present social, cultural, and political ideals. This includes the American political

climate (including the *Let's Move* initiative and the fight against childhood obesity), and the moral dilemmas surrounding school shootings and the decline of quality time. The central argument of this chapter is that the “ideal woman” construct is a symptom of moral panic discourses in the mass media, and that it specifically blames video games for our societal ills. This chapter asserts that exergames are constructed in this way to justify to women (as mothers) that exergames are good and safe because they can resolve these concerns.

Chapter 7 concludes this study, and explains its contribution to feminist game studies through a discussion of this construction within misogynistic gaming culture. This chapter examines the “ideal woman” construct in relation to misogyny in gaming culture and challenges the notion that gaming culture and women are monolithic. It urges us to consider another, different venue that has made the threatening aspects about femininity in gaming culture allegedly safe. In particular, by declaring that the Wii is *for* women, women and women’s game play are devalued and delegitimized, and thereby the masculine, status quo of gaming culture is maintained. This reframing asks us to shift our focus from the depiction of women in video game texts to the more covert forms of exclusion among discourses that revolve around the ways in which women are constructed to spend their time. Finally, this chapter asserts that one of the pitfalls of game studies literature is that it analyzes and makes claims *only* within gaming culture and the history of video games. Therefore, Chapter 7 urges feminist game studies scholars to account more fully for how the gendered definitions of games and game play do not exist in a vacuum, but are part of longstanding cultural ideals and definitions of

women, technology, and domesticity. This chapter concludes with a recommendation for future research in this area.

#### Chapter 4: The Construction of Women as Exer-Moms



*Figure 2.* Celebrity model, actress, author, and mother, Jenny McCarthy standing in a kitchen while promoting YSFJMC (Ubisoft, 2009) in a scene from a TV commercial.

Like any other working mom, I know all too well how challenging it can be to balance fitness with a busy schedule! That's why I'm behind you 100% with Your Shape—entertaining you, keeping you motivated, and coaching you to success! – Jenny. (Quote on the back of the game box for the 2009 exergame, YSFJMC)

Popular journalists have lamented the fact that across class lines, women's educational and professional advances have not changed the underlying ideology that women's primary responsibility is child rearing (Crittenden, 2001; Wolf, 2001). For instance, discourses of motherhood portrayed on TV may have shown a variety of vocational roles for women, but these women's lives still revolved around motherhood. The TV show *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005) depicted a frazzled, middle-class soccer mom, and in media coverage of the American political race in 2008, Sarah Palin used her position as a self-proclaimed, lipstick-wearing, hockey mom to garner support for the position of vice president (with an emphasis on her role as a mother as a reason for her election). We have seen a plethora of stories in the media about celebrity

pregnancies and babies, attachment parenting, and “the myth of the perfect mother,” “mommy wars,” fertility treatments, and home birthing (Kawash, 2011). Another example of this discourse is New York City’s Museum of Mothers. This museum opened in 2011 as the only museum in the world dedicated to the exploration of the family and the historical importance of the roles of women as mothers, having “comprehensively collected, preserved, and disseminated information about the diverse roles of mothers and the many types of family units.”<sup>8</sup>

The media may have circulated and disseminated discourses about an array of women and lived experiences, but this has been undermined by the fact that women are still conceptualized and idealized as mothers. While many scholars of media, the family and media, and the home in anthropology, sociology, gender studies, media, and technology studies have asserted that we have moved beyond the nuclear family, and that the relationship between gender, families, technology, and domestic space has changed, this study contends that in exergames this alleged moving beyond has not fully occurred. The “ideal woman” construct among contemporary exergames is a complicated and contradictory blend of the 1950s notions of womanhood, contemporary notions of women and women’s work, and the relationship of women with new media technologies (and specifically video games). Thus, this chapter explores *who* the exergame player is conceptualized to be in order to set the stage for the arguments through the remainder of the manuscript.

---

<sup>8</sup> Although the Museum of Motherhood was built as a centralized museum in 2011, traveling exhibits and conferences of this non-profit organization first began in 2006. More detailed information on the museum can be found at [http://www.mommuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/MOM\\_Short\\_Sheet\\_Nov\\_2013.pdf](http://www.mommuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/MOM_Short_Sheet_Nov_2013.pdf).



Video game culture, more so than many other mass media forms, carries a great deal of cultural weight in disseminating problematic gendered ideals and norms surrounding women's access and participation. Indeed, while other forms of mass media, such as TV and film, continuously show varied conceptions of what it means to be a woman, in the case of exergames, women are only constructed in a particular, narrow way. Specifically, when we examine the construction of the exergame player, we see that the player is conceptualized as a mother who plays exergames within the context of motherhood.

Still, it would be unfair to claim that the construction of the exer-mom, particularly through advertisements, is in any way a realistic reflection of women's daily lives. It is unjust simply to compare and contrast the construction of the exer-mom with the real lived experiences of women's lives. Rather, this construction through advertisements serves as a barometer to gauge the contemporary cultural, social, and political ideals surrounding gender, domestic space, and technology. Therefore, the exer-mom construction functions as a broader cultural narrative about women, femininity, technology, and domesticity. Given that video game culture is so exclusionary for women, this study asserts that this construction of women as exer-moms helps us to understand better why women are barred from access to and participation in gaming culture. It will then argue that the exer-mom construction simultaneously acknowledges and marginalizes women and therefore that the positive framing of exergame play in the context of motherhood actually undermines women's full participation and legitimacy in gaming culture.

Therefore, in order to understand the significance of the contemporary exergames ecology in video game culture, we must first understand who the exergame player is constructed to be and how this functions as a broader cultural narrative about women. This chapter considers two exergames, *Wii Fit Plus* (2009) and *YSFJMC* (2009), which are representative of this conceptualization. We know, however, that this is not (and has not always been) who all women are and how they go about their daily lives (e.g., Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Holt, 2010; Spigel, 1992). By contrast, many other forms of media, such as TV shows, movies, and commercials, have responded to societal shifts and provided more varied conceptions of womanhood, motherhood, and family (e.g., Douglas & Michaels, 2004).

The messages in the contemporary exergames ecology continuously assume a link between three areas: exergames, women, and mothers. It is also assumed that the exergame player is conceptualized, idealized, and disseminated within the daily, hectic life of motherhood. To that end, exer-moms are imagined to have a built-in desire to be good mothers.

There are important precedents to the exer-mom construction and redefinition of femininity, both within games and in gaming culture. The cultural conflict between femininity in games and femininity in gaming culture, and specifically the Riot Grrrls movement, reached its peak in the 1990s, and proposed an alternative way to be a woman gamer (Consalvo & Allen, 2003; Darms, 2013). Overall, the Riot Grrrl movement became an influential subculture for women, particularly in regard to music, that challenged sexism and patriarchy in a hegemonic masculine society. Kennedy asserted that women faced significant discrimination from the boy's club of gaming culture in the

1990s. In particular, Kennedy contended that “women gamers face significant discrimination in the video game world; their mere presence in such a male-dominated space defies the rules and expectations for women and men” (as cited in Haenfler, 2014, p. 20). As a response to gaming culture, women gamers resisted this discrimination in several ways. As Haenfler (2014) argued, “They [women] resist by forming female-only teams, creating women-run gaming servers, refusing to be pushed out by men, and simply by being successful in aggressive, violent games (Delamere and Shaw, 2008” (p. 21).

In addition, more contemporary video games have engaged with the Riot Grrrl movement and the definition of femininity both within video games and in contemporary culture at large. This is apparent in the video game, *Gone Home*, a game about letting go of secrets. In this game, an angsty teenage Riot Grrrl girl, Samantha, is on “a journey of queer self-discovery” (Bogost, 2013, p. 1). In particular, Samantha embraces the powerful facets of femininity in her navigation of high school, being a lesbian, and as part of her White, middle-class, Evangelical family (Bogost, 2013).

Indeed, women gamers have created their own subcultures based on the Riot Grrrls movement, as a response to the misogyny in gaming culture and within video game texts. As Heller (2000) detailed in his interviews with women gamers,

Alana Gilbert, a female gamer and member of the PMS All Grrl Quake Clan, noted that, “When a female character has been sexualized, really young men will act accordingly—usually ‘talking down’ to the women or making lewd comments because they don’t know what to say. It basically becomes a high-stress social situation for them.” So what of this girlish offensive? For women gamers, the reality is simple: They don’t want to play a game in which “their character’s looks solicit unwelcome responses from men.” (p. 58)

Therefore, the exer-mom is a cultural narrative that is part of a longer history of defining women within video games and in gaming culture. This narrative is not simply a lucrative marketing tactic, but rather demonstrates the complex ways that women are

defined as technological users in video game culture and culture at large. The woman-as-mother narrative is apparent among specific visual and textual cues, such as direct address, celebrity endorsements, non-celebrity moms, certain color schemes, and use of the following terms synonymously: “woman,” “mom,” “working mom,” and “busy mom.” By and large, messages and images of race, class, and sexuality are highly hegemonic and heteronormative.

### **The Construction of Women as Mothers in Our Culture**

Lawyer Caroline Rogus’s (2003) law journal articles, though written from a legal perspective, provide a useful entry point for understanding why the conflation of the “biology is destiny” (biological determinism) and sociological roles of motherhood (socially and culturally constructed and distinct from biology) is so prevalent in our culture. Rogus articulated why this ideal of motherhood plays an important role in legal decisions, ranging from child custody to reproductive freedom. She argued,

Because women who are biological mothers are presumed to be sociological mothers, they are expected to strive to meet society’s ideological standards of motherhood; those who do not or cannot attain such goals are left to internalize their failure, or worse. (p. 804)

Thus, women must be mothers in order to fit the sociological role they are prescribed and are seen as failures if they do not do so.

Rogus (2003) explained this as a narrative of conflation—a conflation of biological sex and the sociological roles of women. She finds this problematic because motherhood is deemed “a ‘natural’ phenomenon” (pp. 815-816). Essentially,

Because there exists an ideal form of motherhood, and because this ideal imagines the nurturing and caregiving we associate with motherhood to be instinctual among women, women who give birth are automatically compared to the ideal mother. Furthermore, because this ideal is unattainable for most women, women are set up to constantly attempt and consistently fail at modeling themselves after this ideal. (p. 815)

Women who are not mothers at all or who are mothers but do not center their lives on child rearing, are therefore not considered legitimate women. Further, this idealized motherhood—of women as innately maternal and motherly—is unrealistic and leaves women with unattainable standards (Holt 2010).

To understand the woman-as-mother conceptualization better, it is necessary to unpack the long tradition of retrograde images and messages of women. Friedan (1963), for instance, paved the way for scholarly work in gender and media studies, and articulated “the problem without a name,” in her seminal work, *The Feminine Mystique*.<sup>9</sup> In this book, Friedan lamented the troubling and reactionary images of blissful domesticity in women’s magazines. These images of domestic caregiving, in the spheres of cooking, cleaning, and childcare, was presented as a woman’s most important role in society. Friedan (1963) explained:

The image of woman that emerges from this big, pretty magazine is young and frivolous, almost childlike; fluffy and feminine; passive; gaily content in a world of bedroom and kitchen, sex, babies and home. The magazine surely does not leave out sex; the only goal a woman is permitted is the pursuit of a man. It is crammed full of food, clothing, cosmetics, furniture, and the physical bodies of young women, but where is the world of thought and ideas, the life of the mind and spirit? (p. 32)

Furthermore, subsequent research has shed light onto the alignment of media sources and societal trends, and trends related to women (Didian, 1998; Tuchman, 1978; Wolf, 2002). For instance, in her study of women’s magazines between the 1970s and 1990s, Didian (1998) found that women were solely represented and discussed as “housewives and homemakers,” whereby “women’s work is never done, happiness is only an electric appliance away, and men are virtually absent from the home except when

---

<sup>9</sup> This is a simplification of Friedan’s work; her influence on feminist movements and feminist scholarship in cannot be overstated.

they are being pampered like children by their wives” (Robinson, 2008, p. 466). In order to understand the meaning behind and impact of media messages, these authors have situated media texts pertaining to women and motherhood as in conversation with and representative of the historical, political, economic, and cultural climates.

The exer-mom narrative is not baseless and does not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, according to the video game industry and marketing perspective, the vast majority of mothers today do play video games. According to a survey in 2013 from the ESA, of approximately 2,500 moms over age 18 with children under age 18, 73% regularly play video games on at least one device in their household (ESA, 2013).<sup>10</sup> Surely, not all women in the gaming population are mothers and they do not all demonstrate the rationale for and enjoyment of video game play within the motherhood context.<sup>11</sup>

### **Analysis of Promotional Materials**

#### ***Wii Fit Plus***

As Lears (1983) has argued, advertisements mask hegemonic ideologies through what he terms the “therapeutic ethos” (p. 4). This idea, he argued, urges people to purchase products in consumer culture, and to find fulfillment and gratification through purchasing consumer goods (Lears, 1983, p. 4). In fact, he claimed that people will attain a heightened emotional, psychic, and physical response simply upon purchase of the advertised product. Applied to the case of exergames, exergame advertisements promise

---

<sup>10</sup> This survey and its findings are an industry tactic and marketing strategy that promotes the expansion of the game playing and purchasing audience by picking and choosing its statistics. Because there are no other published data sources on this information, it cannot be corroborated.

<sup>11</sup> In 2014, the Pew Research Center found that the actual percentage of stay-at-home moms (with children under the age of 18) is only 29% of the entire population of women with children. It is therefore strange that the industry would limit the market to this segment of the population.

a heightened physical and emotional response for women—in the context of their daily lives. In particular, a fundamental way that exergames are sold is through promotional materials for exergames that emphasize relatability, daily life, and the pronouns “you” and “your,” and uses celebrity endorsements, direct address, music, and particular color schemes.

It is also important to note that other genres of advertising have deployed similar tactics to advertisements over the years. Multiple marketing and advertising sites and research are dedicated to targeting women, and specifically mothers, as new media users who make technology purchasing decisions in the household. We have seen this most obviously in the case of advertising smart phones, though this trend is not new. A research marketing firm, Pointiflex, found in 2011 that

women make 85% of purchasing decisions in a household, and often that women is a mom. She’s not just buying for herself; she’s also buying for the baby, the toddle[r], the teenager and for the entire soccer team. And she’s not just buying Cheerios and baby wipes—she’s purchasing electronics and other household items, sometimes even her smartphone, since 70% of moms now own smartphones. (Drell, 2011)

As Microsoft (2012) asserted, “social moms are 56 percent more likely to download coupons than the general public” (p. 1).

There are a number of advertising campaigns for media technologies that target women. For instance, an advertisement for Google Chrome, titled, “The Dear Sophie Chrome Ad,” was successful because it tapped into “true parenting insights that strike an emotional cord” (Drell, 2011). In this advertisement, the [presumed] mother is writing an email to her daughter, Sophie, which includes photos from the hospital right after she was born and concerned becoming a “big sister” (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Screen shot from the “Dear Sophie Chrome Ad” (2011).

Drell (2011), Pointiflex (2011), and *Advertising Week* (2012) suggested several strategies for targeting mothers, such as advertising on Facebook (as this is a platform on which tech-savvy moms spend much of their time). Likewise, they argued that successful advertising campaigns to women should avoid stereotypes in ads (even though stereotypes of the “frazzled soccer mom” or the “*Desperate Housewives*-esque model of perfection” are too common in advertisements) (Drell, 2011). As is the case with exergame advertisements, other contemporary advertisements of women as mothers using computers and specifically smartphones and the Internet are in conversation with notions of motherhood and technology.

What follows is an analysis of *Wii Fit Plus* (2009) TV commercials, a print advertisement, and a TV commercial for YSFJMC (2009). Nintendo’s 2009 *Wii Fit Plus* advertising campaign included two commercials: “Working Mom” and “New Mom.” This campaign depicts the busy life of working and stay-at-home moms. In both cases, a woman’s day revolves around motherhood and family. Goodby, Silverstein, & Partners (2009), the advertising agency that created this campaign, explained:



Nintendo is promoting the new *Wii Fit Plus* collection with “Working Mom” and “New Mom,” a television commercial that fits the game console into busy lifestyles. Of course both women featured in the campaign are working moms, whether or not they are paid for their hours!

In the “Working Mom” and “New Mom” commercials for *Wii Fit Plus* (2009), we see a continuous shot featuring a White mother rushing around her house and elsewhere, as if on a moving sidewalk. In “Working Mom,” the commercial begins with an alarm going off in the marital bedroom (Figure 4). The woman jumps out of bed while the man rolls over. She chooses an outfit from her closet, then throws some dirty clothes into the hamper while she brushes her teeth. Clad in workout attire, the woman strides into the kitchen. Her elementary-school-age daughter, wearing a plaid school uniform, and her husband, dressed in a suit, are already there. As mom enters the room, she catches a slice of toast as it pops out of the toaster and tosses it to her daughter with a cheerful “Hey, sweetie!” She then blows a goodbye kiss to her husband, “Muah!” and irons a shirt before entering the living room.

While the background music up till then has been brisk, the music slows down a bit and we hear the sound of birds chirping as the woman assumes a yoga pose in front of her TV while playing *Wii Fit Plus*. As the pace of the commercial speeds up, the woman is shown in a black business suit, and busy at work. She answers the phone with a firm, “approved,” before using a remote to click to the next slide of a presentation that she is making. After work, she goes grocery shopping, and is gracious enough to thank the cashier. She then arrives home, drops the grocery bags on a living room chair, and plops down on the couch next her to husband to watch their daughter play *Wii Fit Plus*. The female voiceover states, “Custom workouts and fun new games. Fit some fit in with Wii

Fit Plus.” The words “Fit some Fit in,” “Wii Fit Plus,” and “\$199” then appear, and the “E” for “Everyone” logo is in the bottom right hand corner.



Figure 4. Screen shots from the *Wii Fit Plus* “Working Mom” (2009) TV commercial.

The “New Mom” TV commercial is similar to the “Working Mom” commercial (Figure 5). The commercial depicts fast-paced movement throughout spaces in and outside of the home and features upbeat music. While in the “Working Mom” commercial the woman is woken up by an alarm, in this commercial she is woken by a

crying baby. Mom gets up, and dad goes back to sleep. The mom runs to the baby's room, where she turns on the lights, picks up the baby and gives it a kiss. We then hear a telephone ring once and the mom, carrying the baby, enters the kitchen to answer it. It is daylight, and also in the kitchen is her casually dressed husband and a plumber; they are sitting on the floor working on the sink. The new mom passes the baby to her husband, who kisses her before she leaves. She waves goodbye.

Next, new mom is alone in the living room space, wearing her workout attire. As in the "Working Mom" commercial, the music and the pace of the commercial slow down as the woman stands in front of the TV and is boxing (we see her throw a few punches) while playing *Wii Fit Plus*. As the invisible conveyor belt moves her to the next sequence, we see a group of elementary-school-age children enter the frame, as mom, now in casual attire, greets her husband in what seems to be a park. She kisses him, takes control of the stroller, and then to the dry cleaner—picking up a man's dress shirt and thanking the attendant. In the next scene, the stroller has transformed into a vacuum cleaner, which she runs around the living room. After such a busy day, the new mom sits down on the couch and watches her husband play *Wii Fit Plus*. This commercial ends with the same taglines that the "Working Mom" commercial did: with "Fit some Fit in," "Wii Fit Plus," and features its new low price, "\$199."



Figure 5. Screen shots from the Wii Fit Plus “New Mom” (2009) TV commercial.

The “Working Mom” and “New Mom” commercials for *Wii Fit Plus* make several points about the exergame player: the modern woman as a mother. These commercials depict women as exer-moms by showing a heteronormative nuclear family within which the wife and mother is responsible for most of the parenting and housework.

In the commercial about the working mom, the husband is physically present at home before and after working hours; in the morning he is shown drinking coffee and reading the newspaper, and he does not even acknowledge his young daughter, much less help her with her morning routine. The only interaction that the husband has with his family before work is when his wife says goodbye to him. The man takes no role in parenting; this is the woman's responsibility.

The distinction between the man's and the woman's responsibilities in the home reinforces the narrow definition of the "ideal woman." In the end of the commercial, dad's interaction with his daughter is limited to watching her play *Wii Fit Plus*. Once again, he interacts with his wife, but does nothing to acknowledge or assist with the additional housework she is required to do. This is significant, because the de-emphasis on the man in the "New Mom" commercial stands in contrast to the movement, interactions, and responsibilities of the woman. This reinforces the idealized woman as mother whose primary responsibility in the household is domestic caregiving. In addition, although we understand that both the man and woman have full-time careers outside the home (she gets home after he does), the pace of the woman's day is sped up (both inside and outside the home) in order to emphasize the multiple roles of women as mothers. The man's time in the home moves more slowly—he gets out of bed after the woman, enjoys a leisurely cup of coffee and the newspaper before work, and relaxes on the couch at the end of the day. The exer-mom emphasizes the role of woman as mother and housewife, but also a woman who works outside the home, and always on the run. This juggling act is not something to be praised or questioned; it is just the way things are.

In the “New Mom” ad, both parents participate in childcare. The father does not appear to be leaving home to work (we see him in casual attire<sup>12</sup>), and even takes the baby to the park in a stroller before handing baby off to mom. Even so, he is shown spending little time taking care of his child—he immediately hands the baby over to his wife, who is truly meant to take care of the child and see to the household errands. The final scene shows that at the end of mom’s busy workday she still is expected to vacuum the house. Her husband was already home before her, but apparently was content to leave the cleaning to his wife. This suggests that ideal motherhood not only means doing all of the housework, but also giving the father time to participate in childrearing. Although the material ideal is emphasized, there is an implied question about what makes a woman a good mother, and how women can become better ones.

Likewise, the “Working Mom” and “New Mom” commercials and the print advertisement for *Wii Fit Plus* emphasize the importance of time management, and that women’s place of peaceful solitude (something that all women crave) is confined to the domestic household space. In particular, these advertisements use “paleosymbolic scenes” that depict the intimate moments in a woman’s life (Goldman 1996, p. 251). This includes spending time with her family and having quality time to herself (Goldman 1996, p. 251). Consumers, then, are truly able to achieve joy, achievement, and satisfaction in these intimate, joyful moments in life because they purchased an exergame. In both commercials, Mom is busy, overworked, and constantly on the go. She juggles time with family, at home, at work, taking care of a child, and working out. Once mom leaves the

---

<sup>12</sup> It is difficult to conclude that he does not have a job outside the household specifically based on his attire. However, given the gender roles that are otherwise apparent in the advertisement, it is reasonable to conclude that this may be the case.

household, she never takes a break. This is where the product comes into play: because mom is so overburdened, working out, or fitting some *Fit* in, becomes an antidote to her constant busy days. The working mom and new mom's moments alone occur in the household space in which she is most valued and which is supposed to be the center of her life.

In the case of "Working Mom," being a working mom (and good mother) means being it all (and excelling at doing so). The working mom has a respected, managerial role in her company: she has a secretary who asks her to approve a message, and is given full attention (and thus valued) by her colleagues in the business meeting. She is equally responsible for excelling at being a wife and mother; however, she does not merit the same kind of attention (or praise) from her husband. Getting her daughter ready for school, ironing, and grocery shopping are essential, are inevitable, and take precedence over time just for her. Without the *Wii Fit Plus*, mom would not be able to fit solitude and fitness (where solitude means working out) into her life. She only allows herself alone time because of the *Wii Fit Plus*. Therefore, the exer-mom conceptualization emphasizes the given role of a woman as mother and housewife. This juggling act is not something to be praised or appreciated—it is imagined as just the way things are, who a woman is, and what a woman is expected to do. Overall, the product, *Wii Fit Plus*, because it so seamlessly integrates into the domestic sphere, is constructed as the best method for women to achieve a peaceful state of mind as well as to stay physically fit.

We see similar discourses in a full-page magazine advertisement for *Wii Fit Plus* (Figure 6). In this ad, we see a typical day in the life of a housewife, with time stamped scenes to give an impression of her busy day. The photographs in the ad are primarily

black and white, except for three photographs where mom is playing the *Wii Fit Plus*. In these three photos, the background is bright green and the woman is wearing a white workout jumpsuit while standing on the balance board in the foreground. Unlike the other frames, in which we see the other settings and activities in her life, while she is playing *Wii Fit Plus*, she is transported to a serene place outside of her daily life—a green place. In the black and white photos she looks grim; in the *Fit* photos she is smiling. Thus, playing this game brings color and joy into her life. She is able to fit in some *Fit* three times a day, between taking care of her two children, doing housework, and spending quality time with the family. Overall, through images and time stamps of daily life, the *Fit* fits comfortably into to a woman’s life and into her traditional role.





Figure 6. Print advertisement for *Wii Fit Plus*, found in various magazines in 2009.

While many of the features of the advertisements are anti-feminist, there are also feminist features that speak to why these games might appeal to women. For instance, these advertisements are framed as beneficial and enjoyable, because they allow women to navigate hectic schedules easily and to find enjoyment in daily life. And, although many of the narratives in these advertisements align with those of the 1950s, in which

many women were kept home while men dominated the workplace (Spigel 1992), women are empowered through the technology and inhabit working roles outside the home. We know that stay-at-home motherhood was not a trait of all women, even during the 1950s. As Krieder and Elliot (2010) explained, “such evidence suggest[s] that even during the apparent apex of stay-at-home motherhood, it was not as universal an experience as historical anecdotes suggest” (p. 3).

Indeed in the early 21st century, it is not the reality of many women’s lives. The commercials described above, the Wii console, and *Wii Fit Plus*, and YSFJMC were introduced during a time when divorced, single-parent, incarcerated, and blended families became the norm in the United States. Therefore, one reason why the construction of *who* the exergame player is—exer-mom—is problematic is because it does not fully encompass the important multitude of contemporary family structures, women’s professions, and societal roles. For example, in a 2013 *New York Times* article, “The Changing American Family,” Angier (2013) explained,

The typical American family, if it ever lived anywhere but on Norman Rockwell’s Thanksgiving canvas, has become as multilayered and full of surprises as a holiday turducken—the all-American seasonal portmanteau of deboned turkey, duck, and chicken.

In addition, many women have no desire to become mothers, and the age of marriage and motherhood has risen since the 1950s (Toossii, 2002, p. 18).

However, the exer-mom does not fully address the fact that most women of working age participate in the labor force outside the home. Indeed, a large percentage of women with children at home hold part-time or full-time jobs. According to Angier (2013),

the share of mothers employed full or part time has quadrupled since the 1950s and today accounts for nearly three-quarters of women with children at home.

The number of women who are the sole or primary breadwinner also has soared, to 40 percent today from 11 percent in 1960. (p. 1)

Likewise, by 2012, 57% of all women of working age<sup>13</sup> participated in the labor force. In the late 20th and early 21st century, America has seen a rise in the number of married and single mothers of various ethnic backgrounds holding jobs outside of the home (Kreider & Elliot, 2010; United States Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau, 2006-2012). In 2012, 57% of White women, 59% of Black women, 56% of Asian women, and 56.6% of Hispanic women worked outside the home (United States Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau 2012; see Figure 7). It should be noted that the gap between class and race has not dissolved; women who are less educated, younger, and from low-income households constitute a much larger percentage of stay-at-home mothers, and are more likely to have more than one child.

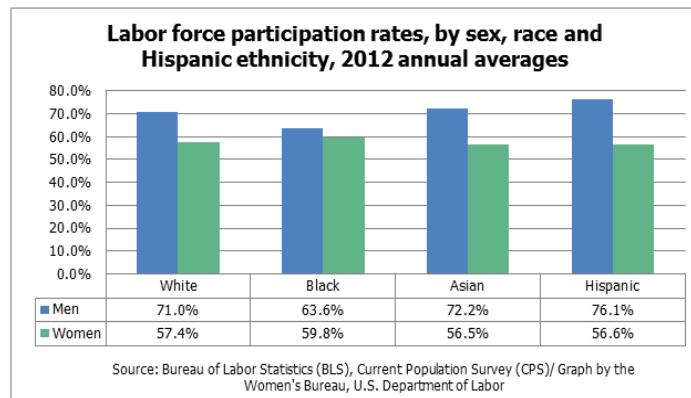


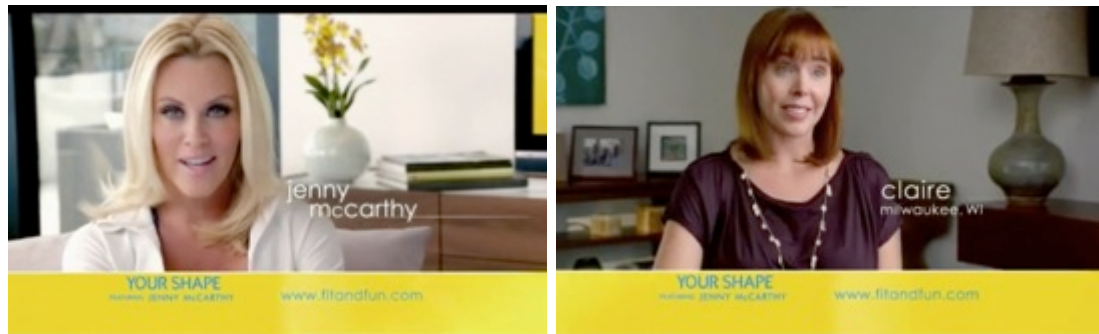
Figure 7. Labor force participation rates, by sex, race and Hispanic ethnicity, 2012 annual averages. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Current Population Survey (CPS)/Graph by the Women’s Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor.

<sup>13</sup> Working age is defined as at least 16 years old (United States Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau).

The *Wii Fit Plus* (2009) promotional materials therefore point to an idealized womanhood/motherhood that is White and middle or upper-middle class. This class privilege manifests itself through the pristine and spacious household and a private school education for the children. In addition, family time during the day is a marker of class privilege. For example, the daughter's private school uniform suggests a costly education. And, although commercials for some other, non-video game products in the 2000s also emphasize retrograde motherhood, advertisements for other genres of video games (non-exergames) do not. The time spent with family is only possible because of the socio-economic status of the families depicted, because if everyone in the household is working one to two jobs, there is no time to sit around and watch children play exergames on the Wii. In addition, exergame advertisements are problematically retrograde in their depictions of women as mothers, particularly in comparison to advertisements for other genres of video games. However, exergames are more than just retrograde—they simultaneously draw from traditional notions of womanhood, domesticity, and technology (whereby women use technologies for the purpose of labor) while also depicting more complex, if not contradictory, versions of womanhood and technology (whereby women work outside of the home and can simultaneously use technologies for fun and entertainment and as a form of work). The advertisements for other video game genres do not call upon these ideals and do not portray allegedly real people playing video games in the household space; rather, they emphasize the in-game world content. This is the case because, unlike women, the hegemonic masculine video game player does not need to be instructed on why video games should be purchased, or how and where to play them.

### *Your Shape Featuring Jenny McCarthy*

The second advertising campaign is the television commercial for YSFJMC (2009) (Figures 8 and 9). The promotional campaign behind YSFJMC exemplifies the trend of utilizing direct address and celebrity endorsements in constructing exer-moms. The commercial begins with the Ubisoft company logo, with Jenny McCarthy's voice saying "Rated E: For Everyone!" in the background. We then see McCarthy sitting casually in an Ikea-like living room, facing the camera. As the camera zooms in to her face, her name, "jenny mccarthy" appears in white letters next to her neckline. At the bottom of the screen is a yellow banner with blue writing that says "Your Shape Featuring Jenny McCarthy" and "www.fitandfun.com." This banner remains on the screen throughout the commercial.



*Figure 8.* Through direct address in the TV commercial, Jenny McCarthy and stay-at-home mother, Claire, explain why YSFJMC (2009) is perfect for mothers.

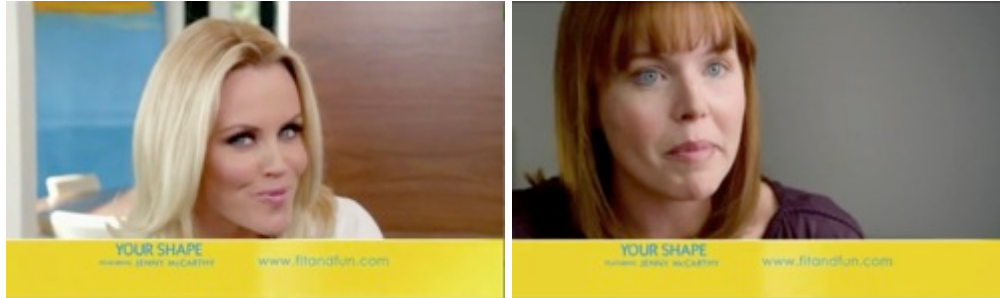


Figure 9. Close up shots from the YSFJMC (2009) commercial.

Next, McCarthy speaks to the viewers: “You know, I’m like a lot of people. I work, and I’m a mom,” and, leaning forward, she continues, “and my schedule gets crazy. So I know how hard it is to find the right fitness program” (Figure 8). The camera then cuts to a table that holds the game box for the Wii and PC versions of the video game, as McCarthy continues to explain the product. The table is in the foreground of the larger living room space, and we see the TV and exercise ball in the background with the *Your Shape* logo on the TV screen. We now see the backside of a white woman dressed in a red tight tank top and black yoga pants, performing the moves that the in-game avatar of McCarthy is demonstrating. The voiceover continues, “...which is why I wanted to be a part of *Your Shape*. It’s an interactive fitness product equipped with a camera to give you the most effective workout possible.” The camera cuts back to McCarthy, who, with a smile and shrug says, “And it works for everyone!”

The following scene features an interview with Claire, who plays *Your Shape*. This blue-eyed redhead is a middle-class stay-at-home mom from Milwaukee, Wisconsin (Figure 8). Her name appears next to her. Claire is sitting in her own living room, framed family photos in the background. She is filmed from the shoulders up, and the camera zooms in on her face as she expresses her praise for the game. She does not

Speak directly to the camera; her gaze is turned to the left to indicate that she is talking to whoever is interviewing her. With a smile, she says,

I found out I was going to be wearing a strapless dress for my sister's wedding, and I just thought, "ugh, my upper arms!" Because I'm a stay-at-home mom I needed a program I could fit in between errands, but would actually *work*.

We once again hear McCarthy's voice in the background, and see the woman in the red tank top demonstrating the product. This time, she points the Wii mote toward the TV in order to take the viewer step by step through game play, as McCarthy says matter-of-factly, "Here's how it works." The woman is doing jumping jacks and squats, and we can see her whole body on the TV screen—as there is the special white camera on top of the TV following her movements.

The camera then zooms in to the TV screen, and we see the cursor (controlled by the woman holding the Wii mote) move to the "Tone" option under the pink, purple, and blue, "Choose Your Goal" menu. Alongside the options is the woman's silhouette in blue. McCarthy explains, "The game gives you a fitness test, then assesses your goals and needs," and as we see the next game menu appear, the cursor selects which dates to schedule a workout over the course of a month, as she says, "...to create your personalized fitness program." The camera returns to McCarthy, who says directly to the camera, "*Your Shape* works because it's personalized. You got two months to tone your abs? It can do it! You wanna increase your flexibility? It can do that, too. Whatever your goal, it's possible" (Figure 9). The camera then returns to Claire: "It asked me what I wanted to work on, and I said, 'my arms.' And it asked me how long I had, and I said, 'three months.' And it created this amazing routine for me" (Figures 8 and 9). The commercial concludes with depictions of in-game world content, explanations of the

special camera, and the benefits of the personalized routine that the game offers, in order to justify why this game is intended for mothers.

The YSFJMC television commercial gives us insight into the construction of exer-moms through the use of endorsements by a celebrity and an ordinary woman. Female celebrities play a crucial role in our culture as standards to which other women should aspire (Douglas, 2010, Chapters 9 and 10; McDonnell, 2014, Chapter 1). Unlike the “Working Mom” and “New Mom” *Wii Fit Plus* (2009) commercials, YSFJMC (2009) draws upon norms found in parenting magazines, gossip magazines, and infomercials. This game was widely publicized and sold on the popular, women-centric TV channel and website, *Home Shopping Network*, which has infomercials for kitchen appliances, perfumes, fitness equipment, and clothing.<sup>14</sup> Another infomercial-like element is the yellow banner at the bottom of the screen, which allows viewers at any point they tune in to the commercial to see what the product is (*Your Shape*), who endorses it (Jenny McCarthy), and where more information can be found ([www.fitandfun.com](http://www.fitandfun.com)).

Jenny McCarthy is best known as a former *Playboy Playmate of the Year*, host of *The Jenny McCarthy Show*, co-host of *The View*, author of books on parenting a child with autism, and as Evan’s mother. She is regarded as sexy, funny, and a typical mother. She explains that she decided to be a part of *Your Shape* because she understands what other mothers are going through. McCarthy is depicted as a mother who is there to help

---

<sup>14</sup> Home Shopping Network (both TV and online) reaches 90 million homes yearly and has a demographic that is 80% women ages 25-54 years old. These women have an average annual income of at least \$60,000. More information about demographics can be found at <http://www.hsn.com/article/hsn-at-a-glance/3666>. Particular information on YSFJMC can be found at <http://www.hsn.com/products/your-shape-featuring-jenny-mccarthy-with-camera-wii/6598326>.



other mothers with their personal goals. In addition, McCarthy's endorsement upholds the ideal that women as mothers must assess how good a mom they are, and how well they balance the expectations of being a woman and mother.

These messages and images are in contrast with the historical shifts among experiences of and values surrounding women in our culture. For example, media scholars claim that mass media sources depict women who would otherwise work as *choosing* to be stay-at-home mothers, citing this as the ideal life for them and their families (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; O'Brien, 2011; Peskowitz, 2005). Peskowitz (2005), for instance, insists on a re-centering the focus to structural, social, and cultural constraints placed upon men and women who inhabit both paid labor in the workforce and the unpaid labor of parenthood (p. 1).

Likewise, Douglas and Michaels (2004) have coined the term *new momism* to argue that there is a critical problem in the fact that despite the historical strides of the feminist movement that have pushed beyond the 1950s ideal that (mis)represented women as having no choice but to be housewives, the mass media have portrayed women as choosing to return to the home after being in the workforce. This work analyzes media sources, and specifically news media and television shows, that depicted, were in conversation with, and were in contestation with ideals of motherhood and key moments in the feminist movement. For example, Douglas and Michaels discussed important televisual narratives and characters in shows such as *Roseanne* (1988-1997) and *thirtysomething* (1987-1981), as well as magazines like *Martha Stewart Living* (1990-present), in order to demonstrate the strides and setbacks in representations of and discourses surrounding women.

According to some media outlets, women (both working and stay-at-home) have now realized that being a caregiver in the home is the superior option (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Douglas and Michaels (2004) claimed,

The only truly enlightened choice to make as a woman, the one that proves, first, that you are a “real” woman, and second, that you are a decent, worthy one, is to become a “mom” and to bring to child rearing a combination of selflessness and professionalism that would involve the cross cloning of Mother Teresa with Donna Shalala. Thus the new momism is deeply contradictory: It both draws from and repudiates feminism. (p. 5)

In other words, despite this not being the lived reality of women’s lives, some media outlets argued that the only proper way to be a woman was be a child-rearing caregiver, and by being seen as a perfect housewife.

O’Brien (2011) extended the new momism’s ideological messages and images in her account of celebrity motherhood in magazines—in what she termed the “*new post-second wave crisis in femininity*” (p. 112). She attributed this emergence to the prevalence of post second wave beneficiaries of feminism (and mothers) who find “their lives split between newfound gains as unencumbered women (without children) and old gender-based oppressive family-life roles and formations when they become mothers” (O’Brien, 2011, p. 112). This work situates contemporary motherhood as a way that the mass media manages the “post-second wave crisis in femininity” by reinforcing traditional divisions of men and women’s public and private labor roles (O’Brien, 2011).

However, within the realm of video games, regressive discourses of girls and women as heterosexual, desiring marriage, and maternal, persist. Feminist game scholarship has problematized the repressive pink games movement of the 1990s, whereby video games (featuring traditionally girly colors and ideals) were created for and marketed to young girls (Cassell, 1998; Kafai, 2008). There were many games based

upon the Barbie doll (*Barbie*, 1991) (Figure 10) and hobbies and/or careers girls were imagined to want (like being a ballerina). Girls' interests and thoughts were constructed not only in the game, but also in the users' manual. For example, in the introduction to the users' manual for *Barbie* (1991), there is a blurb about Barbie's thoughts: she is looking forward to tomorrow when she will go out to lunch, go to the beach, and then have a date with Ken (Figure 10). In fact, date planning is the most important activity she has done in her day, as she debates whether or not to read her book after all this planning: "Maybe I'll read a few pages from my book about mermaids first...yawn...maybe not...ZZZZZ" (Figure 10).

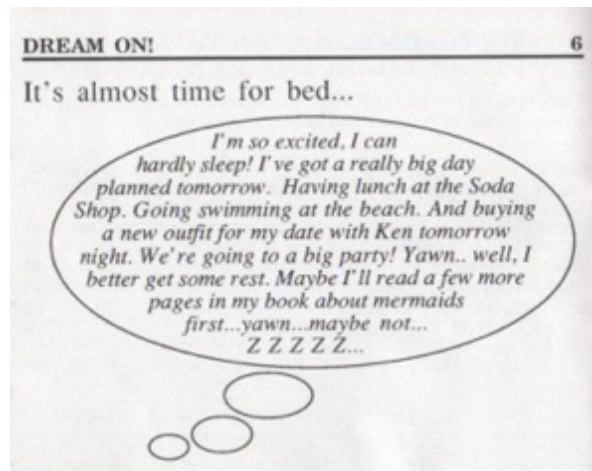


Figure 10. Barbie's thought bubble found in the introduction in the Barbie (1991) user's manual.

Since 2000, pink games have been on the rise, frequently invoking traditional, stereotypical interests and career paths for girls who, as they become women, will become mothers. For example, *My Baby Girl* (2008) for the Nintendo DS allows girls to get to play mother, having "your real baby to love and care for!" (Figure 11). Likewise, in Ubisoft's *Imagine* games line (2007-2013) girls can pretend to be grade-school

teachers (*Imagine Teacher*, 2008), babysitters (*Imagine Babysitters*, 2008), mothers of many children (*Imagine Babies*, 2007), or ballerinas (*Imagine Ballet Star*, 2008) (Figure 12).



Figure 11. *My Baby Girl* (2008) for Nintendo DS. The subtitle reads, “Your Real Baby to Love and Care for!”<sup>15</sup>



Figure 12. What girls should want to grow up to be, according to various *Imagine* games by Ubisoft for the Nintendo DS.

Some games for girls do include more expansive notions of what girls will want to be; however, they still reinforce traditional roles. For example, some *Imagine* games

<sup>15</sup> Image retrieved from <http://www.amazon.com/My-Baby-Girl-Nintendo-DS/dp/B001DZDUCQ>.

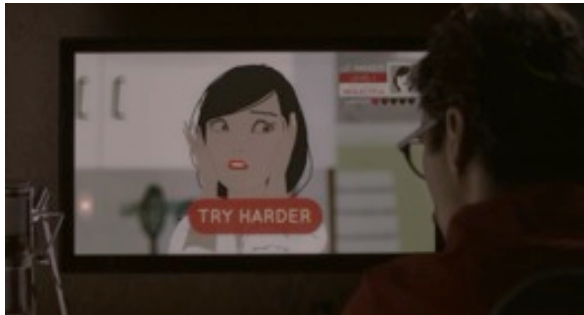
allow girls to pretend being a doctor (*Imagine Family Doctor*, 2009) or a business owner (*Imagine Boutique Owner*, 2009) (Figure 13). In *Imagine Family Doctor* (2009), however, she is a family doctor—not a specialist, like a brain surgeon or emergency room doctor. Likewise, in *Imagine Boutique Owner* (2009), girls pretend to own a boutique—a traditional woman-centric type of business (Figure 13). These jobs are considered acceptable and permissible because they revolve around traditional ideas of women’s work, interests, and values.



*Figure 13.* Girls/women seemingly empowered to undertake what used to be traditional career realms for men (doctors and business owners) (*Imagine Family Doctor*, 2009; *Imagine Boutique Owner*, 2009).

We have seen similar narratives in contemporary films. For example, in a future United States where people can fall in love with operating systems, it has been imagined that women’s primary concern will still be being the perfect mom. However, film portrays idealized womanhood through the video game in order to comment on how ridiculous this ideal is. In the 2014 Spike Jonze film, *Her*, Amy (Amy Adams) is a video game developer and aspiring documentary filmmaker. In one scene, she brings her neighbor, Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix), to her job and allows him to play the title she is

working on: *Perfect Mom* (Figure 14).<sup>16</sup> In this game, the player (mom) must juggle her career and duties as domestic caregiver. She loses points when she feeds her children sugary cereal, but can gain points by making the other moms jealous by bringing cupcakes, becoming the class mom, and joining the Parent Teacher Association. After he plays, Amy sarcastically tells Theodore, “don’t let [being a perfect mom] get to your head,” and we see the words, “BE PERFECT” painted on the wall in the background. In this case, the perfect mom is a commentary on the fact that despite the archaic and longstanding nature of this ideal, it still is part of the cultural imagination of the distant future.



---

<sup>16</sup> *Perfect Mom* is a video game created solely for the film, *Her*. It is a film that was created to look like a video game that Theodore gets a chance to play.



*Figure 14.* Screen shots of Theodore (Joaquin Phoenix) playing the *Perfect Mom* video game in the 2014 film, *Her*.

### **Analysis of Exergames as Texts**

Another significant space that reflects the cultural narrative about women, labor, domesticity, and technology, is among exergames as texts, accomplished through in-game avatars, menus, and story lines via the utilization of particular color schemes, textual messages, and depictions of women's bodies. Color schemes have images that help the viewer to connect and decipher media messages, and allow the viewer to arrive at one visual understanding (Arnheim, 1969; Barry, 1997; Hall, 2007). It is also important to consider visual elements, such as color schemes, in tandem with textual messages. According to Amare and Manning (2007), it is necessary to assess both the text and the visual images in order to understand the import and impact of media messages. Visual cues, or signs/symbols, are frequently called upon as shortcuts to social, cultural, and gendered values and norms (Price, 2011), and these cues are utilized here to

construct women as mothers. Finally, a Foucaultian lens aptly explains the idealized body and body surveillance, as is starkly apparent in the games as texts. Specifically, Foucault argued that bodies are “an objective and target of power” and are subjected to constant, institutional regulation (p. 136). Likewise, games as texts reveal the value that “women are to be looked at” rather than to do the looking (Berger, 1992). The in game world contents of *Wii Fit Plus* and YSFJMC demonstrate Foucault’s ideas regarding bodies and power. As will be elucidated, exergames prescribe body values for women that align with the broader ideologies surrounding women’s body surveillance.

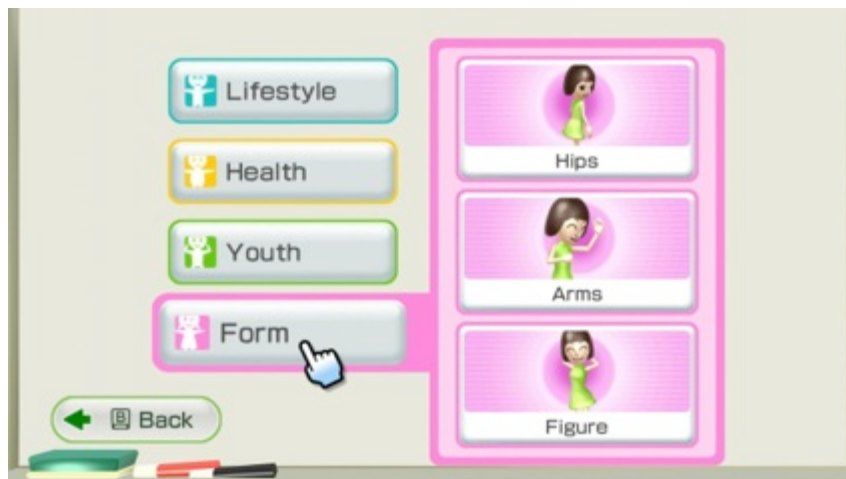
### **Analysis of Games as Texts**

#### ***Wii Fit Plus***

Color has the powerful ability to construct emotion and relay gendered ideals (West, 2005). As Barry (1997) argued, colors have meanings; blue is calming and bright colors are associated with happiness (p. 8). In their study of the Nintendo Wii Platform, Jones and Thiruvathuskal (2012) suggested that the monotone white color scheme of the Nintendo Wii was selected to convey simplicity, innovation, and accessibility (Chapter 2). The in-game world of *Wii Fit Plus* similarly conveys these attributes—particularly its simplicity and ease of access. When the users turn on the game, they have to perform some simple steps to set up an in-game avatar, or “Mii,” and to configure the balance board. The user is guided to stand on the balance board so the game can take his or her weight and calculate his or her body mass index. The game is unforgiving, and, if the user is found to be underweight or overweight, the size of the Mii’s body is modified accordingly. For instance, the Mii for a user with a high body mass index will expand like a balloon.



The game has four categories of exercises: yoga, strength training, aerobics, and balance games. The user can design a fitness routine by selecting one of the four options: lifestyle, health, youth, and form. On the form menu, for instance, the user selects the area on which he or she would like to work. In this case, the options are hips, arms, and figure—the areas typical considered problem areas for women (Figure 15). From here, the user can select the amount of time he or she has to exercise at that moment, with the game emphasizing that even one 15-minute exercise will burn some calories. These segments of game play tell the player how many calories he or she has burned, as well as how that translated into the number of calories of food. In other words, a player can work off a chicken sandwich by working out for a certain number of minutes or hours.



*Figure 15. Wii Fit Plus (2009) menu depicting the preset routines that are grouped into different categories.*

If the user does not play the game for a long period of time, the next time he or she turns it on, there will be a scolding accompanied by an explanation of why it is important to stay in shape. After I was away for a month, the game greeted me with, “Hi Julia, it’s been 30 days since your last visit. In order to maintain optimal physical health

you should exercise every day.” Although other sources have shown the association of this game with motherhood and mothers themselves talk about this game during pregnancy and post-child birth, the game itself cannot operate correctly if someone plays while pregnant. There is no setting in the game to account for pregnancy, so it assumes that any weight is related to diet or lack of exercise. A menu pops up that demands a reason for weight gain: “eating too much,” “night snacking,” “not exercising,” “indigestion,” “snacking,” “late dinners,” “eating too fast,” or “I don’t know” (Figure 16). The “I don’t know” option asks the user again whether or not this is true. Again, pregnancy cannot be chosen as a reason. The justification of workout routines in the in-game world of *Wii Fit Plus* (2009) in small-time segments demonstrates the conceptualization of women as moms, because the underlying message is that this game is valuable for its convenience and efficiency in the management of their time as domestic caregivers.



Figure 16. Options to justify weight gain in *Wii Fit Plus* (2009).

## *Your Shape Featuring Jenny McCarthy*

YSFJMC (2009) relies upon pastel color schemes in conceptualizing exer-moms (Figure 17). The game's colors are pastel pink and purple—traditionally associated with women (Kafai, 2008). When the user turns on the game for the first time, the game shows a purple outline of a woman's body, and tells the user to stand still so the camera can do a full body scan. Pink ribbons circle the on-screen body while it is calibrating. The game then has the user move the reflected silhouette into various positions on the TV screen, keeping the body within the silhouette.

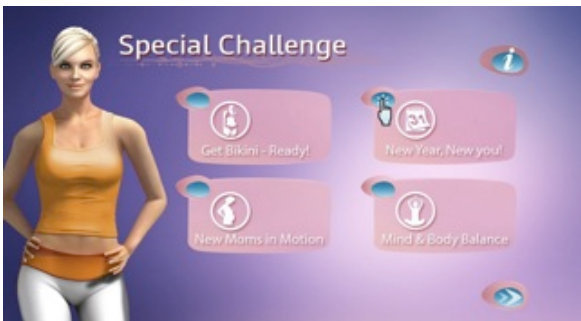




Figure 17. Four images of various screens in the in-game world of YSFJMC (2009).

The game offers fitness goal options (burn, strengthen, and tone), as well as special challenges (Figure 17). The special challenge menu has the following options: Get Bikini Ready!, New Year New You!, New Moms in Motion, and Mind & Body Balance. The Get Bikini Ready! menu features a drawing of a thin woman in a bikini. New Moms in Motion portrays a pregnant woman. When the New Moms in Motion option is selected, McCarthy encourages the players by telling them that they can and deserve to get *back* in shape: intended for women who have recently had a baby.

Like the promotional materials, in addition to color schemes, celebrity endorsement plays a central role in the construction and reinforcement of the ideal woman exer-mom in the in-game world context of YSFJMC (2009). McCarthy is the fitness trainer, coach, and cheerleader. More than any other analyzed exergame, YSFJMC is a reflection of Foucaultian notions of body surveillance. As Foucault (1975)

has argued, “A body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” in order to maintain “order and discipline” (p. 136). What is contradictory (and perhaps telling) is that although the *Wii Fit Plus* has menu options that target women, such as working on alleged problem areas of the body, the game is unable to process women who are pregnant, because it assumes that any weight gain cannot be due to pregnancy. Thus, no matter what stage a woman is in her life, she must always police her body.

### **Analysis of Game Boxes**

#### ***Wii Fit Plus***

Textual and visual cues on exergame boxes also uphold the exer-mom construction. The *Wii Fit Plus* (2009) exterior box features two women in their twenties and thirties, one elementary-school-age girl, a man in his thirties, and an elderly man. Although there are both women and men on the exterior box, the green portion of the box on the left side, where the box details the activities in this new version of the game (“New Activities! Custom Routines!”), features a thin, White woman extending her right arm forward while holding the Wii mote. The same image is featured in the center of the box for the game CD. Although she is not pointing at the person holding the box, the presence of the Wii mote suggests that the game is intended for women.

Unlike the promotional materials, the outer game box for *Wii Fit U* does not feature any dialogue about motherhood and housework. Significantly, however, the four images of a woman, man, elderly man, and young girl in the larger, white portion of the box suggest an idealized, White, middle-class, nuclear family. We can imagine that this is mom, dad, daughter, and grandpa all taking turns playing the Wii. The separate box for the balance board (something players would need to purchase if they had not done so

with the *Wii Fit*) depicts the same slender blonde who is shown on the green portion of the exterior box (Figure 18). Here we see her standing on the balance board in front of a TV console and TV, with no walls confining her.



Figure 18. Game boxes for *Wii Fit Plus* (2009).

## *Your Shape Featuring Jenny McCarthy*

The textual and visual elements on the back of the exterior and interior game boxes of YSFJMC lend to the exer-mom image (Figure 19). The game box consists of an exterior box that explains the game and camera, and the interior game box that contains the video game. The camera is included inside the larger box. The back of the exterior game box is more detailed. A telling example of women as mothers can be found along the top of the back of the exterior box where there is a banner featuring a close up of McCarthy holding red hand weights, next to white writing over a blue background that gives her personal endorsement:

JENNY McCARTHY

Like any other working mom, I know all too well how challenging it can be to balance fitness with a busy schedule! That's why I'm behind you 100% with Your Shape—entertaining you, keeping you motivated, and coaching you to success! Jenny

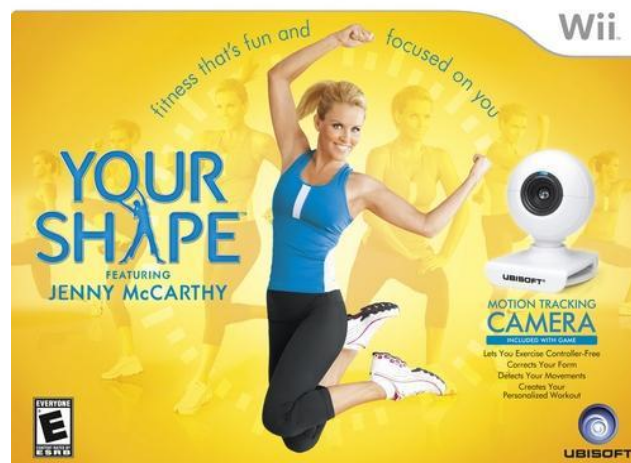






Figure 19. Front and back of game box for YSFJMC (2009).

McCarthy’s endorsement reveals that exergame players are presumably mothers. The fronts of the exterior and interior game boxes are identical: both feature seven images of Jenny McCarthy in fitness poses. The cover is blue, white, and yellow, with a hint of pink in McCarthy’s tennis shoes. In the center we see the largest image of McCarthy, wearing a fitted blue and white tank top, black spandex capris, and smiling brightly while jumping like a cheerleader. Her gaze is direct, and the pose shows off her biceps. The remaining six images of McCarthy are in the background in yellow tones—as if to show the sequence of workout movements. To the left of McCarthy is the title of the game: YOUR SHAPE FEATURING JENNY McCARTHY. The letter, “A” in SHAPE is a drawing of a woman in fitness clothes, leaning to the left and holding up the “O” in YOUR. The ponytail and body shape are similar to McCarthy’s, which indicates that this person is a woman. Above the center image of McCarthy is the tag line, “fitness that’s fun and focused on you.”



The elements on the front of the exterior and interior box make several points about women as mothers. The game is for “your shape,” referring to a woman’s body, and is fitness that is “focused on you.” In the bottom right corner is a description of the benefits of the game: one being that it “creates your personalized workout.” Thus, the game is intended for women, but more, for *you* as a woman. In addition, McCarthy’s gaze and the term “focused on you” personalize women as mothers. Third, the direct address and textual cues, such as the domestic household space and depictions of women, suggest that they are White and affluent.

Because celebrities play a central role in our culture, McCarthy’s position as a putative good mother who supports other mothers with special-needs children, despite having been a Playboy Playmate, reinforces her status as someone to emulate. McCarthy has published books and given speeches about parenting a child with autism. McCarthy has a dual role—being sexually desirable, while being the stereotypical perfect mother.

The thin, White woman holding an exercise pose in her living room reinforces idealized womanhood as motherhood, as it relates to race and class. The pristine white living room space is so vast that it does not even seem to have walls. She stands in front of a large, flat-screen television that sits on top of a white entertainment center. The entertainment center is clean and neat, and has four books on the bottom shelf. Like McCarthy, the woman who is working out has a thin body, a smile on her face, and perfect hair and makeup.

#### **Analysis of Articles and Reviews about the Games or Promotion of the Games**

Articles and reviews in the popular and gaming press exalt the exer-mom by emphasizing a game’s target audience, purpose, and benefits. Women are frequently

acknowledged as the target audience in gaming press; however, they are always talked about in relation to or as mothers. Rob Lowe, senior product manager for *Wii Fit*, for example, admitted in an interview that

confidence in *Wii Fit* follows the highly significant launch of the title in Japan, where the sales broke records. “It’s been one of the fastest selling pieces of *Wii* software released, and the reaction has been absolutely fantastic—especially from housewives, who are one of our key targets.” (Long & Harker, 2008, p. 1)

Indeed, the target demographic of housewives reveals the assumptions about women as mothers, and the intended exergame player.

The gaming press makes several gendered assumptions about women as mothers, consumers, and video game players. One article in *Nintendo World Report* claimed, “NOA (Nintendo of America) will be trying very hard to reach women and, in particular, moms” (Miller, 2008). The writer then describes the NOA marketing strategies:

The reason for the delayed ad campaign is that NOA doesn’t believe that your mother is going to mark “*Wii Fit*” on the calendar weeks before the release. Rather, mom hears about the game on the radio or through a magazine, becomes interested, and buys it. She might also be bugged to do so by her kids and that Diane Sawyer already tried the game and said that it really does make you work. (Miller, 2008)

Thus, exer-moms presumably lack the same desire for or interest in purchasing and playing video games, and so it is necessary to market to women through women-centric media outlets. This presupposes that women are not already a large proportion of the video game playing population. We know this is not the case. Second, it suggests that women do not have the same drive to purchase and play video games that men (and boys) do. They are not likely to mark the release date on their calendar; rather, they need to be convinced by friends, family, and/or the mass media that the game is worthwhile.

The gaming press reinforces this assumption by emphasizing the new option in *Wii Fit Plus* that allows the mother to weigh a pet or baby while standing on the balance board. Nintendo explained,

Wii Fit Plus, an upgrade to Wii Fit, has everything that Wii Fit offered plus more! New features include the option to customize and design your own workout, additional exercises, estimates of calories burned, 15 new balance games, and an option to weigh your baby and even your cat and dog! (Figure 20)

*Wii Fit Plus* is designed for exer-moms by associating the video game with mothers of small children.



*Figure 20.* Demonstrating the new feature of *Wii Fit Plus*, whereby you can weigh a baby while standing on the balance board.

Similarly, exergames are applauded in the popular press for reaching the target demographic of mothers. In an article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, “For moms, Wii might have the perfect Fit,” Kim (2008) stated,

The increase in new female gamers on the Wii has been noticeable, said Ricardo Torres, editor in chief of gaming website GameSpot, but *Wii Fit* can take it a step further. He said it could be what causes mothers to spring for the Wii themselves and not just for their kids. (p. 1)

The article praises *Wii Fit* as a way to reach the elusive female (mother) demographic:

the game, which goes on sale today, has the potential to attract what some marketers have called the chief household officer, a large but mostly unreached population of potential gamers. “This is a game that’s going to skew female,” said Geoff Keighley, host of *GameTrailers TV* on Spike TV. “It’s like a new age ‘Richard Simmons Sweatin’ to the Oldies’.” (Kim, 2008, p. 1)

This assumed that women were not playing video games to begin with. It also demonstrated the ideal that the only way to reach the chief household officer demographic is to offer her exercise video games reminiscent of the 1980s (Kim, 2008, p. 1). The association with 1980s home fitness videos and the word “Fit” implies that “fit” is “for me.” This reveals the ideals surrounding domestic technologies and that fitness needs to take place within the context of the home, as exergames are allegedly meant for women as mothers.

The exer-mom notion of idealized womanhood is also upheld by associating the game with the success stories of allegedly real women. In an editorial in *Southern Living*,<sup>17</sup> “Wii Fitness Team: These Three Women Made Technology Work for Them, and They Lost a Total of 175 Pounds in the Process,” readers are given tips on how the elusive, “unlikely secret weapon: video games” can help mothers lose weight (Street, 2010). The title of the article suggests that the *Wii Fit* is an excellent solution to fitness for women, because technology is too complicated for women to use. Although this article is written about women, we learn in the first sentence of the article that the featured woman, Julie Maloney, was desperate to shed baby weight, and found her solution in the *Wii Fit*:

---

<sup>17</sup> The print edition of *Southern Living* magazine has a 78% female readership, and the comparable online figure is 82%. The average age of the reader is 50 years old, with an average salary of \$66,550 (and \$69,596). More information can be found at [http://www.southernliving.com/static/pdf/2014\\_audience.pdf](http://www.southernliving.com/static/pdf/2014_audience.pdf).

After giving birth to two children and gaining more than 100 pounds, South Carolina mom Julie Maloney couldn't seem to lose weight. Then she discovered an unlikely secret weapon: video games. Over the course of two years, by playing games on her Nintendo Wii and eating smaller portions, Julie dropped the pounds. (Street, 2010, p. 1)

The accompanying photograph shows Wii mommies playing *Wii Fit* (Figure 21).

The three Wii mommies are wearing workout attire, standing side by side with big smiles. Beneath the photo are the women's names and the amounts of weight they lost from playing the *Wii Fit*. Julie Maloney, who lost 100 pounds, stands on the Wii Fit balance board between White forty-something Sarah Downing, who lost 25 pounds, and Black thirty-something Renee Ross, who lost 50 pounds. This image depicts a rare non-white woman playing exergames; however, the women's middle-class background is reinforced. The three women stand in a living room with the entertainment center in the background, the TV in the center, and bookcases full of books.



*Figure 21. "Wii Fitness Team." Southern Living magazine online edition (November 2010).*

There are similar discourses in the articles and reviews for YSFJMC (2009). For instance, an article in *Advertising Age* discusses the rationale behind Ubisoft's

partnership with the television channel, Oxygen. The author explains that this game and the television station have the same target market—women—so this partnership is a perfect match:

So the chance to reach out to younger women in first-time settings presented a few unique opportunities, including booking Ms. McCarthy on *The Tonight Show With Conan O'Brien*.... Those kinds of gamers are not used to being marketed to, so we could find unexpected places to reach them. (Hampp, 2009, p. 1)

Similar to promotional materials, games as texts, and game boxes, articles and reviews in the popular and gaming press for *Wii Fit Plus* (2009) and YSFJMC (2009) use textual associations and images of women as mothers in framing women as exer-moms through exergames.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that in the contemporary exergames ecology both working and stay-at-home women are idealized and conceptualized as mothers, and that this functions as part of the broader contemporary cultural narrative surrounding women, domesticity, and technology. Exergames and paratextual evidence reinforce and conceal traditional notions of women insofar as they make women's roles appear natural and appropriate. This is a problematic conceptualization of exer-moms, whereby the biological (sex) and sociological role (mother) of women defines what it means to be a woman.

It is important to understand, however, that advertisers may have many possible motives—some of which this study is unable to address. For instance, this study argues that women, and specifically women as working and stay-at-home mothers, are the target audience of advertisers, but there could be many other possible motives. In fact, it is possible that advertisers were actually targeting children as the game playing

demographic, and marketing to women as mothers in order to promote the sale of these games. This could explain, for instance, the emphasis on motherhood and speaking to the camera in multiple advertisements. In addition, it is noteworthy that there are both feminist and anti-feminist features among the analyzed materials. Beyond narrowly defining women's roles, these discourses also are framed as enjoyable and empowering—linking game play to pleasure. During this period, we have also seen other, alternative views of womanhood in the media. For instance, the female computer geek character has emerged, on popular TV shows such as *NCIS* and *Bones*, and it is now a staple of TV sitcoms.

The exer-mom narratives discussed throughout this chapter do not merely reflect what it means to be women; they play a paramount role in the formation of conceptions of womanhood and motherhood. More broadly, this narrative tells us about the values that exergames in our culture place upon women, and on the women who play video games.

Coupled with the broader conversations about femininity, feminism, and technology, the exer-mom is a cultural narrative that is part of a longer history of defining women as technological users in a highly hegemonic and masculine environment. Thus, this narrative demonstrates the historical, complex, and contradictory ways that women are invited to participate as technological users as well as the longstanding, gendered partitioning of domestic space. We have seen strides in the mass media, including among other genres of video game advertisements, and the traditional notions of femininity and womanhood have become all but irrelevant (Gauntlett, 2002). While the case of exergames reveals the construction of *who* the exergame player is conceptualized to be, it

is also significant in distinguishing gendered games and game play, and defining the parameters of *how* women should play exergames, as is discussed in Chapter 5.



## Chapter 5: Women's Game Play and the Hardcore/Exergame Dichotomy

"Hardcore" equals  
masculine. "Casual"  
equals feminine.

**IT'S JUST THAT  
SIMPLE.**

*Figure 22.* "Hardcore Maleness" article by Rowan Kaiser (2010) explaining the hardcore/casual dichotomy in allegedly simple terms. Retrieved from [www.escapistmagazine.com](http://www.escapistmagazine.com).

"Hardcore" means dick. Or rod. Or Johnson. Or, for the critical analysis fans out there, the phallus. "Hardcore" equals masculine. "Casual" equals feminine. It's just that simple, and all the marketing-speak about "core" gamers won't change that. (Kaiser, 2010)

Video games as texts, an industry, and a culture, are a boys' club, dominated by white hegemonic masculinity (Everett, 2009; Gray, 2012). Although a broad spectrum of women plays video games today, video games are associated with men and masculinity (Kafai et al., 2008; Salter & Bloggett, 2012). This boys' club is fraught with misogyny and, when women dare to invade this club by participating as game players, this is deemed unacceptable and results in threats of rape and murder. When male gamers acknowledge women as game players in online spaces, for example, the women might be told to "make me a sandwich" or to "go back to the kitchen." As Gray (2012) noted, "Video game culture has privileged the default gamer, the white male, leading to the maintenance of whiteness and masculinity in this virtual setting" (p. 262). Salter and Blodgett (2012) have argued that "Women within the hardcore gaming public are given

tightly bound roles to play and punished for stepping outside of them” (p. 411). These exclusionary, gendered messages exist in a variety of spaces within gaming culture, in video games and in-person and online video game play (Fox & Tang 2012). Gaming culture is an arena in which women are not welcome.

The boys’ club is evident in what others have explained as the “hardcore/casual dichotomy,” due to the popularity of casual video games (e.g., Chess, 2010; Kubik, 2012; Vanderhoef, 2013). As the feminist game scholar Erica Kubik (2012) explained, the terms, *casual* and *hardcore* privilege the hardcore (male) game player at the expense of the casual (female) game player. The boys’ club mentality, discrimination against women, and men/women binary in gaming culture is not new, but as Consalvo (2012) has claimed, it has been on the rise since the first decade of the 21st century. “Of course harassment of female players has been occurring for quite some time—perhaps the entire history of gaming—but it seems to have become more virulent and concentrated in the past couple of years” (Consalvo, 2012, p. 2). Therefore, these messages can be understood as a response to “the growing presence of women and girls in gaming not as a novelty but as a regular and increasingly important demographic” and that “the ‘encroachment’ of women and girls into what was previously a male-gendered space has not happened without incident, and will probably only become worse before it (hopefully) improves” (Consalvo, 2012, p. 3). Although women have always been video game players, their increasing visibility has been fought by the masculine hardcore gaming culture in order to cement hegemonic male dominance (Vanderhoef, 2012). Like the gendered opposition between public/private and work/play in domestic space, casual gaming is irrevocably connected with and in opposition to hardcore gaming.

Gaming culture is distinct from other media cultures insofar as it is most extreme in its exclusion. As Sweedyk and de Laet (2005) stated:

It is this culture that sets games apart from other types of technology and other types of media. Gaming culture is unquestionably a male domain. It is “male,” as in the opposite of “female.” We mean this in the sense that the culture dichotomizes gender to the extreme. (p. 26)

Consalvo (2012) attributed these problems to what she calls “toxic gamer culture,” or the “the ugliness of gamer culture”: the ways in which sexism and misogyny poison gaming culture and the gaming industry (p. 1).

This exclusion is even more apparent in exergames. When women in video game culture are invited to participate, it is solely in the guise of idealized womanhood. Therefore, within the contemporary exergames ecology, women’s exclusion is accomplished through their conditional inclusion. Exergames are framed as inclusive because they are presented as for women, but they are actually exclusive in how women are framed as subjects. This chapter argues that the dichotomous construction of how women are supposed to spend their time playing video games is a symptom of the longstanding, traditional ideals surrounding technology and gendered divisions of labor in public and private space.

I begin with an overview of how casual games are framed for women, as dichotomous to hardcore games that are framed for men, in order to situate the lineage of women’s exclusion from gaming culture. As video game culture today is misogynistic, it is crucial also to discuss some examples of the overt misogyny in gaming culture. This is necessary in order to understand that the conditional inclusion present in exergames is a covert display of misogyny. This includes the advertising campaign in 2011 for the hardcore game, *Dead Space 2*, which revolved around the reactions of alleged real moms

to graphic, in-game world footage, and a TV episode in 2013 of *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon*, that aired “Gaming With My Mom” videos that mocked the way that women play games. I make the case that an overlooked area that reinforces this gamer boys’ club is, *mother through the son* gendering, whereby men (as sons) mock women (as mothers) by portraying them as inept at video games. In addition, although misogyny is reinforced in exclusionary gaming culture, including the culture of exergames, it is necessary to acknowledge the public backlash against misogyny in gaming culture, through the examples of the hate speech related to Jade Raymond’s (Ubisoft) presence at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3) and Anita Sarkeesian’s (Feminist Frequency) Kickstarter campaign for her feminist popular culture critique videos.

Next, I turn to contemporary exergame ecology, because this space simultaneously proliferates women’s exclusion from gaming culture by narrowly defining womanhood and challenges the gendered work/play divide in gaming culture. Citing the examples of *Wii Fit U* (2013) and GFWMB (2010), I assert that the industry markets these exergames to women as game players while perpetuating the hegemonic masculinity that dominates the community and industry. I refer to the men/women opposition among exergames as the hardcore/exergame dichotomy—the male, allegedly real, player of hardcore games versus the female, allegedly less than, player of exergames. The White, *real* male player versus the White, middle-class mother (exer-mom) adds to the misogynistic, exclusionary, boys’ club of gaming culture through a rhetoric of conditional inclusion. These messages define women through the framing of labor (the work of being fit and of ensuring that the family is spending quality time together)—the opposite of affordances, or what people perceive they can and cannot do,

of play for men. Overall, considering these messages allows us to contextualize exergames not only within video game culture, but also in the larger historical trajectory of the gendered partitioning of labor and leisure.

### **Defining Play and Play Versus Work**

In order to situate these discourses, it is important to understand the meaning of the term play. There are many ways that people have thought about and defined play, such as in Sutton-Smith's (1997) anthology, *The Ambiguity of Play*. Burke (1971) explained this as the "common-sense dichotomy" to work, whereby play happens outside of work time and space. Burke argued that the "dictionary gives only one antonym for 'play' ('work'), and only two for 'work' ('play' and 'rest')" (p. 34). While this offers some hope for reducing the range of meanings of each to one or two basic ones, it also suggests that "an activity combining both work and play is somehow a contradiction in terms" (p. 34). Indeed, scholars often discuss play and work in tandem, in order to provide a contrast for one or the other (Cooney et al., 2000).

The most useful definition of play for understanding exergames, though, comes from the philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975), in *Truth and Method*. To Gadamer, play always occurs outside of work, because the two are completely separate (p. 102). In other words, to partake in one of these activities (play) is to not partake in the other (work). Gadamer argued that when elements of play are blended into work, work has been forgotten. In exergames, then, play motivates women's work (fitness) by using fun to motivate work behavior, while the context of work is ideally forgotten.

Indeed, fitness is a form of work, for women are culturally obliged to remain physically fit and attractive. To distinguish hardcore games from exergames, discourses

related to exergames are positioned in opposition to the notion that game play should only be for fun and entertainment—a rite that is reserved for men. Men can even enjoy play both inside and outside the home. As DiBrezza, Glave, and Fort (2009) observed, “When men exercise, they play! You see men participating in picking basketball games at noon, pickup football games on the weekends, and on recreational teams at any time” (DiBrezza, Glave, & Fort, p. 12). However, the work of fitness for women is fraught with gendered ideals surrounding public/private spaces that dichotomize work and play. In fact, to women, exercise is always seen as a form of work. DiBrezza, Glave, and Fort (2009) claimed that

women often view exercise as work—one more thing they have to check off on their “to do” list. Most women know they should exercise, and when they do not, they become more stressed and view it as having one more responsibility, one more chore to do. (p. 12)

These gendered discourses around exergames and fitness use play to get women to work.

In the mass media at large, men versus women, gendered discourses were common in women’s magazines and advertisements. For instance, advertisements in the 1950s told women why they should purchase a TV and that a TV would simplify their domestic responsibilities, while giving men a form of leisure. Spigel (1992) asserted that the public versus private, work versus leisure dichotomy was drawn upon and disseminated in advertisements in women’s magazines to rationalize the purchase of television sets, and to instruct women in the ways to use it. The men/women, public/private, work/leisure discourses drew a picture of women’s lives that cannot be equated with pleasure. She commented that “the gendered division of domestic labor and the complex relations of power entailed by it were thus shown to organize the experience of watching television” (Spigel, 1992, p. 98). These discourses are significant because

they reflect the social construction of TV in the 1950s and its gendered purposes within the domestic sphere. Thus, we can understand the gendered discourses in the contemporary exergames ecology as a symptom of the early 21st century, and of the values surrounding gender in domestic space.

The “complex relations of power” surrounding gender and TV are rooted in cultural ideals surrounding the legitimacy and position of women in society and what they do in their daily lives. Since the early 19th century, women’s work in the home has not been considered a real form of labor (Ouelette & Wilson, 2011). Indeed, the middle-class ideal of domesticity focused on a sharp division between men and women, work and leisure, and the separation of public (men’s work) and private (men’s leisure, women’s work) space for these activities. However, feminist scholars have pointed out that domestic work is indeed a form of legitimate labor (e.g., Elmer, 1957; Ouelette & Wilson, 2011; Woerness, 1978). For housewives, “the home is indeed a site of labor. Not only do women do physical chores, but also the basic relations of our economy and society are reproduced at home, including the literal reproduction of working through childrearing labor” (Spigel, 1992, pp. 73-74). Thus, the home is a space where work/leisure, men/women, and public/private dichotomous lines become blurred. Likewise, TV was situated within the context of women’s (as housewives) work in the home. Spigel (1992) contended,

These popular representations begin to disclose the social construction of television as it was rooted in a mode of thought based on categories of sexual difference.... Women’s magazines engaged their readers in a dialogue about the concrete problems that television posed for productive labor in the home. They depicted the subtle interplay between labor and leisure at home, and they offered women ways to deal with—or else resist—television in their daily lives (p. 98).

In sum, dichotomous discourses in the mass media reinforced dichotomous ideals of gendered work and leisure (Ouelette & Wilson, 2011). TV was sold to housewives as a purposive technology, as women's pleasure derives from household work and is the same as work.

A television, then, should be purchased because it would allow women to perform domestic labor. TV was meant to be pleasurable for men, but for women, it could only be pleasurable if it did not interfere with their roles in society or in the home (Spigel, 1992). These gendered work-versus-play narratives not only teach us about the social construction of technology in the 1950s, but also how subsequent technologies, like contemporary exergames, have resuscitated these gendered dichotomies in selling products to women.

Exergames are a form of play and work, and therefore must be understood in conversation with the notions of gamification and playbor. As noted earlier, gamification is distinct from allegedly serious games and refers to the application of elements and concepts of video game design, such as points and badges, into particular work activities (Smith-Robbins, 2011; Prensky, 2002). Within the particular area of health and fitness, gamification is not simply a means to create a game for the purpose of work, but also to take and apply elements of games to motivate, drive, and engage game players to improve their health, fitness, and wellbeing (Prensky, 2002; Werbach & Hunter, 2012). Thus, gamification incentivizes play—and in particular activities that are not implicitly playful (Easley & Ghosh, 2013; Hamari et al., 2014).

As noted earlier, the idea of playbor, coined by Kücklich (2005), refers to a combination of play and labor (Schott, 2010). In particular, playbor means combining



“the often conflicting interests of work, personal ambitions, and entertainment into a single activity” (Schott, 2010). Whereas the gamification concept consciously uses psychological affordances of video games in order to motivate work, playbor is not as conscious an effort to do so. The concept of playbor has been applied to a number of games and game play experiences, such as playing *Farmville* or *World of Warcraft* (Rey, 2011). This also applies to the unpaid labor in the video game industry, such as that done by computer game modifiers (modders), so that playbor refers to a productive process (Kücklich, 2005). Like the broader literature about work and play, one of the biggest, underlying contradictions in the concept of playbor is that play and labor are mutually exclusive activities (Rey, 2011).

### **Binaries and the Media**

This chapter uses the terms *dichotomies* and *binaries* interchangeably—to describe two opposing forces. Studying binaries in the mass media is nothing new (e.g., Foucault, 1970; Schroeder & Zwick, 2011; Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Indeed, research has shown that the media use a sort of shorthand by representing categories of people in simple binary terms. Foucault (1970) argued, in “Discourse on Language,” that one of the most important elements of discourses, and in particular of binaries, is that they use and articulate a set of limits. Drawing on Foucault’s insights regarding the limits created by the establishment of strict binaries, Schroeder and Zwick (2011) asserted,

These limits enclose the ontological identity of the individual through installing a series of binaries distinguishing self from other, identity from non-identity (i.e., masculinity-femininity, cultured-primitive, sane-insane, and so forth). As a result, limits restrict the set of possibilities open to self-formation. The most important implication of limits is the constitution of the “normal subject.” (p. 28)

Images and messages place subjects into neat, binary categories, rather than accounting for a more messy form of subjectivity (Schroeder & Zwick, 2011). They continued,

Common to all fields however, is that the desired or normal subject fits neatly into the “right” one of the binary categories, for example the white middle-class, the straight, and the law-abiding citizen (versus the black, the homosexual, and deviant citizen), the rational consumer (versus the irrational consumer), or the soccer mom (versus the welfare mom). (p. 28)

It is necessary to situate this chapter within Foucaultian notions of binary discourse in order to interrogate and argue that exergame play for women is socially constructed in allegedly neat opposition to men’s games and game play. This binary ameliorates men’s so-called problem with women’s increased visibility in gaming culture by marking particular games and game play for women.

### **The Hardcore/Casual Dichotomy: An Overview**



*Figure 23.:* A dominant narrative that exergames are not *real* video games. Image from “Casual Gaming: Is It a Crime?” by Duchenne (2013). Retrieved from the GAMEZONE website.

The contemporary exergames ecology and the hardcore/exergame dichotomy are part of a broader discourse that differentiates video games and game play meant for men from that meant for women. It is not universally accepted that these two terms should be placed in opposition; however, it provides a convenient way of defining what casual

games and game play is and is not (Raz, 2014).<sup>18</sup> The Casual Games Association (2012) defined and dichotomized casual and hardcore games by associating hardcore games with particular action movies that are considered masterpieces and are presented as better than casual games that are akin to TV shows that target women, such as soap operas (FAQ section). These hardcore and casual definitions and dichotomy also reveal underlying gendered assumptions—produced, reinforced, and disseminated by an industry that to this day is still dominated by men.<sup>19</sup> It is crucial to document how and why we have seen a staggering rise in such gendered, dichotomous, misogynistic images and messages surrounding women and casual games so we can understand the current state of the gendering of gaming culture. Turning to exergames and gendered dichotomous discourses will help us to do so.

### ***Mother Through the Son Gendering***

A significant way in which the hardcore/casual, gendered, dichotomous narrative is communicated is through messages surrounding the mother through the son gendering, which reaffirms the misogyny of gaming culture by positioning adult women's (as mothers) game play in opposition to men's game play (as sons, the only real gamers). In support of this argument, I draw from two contemporary examples from the video game industry and popular culture: the *Dead Space 2* (2011) advertising campaign, and the

---

<sup>18</sup> This phenomenon has been explained in my previous work in the *Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies* (2014) surrounding the topic of “casualness” (casual video games, and casual as a game play style).

<sup>19</sup> One space in which the male-dominated video game industry is most apparent is the trade show space, such as the yearly E3. Of the almost 50,000 people that attend, the majority are men. In my personal experience as a researcher at E3 in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014, one of the starkest contrasts of this divide is among the restrooms—men's restrooms have lines out the door and far down the hallway, and women's restrooms never have a wait and always have open stalls.

“Gaming With My Mom” videos that appeared on the popular *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon* (2013).

EA’s advertising team for the *Dead Space 2* ad campaign purportedly brought in real mothers to participate in interviews related to the campaign. Videotaped evidence was used in promotional materials, showing clips of mothers who shrieked and scowled upon viewing the graphics in game footage of *Dead Space 2*. Praised as “nothing short of brilliant” by *PlayStation Magazine* and *Edge*, Electronic Arts’ (EA) advertising campaign for *Dead Space 2* (2011), identified cool games, pointing out the opposite. It claimed that fun video games are the antithesis of what mothers find fun, thus ignoring the current demographic terrain of women game players (adweek.com). EA claimed, “A mom’s disapproval has always been an accurate barometer of what is cool” (adweek.com). In one segment of the advertisement, for example, we see a haggard, White, middle-aged mother, who, while shaking her head and placing her hands over her mouth in horror, exclaims, “That’s just icky! I may have a nightmare over that” (salon.com; Figure 24). Thus, hardcore games and game play are cool and are solely for men, because older, adult women are revolted by them.





Figure 24. Screen shots from the *Dead Space 2* (2011) advertising campaign.

In what turned into a tremendous online, gendered, and raced discourse, the “My Mom Hates *Dead Space 2*” ads went viral. In a game giveaway, people (presumably young men) were encouraged to submit their best videos of their mothers reacting to *Dead Space 2* content with the hashtag #mymomhatesdeadspace2. The winners were selected based on the most poignant and funny demonstrations. Thus, the use of public mockery became a barometer of whether or not a game was cool. Indeed, the campaign even offered a reward for the “best of” video. Mothers’ hilarious disapproval exemplifies the ideal that hardcore games are the opposite of what mothers would accept, much less enjoy. Thus, hardcore games are meant only for *real*, male gamers, who play *real* games.

A second telling example originated on a segment on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*. By filming mothers (not mothers and fathers), this segment exemplifies the gendered dichotomous narrative surrounding women’s position in video game culture. Since 2010, Fallon has held a video game week on his show, coinciding with the annual, premiere video and computer game trade show, E3. These special segments feature gaming news and testing of the latest and greatest in the video game industry. In 2013, Fallon asked his viewers to film themselves playing video games with their mothers with

the volume turned down, so that the conversation between the player and their mother during game play is audible, and post the videos on YouTube under the title, “Gaming With My Mom.” While he and the audience intermittently laughed, he announced:

We’ve got a ton of stuff planned. We’re going to be playing the Xbox one, the PS4, the new stuff for the Wii U, it’s gonna be great. And also we came up with a pretty fun idea here: we’re going to need your help. It’s called “gaming with my mom.” If you’ve ever sat down with your mom and tried playing a video game with her it’s usually a *disaster*. (Fallon, 2013)

The “best of” videos that were played on his show positioned women, and specifically mothers, as technically incompetent game players who were hopelessly bad at comprehending video games, characters, and story lines. These videos depicted fish-out-of-water mothers struggling to figure out how to play video games with their teenage sons.

These discourses also marked White, middle-class, hegemonic privilege and the inequity in access to gaming technology, as all of the families in the “Gaming With My Mom” compilation were White and middle-class. This was apparent in the pristine and well-furnished living room spaces, in the brand-name clothing some family members wore, and in their dialogue about the video games. For example, while selecting characters in the classic video game, *Street Fighter* (1987),<sup>20</sup> a White, twenty-something son dressed in an Abercrombie and Fitch t-shirt, asks his White, conservatively dressed, rather tired-looking mother, “Vega, why do you like Vega?” to which she replies, “Because he reminds me of *Phantom of the Opera*.” The mother’s tone in her reference to this musical is also an indicator of their education and middle-class privilege.

---

<sup>20</sup> *Street Fighter* has been revamped and re-released over the years. The most recent version of the game came out in 2012, under the title *Street Fighter X Tekken*. It is unclear from the “Gaming With My Mom” video what version of *Street Fighter* the mother and son are playing, though we can tell it is being played on a contemporary, rather than classic, video game console.

Another mother selected characters based on the male avatar's looks, reinforcing the idea that women must not know the correct way to choose characters. It is assumed that the best way to select a character in this video game is based on its strengths as a street fighter. Selecting a character on the basis of its look makes no sense. While asking her son to set her up with a character, she said, "Do that dude, he's hot," to which her teenage son, wearing an LSU Tigers jersey replied in embarrassment, "Oh my God, Mom!" (Figure 25). Thus, like the *Dead Space 2* (2011) advertising campaign, women are mocked in order to protect the status quo of *real* gamers (young men). This segment positioned White, middle-class mothers and their game play as *delegitimized* and in binary opposition to *legitimate* their White, middle-class sons.

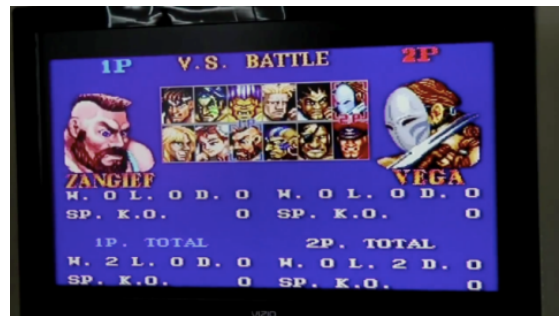




Figure 25. Screen shots from the “Gaming With My Mom” “best of” videos that appeared on the talk show, *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon* (2013).

### Public Spotlight on Misogynistic Discourses

Despite countless examples of misogyny in gaming culture, it is necessary not to ignore the backlash against the discourses surrounding the treatment and representations of women as game players, as industry professionals, as in-game world characters, and in the gaming public. In the introduction, we saw how misogynistic, oppressive, and hateful discourses directed at women in the gaming community and in the industry demonstrate how, as Consalvo (2012) pointed out, “the ugliness of gamer culture is being put on display for the wider world to see” (p. 2). In 2007, some of those in the gaming culture posted pornographic images of Jade Raymond, who is a game developer and designer at Ubisoft and the creator of the widely successful *Assassin’s Creed*. In addition, phrases such as, “BLARG! She’s stupid! Lols” and “ZOMG!!! She is teh (*sic*) hotness!!!” flooded message boards (gamefront.com, 2007). Subsequently, Ubisoft ordered an immediate cease and desist (E3).<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ubisoft filed a cease and desist lawsuit against SomethingAwful.com and made public statements against the “extreme pornographic image” of Jade Raymond that had been circulating the Internet. More information can be found at <http://n4g.com/news/84935/ubisoft-threatens-to-sue-comedy-forum-over-jade-raymond-assassins-creed>.



In addition, hatred toward women as game players gained significantly more public attention due to the famous Kickstarter campaign in 2012 for the online web series, “Tropes versus Women”— started by feminist popular culture critic, Anita Sarkeesian. In Sarkeesian’s (2012) TEDx talk, she detailed the “massive online hate campaign” against her Kickstarter campaign, which resulted in death threats, pornographic images in which she was depicted being raped by video game characters, and the creation of an online game by a Canadian blogger, titled *Beat a Bitch Up* (Figure 26). In this game, players could beat Sarkeesian by clicking on a photograph of her face (Spurr, 2012). The visibility of the hate campaigns against Raymond and Sarkeesian can be interpreted as part of the misogyny of gaming culture.



Figure 26. *Beat a Bitch Up* game, instructing players to “CLICK TO HIT HER!”

These instances are significant. First, the hate campaign against Raymond shows how gaming culture responded to a woman holding a position of power in a domain in which it was perceived that she had no business, and that shows, through the swift and strong reaction of her company, the boys’ club can take a stance against misogyny. In addition, the fact that Raymond and Sarkeesian were sexually humiliated falls into a pattern of the way women are brought down by the Internet—both inside and outside of gaming culture. Finally, sexual violence against women is rooted in notions of sexual threat and the ways in which women’s worth has long been tied to their sexuality.

Given the countless examples of misogyny and sexism in video game culture, it is vital for feminist game scholars to continue studying how various discourses contribute to the exclusionary mentality of gaming culture and how they socially construct women as interlopers in the boys' club. It is necessary to document and understand the problems women face in gaming culture, beyond these overt forms of exclusion. Turning to the hardcore/exergame dichotomy shows a more nuanced definition of women in gaming culture.

### **Dichotomous Narratives in the Contemporary Exergames Ecology:**

#### **Hardcore/Exergame, Men/Women, Play/Work**

This gendered, labored understanding of the exclusionary boys' club can now be framed in the exergames ecology by exploring *Wii Fit U* (2013) and GFWMB (2010), which connect women's game play experience and purpose with domestic labor.

Discourses surrounding exergames, women, and the body are byproducts of the social, economic, and political landscape, and need to be analyzed as such. Boyer (2011) likened discourses surrounding the *Wii Fit* to the Jane Fonda VHS workout videos of the 1980s and stated that studying new media technologies related to fitness is important because they "are windows into the sociocultural roles of all emerging media and sources of information concerning the ways people incorporate technology into their lives" (p. 7). In addition, the *Wii Fit* is similar to the gendered divisions and allegedly appropriate ways to spend time in the household that we saw in the 1980s (Boyer, 2011). As Gray (1992) asserted,

gendered distinctions, the division of labor, and viewing context are crucial in understanding the social and cultural roles of television and video in the household. While women (at least in the 1980s) were more likely to be at home during the day and in a position to use the VCR than men, in Gray's study,

domestic obligations encroach on women's potential to enjoy "the apparent male right to spare time" (126), which is only magnified during the working hours, leading to daytime video and television viewing being "bound up with feelings of guilt." (as cited in Boyer, 2011, p. 7)

Thus, times of leisure are tied not only to gendered divisions within the household, but also to women's putative feelings of guilt because they are not afforded the ability to enjoy any form of leisure within the home.

Bogost's (2005) "The Rhetoric of Exergaming" urged scholars to turn away from the study of exergames in regard to health and well-being. Bogost (2005) interrogated the ways in which exergames "motivate their players to engage in physical activity," by looking at the rhetoric surrounding these games since the 1980s. For example, he examines how the Foot Craze of 1987 (the precursor to what later became the *Dance, Dance, Revolution* game pad) for the Atari 2600 emphasized a rhetoric of running in order to encourage people to engage in physically active game play. Rhetoric about the primary space of exergame play as the living room also reinforces class distinctions and associates game play with middle-class privilege by showing game play only in immaculate middle-class living rooms (Bogost, 2005).

The spaces and methods of play are portrayed through middle-class domestic spaces. In contrast to the advertisements for Nintendo Wii games that show an enormous Ikea-like living room space, few people inhabit these types of spaces. Rather, they are likely to have to rearrange or remove furniture in order to accommodate exergame technology, for early exergaming devices worked only when players stood at least three feet away from the TV screen (Bogost, 2005). Examining the technical elements of consoles and their devices, and later iterations of the Nintendo Wii (Wii U) and Microsoft's Kinect, demonstrates how the class-based, spatial problems in homes have

been corrected with newer, more complex motion-sensor cameras that can be used in large or small spaces. However, these technical corrections are not reflected in the discourses in contemporary exergames ecology, such as among promotional materials.

### **Exergame Play as Work for Women: The Work of Fitness**

I now examine *Wii Fit U* (2013) and GFWMB (2010) in order to explain how and why the gendered, dichotomous narratives of contemporary exergames have manifested themselves, and why this can lead to an understanding of what the media says about what it means to be a woman. The gendered narratives about men and women's game play experiences and the purpose of game play manifest in two ways. Exergame play is a form of work for women, a way for women as mothers to enjoy time with family and to maintain a perfect body. Men's game play, however, is tied to hardcore games and game play for fun, not work.

### **Analysis of *Wii Fit U* Promotional Materials**

Exergames are part of the cultural landscape that pushes women to attain the ideal body through constant dieting and exercise. The first area of analysis is contained in the promotional material for *Wii Fit U*, which equates the way women play video games with the value of staying physically fit. As Dworkin and Wachs (2009) contended, in Western culture, women in all stages of life are expected to maintain a perfect body. They suggested,

Ideals of contemporary motherhood now prescribe a new set of tasks beyond the first shift of work and the second shift of household labor and childcare. There is now a required third shift of bodywork (Dworkin & Messner, 1999). After birth, there are clear warnings that "letting the body go" constitutes failed womanhood and motherhood. Featured article titles in *Shape Fit Pregnancy* indicate this rather explicitly in their titles, and include "Secrets to Bouncing Back," "Getting Your Body Back," "Bouncing Back After Baby," and "Bounce Back Better Than Ever." (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, p. 114)

Today, motherhood entails three shifts: work, household work, and bodywork (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). The contemporary exergames ecology endorses these three work tasks. In the third shift of bodywork, these games are situated and idealized as the *best* way for housewives, to stay in shape. In addition, exergame play is conceived as the sole reason that women would play video games.

Although Western culture values fitness for both men and women, the prevalence of personal, electronic fitness/activity trackers presents this technology as more beneficial for women—and mothers. Personal, fitness/activity trackers are wearable devices that monitor and record daily physical activity—a technology that has become popular over the last decade. The ideal of tracking physical fitness and an idealized body are all the more apparent with the advent of cell phone applications, online programs, and social media that can be linked to devices and used to monitor activity. Fitness culture, through this technology, reinforces the aspiration for the perfect body through monitoring personal fitness places, times, and stages of life.

The ideal of fitness and the popularity of fitness devices dates to the 1980s, when wearable heart rate monitors became available for athletes—prime examples of health and virility in the popular imagination. By the early 2000s, though, wearable electronic fitness devices were available in gyms, where men could emulate their favorite sports figures. Gym patrons could monitor their cardiovascular health on treadmills, bikes, and ellipticals. By 2005, more advanced fitness planning and training software was available to anyone, not just gym rats.

Contemporary exergames are part of the fitness culture that idealizes 24-hour body surveillance and fitness. Indeed, many people, not only middle-class mothers, buy

these devices. The market for fitness devices is very lucrative; according to the market research firm, NPD Group, in 2013, this market was worth \$330 million (Dollan, 2014). The most successful activity tracker in the 21st century is the FitBit, which is clipped to the waist. The most popular models range from \$100 to \$200 and include trackers such as Garmin Vivofit, Jawbone UP, Nike+FuelBand, and Polar Loop. The fitness/activity tracker industry is flourishing, with a variety of trackers designed for different demographics, including gym rats and first-timers at the gym. These devices allow users to track their hours spent working out, food intake, weight, and weight loss goals, all of which are used to encourage women to play exergames.

Although the fitness tracking capabilities of the fit meter for *Wii Fit U* allow the player to exercise in public, outside of the household, the places and activities of fitness still revolve around being a wife and mother. In the commercial for *Wii Fit U*, a woman explained,

With the new fit meter, you can track your fitness throughout the day and feel motivated to reach your goals. Daily activity is now a calorie burning game you can play anywhere. Walking the dog, going shopping, chasing down kids, running, it will even track your activity while you cook. It's a fitness program that literally works *with* your busy schedule. (*Wii Fit U* commercial, 2013)

Drawing from 1950s ideals of women and concerns about cooking and child rearing, these promotional materials suggest a revival of the 1950s idealized housewife and how she was to use TV in her home.

Another significant narrative that marks a problematic revival of gendered textual and visual tropes of domestic labor for women (and mothers) of the 1950s revolves around idealizing women's bodies. This narrative is evident in a print advertisement for *Wii Fit U*, which appeared in *Fitness* magazine in April 2014 (Figure 27). Using phrases such as "Fitness That Fits," "Fitness for fun," and "Fitness to go," the advertisement

explains that the exergame helps housewives stay fit. The images on the two-page advertisement show the same middle-aged, White woman who had appeared in the television advertisement, wearing her fit meter and exercising in the living room and in a park. Because we do not see her in a workplace, and see her taking care of children and describing game play through the lens of domesticity, her position as a housewife is implied.

Figure 27. Print advertisement for the *Wii Fit U* that appeared in *Fitness* magazine (April 2014).

Never is the ideal women’s body narrative more present than in women’s fitness magazines, such as *Fitness*, *Shape*, and *Fit Pregnancy*. For decades, women have been told that they need to do whatever it takes to have the perfect body. Magazines, TV shows, movies, and video games extol the perfect body, and urge women to strive to

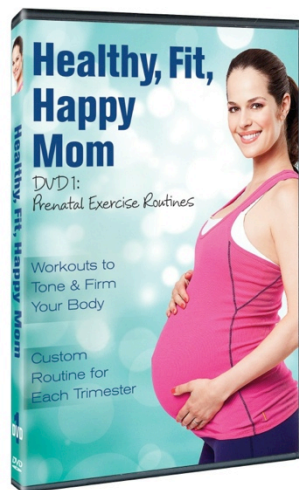
attain it. Indeed, these fitness magazines focus on an idealized womanhood and motherhood and on backwards notions of domestic labor in their articles on celebrity pregnancies, childbirths, and post-natal bodies.

The April 2014 issue of *Fitness* magazine, in which the *Wii Fit U* advertisement appeared, includes articles about dieting, weight loss, fitness clothing, spot reduction exercises, and the weight loss/fitness success stories of everyday women. In this issue there is an article about 29-year-old Christie Morgan from Montana, who lost 296 pounds by “eating proper portions” of “low calorie frozen meals,” by going to the gym six days a week, and by getting to “go on hikes with my husband and daughter” (Walsh, 2014, p. 18). A Lands’ End fitness clothing advertisement depicts Courtney, a “Fitness Fiterrati, healthy lifestyle advocate, new mom, and blogger” whom we see depicted wearing Lands’ End clothes while walking and pushing a stroller. Courtney tells readers that she stays fit by walking: “Walking is a great way to squeeze in exercise—I love the time to bond with my baby” (*Fitness*, April 2014). For her, fitness is enjoyable because it allows her to stay in shape and take care of her child. The *Wii Fit U* advertisement is part of the narrative about fitness success and the enjoyment of motherhood.

An additional type of magazine and story line has emerged in contemporary fitness culture: staying fit while pregnant—reiterating the idea that women’s work never ends. *Fit Pregnancy* exemplifies this trend. Stories about exercise during and after pregnancy abound, with articles such as, “Right after the post-birth euphoria comes the stressors of new motherhood: lack of sleep, breastfeeding challenges, and plotting your postpartum exercise plan” (*Fit Pregnancy*). Thus, exercise is can stave off the “stressors of new motherhood” (*Fit Pregnancy*).



Exergames construct women's video game play through the ideal that women should always have perfect bodies, even if they are pregnant, have recently given birth, or have adult grown children. No longer is pregnancy a time where women can take a break from policing their bodies (e.g., "A Pilates Workout for the Whole 9 Months"), dressing in the most fashionable maternity clothes (e.g., "3 Casual-Cool Maternity Dresses"), and eating right for two (e.g., "Kristin Cavallari's Pregnancy Diet"). By the same token, a pregnant woman also has to worry about getting her figure back after childbirth (e.g., "How Long it Takes Your Belly to go Down After Birth"). In addition to magazines, workout DVDs glamorize fit pregnancies and new motherhood (Figure 28). Taken as a whole, these sources situate a woman within the household as an ever-purposive space where she should constantly be working.



*Figure 28.* Healthy, Fit, Happy Mom Prenatal Exercise Routine DVD.

The narrative of exergame play for the purpose of work in the contemporary exergames ecology is not solely a baseless industry tactic. Indeed, research has shown

that women often view exercise as a form of work—not something associated with play or fun. As DiBrezza et al. (2009) explained,

women often view exercise as work—one more thing they have to check on their “to do” list. Most women know they should exercise, and when they do not, they become more stressed and view it as having one more responsibility, one more chore to do. (p. 12)

Thus, it is necessary to situate, understand, and analyze this narrative as in conversation with the lived anxieties women frequently experience.

Beyond featuring apparently everyday women (who are actually actors and/or models) in print and commercial advertisements, Nintendo draws from women’s allegedly real concerns by promoting the success stories of real women who play *Wii Fit U*. A few Nintendo fans recorded testimonial videos about their lived experiences with the *Wii Fit U*—like the success stories that appear in magazines such as *Fitness* and *Fit Pregnancy*. They featured testimonials by Nintendo fans who were selected to take the *Wii Fit U* Challenge for one month, and to make videos about their experience.

The discourse among the three women who provided testimonials is that the most enjoyable part of exergame play was that it allowed them to stay in shape while taking care of household duties and their children. Lisa Douglas, a brunette in her thirties who called herself “an Army wife and mother of seven ... originally from New York, now living in Texas,” found two benefits of exergames. In a voiceover she stated, “It’s about finding that time for me to work out and play.” She also talked about how the new GamePad has “elevated it yet again and reinvigorated” game play, and she is shown playing one of the games in which she pretends to hold a tray and serve people in a restaurant (holding the GamePad as a tray).

Douglas (2014) claimed that the most important part of the game for her is that she is actually getting a workout. She enjoys having aching calves, sweating, and “huffin’ and puffin’ a little bit.” She added,

Make no mistake, it’s a game, and it’s fun, and it involves your whole family, and they get really excited because you’re doing the obstacle course or you’re running, but the *fun* part about it is: suddenly you’re done and you’re sore. And suddenly you’re done and you have, you touch your face and you’re like “whoa, I’m actually sweating!” Suddenly you’re done and you step off the Balance Board because someone else wants to get on and you realize, “whew! My calves ache a li’l bit! I’m huffin’ and puffin’ a little bit!” (Douglas, 2014)

Unlike the discussion about the boys’ club and about hardcore versus casual games/game play, the messages within exergames and in the way they are advertised reinforce the boys’ club mentality of gaming culture by dichotomizing women’s game play from men’s, and by equating women’s play with work. Exergame play is framed through fitness in order to substantiate why and how women should play video games. By drawing from the tropes of home fitness videos of the 1980s, these games position women’s time in the household as always purposive. Boyer (2011) explained:

Exercise, then, provides an important function in convincing women that video games can be used productively, which itself raises a number of questions about what is socially acceptable and what is considered “useless.” While women working in the home may feel guilty putting on an entertainment program instead of doing chores, this guilt may be lessened when it is strenuous and produces (potentially) visible effects. Moreover, it suggests that exercise is crucially linked to women’s position in society. (p. 3)

### **Analysis of Games as Texts**

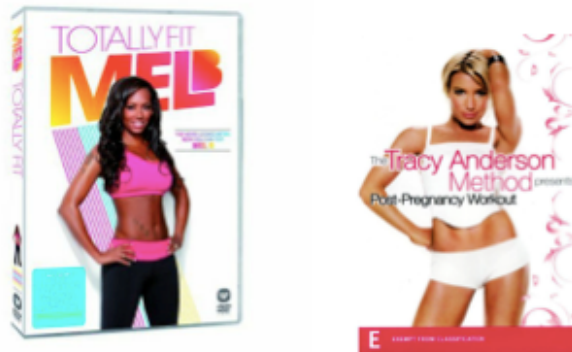
#### **Analysis of the *Get Fit With Mel B* In-Game World**

Celebrities play a substantial role in the idealization of the woman’s body in American culture (Douglas, 2010; McDonnell, 2014, Chapters 9 and 10). We see these bodies in magazines, TV shows, movies, and home fitness videos (Figure 29). In exergames, celebrity bodies are not only endorsers of games in promotional materials, but

also standards within the game world against which the player can compare and judge her own body. Indeed, research has demonstrated that having a friend, family member, or trainer (such as a celebrity) can be a key motivator in encouraging people to work out:

One of the best ways to encourage adherence is to exercise with someone else, whether a friend or trainer. Women respond to the social aspect associated with a partner, and the feeling of being accountable to someone else can help make exercising a high priority. (DiBrezza et al., p. 12)

Thus, turning to the in-game world space of an exergame, GFWMB (2010) leads to a better understanding of the gendered narratives in relation to fitness and the ideal body. According to a review of GFWMB in 2010 that described the in-game world trainer, Mel B, “As you follow her lead through rounds of exercises, her peppy attitude serves as encouragement, while her still-flat-after-two-kids abs serve as an incentive to get your butt movin’” (modernmom.com).



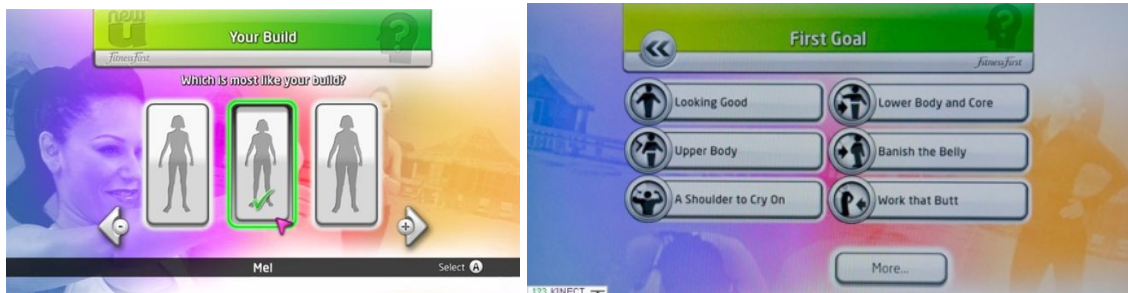
*Figure 29.* Celebrity fitness DVDs.

Throughout setting up the player’s profile and while playing the game, the player’s avatar is positioned alongside Mel B, suggesting that women’s game play has the purpose of striving for a physically fit body. GFWMB (2010) begins with the player

setting up a profile by entering gender, date of birth, height, and dietary requirements.

The next screen asks the player “Which is most like your build?” From left to right, the bodies become fuller and wider, though even the largest body is relatively thin (and not typical).

Next, the menu asks the player to choose a fitness goal from a number of options, including those focused on weight loss and “Looking Good,” “A Shoulder to Cry On,” “Banish the Belly,” “Work that Butt,” “Drop a Dress Size,” and “Arms Like Men” (Figure 30). These menu options assume that the player is a woman by drawing from stereotypical notions of womanhood (being emotional) and woman’s ideals (losing weight, dropping a dress size). The player has the option of selecting an onscreen, pink silhouette of her body to appear or for her actual, videotaped movements to appear on the screen next to the avatar of Mel B.





*Figure 30.* Selecting the silhouette option in GFWMB.

Once the player has set up her profile, the game generates customized workout routines, such as dance moves, jumping jacks, and squats. The game allows the player to use home fitness devices, such as resistance bands or weights. These can also be purchased in special bundle packs of the exergame. While working out in one of the many locations, the game asks the player to copy Mel B's onscreen moves and count how many repetitions the player has completed, the amount of time she has exercised, and the number of calories burned. Throughout game play, Mel B encourages players with exclamations such as "Yeah!" At the end of game play, the player is told the total number of calories burned and the percentage of completion of her fitness goal.

By prescribing an additional menu of meal planning, which generates a daily food plan to go along with the fitness regimen, the game suggests that women's game play is a form of labor in which women must police their body shape and what they can and cannot eat at all moments. The menu options include "Breakfast," "Lunch," "Dinner,"

“Dessert,” and “Snacks” (Figure 30). Game play through exercise, diet, and the ideal body, is closely connected to ideals surrounding gender roles and the women’s work is never done narrative that situates any non-purposive time at home as an emotional struggle. I contend that this is also a problematic revitalization of the 1950s ideal of womanhood and the discourses surrounding why women should purchase and use a TV.

### **Analysis of Game Boxes**

#### **Analysis of the *Wii Fit U* Game Box**

Consistent with the original Wii console’s tropes, the *Wii Fit U* box utilizes particular color schemes, images, and phrases to sell women’s exergame play as work. Each *Fit U* unit comes packaged in two boxes: the outermost box explains the game, as well as the included fit meter device. The inner box that holds the game disc and fit meter tracking device is identical to the outer box. In the center of the front cover of the outermost boxes, we see a White woman in her twenties, her long brown hair in a ponytail, wearing a white sweatshirt with a blue hood and sweat pants. She is sitting on the balance board as if it was a bobsled, while looking at the TV screen, on which we see the in-game world action of a bobsled run. The Wii U controller sits next to the TV on the TV stand. Two images are printed to her left: a photograph of a woman’s hands and feet, showing her standing on the balance board and looking down at the Wii U handheld screen, and the other shows the in-game world action of the new hula dancing game. To the right of the woman are three more images. The topmost image shows the back of a torso from the shoulders to right below the buttocks. The person is wearing blue long-sleeved sweatshirt, khaki pants with the fit meter attached to a brown belt, and carrying a blue backpack as he or she hikes up a steep set of stairs. It is hard to tell the gender, but

given the remainder of the images that depict women on the front cover, it is possible to infer that this person is a woman.

Although the simplicity of the game is its selling point, the game box is covered with photographs and text. Below this photograph is a split screen of an in-game world avatar in a yoga tree pose, and to the right a photograph of a young White woman, also in blue and white, standing on the balance board in the tree pose. Below the large photograph of the woman in the center of the front cover, the words “Wii Fit U” and “Fit Meter Included! Inclus! !Incluido!” are printed. To the right is a photograph of the fit meter, with the face of a female Mii on the screen of the fit meter and the 175 calories she has burned. Below that is an image of footprints, with the 2362 steps taken.

A green thought bubble circle surrounds the fit meter—the same color as the word “Fit” in “Wii Fit U.” To the right of the fit meter is a blue outline of a woman’s body, with the exception of the fit meter, which is indicated by a white circle on the woman’s hip. The woman is drawn walking up a hill. To the left of the text “Fit Meter Included!” is the ESRB rating “E for Everyone.” Below the “Fit Meter Included!” text is a drawing of the balance board, indicating that this game requires the use of this technology—something some people might already have if they have previously played, the *Wii Fit* or *Wii Fit Plus* on their Nintendo Wii.

The box promotes women’s game play as for the purpose of labor through a combination of in-game world screen shots, depictions of women as players, and spaces of play. Along the top of the box are the words, “Get Moving. Have fun. Inside your home and out!” The outermost box indicates that women’s game play is intended for the purpose of domestic labor through the message that having fun means moving the body.



The back cover features a combination of screen shots of the in-game world, menus, and images of a woman playing the video game in a living room. Next to this text is a photograph of the same woman depicted on the front cover, but this time she is playing a mini game that requires her to stand up and lunge backward with her left leg while holding the Wii U controller in front of her. Like the front of the box, we do not see any interior walls, only a TV on a TV stand.

Below the text, we see an in-game menu with a fit meter, showing how everything logged onto the fit meter is linked to the Wii U to track fitness progress. It says, “Take your Fit Meter with you and keep track of your altitude, steps taken, and calories burned.” Next to this image and text is a picture of a group of Miis, showing the options of exercises and trainers that the player can select. At the bottom of the screen is a log of the amount of time spent working out. Below this image is the sentence, “Customize your workout based on your personal goals.” To the right of this image and text is the same picture from the front of the box of the woman standing on the balance board and looking down at the Wii U she holds in her hands, below which the text states, “With the new Wii U GamePad controller, you can get active, play games, and view your personal progress all on a second handheld screen!” As a symptom of the fitness culture at large, then, the game box draws from notions of fitness and always being dissatisfied with one’s body in its depictions of players and game play.

### **Analysis of Articles/Reviews**

#### **Analysis of the *Get Fit With Mel B* Game Box**

Articles and reviews in the popular and gaming press set women’s game play in opposition to men’s game play in ways that depend upon narrow understandings of

gender. These sources emphasize fitness, weight loss, motherhood, and mothers' daily lives in order to position exergames as mom games. First, reviews frequently claim that exergames are not real games because they are just like a home fitness workout video. For example, Nintendo's website deemed GFWMB as "purely an exercise game" (<http://wiiaccessories.org>). A review on [gamespot.com](http://gamespot.com) claimed,

Get Fit With Mel B is a fitness game, where "game" is understood to mean "something that runs in an Xbox 360 but won't run in a DVD player." Closer to the mark would be "interactive celebrity fitness video," since there's not much to it that's game-like (that is, playful or competitive), though it does ostensibly know, via the magic of the Kinect, whether you're replicating Mel B's movements or not. In this respect it is functional, if not fine-tuned. Likewise, the presentation is passable, but no more than that; it's cheap and cheerful rather than slick.<sup>22</sup> (Douglas, 2010)

Like home fitness videos of the 1980s, GFWMB is marked as a game just for women and is therefore not a *real* game. In addition, it is implied that the game is set against hardcore games and game play for men, because there is "not much to it that's game-like (that is, playful or competitive)" (Douglas, 2010).

Second, articles and reviews about *Wii Fit Plus* and GFWMB dichotomize mother's game play by emphasizing the ideal of attaining and maintaining an attractive figure. For instance, articles focus on the purpose of game play for baby weight loss, and assume that women want to lose the extra pounds they put on during pregnancy as soon as their children are born. In addition, these discourses frame women's exergame play for the purpose of domestic labor by emphasizing that game play allows mothers to tend to their children while attaining the ideal, post-partum body. For instance, an article on Nintendo's website lauds GFWMB based on Mel B's body, rather than based on the in-game world content or game play.

---

<sup>22</sup> Jane Douglas (2010). "Get Fit With Mel B Review." [Gamespot.com](http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/get-fit-with-mel-b-review/1900-6284688/). 1 December 2010. <http://www.gamespot.com/reviews/get-fit-with-mel-b-review/1900-6284688/>.

One look at the game's title and you might be tempted to ask "Who in the world is Mel B?" Short for Melanie Janine Brown, Mel B is better known as Scary Spice, the vivacious and feisty member of the highly popular, 90's (*sic*) girl-group Spice Girls. If Mel's curvaceous and well-toned body is any indication of her capabilities as a fitness trainer, then players are in good hands. (<http://wiiaccessories.org>)

Importantly, this article emphasizes Mel B's body and her position as a key figure in the girl power movement in order to sell exergames and game play to women under the guise of progress.

One article claims the game is perfect for mothers because it allows them to have their own in-home, hot personal trainers, "A hot one with a British accent!" ([modernmom.com](http://modernmom.com), 2010). Praising Mel's hot body that she so easily attained after having her two children, dichotomized men's/women's game play through the labor of mothers. Likewise, a piece on [oxygen.com](http://oxygen.com) revolves around Mel B's body both in the game and as a host on the weight loss television show, *Dance Your Ass Off*.

Mel B is encouraging people to get physical, fit, and fabulous. The show challenges overweight contestants to lose pounds and gain confidence on the dance floor. We think she'll be the perfect host, offering inspiration, style, and a whole lot of personality. ([oxygen.com](http://oxygen.com))

Finally, articles associate women's game play within the context of a mother's busy day, and a supermom who can juggle everything (as everyone should). For example, "As a mother her first priority is her family, and because of this simple fact she 'schedule[s] *around* the kids,' as opposed to scheduling her family time around her exercise routine." Another review claims, "Former Spice Girl turned fitness guru, Mel B is [a] 35-year-old supermom who is currently launching her own exercise game to help you get into shape" ([modernmom.com](http://modernmom.com), 2010). The article on [oxygen.com](http://oxygen.com), "5 Reasons We Love Mel B," says "SHE'S GOT BALANCE: Mel B really has it all—a great career *and* a loving family. She knows how to keep things in balance and is a role model for

working mothers. And she somehow maintains her fabulous figure. (For that, we're eternally jealous)" (oxygen.com).

### **Conclusion**

The previous chapter argued that the "ideal woman", or exer-mom, is a revival of the 1950s ideal housewife and demonstrated how there is more than one monolithic construction of women in gaming culture. This chapter argues that the hardcore/exergame, gendered, dichotomous narratives about *how* women are conceptualized to play exergames also helps in understand how women are defined in gaming culture, and how this is a symptom of the longstanding, gendered, labored definitions of women and domestic space. These discourses are a covert form of misogyny, whereby women are included into video game culture only when they are White, middle-class mothers who play for the purpose of labor. In this case, women's game play is defined as permissible only when it is purposive (for labor), rather than play for play's sake (for fun and leisure, something that men are permitted to do).

Particular ideals surrounding women's work and play are apparent in the contemporary exergames ecology—where work becomes synonymous with play. These discourses are situated as part of a broader conversation about women's (exergame) and men's (hardcore) play—which have been enunciated with the introduction of contemporary exergames.

Certainly, though, women do not play exergames solely for the purpose of work—whether it be fitness or caring for their family. Though this study does not focus on the lived experiences of women, it is clear that many women's experiences playing exergames are likely positive and have nothing at all to do with exercise. In fact, women

may see exergames as an oasis or remedy for the current climate of misogynist gaming culture. For example, women may enjoy playing exergames simply because they enjoy listening to the in-game world music or getting to dance. Be that as it may, though, the revival of these dichotomies surrounding gender and the idealized uses of domestic technologies helps us to assess the current problems surrounding women and video games and contributes to our understanding of the underlying sexism in the industry and gaming culture at large.

## Chapter 6: Contextualizing Exergames

Manufacturers and advertisers are not designing and marketing exergames with these particular marketing targets without some reason. It is important, then, to question the industry's motives in terms of the broader cultural context of the 2000s. This chapter answers the question: what is the larger socio-historical context for why women are being constructed in this way, and what does this tell us about our cultural values regarding women, technology and domestic space? As Bogost (2011) noted, one of the biggest pitfalls of research on exergames is that they fail to address the broader, cultural context in which these games exist, including the concerns over “diseases of affluence” (such as obesity and diabetes), the increased time spent in cars, and the increase of time spent sitting at work (p. 111).

What follows is an examination of the possible motives behind the retrograde framing of womanhood. It argues that *conditional inclusion* of women was an attempt to refute the bad reputation that video games get in our culture. In particular, this includes accounting for Michelle Obama's *Let's Move* initiative, school shootings and violent video games, and concerns over the decline of quality time spent with family. This chapter also argues that the “ideal woman” of exergame advertising indicates the current state of gender politics in the United States, and argues that it is a reaction to the decline of feminism.

The depictions and the design of exergames draw from deep-seated ideas about gender, families, play, domesticity, and technology—ideas that are used as resources in

everyday conversations. Similar to the discourses surrounding the technology of TV in the 1950s that sold TV to women (Spigel, 1992), exergames needed to be sold to the public. As this study has shown, this meant instructing women, as users, on why to buy this particular technology and how this technology was supposed to be used in their homes (Grint & Woolgar, 1997). But at the same time, exergames were marketed as good, evoking the values of fitness, health, and family togetherness in order to redress some of the cultural problems for which the media have been blamed.

### **The American Political Agenda Surrounding the Childhood Obesity Crisis**

The “ideal woman” construct reflects the American political climate and the legitimate concerns over childhood obesity. This obesity crisis cannot be understated: the percentage of children who have become obese has increased at a staggering rate (cdc.gov). In fact, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that “In 2012, more than one third of children and adolescents were overweight or obese” (cdc.gov). These statistics are undeniable; however, the blame that video games have received is unwarranted. Given this context, exergames were sold to women in order to justify these games as a good thing, for they have the ability to resolve the perceived problem that video games are to blame for our sedentary lifestyles and the growing rate of childhood obesity.

A key political agenda of the Obama administration—the *Let’s Move* initiative—focused on fighting this childhood obesity epidemic in the United States by encouraging healthy eating and increasing physical activity in K-12 schools. Launched in 2010 by First Lady Michelle Obama, this included an overhaul of school cafeteria lunch menus, increasing the amount of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. In addition, this initiative

aimed to diminish the number of vending machines that sell sugary beverages like Coke or Mountain Dew on school campuses.

The second part of the campaign focused on getting children active, especially given the cuts in physical education classes. Although no studies were cited that correlated time spent with the media as impeding physically active hours, the mass media and video games were blamed. Michelle Obama contrasted her childhood spent running around outdoors for hours every day to the present situation of shorter recesses and gym classes, along with seven and a half hours a day watching TV, using the Internet, on their phones, and playing video games. In addition to problematizing the lack of active time at school and the increase in sedentary time at home with the media, Obama (2010) argued that urban sprawl and fears of safety are significant contributors to the current state of affairs. Whereas in her childhood, kids would play outside in the street with their neighbors until they were called in for dinner, kids today spend far less time outside because their parents are afraid of crime (Obama, 2010).

### **Exergames and the Political Context**

It is no surprise, then, that the companies who produce and market exergames have positioned their games within these political concerns. Indeed, Nintendo partnered with the American Heart Association to promote active game play as part of a family lifestyle (Nintendo.com). Studies have produced mixed results about whether exergame play has any significant effect on raising people's heart rates and physical fitness levels. Still, Nintendo leveraged these political concerns in selling this product to women.

This construction of exergames through fitness was apparent in the earlier discussion of Nintendo's *Wii Fit U*. In the case of the print advertisement, game play was



constructed both inside and outside of the domestic space, in order to foster physical fitness and maintaining a healthy weight, because people are not tied down to a single space for working out. In particular, the new fit meter (fitness tracker) for *Wii Fit U* allows the player to exercise within the fixed position of the living room and with the transitory spaces of everyday life. In addition, as was discussed in regard to the TV commercial for YSFJMC, for the stay-at-home mother, exergame play is justified as a means to lose weight, even for women who have a hard time getting out of the house because they are stay-at-home mothers. In this case, Claire, the stay-at-home mother, endorsed the exergame because she had a few months until her sister's wedding, and she wanted to sculpt her upper arms ("...and I thought uh! My upper arms!"). Overall, in line with the political initiative to get children and families to be active, the in-game world menu options, advertisements, and game boxes all justified exergame play as beneficial to women and their families' health and fitness. It is difficult to see how a fear of crime or the difficulties of the urban environment could have been brought to bear as a marketing tactic for exergames, but as exergames were never seriously marketed to a broad class demographic, the point is moot.

### **The Causal Link Between Violent Video Games and Violent Behavior**

#### **Violent Media and Aggression Research**

More than any mass media form, video games have borne the brunt of the blame for violence in our culture (e.g., Anderson, 2003; Bartholow, 2005; Bushman, 1995). Therefore, exergames are embedded in the decades-long moral panic over violent video games. However, this moral panic is just that—a panic. It is not a valid description of the real effects that video games have on people's attitudes and behaviors. Still, while

some research studies falsify the claims that violent video games cause violence, this message is undermined by media narratives that state the opposite: e.g., media coverage of school shootings that states a linkage to video games.

The relationship between representations of violence in the mass media and their potential impact on the public is a consistent concern among academics in the social science tradition, evidenced by the plethora of empirical studies. Moral panics surrounding mass media—including radio, TV, and movies (Sternheimer, 2007)—can be traced to the 1940s, and the seminal study on the “War of the Worlds” broadcast that led to mass hysteria that a real alien invasion had occurred in New Jersey (Cantril et al., 1940). Over the years other mass media forms have been blamed for social ills: past scapegoats have included rock music, hip-hop music, and sexually and violently explicit films (Sternheimer, 2007).

To media effects researchers, everyone, to some degree, is susceptible to violent media (Anderson, 2003). Two example studies exemplify this stance. First, Anderson et al.’s (2003) comprehensive article reviews the violence and media research base. In particular, the authors found that a causal link between video games and violence exists and is consistent across studies and over time, so that “no one is exempt from the deleterious effects of media violence; neither gender, nor nonaggressive personality, nor superior upbringing, nor higher social class, nor greater intelligence provides complete protection.”

In a second example, Bartholow et al. (2005) conducted an experimental study, and were the first to address the relationship between media violence, aggressive behavior, and desensitization. In this study, participants were shown images depicting

different types of violence, and asked to rate these images based on perceived violence, followed by playing a violent computer game, and were given the option to send a “loud shock” to their opponent (whom they were told was a real person) if they won.

Bartholow et al. found that the participants who had been playing video games for many years, indeed, were likely to send their opponents a loud shock. Specifically, they found, “chronic exposure to violent video games —and not just frequent playing of any video games—has lasting deleterious effects on brain function and behavior” (Bartholow et al., 2005). Overall, they found that violent behavior was a result of chronic violent video games desensitizing players to violence.

What is more persuasive, however, is all the research that has rendered these findings about violent video games and violent behavior inconclusive, if not entirely false. For instance, Lawrence and Olsen (2008) argued that the news media is to blame for the “big fears” over the impact of violent video game play on violent behavior. They contended,

It’s clear that the “big fears” bandied about in the press—that violent video games make children significantly more violent in the real world ... —are not supported by the current research, at least in such a simplistic form. That should make sense to anyone who thinks about it. After all, millions of children and adults play these games, yet the world has not been reduced to chaos and anarchy. (Lawrence & Olsen, 2008, p. 25)

As is explained in the following sections, the increase in school shootings correlates with an increase in discourses in the mass media that blame violent video games for young people’s aggressive behavior, finding a direct causal link and urging parents to stop purchasing these games and allowing their children to play them. This moral panic tone is the overarching trend in media effects research as well as in mass

media coverage of video games in the 21st century, including coverage of school shootings and the landmark case, *Brown v. EMA/ESA*.

### **School Shootings**

This moral panic became all the more potent in the wake of school shootings, such as the Virginia Tech massacre in Blacksburg, Virginia in 2007 and the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012. At Virginia Tech, 32 college students were killed and 17 injured, before the killer took his own life.<sup>23</sup> At the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, the shooter killed 20 children, six adult staff members, and his mother, before killing himself.<sup>24</sup>

After these tragedies, many of the discourses in popular culture and in academic research have pointed a blaming finger at video games (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004; Muschert, 2007). This is because video games are an easy target, and have been talked about as such in the media and by many media effects scholars: they are the all-encompassing reason behind an alarming, complex problem. In fact, Gunn and Beard (2003) went as far as to call this panic an apocalypse—discussed in the news media as catastrophic and the end of the world as we know it. There are several reasons why this has been at the forefront of cultural anxieties in the 21st century, including that the shootings took place at schools and that there has been no real solution devised to this problem, or a way to identify school shooters and to prevent these massacres from occurring. Indeed, this uncertainty is apparent in the FBI's report on school shootings in

---

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2014/04/19/school-shootings-timeline/7903671/>.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2014/04/19/school-shootings-timeline/7903671/>.

2000, which described school shooters as unexplainable due to their rarity.<sup>25</sup> For these reasons, as Sternheimer (2007) argued,

In the absence of a simple explanation, the public symbolically linked these rare and complex events to the shooters' alleged interest in video games, finding in them a catchall explanation for what seemed unexplainable—the white, middle-class school shooter. (p. 13)

A central way that this blame circulates is through mass media sources, and especially the news media. As Muschert (2007) argued, “Mass media play an integral role in the public perception of school shootings as a social problem, and social scientists have examined the media’s framing of school shooting incidents” (p. 65).

In addition to news media coverage, political discourses have also pushed an agenda of blaming violent media for school shootings (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004). As Sternheimer (2007) argued,

politicians and other moral crusaders frequently create “folk devils,” individuals or groups defined as evil and immoral.... Video games, those who play them, and those who create them have become contemporary folk devils because they seem to pose a threat to children. (p. 13)

In sum, the focus on rampage-type incidents resulted in video games becoming the only available reason why people become violent and why school shootings are so prevalent (Muschert, 2007). Although playing video games is an everyday activity, it has been seized upon as a predictor of homicidal behavior.

***Brown v. Electronic Merchants Association (EMA)/Entertainment Software Association (ESA)***

At this time, the moral panic over video games reached the Supreme Court. In 2011, the landmark *Brown v. EMA/ESA* case challenged a proposed 2005 law that would regulate the sale and rental of violent video games to minors. This law would have

---

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/school-shooter>.

placed a distinct set of regulations on video games, something that is not required for any other form of mass media. In particular, this law would mean that if a violent video game (rated “M” for “mature” and any rating considered more explicit) were rented/sold by a retailer to a minor without parental consent, the retailer would be fined (*Brown v. EMA/ESA*, pp. 3-4).

The Supreme Court sided with the video game industry and blocked the regulations, ruling that video games are protected under the First Amendment and that there is no substantive evidence that video games cause violence. Writing for the majority, Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia claimed that “Psychological studies purporting to show a connection between exposure to violent video games and harmful effects on children do not prove that such exposure causes minors to act aggressively” (*Brown v. EMA/ESA*, pp. 12-13). The President of the Parents Television Council, one of the groups that opposed the ruling, asserted in an interview with *Escapist* magazine in 2011,

Countless independent studies confirm what most parents instinctively know to be true: Repeated exposure to violent videogames has a harmful and long-term effect on children. Despite these troubling findings, videogame manufacturers have fought tooth and nail for the “right” to line their pockets at the expense of America’s children.<sup>26</sup>

The media concluded that the ruling was a big win for the video game industry, yet it generated a large amount of negative publicity. The proposed linkage between video games and violence has been reported over and over again in the media, which described the ruling as a big loss for the children.

---

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.escapistmagazine.com/news/view/111306-Parents-Group-Denounces-Supreme-Court-Decision>.

## **Exergames in the Moral Panic Context**

When considering the construction of the “ideal woman” through exergames, whether or not video games cause violence is beside the point. It is important, however, to understand that these studies, and the ensuing discourses in the mass media over video games, violence, and school shootings, have resulted in cultural fears about video games; these fears can partially explain video game design and marketing strategies toward women. Thus, exergames and the “ideal woman” construct need to be understood as a result of the moral panic discourses.

A small body of literature has tried to understand this persistently negative view of video games. According to Sternheimer (2007)

By focusing so heavily on video games, news reports downplay the broader social contexts. While a handful of articles note the roles that guns, poverty, families, and the organization of schools may play in youth violence in general, when reporters mention research to explain the shooters’ behavior, the vast majority of studies cited concern media effects. (p. 13)

Salonius-Pasternak and Gelfond (2005) concluded that “Most research on electronic play has focused on its possible negative effects for children and adolescents, and contextual factors such as socioeconomic status and culture are rarely considered” (pp. 11-12). Thus, the mass media, and a large corpus of research in the media effects tradition, through omitting important contextual factors such as socioeconomic status, psychological predispositions, and upbringing from their discussion of video games, has convinced the public that video games cause violent behavior. For these reasons, therefore, contemporary exergames constructed idealized womanhood to sell these games as a technology that is safe for women to purchase for themselves, for their families, and

to have in their home—something that would actually assuage the moral panics over video games, violence, and obesity in American culture.

### **Femininity and the Decline of Family Time**

In a 2010 episode of *Modern Family*, “Unplugged,” Claire Dunphy, a White, middle-class housewife becomes irritated with her family as she tries to serve them breakfast.<sup>27</sup> Everyone is ignoring her. Her husband, Phil, reads his fantasy football roster on his iPad, their son Luke plays a video game on his Nintendo DS, and daughters Haley and Alex are texting each other from across the table. Claire finally declares, “Okay, now that’s it, everybody, gadgets down, now!” When no one responds, she laments, “You’re all so involved in your little gizmos, nobody is even talking. Families are supposed to talk!” The family temporarily looks at Claire. Then Haley sends Alex the text message that “Mom’s insane,” and the husband and children go back to their gadgets.

This scene is a snapshot of a significant cultural concern over around the proliferation of the way in which new media technologies have transformed what families do together. Accompanying the moral panic about media and violence, cell phones, laptops, tablets, and video games, are blamed for the decline of the family. It has been argued that people are spending less time at home talking to their families because everyone is more interested in their gadgets than in each other (Turkle, 2012). As in the debate over media and violence, there is a popular and a scholarly debate about what is going in in today’s families (Turkle, 2012).

Turkle (2012) noted that “The new technologies allow us to ‘dial down’ human contact, to titrate its nature and extent” (p. 30). Her idea of being *alone together* means

---

<sup>27</sup> <http://abc.go.com/shows/modern-family/episode-guide>.



that with the popularity of personal media devices in the home, families are spending less quality time together, even when they sitting around the breakfast table. However, exergames appear to be designed as a counter to Turkle's alone together theory. Because exergames combine in-person, unmediated with mediated interaction, they are largely immune to Turkle's critique. The industrial promoters of exergames have been quick to point out that playing is not like playing other video games: exergames are, to them, a communal activity.

Research has shown that parents do spend more time with their families today than they did decades ago, and that one of the reasons is that new media technologies allow parents to bring work home.<sup>28</sup> However, the technologies that are supposed to allow parents to work at home do not necessarily result in parents spending quality time there. The ability to blur the lines between work and home allows people to become consumed by their work life at the expense of their home life. Turkle called for a redefinition of what it means to be with someone else. As she stated in an interview with *USA Today*:

That mother shows up in these surveys as being with the child, but is she actually, if she's on the BlackBerry in the car? A mother putting laundry in while the child sits on the couch is not the same as a mother concentrating on this screen and going into their virtual space. Kids are totally attuned. They know ... their parents are in la-la land. (Turkle, 2010)

Still, the concern over the decline of family time precedes the new media technologies. An earlier moral panic accused the mass media of causing the decline of quality time at home with the family. According to Koepnick (2011), these anxieties about the family are part of a long history of a set of anxieties about time spent with

---

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.asanet.org/images/journals/docs/pdf/asr/Dec11ASRFeature.pdf>.

media at home, and also about women. Two hundred years ago, there were complaints about people reading too much.

The family room filled with different people reading books created a lot of concerns and anxiety, particularly regarding women, because all of a sudden they were on their own, their minds were drifting into areas that could no longer be controlled. (as cited in Williams, 2011, p. 2)

Indeed, in *Reading the Romance*, Radway (1991) found that White, middle-class, Midwestern housewives of the 1980s enjoyed reading romance novels at home because it was a way to spend time on themselves. For these women, “reading the romance is a ‘declaration of independence’ and a way of saying ‘This is my time, my space. Now leave me alone’” (p. 213). Given video games’ bad reputation for inciting violence and contributing to childhood obesity, they are well-positioned to take some of the blame for the decline of the family as well.

### **Exergames, Femininity and Family Time**

Look Mom, your family, in a room, together! (Kevin Butler explaining why video games are a great addition to your family home, on a TV commercial for the “Dear PlayStation” advertising campaign)

The discourses around *Wii Fit Plus*, YSFJMC, *Wii Fit U*, and GFWMB all reflect a nuclear family ideal and therefore demonstrate how particular elements of the 1950s ideal woman have emerged in the contemporary exergames ecology. Specifically, this narrative illuminates the broader cultural narratives about contemporary women’s lives and the long history of portioning women’s access to and participation with technologies. In TV commercials, we saw celebrities and ordinary people talking about how much they enjoy playing exergames as a family activity (*Wii Fit Plus*, *Wii Fit U*), and because of the difficulties of being a stay-at-home mother (*Wii Fit Plus*, *Wii Fit U*, YSFJMC, GFWMB). In the *Wii Fit Plus* TV commercial, at the end of every busy day, parents and child

congregate in the living room to play *Wii Fit Plus* together. Likewise, the TV advertisement and game box for *Wii Fit U* construct a reactionary image of womanhood (the woman in the commercial loves the *Wii Fit U* because “it even tracks your progress while you cook”), and depicts family members enjoying physical activity together, and even as a way for a mother to stay active while chasing after one of her children outside.

These examples make it clear that exergaming is an intentional response by the gaming industry to the debate over quality time and family time. Several additional examples from the “Dear PlayStation” TV advertisement campaign for PlayStation 3 aptly address the concern over family time from the perspective of the white, middle-class mother (Figure 31).

Lindsey McDermott, “Miffed Mom”: Dear PlayStation, my family never spends time together and...

Kevin Butler, “Family Whisperer”: No more words. Just get the fam a PS 3. You’ll get free access to a world of entertainment on the PlayStation network. I mean look at this freakishly happy fake TV family here. Daughter’s on Facebook. Son’s gaming online. Mother’s streaming a dramady on Netflix. See, they’re just like your family.

McDermott: That’s great! But I don’t look like her.

Butler: She smells like strawberries.



*Figure 31. “Dear PlayStation” commercial titled, “She Smells Like Strawberries” (2009).*

Son: We’ll make this quick.

Daughter: Family time’s dropping fast, people.

Son: Beeeew!

Daughter: Time to upgrade to ... Wii U.

Son: With Wii U we can play Super Mario 3D World!

Daughter: Find secrets with the Wii U game pad.

Son: And did we mention, togetherness?

Daughter: Just check out the simulation.

Father: Whoa.

Mother: I look good.

Father: I look like I’ve been upgraded. Bow!

Son: Give the gift of family when you upgrade to Wii U for \$299.99. Rated “E” for “Everyone.”



Figure 32. “Family Time” Wii U commercial (2013).

In both cases, the mother needed a simple explanation for why she needed to buy video games. As was argued in Chapter 5, these examples reflect the dominant ideologies in gaming culture that bar women access and the traditional ideals surrounding the alleged proper ways for women and men to spend their time in the domestic space. The explanation provided the details of the game consoles and in-game world action, but more importantly what game play would actually look like in the home. In the “Family Time” commercial (Figure 32), the children re-enact game play on the TV screen, which includes the woman dancing after scoring a goal while her family stands and cheers. Video games are depicted as facilitators of quality time.

The ESA's 2013 survey of mothers who play video games found that 56% of all mothers described game play primarily as an activity that could involve the entire family (ESA, 2013). As an executive director of the Institute for Play pointed out:

Games provide a wonderful platform for intergenerational play and learning. Kids often take the lead in showing their mothers what they know how to do in the game—they are the experts! This gives both mothers and their children a chance to interact and learn together, which we know from a developmental perspective has great benefits.<sup>29</sup> (Salen, 2014)

Thus, the industry has emphasized family time, having learned that this is why women as mothers enjoy playing video games.

We must also consider this construct as part of the climate of feminism in the United States—the timing of exergames coincides with many women's rejecting of feminism. Here, exergames are framed as empowering through conservative womanhood at a time when that image may have renewed appeal. Baumgardner and Richards (2004) insisted that young women today are taking on girlie feminism—listening to boy bands while maintaining a political stance. However, as McRobbie (2009) found in the aftermath of feminism and in light of what Douglas (2010) has called enlightened sexism, there is a problem with this idea. Not only are young women today not identifying as feminists—they are also opposing feminism. In doing so, they are also rejecting the hard-won accomplishments of generations of feminists.

Two instances of gender politics have recently drawn national media attention to the ways in which women take charge of their careers and to the claim that women cannot have it all. In February 2014, Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Facebook, presented a TED Talk about her controversial 2013 book, *Lean In*. Her talk

---

<sup>29</sup> This comment was cited in the ESA's 2014 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry.

went viral, and has revived the backlash in media outlets, such as the *Washington Post* article, “Recline, Don’t ‘Lean In’ (Why I Hate Sheryl Sandberg)” (Brooks 2014). Sandberg urged women “to lean into their careers and speak up on issues of women’s rights, in order to enact overall positive change for women, both working and nonworking” (Greenhalgh, 2013).

One of the most poignant and controversial portions of her book is her assertion that the media fail to offer positive realistic portrayals of women’s lives, and that this leaves little room for women to identify themselves. Commentators, noting the huge number of problematic stock images and stereotypes, deplore the lack of realistic and pluralistic images and messages about women in mass media. In a partnership with Getty Images, Sandberg hoped to problematize the sexist stock photos we so often see in the media, such as White, middle-class businesswomen in dark power suits, and carrying briefcases. Some participatory forms of online mass media have turned these images on their head, such as the commentary on limited representations of women through displaying an array of stock images of “women laughing alone with salad,” which is exactly what it sounds like (2011). These efforts are best seen in a comparison of Lean In Getty Images (left) and the alternative, problematic stock images (right), provided by *Time* magazine’s (2014) online NewsFeed (Figure 33, Figure 34, Figure 35):



*Figure 33.* “Work and Kids.” *Time* magazine online NewsFeed (2014).



Figure 34. “Eating and Working.” *Time* magazine online NewsFeed (2014).



Figure 35. “Eating Salad.” *Time* magazine online NewsFeed (2014).

In addition, a prominent narrative about women, femininity, and feminism is that women still cannot have a happy and fulfilling life while juggling professional and family responsibilities. Media sources suggest that mothers are policed for their choices and desires, including parenting style, work, and family. Some critics go as far as saying it is impossible to have it all, not because of this policing, but because it is simply not possible (Slaughter, 2012). In 2012, magazines asked, “Are You Mom Enough?” (*Time*), declared “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All” (*The Atlantic*), and described “The Fantasy Life of Working Women” (*Newsweek*) (Figure 36).<sup>30</sup> Men’s work and family choices, however, are rarely, if ever, questioned.

---

<sup>30</sup> There are many critiques of these three cover stories. A commentary on [bitchmagazine.org](http://bitchmagazine.org) by Kelsey Wallace (2012), “Anne-Marie Slaughter in the *Atlantic*: Women Still Can’t Have It All. Can Anyone?” provides its own critique and a summation of many others’ work. More information: <http://bitchmagazine.org/post/anne-marie-slaughter-in-the-atlantic-feminist-magazine-women-work-life-balance-children-career>.





Figure 36. “Are You Mom Enough?” (*Time*, 2012); “Why Women Still Can’t Have it All” (*The Atlantic*, 2012); “The Fantasy Life of Working Women” (*Newsweek*, 2012).

The particular segment of the 1950s ideal of womanhood is an example of how the hard work of the feminist movement is being undone under the pretext that feminism has now been achieved; exergames make parts of 1950s femininity a choice, while the way that exergames merge work and play together sanctions them as efficiency tools. In this way, exergames are construed as enabling women to meet the cultural expectation of having a perfect body. For example, all four of the video games analyzed here use the narrative of empowerment through time management, time with family, and fitness. In the in-game world, game box, and commercials, McCarthy, in YSFJMC, claims that the game is for you—it is there to help a mother and housewife, no matter how much time she has, and whatever her fitness goals.

Second, this construct frames game play as a good thing, because it assists women in making time for husband and children within their traditional social roles. Like the “Family Time” commercial for PlayStation (“family time’s dropping fast people!”... “And did we mention, togetherness?”), the *Wii Fit U* print advertisement and TV commercial portrayed a nuclear family playing the exergame within the household in

framing game play as empowering. This is all the more problematic in video games and video game culture, because it perpetuates exclusionary, stereotypical, and sexist discourses about women, femininity, and participation.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has asserted that the resurgence of a complex and contradictory version of the “ideal woman” in exergames is a result of today’s socio-cultural and political climate in the United States. In addition, this construct is found to be symptomatic of gender politics in America and of the idea that because young women believe that the battles of feminism have been won, it is acceptable to reject feminism now. Finally, this chapter contended that in exergames, this manifests in the framing of women’s game play as empowering. Overall, these discourses are not so much about selling exergames as a way to maintain the status quo in gaming culture. Rather, selling video games to women in this way was necessary because, unlike the allegedly real masculine video gamers in the male-dominated gaming culture, women needed to be told why video games are good for them. In all cases, the construct is leveraged to sell exergames as a means of female empowerment and to deflect accusations about the deleterious effects of video games.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand how and why the “ideal woman” is constructed in the contemporary exergames ecology. In order to solve this puzzle, I examined four contemporary exergames: *Wii Fit Plus*, YSFJMC, GFWMB, and *Wii Fit U*. The guiding questions of this study were as follows. How do contemporary, console-based exergames and related paratexts define what it means to be a woman in video game culture? What does this construction reveal about contemporary cultural ideals about women, technology, and domestic space? How does the socio-historical context inform this construction of womanhood? I found that the definition of women in misogynistic gaming culture is not monolithic. Second, exergames reflect ideals surrounding gendered work/leisure divide of time spent at home. Next, exergames reflect ideals surrounding gendered work/leisure divide of time spent at home. Finally, the “ideal woman” construct is a symptom of and contributor to the political, social, and culture contexts of the 2000s.

This chapter situates this research within feminist game studies, and explains the major findings of the study. It challenges the notion that gaming culture and women are monolithic, and urges scholars to consider exergames as a relatively unexamined avenue that has rendered the threatening aspects about femininity in gaming culture safe. In addition, it asks game scholars to avoid studying video games only within the context and history of video games. Instead, there is a need for more research that considers gender and video games as a symptom of and contributor to politics, society, and culture. This

chapter also discusses the limitations of the study. Finally, it concludes with a discussion of future research in this area, a potential audience reception study, and implications for the video game industry.

Many examples of blatant misogyny have been documented by feminist game studies scholars, beginning with studies of the pink games movement of the 1990s (Cassell & Jenkins, 1999). In addition, the literature on gaming culture and casual games often adopts a utopian vision by focusing how casual games are expanding the gaming audience or making games seem normal (Chess, 2011; Juul, 2010; Vanderhoef, 2012). As I have shown, when the literature does focus on how casual games reinforce hegemonic masculine video game culture, it does not fully contextualize these definitions of games and women in terms of the culture and cultural values that surround women, technology, and domesticity. In other words, this literature focuses on discourses over gender and video games within gaming culture.

I found, in contrast, that misogyny in gaming culture is not uniform. By touting exergames as for women, women and women's game play are devalued and delegitimized. This reframing asks feminist game studies scholars to shift their attention from depictions of women in video game texts and to more covert forms of exclusion that depict the ways in which women are invited to spend their time, especially their time at home. In the case of the Nintendo Wii and exergames, the threatening aspects of femininity are softened and made less controversial than they are elsewhere. However, they still degrade women, and for that reason exergames are part and parcel of a misogynistic culture. These games are a platform *just* for women or *only* for women, and

that is why exergames identify women as game players whose game play is considered to be less valued, not real, and not legitimate.

I have shown how exergames, as a subset of casual games, are a subaltern form of misogyny in gaming culture, and how these reflect ideals of women and technology. Exergames are a blatant example of misogyny, because they construct game play for women strictly through domestic labor. Women's conditional inclusion invites the participation of women in gaming culture, but only in a small, designated area. This also allows the contextualization of video games in terms of the ideals about women, technology, and domesticity. This construction of idealized womanhood is complex and contradictory—conveying traditional (stay-at-home mother and housewife) and modern notions of womanhood (working and stay-at-home mothers), while simultaneously empowering women through technology.

As a microcosm of women's position in exclusionary gaming culture, exergames demonstrate the tumultuous, exclusionary landscape that women must navigate in gaming culture. Simultaneously, the "ideal woman" construction in the contemporary exergames ecology subverts the notions of public/private, work/leisure, men/women, and domestic space by inviting women to play at home, but only when play is a form of work. In other words, traditional notions of domestic space associate the household with women's labor and men's leisure, but with exergames, the line between women's leisure and labor in the home become blurred.

As this textual analysis has demonstrated, women's problematic position in video game culture is not only about game developers and game designers—it is also a result of discourses, including those in the popular press, that support a type of video game player

who plays for particular reasons. In addition, this study contends that this “ideal woman” is symptomatic of today’s historical, cultural, political, and economic climate. This includes the childhood obesity epidemic, school shootings, the *Brown v. EMA/ESA* court case, moral panics surrounding the mass media, concerns over the decline of family time, and definitions of femininity in Western culture.

### **Limitations**

As a textual analysis, this study does not make claims about how women think about, play, and enjoy exergames. This research primarily focused on exergame advertisements, additional paratexts, and the in-game world content. The methodological lens of this study was useful in narrowing the focus of the study and making the project manageable. Indeed, these sources are instructive and reflective of larger social, cultural, and political trends, specifically as they relate to women. And, although there is no evidence here of women’s interpretations, this study has revealed the dominant messages that bombard women in video game culture.

Another limitation of this study is that it examined exergames in the form of mobile phone apps and online sites. This was a strategic choice not only in order to keep the project narrow in focus, but also to make broader connections between video games, gender, and domestic space. Coupling this study with analysis of other forms of exergames can help to elucidate the function of exergames as a cultural phenomenon.

In addition, this study was unable to address the role of pleasure in video game play and the readings are informed, but are my own. In order to develop my findings fully, however, it is necessary to complement this research with responses from women who play these games. As the seminal study in media studies by Hall (1973) claimed,

there are many audience responses to the media. Audiences can accept, reject, or have a negotiated reading of media texts. In addition, scholars such as Fiske (1992), Chesher, Crawford, and Kücklich (2006), and Kennedy (2006) have documented the longstanding trend of counter-gaming and resistance in video games and gaming culture, whereby game players resist the dominant messages and game mechanics and create countercultures of their own. For instance, Chesher, Crawford, and Kücklich (2006) argued,

While games often come burdened with ideology, this does not mean players cannot find ways of resisting interpellation. There is a long tradition of playful subversion, from the *Quake* players who wrapped female “skins” around male avatars and early game modifications like *Castle Smurfenstein* to the sophisticated “countergaming” culture of today, which includes mods that act as a form of political critique (e.g., *Escape from Woomera*), games that engage directly with social issues (such as those created by Molleindustria), and satirical machinima like *The Strangerhood*.

Therefore, there is no question that women resist this construct of womanhood and play these games for reasons other than spending time with family and staying in shape.

Women are not simply dupes to the images and messages among exergames and, more broadly, in gaming culture at large.

Surely, women play video games in general simply for fun and entertainment. For many women, exergames and exergame play may solely be a form of pleasure, enjoyment, irony, and/or escape from the misogynistic gaming culture or even escape within the context of motherhood. In my chapter on the construction of women as exermoms and in my chapter on the construction of how women are intended to play video games, for instance, it would be useful to have women’s responses in order to get a clearer picture of how they are actually understood and played by women—including the role of pleasure and counterculture. Finally, supplementing this study will allow scholars

to narrow in on the role of pleasure and women's own understanding of their position in video game culture.

### **Recommendation for Future Research**

There could not be a more crucial time to do research in this area. It is clear that that gaming continues to be a culture of deep misogyny, and that this has been once again brought to public light due to recent death threats in 2014 to feminist culture critic Anita Sarkeesian and the #gamergate Twitter campaign that attacked women. As Sarkeesian explained in an interview on an October, 2014 episode of the political satire show, *The Colbert Report*, she was once again the threat of a massive hate campaign. In fact, she was forced to leave her home and cancel a scheduled lecture at Utah State University when someone threatened to “commit the biggest school shooting massacre if I was allowed to speak” (Sarkeesian, 2014). Overall, Gamergate is part of the broader narrative of the boys' club positioning of gaming culture. Specifically, Sarkeesian claimed,

I think women are seen as threatening because we are asking for games to be more inclusive. We're asking for games to acknowledge that we exist and we love games.... They are lashing out because we are challenging the status quo of gaming as a male dominated space. (Sarkeesian, 2014)

Therefore, it is essential for more research to be done in the area of exergames and the construction of women. Not only is the market for video games constantly changing, but wearable fitness technologies and fitness trackers for mobile phones also continue to evolve at an exponential rate. As this occurs, it is vital for game scholars to discern how video games targeted at women are a result of and are contributors to not only gaming culture, but also the dominant cultural ideals about femininity, domesticity, and technology. Overall, we must understand how video games aimed at the women



demographic function as a broader cultural narrative of women's equity, access, and participation with media technologies.

This raises an opportunity for future research: an audience reception study. By conducting in-depth interviews with women who play exergames, we can arrive at an even more holistic understanding of the messages surrounding them. In addition, in-depth interviews can be conducted with women as mothers in general, and specifically as it relates to technology in the home. In particular, this might entail recruiting adult women as video game players through snowball sampling. The guiding questions will include: How do adult women who play these games understand their own construction? How do they respond to these retrograde understandings of womanhood? How and why do they enjoy playing exergames? What do they make of all the moral panics surrounding video games? What do they think about women's position in exclusionary gaming culture? Through such a project, we can learn how these messages may support, complicate, and even contradict women's identities in video game culture, and how and why women play exergames.

### **Implications for the Video Game Industry**

There is a large disconnect between those in the video game industry and academics. This study has implications for the video game industry, in terms of better understanding the position of women in gaming culture, but also in the production of video games that target women. There has been a push in recent years to design video games for a broad spectrum of game players, and specifically women. As I have explained, contemporary exergames are part of the broader trend of casual games, produced for consoles, mobile platforms, and online spaces. Indeed, the perceived

archaic stereotype of the male gamer and the perceived gender gap have been recognized by both academics and those in the video game industry. Yet, this study has shown that the same tropes among video games and the paratextual evidence paint a different picture. Many discourses surrounding women and the family as game players have actually resulted in perpetuating women's positions in exclusionary gaming culture, and game play and game styles are still stereotypically designed and marketed.

If women are to achieve parity in video game culture, it is necessary for game designers, developers, and scholars in game studies to work together to make sense of this trend. There are far too few conferences, such as Meaningful Play at Michigan State University, where those in the industry and in academia get to have productive discussions and debates about issues like the ones addressed in this study. As a recent roundtable that I co-chaired and moderated, titled, "Gender Inclusive Game Design: An Academic and Industry Discussion," show, there is much we can learn from each other in terms of games designed for women and gaming culture. Regardless of where these conversations begin and occur, it is vital that we continue to look at the operation of video games as instructive in understanding the definition of women—as technological users, as video game players, and in domestic space as a function and symptom of the broader social, cultural and political contexts.

## References

- 2014 media kit. (2014). *Southern Living*.
- Aarsand, P. A. (2007). Computer and video games in family life: The digital divide as a resource in intergenerational interactions. *Childhood 14* (2): 235-56.
- Aarsand, P. A. (2009). Gaming and territorial negotiations in family life. *Childhood 16*(4): 497-517.
- Alter, C. (2014). "10 ridiculously clichéd stock photos of women vs. lean in's alternatives." *Time*.
- Anderson, J. & Rainie, L. (2012, May 18). The future of gamification. Retrieved from <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Future-of-Gamification/Overview.aspx>
- Baranowski, T., Abdelsamad, D., Baranowski, J., O'Conner, T. M., Thompson, D., Barnett, A., Cerin, E., & Chen, T-A. (2012). Impact of an active video game on healthy children's physical activity. *Pediatrics 129*(3): e636-e642.
- Barbie: Instruction booklet. (1991).
- Barry, A. M. S. (1997). *Visual intelligence: Perception, image, and manipulation in visual communication*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Baumgardner, J. and Richards, A. (2004). Feminism and femininity: or how we learned to stop worrying and love the thong. In Harris, A. (2004). *All about the girl: Power, culture, and identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Begy, J. & Consalvo, M. (2011). Achievements, motivations and rewards in Faunasphere. *The international journal of computer game research*. 11:1. Retrieved from [http://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/begy\\_consalvo](http://gamestudies.org/1101/articles/begy_consalvo)
- Behrenshausen, B.G. (2007). Toward a (kin)aesthetic of video gaming. *Games and Culture 2*(4): 335-54.
- Benedettl, W. (2011). After passing on Kinect, Sony makes a move on hardcore gamers. *NBC News*.
- Beauvoir, S. de. (1961). *The second sex*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Boellstorff, T. (2008). *Coming of age in second life: An anthropologist explores the virtually human*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Bogost, I. (2011). Persuasive Games: Exploitationware. *Gamasutra.com*. Retrieved from [http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6366/persuasive\\_games\\_exploitationware.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/6366/persuasive_games_exploitationware.php).
- Bogost, I. (2005, December). Proceedings from the Digital Arts and Cultures conference: *The Rhetoric of Exergaming*. Copenhagen, Denmark.
- Bogost, I. (2011). Shit Crayons. Presented at the Game Developers Conference, San Francisco. Retrieved from [http://www.bogost.com/writing/shit\\_crayons.shtml](http://www.bogost.com/writing/shit_crayons.shtml)
- Bogost, I. (2013). Perpetual adolescence: the Fullbright company's 'Gone Home'." *Los Angeles Review of Books*. Retrieved from <http://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/perpetual-adolescence-the-fullbright-company-gone-home>
- Bolin, G. (2011). *Value and the media: Cultural production and consumption in digital markets*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Boyer, S. (2011). Proceedings from the DiGRA 2011 Conference: Think Design Play. *Jane Fonda's Wii Fit: Continuity, contingency, and concordance in fitness gaming*. p. 1-8.
- Bradley, P. (2005). Mass media and the shaping of American feminism, 1963-1975. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Brody, G. H., Stoneman, Z., and Sanders, A. (1980). Effects of television viewing on family interactions: An observational study. *Family Relations*. 29(2): 216-220.
- Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association (2011). 131 S. Ct. 2729, 2737.
- Brummett, B. (2008). Social issues in disguise: An introduction to sneaky rhetoric. *Uncovering Hidden Rhetorics: Social Issues in Disguise*, (1-12). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bruun, H. (2011). Genre in media production. *Journal of Media and Communication Research*. 51: 22-39.
- Bryce, J. W. (1980). *It's all in the family: An ethnographic study of families and television*. Ph.D. dissertation, Teacher's College, Columbia University.
- Burrill, D. (2010). "Wii will become silhouettes." *Television New Media*, 11(3), 220.
- Butcher, G., & Dunbar, K. (2012). Video games: harmful or helpful? *Learning & Leading with Technology*, 29(7), 6-7.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cassell, J. (1998). *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and computer games.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cassell, J. & H. Jenkins. (1999). Chess for girls: Feminism and computer games. In J. Cassell & H. Jenkins (Eds.), *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (pp. 2-45). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Castell, S. & M. Bryson. (1999) *Retooling play: Dystopia, dysphoria, and difference.* In J. Cassell & H. Jenkins (Eds.). *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (pp. 232-261). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Casual Games Association. (2012). Casual games and industry facts.
- Casual Games Association. (2012). FAQs.
- Chafetz, J. Saltzman., Dworkin, A. Gary. (1986). *Female revolt: women's movements in world and historical perspective.* Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allanheld.
- Charles, T., Bustard, D., & Black, M. (2011). Experiences of promoting student engagement through game-enhanced learning. *Serious games and edutainment applications.* pp. 425-445.
- Charmaz, K. (2000). Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods, in Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research.* 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. pp. 509-535.
- Chesher, C. Crawford, A. & Kucklick, J. (2006). "Gaming networks: editorial." *The Fiberculture Journal.* Issue 8. <http://eight.fibreculturejournal.org/>.
- Chess, S. (2011). A 36-24-36 Cerebrum: Productivity, Gender and Video Game Advertising. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 28(3), 230-252.
- Chong, K. (2007). "Ubisoft threatens to sue comedy forum over Jade Raymond, Assassin's Creed." *N4G.*
- Christison A., Khan H.A. (2012). Exergaming for health: A community-based pediatric weight management program using active video gaming, *Clinical Pediatrics,* 51 (4) pp. 382-388.
- Clarke, A. E. (2005). *Situational analysis: Grounded theory after the postmodern turn.* London: Sage Publications.
- Cole, D. (2007, July 20). Martha Stewart makes a Wii cake with *Wired* magazine. *Infendo.*

- Collins, G. (2009). *When everything changed: the amazing journey of American women from 1960 to the present*. New York: Little, Brown and Co.
- Consolvo, M. (2012). Confronting toxic gamer culture: A challenge for feminist game studies scholars. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*.
- Consalvo, Mia. (2009). Hardcore casual: Game culture return(s) to Ravenhearst. *Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, Orlando, Florida. ACM Portal.
- Consalvo, M. and Allen, M. (2003). *Internet research annual: selected papers from the Association of Internet Researchers conferences*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Cresente, B. (2009). "Wii fit officially topples Halo 3 sales." *Kotaku*.
- Crittenden, A. (2001). *The price of motherhood: Why the most important job in the world is still the least valued*. New York, NY: Metropolitan.
- Croshaw, B. (2009). *Wii Sports Resort Review*. *The Escapist Magazine*.
- D'Acci, J. (1994). *Defining women: Television and the case of Cagney & Lacey*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.
- Daley, A. J. (2009). Can exergaming contribute to improving physical activity levels and health outcomes in children? *Pediatrics* 124(2), pp. 763-771.
- The decline of marriage and rise of new families. (2010). Pew Research Social and Demographic Trends.
- Darms, L. (2013). *The riot grrrl collection*. New York: Feminist Press.
- Dear Sophie Chrome advertisement (2011).
- Deterding, S. (2012a). Gamification: Designing for motivation. *Interactions*. New York, 19(4), pp. 14-17.
- Deterding, S. (2012b, May 23). Moving outside the box: From game-centered interventions to playful contexts. Retrieved from <http://gamification-research.org/2012/05/moving-outsidethe-box-from-game-centered-interventions-to-playful-contexts/>
- Dolan, B. (2014, January 15). Fitbit, Jawbone, Nike had 97 percent of fitness tracker retail sales in 2013. *MobiHealthNews*.
- Douglas, J. (2010). "Get fit with Mel B review." *Gamespot*.
- Douglas, S. J. (1987). *Inventing American broadcasting, 1899-1922*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Douglas, S. J., Michaels, M. W. (2004). *The mommy myth: The idealization of motherhood and how it has undermined women*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Douglas, S. J. (2010). *Enlightened sexism: The seductive message that feminism's work is done*. New York, NY: Times Books.
- Douglas, S. J. (2010). Some thoughts on the question "how do new things happen?." *Technology and Culture*. April 2010: 293-304.
- Drell, L. (2011). 7 tips for marketing to moms. *Mashable*.
- Duchenne, S. (2013). "Casual gaming: Is it a crime?" *Gamezone*.
- Easley, E. & Ghosh, A. (2013). Incentives, gamification, and game theory: an economic approach to badge design. In *Proceedings of the fourteenth ACM conference on Electronic commerce (EC '13)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 359-376.
- Edery, D. (2009). *Changing the game*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press.
- Electronic Arts. (2012). EA Sports Active 2.
- Elmer, E. E. (1957). Review of *Women's Two Roles: Home and Work*. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 250-251
- Entertainment Software Association (2012). 2012 Essential facts about the computer and video game industry.
- Entertainment Software Association (2013). Mom gamers study: A new generation of gamers.
- Essential facts about the computer and video game industry. (2014). *Entertainment Software Association*,
- Facer, K. (2003) *Screenplay: Children and computing in the home*. London: Routledge
- Facer, K., J. Furlong, R. Furlong and R. Sutherland ( 2001) "Home is where the hardware is: Young people, the domestic environment and 'access' to new technologies," in J. Hutchby and J. Moran-Ellis (eds.) *Children's Technology and Culture: The Impact of Technologies in Children's Everyday Lives*, pp. 13-27. London: Routledge Falmer.
- Fallon, J. (Performer) (2013). *Gaming with my mom (Late night with Jimmy Fallon)* [Web].
- Ferguson, C. J., Coulson, M., & Barnett, J. (2011). Psychological profiles of school shooters: Positive directions and one big wrong turn. *Journal of Police Crisis Negotiations*, 11(2), 141-158.
- Fey, T. (2011). *Bossypants*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Co.

- Flichy, P. (2007). "From no technology to all technology" and "Technological determinism-social determinism," in Flichy, P. *Understanding Technological Innovation* Cheltenham, UK, 2007, vi-72.
- Flynn, B. (2003). "Geography of the digital hearth." *Information, Communication and Society* 6(4): 551-576.
- Fiske, J. (1992). "The cultural economy of fandom," in Lewis, L.A. (ed.) *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*. New York: Routledge.
- Fit Pregnancy* (2009).
- Foster, D. (2010). "'Wii're here for a good time:' The sneaky rhetoric of Wii-themed parties." *The Journal of American Culture*, 33(1).
- Foucault, M., & Rabinow, P. (1991). *The Foucault reader*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Frederick, S. (2010). *Gamers unite! The video game revolution*. Mankato, MN: Compass Point Books.
- Fron, J., Fullerton, T., Ford Morie, J., & Pearce, C. (2007). The hegemony of play. In *Situated Play: Proceedings of the Third Annual Conference of the Digital Games Research Association*, ed. Akira Baba, 309-318. Tokyo, 2007.
- Gadamer, H. (1975). *Truth and method*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Gailey, C.W. (1994) "Mediate messages: Gender, class, and cosmos in home video games," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27(4): 81-97.
- Gao, Y. & Mandryk, R. L. (2012). The acute cognitive benefits of casual exergame play. CHI '12: Proceedings of the 30th international conference on human factors in computing systems, Austin, Texas, USA.
- Gauntlett, D. (2002). *Media, gender and identity: An introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Gee, J.P. (2008). Video games and embodiment, *Games and Culture* 3(3-4):253-263
- Genette, G. (1997). *Paratexts: Thresholds of interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Get Fit With Mel B Bundle [Print Photo].
- Get fit with Mel B for the Wii. (2013).
- Gettyimages. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.gettyimages.com/>



- Gitelman, L. and Pingree, G. B., (2003). "Introduction: What's new about new media?" in Gitelman, L. & Pingree, G.B., *New Media, 1740-1915*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, xi- xxii.
- Gobel, S., Hardy, S., Wendel, V., Mehm, F. Steinmetz, R. (2010). Serious games for health—personalized exergames. Proceedings of the *International Conference on Multimedia*, pp. 1663-1666.
- Goldenberg, S. (2008). "Hockey moms are key players in hunt for women's vote." *The Guardian*.
- Graner Ray, S. (2003). *Gender inclusive game design*. Revere MA: Charles River Media.
- Greenhalgh, M. (2013). "Everybody hates Mommy." *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*.
- Greenwald, W. (2010). "Kinect vs. Playstation Move vs. Wii: Motion Control Showdown." *PC Mag*.
- Grisham, L. and Deutch, L. (2014). Timeline: Deadly school shootings since Columbine. *USA Today*.
- Grossberg, L. (1988). Wandering audiences, nomadic critics. *Cultural Studies*, 2, 377-391.
- Haenfler, R. (2014). *Subcultures: the basics*. London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Hall, S. (1973). Encoding and decoding in the television discourse. Birmingham, England: Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham, 1973. 507–17.
- Hamari, J., Koivisto, J., and Sarsa, H. (2014). Does gamification work? – a literature review of empirical studies on gamification. In proceedings of the 47th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences, Hawaii, USA, January 6-9, 2014.
- Hampp, A. (2009). "Ubisoft gets in touch with female side." *Advertising Age*.
- The harried life of the working mother. (2009). Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends
- Healthy, Fit, Happy Mom (DVD Image). (2013). [Print Photo].
- Heeter, C. (2008). Gender studies and feminism, in Perron, B. and Wolf, M., eds., *The Video Game Theory Reader 2*. Routledge, Inc.
- Hendershot, H. (2004). *Nickelodeon nation: The history, politics, and economics of America's only TV channel for kids*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Hills, M. (2002). "Fan cultures between community and 'resistance'." *Fan Cultures*. New York: Routledge.

- Hippyfreak's wii iso only thread*. (2011, August).
- Hodgkins, C. (2012). Street fighter 25th anniversary collector's set overview [Web Video].
- Holt, J. (2010). The "ideal woman", *Soundings*. CSU Stanislaus, CA.
- Hoover, S. M., Clark, L. Schofield. (2003). *Media, home, and family*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- HSN at a glance. (2007).
- Huntemann, N. (2012). Feminist game studies. *Antenna: Responses to Media & Culture*.
- Huntemann, N. (2010). Irreconcilable differences: Gender and labor in the video game workplace. *Flow TV*. (January 22, 2010).
- Huntemann, N. (2010). "Pink slips for Booth Babe? No way! Re-train and re-skill." (February 13, 2007). *Flow TV: Special Video Games Issue*.
- In defense of Jade Raymond, producer for Ubisoft's Assassin's Creed. (2007, November 9). *Game Front*.
- Jacobus, M. (1990). *Body/politics: women and the discourses of science*. New York: Routledge.
- Janeway, E. (1971). *Man's world, woman's place: a study in social mythology*. New York: Morrow.
- Jones, S. E., & Thiruvathukal, G. K. (2012). *Codename Revolution: The Nintendo Wii Platform*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Juul, J. (2010). *A casual revolution: Reinventing video games and their players*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kafai, Y. B. (2008). *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New perspectives on gender and gaming*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kaiser, R. (2010). "Hardcore maleness." *Escapist Magazine*
- Kawash, S. (2011). New directions in motherhood studies. *Signs* 36(4), pp. 969-1003.
- Kent, S. L. (2001). *The ultimate history of video games: From Pong to Pokémon—The story behind the craze that touched our lives and changed the world*. New York, NY: Three Rivers.
- Kilbourne, J. (1999). *Can't buy my love: How advertising changes the way we think and feel*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

- Killham, E. (2012). "You can't unsee these 11 video game box art clichés." 15 June 2012.
- Kinder, M. (1991). *Playing with power in movies, television, and video games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Kohler, C. (2012). "Kevin Levine explains *Bioshock Infinite*'s bland box art."
- Kornreich, L. (2007). A Nintendo for Grandma. *Time Magazine Online*.
- Kücklich, J. (2005). Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Games Industry. *The Fibreculture Journal*, 5. Retrieved from <http://five.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-025-precarious-playbour-modders-and-the-digital-games-industry/>
- Kuittinen, J., Kultima, A., Niemela, J., & Paavilainen, J. (2007). Casual games discussion. *Proceedings of the 2007 conference on future play*, Toronto, Canada. ACM Portal.
- Kücklich, J. (2005). Precarious playbour: modders and the digital games industry. *The fiberculture journal*. 5: 2005.
- Late Night with Jimmy Fallon premieres its first-ever video game week. (2010, June).
- Lavery, D. (2012). More mothers of young children in U.S. workforce. *Population Reference Bureau*.
- Levine, E. (2014). What Should Women Watch? Feminized Productivity and the End of Soap Opera. *Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association Annual Meeting, Puerto Rico Convention Center and the Caribe Hilton., San Juan, Puerto Rico*. 2014-09 12.
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2002). *Qualitative communication research methods*. 2nd ed. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Living in a spice world: Mel B talks fitness, mommyhood and more. (2014). *Modern Mom*.
- Long, N., & Harker, J. (2008). "Nintendo unleashes Wii Fit marketing – but is there enough stock?"
- Lotz, A. D. (2006). *Redesigning women: Television after the network era*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Mackay, H., Ivey, D. (2004). *Modern media in the home: An ethnographic study*. Rome, Italy: John Libbey Pub.
- Mantilla, K. (2013). "Gendertrolling: misogyny adapts to new media". *Feminist Studies*. Vol. 39, No. 2, pp. 563-570.

- McDonnell, A. M. (2014). *Reading celebrity gossip magazines*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- McIntosh, J. (2014). Playing with privilege: The invisible benefits of gaming while male. *Polygon*.
- McRobbie, A. (2009). *The aftermath of feminism: Gender, culture and social change*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Meehan, E. R., & Byars, J. (2004). Telefeminism: How lifetime got its groove, 1984-1997. *The Television Studies Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Mel B Totally Fit (DVD Image). (2008). [Print Photo].
- Meyerowitz, J. (1994). Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America 1945-1960. Philadelphia: Temple University Press: 252.
- Microsoft (2012). Top 10 reasons to choose Microsoft advertising to engage moms. Retrieved from <http://www.adweek.com/news/technology/those-multitasking-smartphone-connected-tv-loving-moms-139710>.
- Miller, K. (2011). *Playing along: digital games, YouTube, and virtual performance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, Z. (2008). "Cammie Dunaway on Wii Fit." *Nintendo World Report*.
- Millington, B. (2009, June). Wii has never been modern: 'Active' video games and the "conduct of conduct" *New Media & Society*.
- Morgan, M., Alexander, A., Shanahan, J., & Harris C. (1990, February). "Adolescents, VCRs, and the family environment." *Communication Research*.
- My baby girl-Nintendo DS. (2008).
- Nardi, B. A. (2010). *My life as a night elf priest: An anthropological account of World of Warcraft*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Nakamura, L. (2002). *Cybertypes: Race, ethnicity, and identity on the Internet*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Nakamura, L. (2010). Pregnant Sims: Avatars and the visual culture of motherhood on the Web," *Electronic elsewheres: Media, technology, and social space*, edited by L. Spigel, K. Soyoung, & C. Berry City, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nelson, A. (2011). Get Fit With Mel B (PS3) Review.
- Nintendo (2006). "Wii would like to play."

- Obama, M. (2010, February 9). "Remarks of the First Lady Michelle Obama: Let's Move Launch."
- Oldenziel, R. (1997). "Boys and their toys: The Fisher Body Craftsman's Guild, 1930-1968, and the making of a male technical domain." *Technology and Culture* 38(1): 60-96.
- O'Meara, S. (2012, June 7). Internet trolls up their harassment game with "beat up Anita Sarkeesian." *Huffington Post*.
- Ortner, S. B. (2010). Access: Reflections on studying up in Hollywood. *Ethnography*. Parent's corner: Imagine. (2014).
- Ouellette, L., & Wilson, J. (2011). Women's work. *Cultural Studies*, 25(4-5), 548-565.
- Pearce, C. (2009). *Communities of play: Emergent cultures in multiplayer games and virtual worlds*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Pearce, C. (2006). Productive Play: Game Culture From the Bottom Up. *Games and Culture*, 1.1, 17-24.
- Pepper, S. (2009). The Tracy Anderson method presents post-pregnancy workout DVD [Print Photo].
- Perron, R., Graham, C., Feldman, J., Moffett, R., & Hall, E. E. (2011). Do exergames allow children to achieve physical activity intensity commensurate with national guidelines? *International Journal of Exercise Science*, 4(4), 257-264.
- Peskowitz, M. (2005). *The truth behind the Mommy wars: Who decides what makes a good mother?* Emeryville, CA: Seal.
- Pew Research Center for the people and the press. (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.people-press.org/>
- Pew Research Center Social and Demographic Trends survey. (2009, July 20). Retrieved from <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/>
- Phillips, W. (2011). LOLing at tragedy: Facebook trolls, memorial pages and resistance to grief online. *First Monday*. Vol. 16. No. 12. Retrieved from <http://firstmonday.org/article/view/3168/3115>.
- Pigna, K. (2009). Wii Fit sales officially surpass Halo 3 in U.S.
- Pointiflex (2011). Social media marketing to women: what every brand needs to know.
- Prensky, M. (2002). The motivation of gameplay: The real twenty-first century learning revolution. *On the Horizon—the Strategic Planning Resource for Education Professionals*, 10(1), pp. 5-11.

- Ramsay, R. (2009). Wii Fit Plus review.
- Raz, J. G. (2014). Casualness. Essay in *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies*. Eds. Mark Wolf & Bernard Perron. Routledge. p. 135-141.
- Rey, P. (2011). Playbor vs. weisure. *The society pages*.
- Robinson, B. K. & Hunter, E. (2008). Is Mom still doing it all?  
 Reexamining depictions of family work in popular advertising. *Journal of Family Issues*, 29: 465.
- Rose, J. (2013, November). Museum of motherhood.
- Rose, M. (2012, April 27). Nintendo reveals lifetime sales for numerous DS, 3DS, Wii games. Gamasutra.
- Rosen, R. (2000). *The world split open: how the modern women's movement changed America*. New York: Viking.
- Rosenberg, D., Depp, C. A., Vahia, I. V., Reichstadt, J., Palmer, B. W., Kerr, J., Norma G., & Jeste, D.V. (2010) "Exergames for subsyndromal depression in older adults: A pilot study of a novel intervention." *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry: Official Journal of the American Association for Geriatric Psychiatry*. 18(3), pp. 221-226.
- Rovio Entertainment Ltd. (2012). About us.
- Rrobba. (2010). The motion control war - Playstation Move, Kinect, Wii Motionplus. N4G.
- Rubin, V. L. & Camm, S. C. (2013). Deception in video games: examining varieties of grieving. *Online Information Review*, 37 (3), 369-387.
- Russoniello, C.V., O'Brien, K., & Parks, J.M. (2009). The effectiveness of casual video games in improving mood and decreasing stress. *Journal of Cyber Therapy and Rehabilitation*, 2(1), 52-66.
- Ryan, J. (2011). *Super Mario: How Nintendo conquered America*. New York, NY: Portfolio Penguin.
- Sarkeesian, A. (Director). (2012). *The Mirror*. United States: TEDxWomen 2012.
- Sarkeesian, A. (2014). "Gamergate". *The Colbert Report* [Web].
- Schott, B. (2010). Playbor. *The New York Times*.

- Scopus reverse citation analysis. (2013). [Graphic illustration the articles that cite Lynn Spigel's (1992) *Make room for TV: Television and the family ideal in postwar America*]. *Reverse citation analysis from Scopus*.
- Sedgwick, E. Kosofsky. (2008). *Epistemology of the closet*. Updated ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Seger, L. (1996). When women call the shots: The developing power and influence of women in television and film.
- Shaw, A. (2010, May). What is video game culture? Cultural studies are game studies. *Games and Culture* 5(4), 403.
- Shaw, A. (2012, February). Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity. *New Media & Society*.
- Sheff, D. (1993). *Game over: How Nintendo zapped an American Industry, captured your dollars, and enslaved your children*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Silverstone, R., Hirsch, E., & Morley, D. (1992). Information and communication technologies and the moral economy of the household, in R. Silverstone & E. Hirsch (eds.). *Consuming technologies: Media and information in domestic spaces*, pp. 11-31. London: Routledge.
- Sionna, A. (2009). Wii for weight loss: How moms are using this system to drop baby weight (and how you can too)." Examiner.com.
- Smith, D. E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: a feminist sociology*. Boston: Northeastern University Press.
- Smith, M. R. and Marx, L. (1994). *Does technology drive history? The dilemma of technological determinism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Smith-Robbins, S. (2011, February 7). "This game sucks": How to improve the gamification of education. Retrieved from [http://www.educause.edu/ero/article/"-game-sucks"-howimprove-gamification-education](http://www.educause.edu/ero/article/)
- Spigel, L. (1992). *Make room for TV: Television and the family ideal in postwar America*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Spigel, L. (2001). *Welcome to the dreamhouse: Popular media and postwar suburbs*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Spigel, L. (1992). *Private screenings: Television and the female consumer*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Spurr, B. (2012). "Eulogy for 'beat up Anita Sarkeesian.'" *Newgrounds*.

- Staiano, A. E., & Calvert, S. L. (2011), "Exergames for physical education courses: Physical, social, and cognitive benefits." *Child Development Perspectives*, 5: 93-98.
- Sternheimer, K. (2007). Do video games kill? *Contexts*, 6, 13-17.
- Subrahmanyam, K. & Greenfield, P. (2000). Computer games for girls: What makes them play? In J. Cassell & H. Jenkins (Eds.). *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (pp. 46-71). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sutton-Smith, B. (1997). *The ambiguity of play*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schroeder, J. E. & Zwick, D. (2004). Mirrors of masculinity: Representation and identity in advertising images. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 7:1, 21-52. Routledge.
- Szecsei, M. (2011). Get fit with Mel B review – may contain traces of spice... girl. *PC Mag*.
- Taylor, E. (1989). *Prime-time families: Television culture in postwar America*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Taylor, N., Jenson, J., & De, C. S. (2009, December 1). Cheerleaders/booth babes/ Halo hoes: Pro-gaming, gender and jobs for the boys. *Digital Creativity*, 20(4), 239-252.
- Taylor, T.L. (2009). Intentional bodies: Virtual environments and the designers who shape them, *International Journal of Engineering Education*, 19(1), 25-34.
- Taylor, T. L. (2003). Multiple pleasures: women and online gaming. *Convergence*. Vol 9., No. 1, pp. 21-46.
- Taylor, T.L. (2006) *Play between worlds: Exploring online game culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Thin, A. & Poole, N. "Dance-based exergaming: User experience design implications for maximizing health benefits based on exercise intensity and perceived enjoyment," *Transactions on Edutainment IV*. Volume 6250, 2010, pp 189-199.
- Tincknell, E. (2005) *Mediating the family: Gender, culture and representation*.
- The Tonight Show starring Jimmy Fallon. (2014).
- Toossi, M. (2002). "A century of change: The U.S. labor force, 1950–2050." *Monthly Labor Review*, Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2002/05/art2full.pdf>
- Trefry, G. (2010). *Casual Game Design: Designing Play for the Gamer in ALL of Us*. Burlington, VT: Elsevier.



- Turkle, S. (2011). *Alone together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the Screen*. New York, NY: Touchstone.
- Ubisoft unveils imagine video game series for girls. (2007).
- Vance, M. (2004, January). Casual online gamer study. *Digital Marketing Services for America Online*.
- Vanderhoef, J. (2012). "One life to live: Denigrated media cultures." [gameranx.com](http://gameranx.com).
- VGChartz: Wii Fit Plus. (2014).
- VGChartz: Wii Sports. (2014).
- Vranica, S. (2008). Nintendo hopes its 'Wii Fit' works out: New exercise games are targeted at women; Alienating core gamers? *The Wall Street Journal*.
- Wajcman, J. (1991). *Feminism confronts technology*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Wallace, K. (2012). "Anne-Marie Slaughter in the *Atlantic*: 'Women still can't have it all.' can anyone?" *Bitch Media*.
- Walsh, K. (2014, April). "I did it!" *Fitness* magazine. p. 18.
- Welsh, K. (2014). Mel B's post-baby workout. *Body and soul Mums*.
- Werbach, K., Hunter, D. (2012). *For the win: how game thinking can revolutionize your business*. Philadelphia: Wharton Digital Press.
- Wii Fit plus. (2014). *Nintendo*.
- Williams, A. (2011). Quality time, redefined. *The New York Times*.
- Williams, R. (2003). *Television: Technology and cultural form*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Winn, J., & Heeter, C. (2009) Gaming, gender, and time: Who makes time to play? *Sex Roles*, 61, 1-13.
- Winston, B. (1998). *Media technology and society: A history: From the telegraph to the Internet*. London: Routledge.
- Wodak, R. & Meyer, M. (Eds.) (2001). *Methods of critical discourse analysis*. London: Sage.
- Woerness, K. (1978). The invisible welfare state: Women's work at home. *Acta Sociologica*, 21, 193-207.

- Wolf, M. J. P. (2012). *Before the crash: early video game history*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Wolf, N. (2001). *Misconceptions: Truth, lies, and the unexpected on the journey to motherhood*. New York, NY: Doubleday.
- Women, work and motherhood. (2012). *Pew Research Center*.
- Yohe, M. (2013). "Video game cover critique."
- Your shape: Featuring Jenny McCarthy with camera - Wii. (2009).
- Zichermann, G., & Cunningham, C. (2011). *Gamification by Design: Implementing Game Mechanics in Web and Mobile Apps*.
- Zimmerman, E. (2011). Women laughing alone with salad. *The Hairpin*
- Zynga. (2012). FarmVille.