Changing the Core: Redefining Gaming Culture from a Female-Centered Perspective

by

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Abstract

In the mid-2000s, the spread of casual, social, and mobile games led researchers, journalists, and players to believe that video gaming was opening up to previously marginalized audiences, especially women. At the same time, game culture has seen a significant increase in incidents of sexism and misogyny. This dissertation uses a critical exploration of industry texts and practices, as well as interviews with thirty-seven female gamers, to explain how these conflicting narratives can co-exist and how women navigate their contradictions.

The dissertation posits that industrial changes and the broadening of gaming audiences have motivated a Gramscian crisis of authority, where previously hegemonic male gamers fear losing their privileged position in this space. As a protective measure, they have reacted with both overtly and implicitly sexist forces, such as gender-based harassment, that marginalize non-male gamers, barring them from cultural power. This works to maintain what this project describes as a "core" of gaming culture that is exclusionary and misogynistic.

At the same time, women and other marginalized audiences express deep pleasure in gaming and have developed nuanced strategies for managing their exclusion, pursuing positive gaming experiences, and competing with men on their own turf. In doing so, they put themselves in a complicated position, often simultaneously enjoying their identity as gamers while being told they should not possess that identity. By embodying their conflicting identities in diverse and negotiated ways, however, they work to break down the idea of "women" as an essentialized group and instead outline new ways of being female. This performs feminist action not only by diversifying ideas of who women can be, but also in demonstrating how they are already deeply

connected to technologies like games despite their historic masculinization. Women are barred from gaming identity in many ways, but they are also still already part of its “core”.

In addition, their management of conflicted identities illustrates pathways along which players could build networks of affinity across gendered lines, encouraging the development of a more equitable power structure in gaming, and perhaps in other masculinized and sexist spaces as well.

Introduction

Within the context of the United States, the first video games arose as a side-effect of Cold War military research in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when academic and military researchers who had access to advanced computers developed programs that used these for entertainment purposes. At this time, computing technology was limited and expensive, largely only available to government contractors, think-tanks, or universities. As the cost of computing dropped and computing technology became more widespread, however, an industry solely focused on the creation of games developed. By the early 1970s, video game companies were creating both arcade games, or individually programmed games located in a large cabinet for public play, and home consoles, smaller devices that attached to a consumer's television for the purpose of playing video games. Sales of both types of games boomed. *Pong*, the first commercially successful arcade video game, sold over 8,000 cabinets in its first two years, with each individual unit posting record profits. "Other [coin-operated] machines collected $40 or $50 dollars a week. In those early days, *Pong* frequently brought in four times as much as other machines" (Kent, 2001, p. 53). Home consoles also sold rapidly; the Magnavox *Odyssey*, the first video game system on the market, sold 100,000 units in its first year (Kent, 2001, p. 54). Other companies rapidly capitalized on the success of Atari and Magnavox, introducing their own arcade games and home systems to create an industry that drew in over $8 billion dollars in arcade sales and $3.8 billion dollars in home console sales by 1982, at the peak of the arcade industry (Wolf, 2008).

This success proved to be unsustainable. In terms of arcade games, the industry achieved

saturation in the early 1980s, with few new venues arising to purchase games. At the same time, the continued advance of cartridge-based home consoles, where players could easily swap games in their own systems, made trips to the arcade less attractive. This was especially true as console costs declined and their technology improved, slowly making arcade games both expensive and outdated. Arcade games peaked in profitability in 1982, with each subsequent year posting lower profits. The console industry also faced problems of their own. In their drive to release new titles continuously, console game companies produced lower quality, repetitive products and failed to innovate effectively (Kent, 2001, p. 235). Because of this, players refused to purchase new games and systems, resulting in an industry-based recession in 1983.[1] Profits dropped and many companies, including industry pioneer Atari, folded or sold their video game branches off to other corporations in order to recover from severe losses. However, the home console market made a resurgence when Nintendo introduced the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) to the American market in 1985. Focusing on both quality technology and quality games, the NES rapidly became the best-selling system of its time, and led the way for other companies to re-enter the market.

Since 1985, the video game industry has experienced relatively unimpeded growth, improving in terms of technology and profits over time. Games have developed more and more realistic graphics, larger in-game environments, and intense narratives. They have also achieved network connectivity, or the ability to play with others across the Internet, increasing the ways in which people can connect while gaming. And games have become a major entertainment industry. According to the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), a trade association focused on the business and public affairs aspects of the gaming industry, video game sales alone

[1] Problems within the game industry were the main reason for this downturn, but it was likely worsened by the overall economic recession the U.S. experienced between summer 1981 and early 1983.

amounted to $15.4 billion in 2014, with the total consumer spending on games amounting to $22.41 billion (ESA, 2013, pp. 12-13). The same data set shows that over half of US households own at least one gaming console and 42% of Americans play games regularly, meaning three or more hours per week (ESA, 2013, p. 2).

Most importantly for this project, the video game industry has recently seen a dramatic expansion in the platforms on which it can offer games and in the styles of games audiences seek. More specifically, the mid-2000s to the present have seen the rise of mobile, social, and other forms of so-called "casual games", or easy to learn games aimed at a broad audience. Because of these changes, video gaming is currently in a relatively new era. While much of the industry's history rested on the assumption that video games were primarily made for and used by boys and men, the current era of gaming, which I will term the "post-casual era[2]", has seen new audiences arise. In particular, video game developers and journalists believe that mobile, social, and casual games are key to reaching female audiences, potentially redefining the gender assumptions surrounding games and game culture.

At the same time, gaming culture and game communities have experienced a sharp rise in aggressive sexism and misogyny during the post-casual era. These trends run counter to the idea that gaming is becoming more diverse, in that they deliberately try to drive out new types of players and broader audiences. This dissertation therefore attempts to explain how these two trends can coexist and what that means in terms of power and gender equality. Specifically, it argues that the industrial changes of the post-casual era have motivated a Gramscian crisis of

[2] Overall, this dissertation divides gaming into two main eras— pre-casual and post-casual. The former describes gaming prior to the rise of casual games and their subsequent normalization of gaming, while the latter describes the current time period, when casual games have spread gaming to wider audiences. I have chosen this terminology, rather than calling the current era the "casual era", because I felt that "casual era" implied that casual games were the dominant form of gaming. As this dissertation will show, that is not truly the case; therefore, "post-casual" indicates the significant impact they have had on games and gaming culture, but does not imply dominance on the part of casual games.

authority, where the rise of new players undermines traditional, hegemonic ideas about game audiences. Because of this, previously hegemonic white, male gamers are trying to maintain gaming as a homosocial space through a variety of exclusionary practices, while newer types of players are working to redefine gaming as an inclusive arena.

To support this argument, this project draws on a critical exploration of industry practices, texts, and themes, as well as thirty-seven in-depth interviews conducted with female gamers. Through these, it focuses on the sociocultural role of video games and gaming in the post-casual era, the impacts of industrial and audience change, and the actual experiences of female players, such as when and how they resist or subvert the traditionally masculine identity of games and gamers. The project does so through the following research questions:

1. In a moment where the gaming industry is simultaneously seeking to expand its market base to include more women and families yet many of its traditional consumer base is seeking to police its boundaries and reaffirm gaming itself as an exclusionary male preserve, what dilemmas do women still struggle with the most when trying to identify as both gamers and women?
2. Given the deep contradictions inherent in identifying as both female and gamer, why and how do women take on these differing and at times seemingly mutually exclusive identities?
3. What strategies do they deploy in struggling with these identifications? What subject positions do they inhabit and engage with as they navigate these?
4. What can be learned from women's strategies for managing identity in this forum, where they are engaging with a traditionally masculine medium, often feel isolated from other players, and get minimal outside help?

To answer these questions, the dissertation employs existing video game studies, other areas of media and gender research, and identity theories that posit identity as flexible, contextual, and ever-changing. Combining this theoretical background with participants' interviews reveals that female gamers still face extensive struggles when trying to identify as both female and gamer simultaneously, despite discursive narratives that games are becoming more open to diverse players. Women who game are opting to engage with a medium that is strongly marked as "not for them". However, they do so because they find extensive pleasure in games, in elements like narrative exploration and skill development, and because they can use games as a space to engage in a struggle over rights and identity. Through identifying both as women and as gamers, and inhabiting these identities simultaneously and in diverse and negotiated ways, they help break down the idea of "women" as an essentialized group, and instead outline new ways of being female. Although players rarely refer to their actions as feminist, many of their strategies for choosing games and managing their engagement with game spaces "make precisely this kind of intervention" (Kennedy, 2005, p. 198). Furthermore, they undermine the existing hegemony in gaming that prioritizes men over women by revealing the constructed nature of this hierarchy.

Interviewees also revealed, however, that these strategies were not without their challenges. Women's interventions into gaming culture and gender identity are complicated and detailed; they involve many levels of acceptance and resistance. Because of this, women become practiced navigators of multiple fragmented positions rather than a single essential identity, but have to perform extensive labor in able to embody their desired position[3]. In turn, the amount of

[3] This is not to imply that men naturally have a more essentialized identity or that they do not also struggle at times with their identifications. As this dissertation will show, games often prioritize a specific form of hegemonic masculinity that many men likely do not identify with. However, as I only interviewed women for this project, it

labor required to embody and defend contradictory identities often encourages them avoid this struggle and present as either female or a gamer, rather than fighting to be both at once. Their interventions are constrained— by a desire to protect themselves from harassment, to enjoy individual pleasures in game play rather than fight for acceptance, and more. However, their ability to deploy intervention strategies demonstrates how individuals can take feminist action even in an environment that is specifically structured as exclusionary and where they often feel isolated and alone. Where traditional feminist politics are about banding women together into a movement for change, this dissertation shows how women can embody feminism on their own, as well as how or when they cannot. In doing so, it lays out strategies for managing misogyny not only in games, but also in other areas where the community women or other marginalized groups identify with does not necessarily include them.

To theorize this intervention, this dissertation will not only draw on interview data and past research, but will also engage with the concept of "core", a term in video gaming that refers to games that take the highest investment of time and skill in order to complete successfully or to the gamers driven to invest that time and skill in order to be the best. Although core is generally deployed as an industrial, generic adjective for a particular set of aggressive, male-oriented games, I use it instead as a conceptual framework regarding centrality, a means for defining boundaries, policing what is central or marginal in games, game spaces, and gamer identity. In determining what is allowed in the core and what is relegated to the margins, as well as in analyzing how this changes contextually, we can demonstrate how the "core" of gaming is a non-essential space. Rather, it is changeable and can be challenged and re-imagined, as female gamers are already attempting to do.

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cannot at this point draw conclusions about men's identifications and will therefore remain focused on women's challenges.

Although it may be easy to dismiss gaming as a simple form of entertainment, undeserving of further analysis, “our discussions of gaming culture must always begin with the assumption that video games are more than a playful diversion. Indeed, video games not only afford a unique and important space in which to think critically about representation, narrative, human beliefs, and behaviors, but they also direct attention to the centrality of race, gender and nation: they offer a window into persistent stereotypes, political debates, and an insatiable desire for all things violent” (Leonard, 2014, p. xii). Video games, like other media, take on an important role in defining cultural systems of power in particular because they are often uninterrogated and so easy to dismiss as unimportant.

In addition, sexism and misogyny in gaming can spill over to other areas, affecting both broad sociocultural trends and individuals’ daily lives. Research into sexist content in games, for instance, has shown that it can affect individual women’s sense of self-efficacy, while also perpetuating stereotypes about gender roles among both male and female players (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 2009; Yao et al., 2010). Women who have critiqued game content or game culture have experienced threats of assault or rape, “doxxing”, or the publication of their personal information online, and even “swatting”, when harassers falsely call in a domestic disturbance at their home address in order to get a SWAT team sent to the location. These incidents obviously affect their daily lives, often requiring them to leave their homes for safety. But trends like these, and the more subtle day to day harassment of regular female gamers, also legitimate and reinforce misogyny, by making it appear easier for women to leave problematic spaces than to fix them.

Finally, the historical masculinization of games and gaming culture, and some of their problems with sexism, is not unique; sports, for instance, represent another area where, when

women choose to engage, they are often doing so in the face of assumptions that women are disinterested in sports and that sports-oriented environments such as bars and stadiums are primarily homosocial spaces for men. Women also face exclusion and misogyny on many online platforms like Twitter or Reddit. Therefore, insight into the possible interventions women make in gaming may serve as a model according to which resistance on other platforms could be explored. To begin this process, the remainder of this introduction will provide a brief overview of the masculinized history of video games and of the current moment's unique changes and discussions surrounding gender, as well as insight into the dissertation's methodology and structure. Subsequent chapters will then address relevant literature, present participants' insights, and analyze these through the use of "core".

Video Games' Masculinized History

Video games have a long history as a masculinized technology. This is not to say that men are the only ones who play games; women have always been present in gaming to at least some degree. Rather, it means that a variety of forces have constructed video games as something meant more for men than for women. Although arguments exist regarding what the first video game was, the contenders are deeply rooted in the masculine milieu of the military-industrial complex (Dyer-Witheford and dePeuter, 2009, pp. 7-8). William Higinbotham, who worked on the first atomic bomb, created the analog computer game *Tennis for Two* in 1958. It served as a Visitor's Day attraction at the Brookhaven National Laboratory, the nuclear research lab on Long Island where Higinbotham worked. The game to follow *Tennis for Two*, 1961's *Spacewar*, was created "in an MIT department saturated with funding for air-defense systems" (p. 8) and on a computer produced by a company specializing in military technology. Even the Magnavox Odyssey, the first commercial game console, was originally developed by Ralph Baer

in 1966 when he convinced a supervisor at the military electronics firm Sanders Associates to let him develop a side project that would take advantage of the rapidly dropping cost of a home television (Kent, 2001, pp. 21-22). Each of these developments took place within an industry predominantly populated by men and defined by traditionally masculine behaviors like mechanical tinkering, which linked early video games to masculinity as well.

Gaming environments also affected games' gender construction. For example, arcade culture grew out of masculinized spaces like bars and pool halls. As Keisler, Sproull, and Eccles stated in 1985, "The video arcade culture shares many characteristics of a larger culture- the culture of young, male adolescents. At the outset, anyone can peer into a video arcade and, except for electronic bells and whistles, see the pool hall of yesterday. Video arcades are places where young males hang out with their buddies. Occasionally they bring their girlfriends, but the girlfriends' role is to admire the performance of her boyfriend, not to perform in her own right" (p. 455). Again, this is not to argue that women never played arcade games; multiple participants from this study related stories of going to the arcade with friends, both male and female. However, they did recognize that men dominated the environment, with one participant, Harley, even stating, "There were very few girls. Some of them were good though. The ones that did play were good. But there were a lot of men, college kids, and you just barely saw one [woman playing]… The rest of them were cheering their boyfriends on or they were on the side." Women were primarily spectators to arcade culture rather than real participants.

Early home consoles and computer-based games provided an exception to games' overall masculinization, advertising primarily to families in the recognition that their systems would require the use of a shared television for gaming or the purchase of a home computer (Williams, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2015). Both of these required parents to assent to the presence of video games

in the home. However, when the video game industry crashed in the early 1980s, producers chose to redefine their audiences more narrowly to manage future risk (Graner Ray, 2004; Williams, 2006; Shaw 2014a). Because young men had been visible game players during the arcade era, and because of masculine discourses present in gaming magazines (Kirkpatrick, 2015) as well as other areas of the industry, game developers focused on this group as a proven consumer base to ensure successful products. With these forces and many others at work, video games were firmly masculinized by the mid-1990s (Kirkpatrick, 2012), naturalized as something specifically for men and boys. In turn, this affected and was reflected in audience demographics. "As late as the mid-1990s, 80 percent of players were boys and men" (Dyer-Witheford and dePeuter, 2009, p. 20). Industry members constructed games as a product for young men, and "gamers" became narrowly defined along similar terms.

The only real attempt to change this construction occurred in the 1990s. At this time, a few game companies and a number of feminist activists tried to address gaming's gender gap and draw in more women and girls (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998; Laurel, 1998). This girl games movement rested on the assumption that games were inherently more boy-oriented, and developers therefore sought to create games that appealed to girls by drawing on their pre-existing interests, such as social relationships and cooperative exploration (Laurel, 1998; Graner Ray, 2004). "The girl games movement did not result, however, in the creation of a place for female players in the hard-core gamer market. Rather, it made content designed 'for girls' a peripheral interest" (Shaw, 2014a, p. 170). By separating girl games from games as a whole, the movement maintained gaming itself as a masculinized space, while offering girls only a limited spot on the industry's margins. Furthermore, many of the companies that targeted girls specifically went out of business only a few years after the girl games movement began. This

business collapse, combined with the fact that game audiences did not actually diversify, marked the girl games movement as a general failure, and developers made few or no other attempts to alter games' gender construction. The industry continued to think of their "gamers" as young men, and cultural texts largely represented them as white, cisgendered, and straight.[4] This led to the development of broad cultural stereotypes that also defined gamers in this way, marking individuals who were not straight, white, and male, but who did play games, as abnormal or "other",

The Start of the Post-Casual Era

In the mid-2000s, however, a series of industrial changes began. First, Nintendo deliberately contradicted traditional logics about video game audiences with the release of their *Wii* game console, focusing their advertising on families and targeting people developers generally considered unlikely to game, such as moms and the elderly. In doing so, the system introduced a new era in the history of games, where so-called "casual games", or easy-to-learn games targeted at broad audiences, became a major player in the overall industry. Although casual video games existed for many years prior to the Nintendo Wii, in the form of games like Solitaire and Minesweeper, these were tangential to the main industry, included on home computers for free, and rarely thought of as "real games". The Wii brought these games to the forefront of the industry and made them a major part of the console market, which was a bastion for the more involved, time intensive "core" games.[5] Because Nintendo had been failing to

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[4] Because the term "gamer" comes with many stereotypes regarding identity and behavior— e.g. straight, white, male, and cisgender, as well as isolated, socially awkward, and potentially aggressive (Shaw, 2012), this dissertation uses "gamer" in quotes to refer to the stereotypical identity. Self-identified gamers who do not fit these stereotypes are referred to free of quotes, while player is used more generally to refer to anyone who plays games but does not necessarily see this as part of their personal identity.

[5] The concepts of core and casual, although previewed here, will be explored in greater depth in chapter two, which will also explain how this dissertation mobilizes core as a conceptual framework rather than just an industry

compete with its console rivals in technical superiority, core game creation, and audience numbers, they made the Wii using completely different assumptions, and it proved to be a successful approach. In the year it was introduced, the Wii outsold both its competitors, the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3 (Kuchera, 2007), and by 2008 it had completely surpassed the Xbox 360 in overall sales to become the top-selling console worldwide, despite the fact that the 360 was released a year earlier (Kim, 2008).

With this success, the Wii provided widespread evidence that diverse groups of people were interested in video games and undermined the idea that games were a technology for men. The Wii's marketing campaign and easy-to-learn games directly targeted families, older individuals, and women as well as more traditional "gamers", and other industrial changes that also diversified imagined game audiences rapidly followed its success. For example, the growth of Internet-enabled smartphones has increased the reach of mobile games, which, like console or PC-based casual games[6], focus on large audiences, easy-to-play games, and entertaining mechanics rather than top-tier graphics and technical superiority. Overall, the industry's attention has shifted from a sole focus on big-budget "Triple A" games produced by large studios for a primarily male audience to including many smaller, more accessible games aimed at a broad population. Rather than assuming that traditional "hardcore" or core games are the best means for obtaining an audience, some industry members are recognizing the power wielded by casual games and the diverse markets that purchase and play them. As Jesper Juul writes in his book *The Casual Revolution*, "The rise of casual games has industry-wide implications and changes

descriptor.

[6] Although casual games and mobile games are frequently distinguished based on their different platforms and mechanics, the overall argument of this paper focuses on the differences between traditional "core" video games and casual/mobile/social games. Therefore, these three types will frequently be discussed simultaneously under the term "casual games", drawing on their similarities rather than their differences.

the conditions for game developers, pushing developers to make games for a broader audience" (p. 7). The success of casual games, Juul argues, demonstrates that diverse individuals and audiences will buy games, which should fundamentally alter the structure of the game industry and its products. Because of this argument, the video game industry and community have spent the past decade, the post-casual era, dominated by the idea that anyone can now be a gamer and that "gamers" are dead (Alexander, 2014). Rather than expecting all gamers to be young, white, cisgender men, supporters of the diversification narrative believe that gamers embody many different identity categories and expect that these will not interfere their ability to identify simultaneously as a gamer.

Challenges to the Diversification Narrative

At the same time, however, this era has also seen a backlash against diverse players. For women, this has involved major sexist incidents that have targeted female gamers, game developers, journalists, and cultural critics. For instance, 2012 saw professional gamer Miranda Pakozdi quit her competitive team due to sexual harassment from her coach, who focused the team's web stream camera on Pakozdi's body while making lewd comments. Feeling this was an unfair distraction to her teammates, and uncomfortable for her, Pakozdi opted to remove herself from the team (O'Leary, 2012). In the same year, media critic Anita Sarkeesian proposed a project examining tropes surrounding women in video games; in response, wide swaths of the gaming community published her personal information online, threatened her safety, and even created a video game in which users could beat up her virtual representation (Sarkeesian, 2012). As Sarkeesian released her actual analyses of video games, threats continued, to the extent that she has at times been driven from her home in order for her own safety (Campbell, 2014).

Although these events received outraged protests and a high level of publicity, it was not

enough to prevent further issues; as recently as 2014, a female game developer stepped forward to discuss harassment in the industry, describing an incident when a male games journalist graphically propositioned her during a work-related conversation (Edidin, 2014). She spoke under a pseudonym to avoid professional and personal consequences, such as those experienced by another developer, Zoe Quinn. When her ex-boyfriend claimed that she traded sexual favors for favorable press coverage of her game Depression Quest, Quinn became the center of a sustained harassment campaign that also caused her to leave her home, fearing for her safety (Auerbach, 2014; Wingfield, 2014). These incidents culminated in 2014's GamerGate, which, motivated by the allegations against Quinn, was ostensibly a movement trying to decrease political correctness in gaming and improve ethics in game journalism. In actuality, the movement involved virulent misogyny and the online harassment of female game developers, cultural critics like Sarkeesian, and anyone who supported them, including popular male developers. For example, Phil Fish, creator of the critically acclaimed independent game *Fez*, had his personal information hacked and publicly posted online after he defended Zoe Quinn, leading him to sell his games company and leave the industry (Maiberg, 2014).

Individuals face further problems if they possess multiple characteristics that make them a gaming minority. The impact of this intersectionality can be seen in the treatment of comedian/actress/gamer Aisha Tyler, who was widely attacked when she hosted game company Ubisoft's press conference at the 2012 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), gaming's largest industry event. Tyler has been deeply involved in the gaming community for years and responded to the harassment with an open letter detailing her experience and love of the medium. Despite this, many community members still felt that her position as a black woman meant that she could not possibly be "a real gamer", that she had to be an outsider Ubisoft had brought in as

part of a publicity stunt (Tyler, 2012; Jackson, 2012; Narcisse, 2012; Stuart, 2012). Tyler defended her "gamer cred" extremely well, but the fact that she had to do so in the first place demonstrates the strength of community stereotypes and expectations, as well as their exclusionary nature. Furthermore, it indicates how gaming culture can bleed into other areas. In the case of Tyler's treatment, harassment by gamers played off broader racial issues, in that they assumed she was a "diversity hire" for Ubisoft, rather than a skilled equal. Discriminatory trends both draw on and feed into wider culture issues.

These instances demonstrate that, although some elements of the industry and some players support diversification, others seek to preserve the gendered, racialized, and overall exclusionary nature of gaming. Specifically, they see games as a homosocial space in which men can be men (without having to be "politically correct" or sensitive to the feelings of others), and they perceive changes to the industry as threatening this preserve. To protect it, they deploy harassment to drive out outsiders who may seek to change what gaming is or what it means. This can also be seen in day-to-day behavioral trends in gaming spaces and culture. Harassment is not limited to public or industrial figures; female players speak eloquently about the day-to-day issues they face, particularly when they choose to play video games online. Some interviewees for this dissertation state that male players treat them as a "nuisance", while others describe more offensive experiences, such as frequent rape comments or threats of assault. These problems are particularly common in online gaming due to the anonymity of other players. Past research demonstrates that combining anonymity, a lack of immediate consequences, and a competitive game environment where emotions run high often means that players become more aggressive and offensive toward others (Chisholm, 2006; Fox and Tang, 2014), especially if that person does not seem to belong. Due to their gender, players often target female entrants into the

gaming community as outsiders, and women face many serious barriers to the gamer identity they want to embody.

Furthermore, even in circumstances where gaming is broadening, the treatment of women and other non-traditional gamers as “new” additions to gaming communities, brought in by casual, mobile, and social games, ignores the many individuals who have always played games and who do consider themselves to be gamers, despite the medium’s history of masculinization. This dismisses their long-standing connection to games and to their personal and cultural histories in gaming environments. It also ghettoizes them to the margins of gaming culture rather than drawing them into the heart of it, as “core”-focused audience and industry members frequently scorn casual games as overly feminized and less meaningful than more traditional hardcore games. As Vanderhoef states, “There has been a long history of linking mainstream or popular culture with the feminine for the purpose of denigrating both” (p. 1). Treating casual games as non-serious or overly commercial builds a barrier between female players and the mainstream gaming community, or the core of the community. Associating femininity with casual games alone maintains traditional “core” games as masculine and indicates that they are not an area in which women have a place. When non-casual development teams push for greater gender equity, they often still encounter problems; for instance, *The Last of Us* developer Naughty Dog had to request that its popular post-apocalyptic survival game be focus group tested with women prior to its release. Without this request, the research group conducting the focus testing would have considered women to be outside the game’s target audience and excluded them from testing (Agnello, 2013). This assumption reveals to some extent the depth to which men and video games are still intimately linked in cultural imagination despite the rise of casual games and their supposed diversifying influence.

Project Goals and Significance

The contrast between the narrative that gaming is opening up and the evidence that this is not necessarily true demonstrates how the post-casual era of gaming is complicated, multi-faceted, and in need of greater study. In terms of gender specifically, this is an era of conflict, where industrial changes have motivated previously hegemonic "gamers" to police their privileged position through both common sense ideologies and direct force. Rather than being granted full entry to gaming culture and communities, women find themselves invited into some spaces and excluded from others. The rise of casual games has helped divide the industry and community along new lines; where before there was only one cultural imagining of a "gamer", there is now a sharp divide between core games and gamers and casual games and gamers. Some diversification has happened, but many exclusionary barriers are still in place and even a few new ones have arisen. Overall, these forces act as continued impediments between non-traditional players and the ability to identify as a gamer, demonstrating how cultural logics and expectations around an identity are difficult to change and often leave individuals in a position of conflict where they struggle to embody different parts of their identity simultaneously. Core gaming, in opposition to casual gaming, is not only an area in which women are underrepresented; it is a space defined in masculine terms, where the assumed identity of a gamer is male. This leads to the harassment and exclusion of women as outsiders and frames their negative treatment as acceptable. The current core/casual divide in gaming is contributing to a cultural power structure in which women are not treated equally.

In terms of individual experiences, the cultural construction of gamers and games in specific, limited ways can deeply affect a person's attempts to maintain and embody these identities. This can put them in a position of deep contradiction, where their desire to embody

one form of identity brings them into direct conflict with another aspect that they also feel connected to. In addition to individual impacts, limited representations and cultural understandings of certain identities and media forms can have widespread social impacts. The current dominance of masculinity in core video gaming, and the related dismissal of women and femininity, can help support gender-based inequality in broader power structures, in the form of sexism and discrimination. Research on gender harassment, for instance, shows that individuals whose identity and self-presentation violates expected norms for their group are harassed most frequently, in an attempt to fix their behavior by forcing them back into more traditional roles (Berdahl, 2007). Due to gaming's masculinized nature, therefore, women who play are likely to face increased harassment due to their outsider status and the fact that they are not "gamers". This leads to a toxic and exclusionary environment. Because of this, the interventions women make into core games and core gaming, where they are not expected or welcome, matter as a means for analyzing and potentially undermining the reproduction of sexism and misogyny in gaming. They also provide a potential model for addressing sexism and misogyny in other areas where it occurs, particularly when women are engaging with a traditionally masculine medium.

In the past, media researchers have focused more heavily on women's experiences with feminized media than their experiences with masculinized media. Janice Radway, for instance, studied women's engagement with romance novels in an attempt to understand how they coped with the derision and social ridicule feminized texts receive specifically because they are for women. Soap operas, feminized websites and Internet applications, and fashion magazines are other feminized media areas researchers have similarly addressed.

Masculinized areas like gaming, however, have often been overlooked based on the assumption that women are not present in them, or they have been studied in primarily

quantitative ways that cannot account for the nuances of individual players' experiences. This project therefore builds on past research into feminized media by prioritizing women's experiences similarly, but with a masculinized cultural space as the background. In doing so, it analyzes what women's engagement strategies are, why they choose to engage with masculine spaces, and where they encounter limitations or barriers. To do this, it draws on in-depth interviews.

Research Design

Recruitment Processes

I conducted thirty-seven in-depth interviews with self-identified female gamers, the majority of whom were recruited through online video game forums. I wrote a general post explaining that I was conducting a research project focused on women's experiences as gamers and asking interested parties to contact me for more details or to participate. When women responded, I gave them more information about the study, the ability to ask questions, and a consent form to sign electronically. Upon return of the consent form, we scheduled a time and procedure for the interview. Because recruitment occurred online, most interviews were also conducted this way, through the use of video or text chat services such as Skype or Gchat. Participants selected their preferred software for their interview, with the understanding that video chats would be audio-recorded. Following completion, text-based interviews were cleaned and audio or video interviews were transcribed, and all identifying information was removed from the final transcripts in line with Institutional Review Board (IRB) policy. Participants selected their own pseudonyms for the study, but I guided them to choose a name that differed from any of their gaming identities, for extra identity protection. All recruitment and interview

procedures were approved in advance by the University IRB and conducted in line with their regulations.

Rationale

The recruitment post used for this study was deliberately vague, giving no indication of the type of women or games I was interested in; potential participants just had to identify as and be over the age of eighteen, due to IRB restrictions. This broad approach may seem unusual for an interview based study, as interviews tend to be useful in explaining specific, nuanced phenomena. Therefore, researchers using interviews usually gather participants who possess a narrow, pre-defined set of characteristics that will make them useful contributors to the research goals. Broad recruitment, on the other hand, is frequently used to obtain more quantitative data, which can be generalized to a large population through the use of statistics. Although atypical, a broad, un-defined approach was useful in this case not in an attempt at generalizability, but in order to account for the wide variety of issues female gamers might face. As discussed earlier, people with different backgrounds are likely to face different barriers to core gaming. My choice of a broad array of people was intended to provide a similarly wide range of viewpoints on gaming's power structures and problems. Online recruitment also contributed to the range of viewpoints by expanding the geographical region from which participants were chosen; using online forums meant that participants could (and did) come from all over the US and even from around the world.

Participant Characteristics

The women who responded to the call for participants did come from a few different countries and backgrounds, although with some common similarities. First, they skewed

somewhat young; the full sample ranged in age from nineteen to forty-five but averaged just over twenty-five. This indicates that more of the participants were on the younger end of this spectrum, with only five at age thirty or above.

They were also primarily Caucasian, although they did hail from six different countries. Most participants were from various regions of the United States, but three were based in Canada, two in the UK and one in Bahrain. Early interview guides did not ask about race, meaning four women did not identify their background. Of the thirty-three who did give information on ethnicity, twenty-five were non-Hispanic Caucasians, while eight came from other ethnic backgrounds. Two identified as Arabic, two as Mexican, and four as Korean, Chinese, or Asian-American.

All research participants are college-educated, with many either holding or pursuing advanced degrees. Of the thirty-seven participants, two defined themselves as having completed "some college", and two possessed associate's degrees. Nine are currently undergraduates, and the rest all possess at least a bachelor's degree.

Impact of Online Recruitment

These demographic characteristics demonstrate that online recruitment came with some benefits and some expected limitations. For instance, I was able to recruit people from a few different backgrounds, and to talk to players across the United States, rather than being restricted to my immediate surroundings. As regions of the US differ somewhat in terms of history, culture, and gender expectations, this likely broadened the types of experiences my participants had to relate. Furthermore, although the sample tended to be young, the inclusion of at least a few older participants helped provide a perspective on how gaming has changed over time, as well as whether or not age influences access to power or control. For instance, "older women

appear to handle harassment more aggressively than their younger counterparts, confronting harassers rather than avoiding them" (Cote, 2015, p. 7). Because the goal of this study is broad exploration, rather than generalizability, even a small number of differences between participants was helpful in expanding the experiences they had to relate.

On the other hand, recruitment through video game-specific forums meant that participants were deeply involved in gaming, to the point where they would join online discussions. Therefore, this sample may leave out women who have stopped gaming, those who play less often, or those who do not necessarily identify as gamers. This could, for instance, explain the slightly younger age of the participants compared to overall industry averages. Although industry statistics show players' average age as 31 years (ESA, 2013), many older women play primarily mobile games, social games on Facebook, or casual computer games such as Solitaire (Heyman, 2014), and therefore may not visit online forums devoted to gaming as a general hobby. Future projects that build on this work may need to use off-line recruitment techniques or more specific online spheres. For the purposes of early exploration and for examining harassment and coping strategies broadly across games and genres, however, an undirected sample sufficed. Future projects that aim to reach women with specific characteristics will have to keep this in mind, and may need to use offline recruitment techniques or find online forums that target minority gaming populations.

Data Analysis

Interview material was analyzed using a grounded theory approach, in which theories and conclusions are generated directly from patterns in the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). This was the most useful approach for this project because of the research questions' focus on women's lived experiences; drawing most heavily on the content of the

interviews themselves ensured that conclusions were drawn from participants' experiences, rather than theory.[7]

Successful grounded theory develops from systematic analysis. The interviews were analyzed using a combination of open and axial coding, an approach that is sometimes described as "unitizing and categorizing" (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). In this process, each interview is carefully read and tagged for the ideas it contains; each line or short segment is marked with a one or two word code that indicates what meaning it contains. This step is known as open coding or as "unitizing", breaking the data down into its component parts. Open coding is then followed by axial coding or "categorizing", where units are grouped by similarities. Categories are motivated jointly by the project's research questions and by patterns inherent in the data. Unitizing and categorizing is an iterative process, particularly when combined with a grounded theory paradigm (Bloomberg and Volpe, 2008). Interviews, units, and categories are constantly compared to ensure that they make sense given the content of the data, and as each interview is analyzed, new topics that arise are added to the coding scheme and applied to earlier material as needed. This grants all interviews equal importance, regardless of when they were conducted or analyzed, and ensures that all relevant perspectives and ideas are considered. This significantly contributed to some of the themes of the current project and the breadth of material covered.

Dissertation Structure

Prior to analyzing the relation of gender and gaming in the post-casual era, this dissertation begins with a literature review of relevant studies, theories, and methods.

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[7] As Gray (1992) points out, this type of work can struggle to balance interpretation and cultural analysis with "allowing the subjects of the study to 'speak' in the text" (p. 27). Like her, I have provided analysis of what my participants said, but I have also tried to prioritize their experiences by including extensive quotes throughout the project, "in order to give the reader more direct access to the subjects of this study" (p. 35)

Specifically, Chapter 1 discusses foundational works in both games studies and broader media and gender research, such as Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance.* It shows how the current project both draws on and extends the questions and conclusions of these works in new but interconnected ways. Chapter 1 also outlines different theories of identity that inform the project's discussion of identity as contextual, fluid, and multiple.

Chapter 2 then begins the project's analytic work through a critical exploration of the terms "core" and "casual", both as industrial descriptors and as the theoretical framework for the following chapters and analyses. The chapter also presents the project's first analysis of elements of "core", demonstrating how the industry has changed in the post-casual era, how these changes have encouraged industry members to question their "core" audiences and content forms, and how this has motivated the potential broadening of the industry and gaming communities as well as a backlash against this diversification.

Chapters 3 through 6 draw most heavily on interview data, to show how female gamers' interactions with media in the current era of gaming are conflicted, with interviewees struggling to embody both their gender identity and their gamer identity without being singled out for this seemingly contradictory combination. Chapters 3 and 5 focus on the forces women encounter that work to maintain core as a definable, masculine sphere, such as direct harassment, gendered stereotypes, and being treated with surprise, among others. They show how these behaviors and themes separate women from gamer identity and work to relegate them to the margins of gaming rather than allowing them to enter the community or cultural "core" through overt sexism, where the sexist nature of a behavior or trend is obvious, and implicit sexism, which rests more heavily on common sense assumptions about gender and gender relations. These two forces serve to preserve gaming's existing hegemony and power for male gamers over female gamers.

Chapter 5, however, focuses on the ways in which women can and do embody a gamer identity, laying out how their preferences in gaming are personal, contextual, and rarely specifically gendered. It addresses the many subject positions women embody as they game, and how these are encouraged by or resistant to the overall culture of gaming. Through this, it demonstrates how women are a diverse, rather than essentialized, group and how both gender and gamer identity can be embodied in multiple ways. Finally, Chapter 6 wraps up with a discussion of how players cope with the conflict between core and margins, demonstrating that they are capable managers of their media environment with many specific strategies for challenging and changing conceptions of “core”. However, it also shows that managing a conflicted identity involves a significant amount of work, and that within gaming, systems of power that valorize masculinity over femininity and focus on men rather than women still exist and encourage distinction between types of gamers.

Chapter One: Literature Review

In addressing questions of gender and gaming in the post-casual era, this dissertation engages with three main areas of existing research. Obviously, it builds off previous games studies, but it also extends broader gender and media research, especially the work done by scholars like Janice Radway, who analyzed women's relation to patriarchal systems of oppression through their consumption of marginalized, feminized media. Radway discovered that her participants used romance novel reading both to resist and to reaffirm hegemonic ideas about relationships and gender. I similarly demonstrate how women sometimes resist and sometimes support existing ideologies about gender, but in this case through their engagement with a medium that is marked as not for them. Finally, the project draws on conceptions of identity and identification as non-essential in order to provide a theoretical framework through which women's desire to identify simultaneously as female and as a gamer, and the struggles they face in doing so, can be understood. To set up this foundation, this chapter reviews these areas of research and demonstrates how the work at hand draws on, builds from, and moves beyond these existing works.

Games Studies Work

The academic study of gender and gaming began somewhat late, arising almost two decades after video games first became widely available. Prior to this, developers and games journalists discussed and responded to some early gender-based trends, such as when Midway created and released the arcade game Ms. Pac-man in 1981 after realizing that their original Pac-

Man game attracted a larger female audience than most arcade systems (Worley, 1982). But academic research into gaming did not occur frequently until the mid-1990s, after the industry had experienced its recession and started to recover from it. Only a few studies predate this point.

In the mid-1980s, survey-based research into the usage of computers and video games, and the subsequent effects of these technologies, found that boys and men played video games more frequently than girls and women, generally regardless of game type (arcade, PC, or home console) or player age (Dominick, 1984; Lin and Lepper, 1987; Morlock et al., 1985; Wilder, Mackie, and Cooper, 1985). Subsequent research studies, beginning in the 1990s, then largely focused on this gender gap, trying to explain how or why it occurred. This was a significant area to explore because researchers and game developers saw video game play as an entryway into broader technological fields, like engineering or computer programing, and the lack of games for girls as a serious problem. While certainly not the only way to become interested in these areas, they argued that games provided a fun and entertaining path to comfort with technology and its workings. When fewer girls played games than boys, early games and gender researchers expected this unevenness to create power inequalities that influenced far-reaching areas such as employment and economics (Cassell and Jenkins, 1998, p. 11; Greenfield, 1984; Kiesler et al., 1985).

To prevent this, they attempted to explain why the gender gap occurred, discover what types of games girls would be more likely to play, and create games that met these needs. This was a well-meaning approach and did address many of the reasons why most women or girls would likely avoid gaming, such as a high proportion of violent content, a lack of female characters, and more.[8] However, this research largely ignored women and girls who did play

[8] Some of the many research studies that drew these conclusions will be outlined in the ensuing literature review sections.

games already. Its focus on majorities— what *most* girls would enjoy or what *most* games did to target boys— also essentialized gender to a binary rather than recognizing and allowing for the many different expressions of gender identity that individuals engage in.

This dissertation, therefore, builds more heavily off of recent work that moves away from questions of majorities and majority preferences. Specifically, it draws on and attempts to recreate more in-depth, contextual work that studies audiences, culture, and the interaction of the two. To demonstrate how the project does so, the following sections lay out the major conclusions and methods used in early games studies, outline the gaps in this research that need to be addressed, and then discuss research that has started to do this work. The games studies section of the literature review then ends with what this project contributes to existing material.

Early Games and Gender Research: Addressing the Gender Gap via Content Analysis

Gendered Preferences in Game Mechanics and Content

Starting in the 1990s, research regarding games and gender found that female players tended to prefer different types of games than their male counterparts (Kafai, 1996; Laurel, 1998; Cassell and Jenkins, 1998; Kafai, 1998; Graner Ray, 2004; Kafai et al., 2008). In her book, *Gender Inclusive Game Design*, veteran game designer Shari Graner Ray outlines many of these variances. For example, when discussing an experiment in which fourth-grade children were asked to design games, she states, "The boys' games were distinctly goal-oriented. They focused on 'getting something,' such as a lost or stolen item to be retrieved through a hunt or an exploration adventure… In contrast, the girls' games were activity based. The object of the game was the activity itself" (2004, pp. 7-8). Graner Ray argued that these differences were evidence

that the play style and mechanics of a game, which had generally been considered gender-neutral, were actually gendered. This difference was illuminated further by girls' tendency towards play that was cooperative rather than competitive and that contained options for negotiation rather than requiring conflict-based solutions to problems (p. 43). Girls also preferred games that were intuitive to learn or that guided the player more clearly at the beginning, allowing them to develop an overall strategy for play (pp. 71, 86). Other researchers and developers such as Brenda Laurel, a key contributor to the girls' games movement of the 1990s, mirrored these results in their own studies (Laurel, 1998).

In addition, researchers also found significant gender differences in terms of preferred content. For instance, Kafai (1996) found that girls tended to include less violence than boys did when designing video games to teach fractions. When a player answered a question incorrectly in a girl's game, he or she was given the correct answer, sent back a level, or forced to take French as a punishment. In the boys' games, players were eaten by sharks, verbally insulted, or faced with a "game over" message (p. 53). Despite the fact that all her participants were designing educational games, Kafai found that the consequences of failure were extremely different across genders, with boys programming harsher, more violent punishments than girls.

With these findings in mind, researchers and advocates used content analysis methods to explore the themes, character trends, and play styles present in games. They concluded that games were extremely male-oriented, reflecting few of the traits they had identified as "girl-oriented" in their studies on gendered preferences. They then used these results to explain gaming's gender gap.

Impact of Violence

For instance, Graner Ray's studies found that violence and confrontational problem

solving methods were more male-oriented than female-oriented (2004, p. 43). This was significant as violence is a component of many popular video games. Content analysis of early arcade games[9] demonstrated that violence, defined as "the act of destroying individuals or objects or the ingestion of individuals" (Braun and Giroux, 1989, p. 95) was present in 71% of games (Braun and Giroux, 1989; Smith et al., 2003). These results were reaffirmed by a series of studies in the late 1990s and early 2000s that found violence to be present in 68-89% of games (Dietz, 1998; Children Now, 2001; Smith et al., 2003; Haninger and Thompson, 2004) including 64% of E-rated games, the rating designated "for everyone" (Haninger and Thompson, 2004; ESRB Ratings Guide).[10] This is particularly relevant to the question of women playing games not only because early gender-based studies showed women tended to have an aversion to violence, but also because female characters are frequently portrayed as victims of violence. Dietz (1998) found that 21% of all games analyzed contained violence against women, a surprisingly high amount considering that 41% of games did not contain any female characters at all (p. 425). Researchers expected these high levels of violence, especially those against women, to keep girls and women from gaming.

Representing Female Characters

In addition to prominent themes like violence, researchers who used content analyses to address the gender gap in gaming found many problems with how women were portrayed in

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[9] Braun and Giroux (1989) visited seventeen arcades in Montreal and counted player interactions with different machines to determine the most popular. They then did a simple content analysis of the top 21 games and determined that 71% contained violent content.
[10] Some of these studies, such as Dietz (1998) and Smith et al. (2003), focused on top-selling games, assuming that these would be most likely to influence players due to their popularity, while others such as Haninger and Thompson (2004) took a random sample of all games. Analysis methods also ranged from examining the whole game (Dietz, 1998) to one hour of play (Haninger and Thompson, 2004) to merely the first ten minutes of play (Smith et al., 2003). However, all found high levels of violence. Dietz, the only researcher to analyze games in their entirety, found 79% contained violence.

video games. Various content analyses conducted in the early and mid-2000s found that video games systematically under-represented women, particularly as primary characters. For instance, Beasley and Standley (2002) had players complete the first 20 minutes of a random selection of PlayStation and Nintendo 64 games, the most popular systems at the time, while coding the material for game system, parental rating, genre, character gender, species, sleeve length, neckline, lower body clothing, and cleavage. They found that 71.5% of characters were male. Studies in 2004, 2006, 2007 and 2010 affirmed these results (Scharrer, 2004; Ivory, 2006; Burgess et al., 2007; Dill and Thill, 2007; Jansz and Martis, 2007; Miller and Summers, 2007; Downs and Smith, 2010). These studies looked at a wide variety of game texts (Dill and Thill, 2007; Downs and Smith, 2010) and paratexts, including advertisements (Scharrer, 2004), reviews (Ivory, 2006), magazines (Miller and Summers, 2007), and video game packaging (Burgess et al., 2007). Each tallied how frequently women appeared in these materials in comparison to men, and all found the gender ratio of their chosen material to be between 60% and 86% male.[11]

These content analysis studies also found that, when women were represented, they were often over-sexualized, dressed in inappropriate clothing for the storyline, and with unrealistic body shapes. In Beasley and Standley's study, "The majority of female characters [were] dressed in such a way as to bring attention to their bodies, particularly their breasts" (2002, p. 289). Again, later studies mirrored these results across various texts and paratexts. Studies analyzing total game content, introductory videos to games, magazine articles, and online reviews all found

[11] The study that found a gender ratio of 60% men to 40% women, Jansz and Martis (2007), looked at only twelve games and analyzed only the short filmic sequences each used to introduce players to the game. They also deliberately chose the most diverse sample of games possible, rather than reflecting games' popularity or sales numbers in their analysis. Therefore, the studies that show a larger gap in character representations, around 25% female to 75% male, are likely more representative of games' gender ratios overall, as well as of the characters players actually encounter while gaming.

that women were less commonly shown but still more likely to be sexualized than their male counterparts (Beasley and Standley, 2002; Scharrer, 2004; Ivory, 2006; Burgess et al., 2007; Dill and Thill, 2007; Jansz and Martis, 2007; Miller and Summers, 2007; Downs and Smith, 2010).

This means that, from a representation standpoint, all aspects of video gaming- content, reviews, ads, etc.- offered men and boys more characters with whom to identify directly through shared characteristics. Researchers used these gender differences in game content to explain why fewer women than men played video games at the time of the study. Given that they either had to play as male characters, with whom they might not identify, or as hyper-sexualized female characters, the researchers expected women to find games, overall, unwelcoming.

Changing Research Trends: Increasing Attention to Audience and Industry

Content analysis research has pulled out many problematic themes in video gaming, demonstrated how the structure of texts could be potentially off-putting to female players, and contributed to media effects studies that have analyzed how these themes could affect players in negative ways. For example, researchers have found that over-sexualized female representations in games may result in negative impacts on female self-efficacy, as well as the continuation of gender role stereotypes (Behm-Morawitz and Mastro, 2009; Yao et al., 2010). At the same time, a significant weakness of this work rests on the fact that games are, at their core, fundamentally interactive, meaning they respond to the user's input. Therefore, players may experience the content of the game very differently depending on who is playing, what character they select, and what path they take through the game's storyline. For example, Helen Kennedy (2002) used debates around the video game character Lara Croft to illuminate the limits of textual analysis in gaming; Kennedy found that Lara had the potential to be an empowering female character, capable of achieving feats of physical and mental strength while still being attractive and

feminine, but could also be seen as a negative role model due to the unattainability of her appearance, strength, and capability. In other words, Lara was *too* perfect, potentially driving women and girls to police themselves more excessively in an attempt to achieve the impossible. She also found that the act of playing as Lara, particularly for male players, could be read both as an instance of male mastery over the female form, through the player's control of Lara, or as a means for transgendering the player, through his identification with Lara's femaleness. These different interpretations, she argued, called for more extensive study of the contexts of games and gaming, rather than just the texts.

Video games are also increasingly networked, played in multiplayer format over the Internet. What this means is that, although interesting to study as texts, games cannot only be studied this way: the social context of who is playing and how they are interacting with the game and other players is deeply significant. Many interviewees for this study played primarily single-player games, where they explored a storyline or adventure on their own. In these games, content analysis and attention to the text may be sufficient for pulling out the main themes and trends a player has to deal with. But other participants played primarily networked games like *World of Warcraft* or *League of Legends*. Their experiences with these games could not be separated from their interactions with other players, especially as both WoW and LoL are set up to require cooperation between players in order to achieve many in-game goals. Furthermore, even the purchase of single-player games and the choice to play them occurs within a social environment in which the construction of games as masculine matters.

As interviewees for this study point out, the act of entering a game store as a woman is a very different experience than entering it as a man, as store clerks often assume women are there to buy gifts for male family members or friends, rather than for themselves. Women also find

that, when they express their desire to buy games for themselves, clerks and other players tend to direct them towards casual, rather than core, games, demonstrating how these are differently gendered and how that affects players' actual experiences. Without a recognition of audience and how audiences interpret, use, and interact through games, a large portion of these games' significance is missing.

Finally, researchers recognized that the industry producing games was, like game audiences, male-dominated. In 2005, the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), found "the 'typical' game developer is white, male, and heterosexual. Furthermore, the survey revealed the workforce is younger and more likely to be single or childless than the average population. Men dominate the creative roles of game production such as programming, art, audio and design by at least 88%" (Huntemann, 2010a). Women tended to hold public relations or administrative jobs, rather than having a large role in actual game creation. IGDA's more recent survey, conducted in 2014, showed some improvement. In their result, "76% of respondents identified their gender as male, with 22% identifying as female. Only 0.5% identified as male-to-female transgender, and 0.2% as female-to-male transgender. An additional 1.2% selected "other" as their response to this question" (Edwards et al., 2014). Unfortunately, the survey report did not offer a breakdown of gender by job type, and also concluded that "the game industry remains young, white, and male. The average age was 34 years, 79% identified as Caucasian, and 76% identified as male" (Weststar and Legault, 2014). With these very limited demographics in mind, researchers expanded from asking why game audiences were so uneven in terms of gender to asking why games and gaming more generally were so uneven in terms of gender.

Because of this, many research projects conducted between the early 2000s and the

present have continued to address gaming's gender gap, but have moved away from strict content analysis and instead focus on the ways in which socialization or audience and industry norms matter to player experiences and to the construction of games as for men. Researchers have found a variety of factors that contribute to the lower number of women in gaming than men. These range from the general socialization of women away from technology to the specific linguistic norms of gaming spaces and beyond. Furthermore, researchers employed a variety of methods in analyzing these trends, creating a strong overall argument that gaming as it currently exists is deeply gender-biased and frequently even overtly misogynistic.

Socialization Away From Technology

A number of studies have indicated that, even at a young age, social forces teach children that technology is a male pursuit. Parents often feel that computing is not an appropriate or useful pursuit for a female child and therefore will not purchase technology or encourage interest in it (Gilmour, 1999; Schott and Horrell, 2000; Bryce and Rutter, 2003; Jenson et al., 2007; Jenson and de Castell, 2011). For instance, early computing research showed that parents were less likely to buy a home computer for a daughter than a son (Gilmour, 1999), limiting the time girls could spend becoming familiar with all of the technology's possibilities. Although home computers have become more common overall, gendered differences persist (Jenson and de Castell, 2011).

When girls are introduced to technology, male friends and family members often carefully manage their relationship to it. In terms of games specifically, Kerr (2003) found that women were generally introduced to gaming through a male friend or relative, and their continued participation in the gaming community depended heavily on having a social network that also played (p. 10). Women who lost touch with their gaming friends also tended to stop

gaming themselves. Other studies indicate that male players frequently take over control of games when women are playing, under the guise of “helping”, and that girls who claim to have experience with gaming often admit, when pressed, that their experience is primarily limited to watching male acquaintances play (Bryce and Rutter, 2002; 2003; Jenson et al., 2007; Jenson and de Castell, 2011). “Even in homes in which the gaming machine belongs to a female member of the family it is fathers, brothers or cousins who take control of the technology as part of what they claim to be 'support or collaborative play'...Such behavior reproduces the perception of computer gaming as a masculine activity and its relationship to its technological nature" (Bryce and Rutter, 2002, p. 252). Even at a young age, the playing field between men and women is not level with regards to technology and video games.

A heavier burden of responsibility at home can hold back women and girls’ use of technology as well (Hochschild and Machung, 1989; Schott and Horrell, 2000; Yee, 2008; Lewis and Griffiths, 2011). Even when they have access to games and computers, women and girls often need to prioritize domestic pursuits over play. This is due to persistent gender expectations that mark the home as a feminine sphere and maintain domestic work as primarily female. This can be particularly true for adult women. For instance, women who pursue a career often struggle with the “second shift”, or the higher burden of housework and home management that falls on their shoulders in comparison to men (Hochschild and Machung, 1989). The expectation that there is something else they should always be doing, and that games are not an efficient use of time, affects women’s relationships to games to such an extent that even women who have been able to overcome the gender gap and enjoy playing games tend to underreport their playing time. Using in-game data from *WoW*, Williams et al. (2009) were able to compare players’ true playing levels with the times they reported in an anonymous survey; while all players tended to

underreport the amount of time they spent in-game, women did so nearly three times more than men did (p. 717). Other studies focusing specifically on adult female gamers have found that women tend to express guilt regarding their gaming habits (Lewis and Griffiths, 2011) or employ defensive strategies that emphasize how well they complete other responsibilities before gaming (Taylor et al., 2009). All of these factors indicate how strongly the gendered nature of gaming and technology affect women's use and perception of it. This partially explains why fewer women play games than men.

Male-Dominated Spaces

Social contexts also matter to women's relationship to gaming, and the male-dominated nature of many game spaces can help account for women's smaller presence in these areas. For instance, researchers such as Bryce and Rutter (2002; 2003), Jansz and Martens (2005), and Taylor et al. (2009) examined the presence of women in public gaming events, such as Local-Area Network (LAN) events[12] and professional gaming competitions. Jansz and Martens approached these spaces with a survey methodology, recruiting attendees to complete a quick, short questionnaire in order to assess who attends LAN events and why. The other researchers employed ethnographic research methods to collect their data, engaging in deep observation of event participants and how they interacted both with their systems and with other attendees. They also conducted interviews with some attendees to gather more directly players' perspectives on public gaming. Through this combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, the research into public gaming spaces decisively shows that both more casual LAN

[12] At a LAN gaming event, players converge on a centralized location and connect their computers or consoles via a short-range Internet network, either wired or wireless. They then compete or cooperate in multiplayer games. This type of event allows players to interact more closely than regular online play, to compare their computers or systems (especially if they have modified their equipment to improve its efficiency), and of course, to compete in their favorite games, often with prizes awarded to the winners.

events and formal e-sports competitions are almost entirely dominated by men (Bryce and Rutter, 2002; 2003; Jansz and Martens, 2005; Taylor et al., 2009). Jansz and Martens found that 1200 attendees were registered at their event; only thirty of these were female. The more contextual research of Bryce and Rutter then showed "the majority of females who did attend appeared to fit into acceptable non-gamer roles" (Bryce and Rutter, 2003, p. 10). There was a deep division between men and women's roles, with the identity of "player" primarily reserved for and embodied by men, while women took on supporting roles such as cheerleader for their male friends and significant others (Bryce and Rutter, 2003).

Taylor et al. (2009) found similar limitations in professional gaming spaces. Professional gamers, who are paid to compete in tournaments, are predominantly men (Kane, 2008; Taylor et al., 2009), while women tend to be players' mothers and cheerleaders or "booth babes", promotional models advertising products, professional teams, or gaming in general (Taylor et al., 2009). The few women who do take on the role of professional players, Taylor (2008) found, are increasingly being bracketed away from their fellow professionals and glamorized into ultra-feminine roles, to help them gain appeal with a male audience (p. 51). As with professional sports, genders are being separated into different leagues, with the women's side taking on a more ornamental, less serious, and less well-paid role.

Researchers drew on the information they gathered at LAN parties and professional gaming events to argue that the male-dominated nature of public gaming works to normalize games as a masculine activity. In other words, the lack of female players in public gaming spaces marks the few women who enter them as abnormal or unusual. This perpetuates the idea that the standard "gamer" is male, masculinizing gaming spaces, then restarting the cycle. As Bryce and Rutter (2002) contend, "In many public gaming spaces it is the environments that are male-

dominated, and this gender asymmetry works towards excluding female gamers at a stage prior to the gendering of gaming texts" (p. 249). This assertion pushed back against the idea that women and girls are naturally less interested in games than men and boys, or that they need specifically female-gendered games in order to play, while still accounting for the lack of women in gaming. Gaming spaces that are heavily masculinized work to exclude women from gaming overall, or at least drive them to keep their gaming habit more private as it is a violation of gendered norms around leisure time.

Johnson (2011), Huntemann (2013), and other researchers like Blodgett and Salter (2014) have found similar pressures and limitations in the social contexts of the video game industry and work spaces. Women in game development face many industry norms that sexualize or objectify women, such as the use of "booth babes" at major industry events (Lang, 2013; Huntemann, 2013). "Based on the assumption that 'sex sells', promotional models are typically young women, between 20 and 30 years of age, physically attractive, and often provocatively dressed in short skirts with midriff and cleavage exposed" (Huntemann, 2013, p. 51). The gaming industry is hardly the first place to use female models to promote products; such a practice is commonplace in the consumer electronics, liquor, automobile, and sports industries (Huntemann, 2013). However, the use of sexualized promotional models can complicate female industry members' participation at events, not only because they are sometimes mistaken for booth babes themselves, but also because they can feel as if their design talents and experience are overshadowed by a temporary worker's physical appearance (Huntemann, 2013; Blodgett and Salter, 2014).

Sexualization can spill over into other events and affect professional developments as

well. In their thematic analysis of Twitter posts using the #1ReasonWhy hashtag,[13] in response to the question of why there are so few women in game development, Blodgett and Salter (2014) found that many female industry members felt excluded by the tendency for after-convention events to be held in traditionally male spaces. For example, one of the tweets they analyzed stated, "Not-to-be-missed, vital-for-networking after-parties thrown by big names at game dev conferences... that feature strippers. #1reasonwhy" (Blodgett and Salter, 2014).

Observational research has also shown vital work taking place at more casual, but still gendered, events such as "Beer Friday". This event was not deliberately limited to male employees nor was it as gendered as parties with strippers, but female workers at the company under analysis felt that it was primarily a space for their male counterparts due to the event's focus on beer drinking and competitive multiplayer games, both hobbies they argued were traditionally masculine (Johnson, 2011). The homosocial construction of "Beer Friday" meant that female employees felt out of place and did not attend, but also meant that they missed key opportunities to network and to contribute their ideas to ongoing projects that would advance their careers. Being taken seriously in an industry that prominently features women as objects rather than creative contributors and in which participants socialize in gender-specific arenas can be very difficult. Because of this, researchers like Johnson argue that game spaces and social environments contribute to the lack of women in development.

[13] As Salter and Blodgett state, "The #1ReasonWhy event on Twitter stands out as a highly active discussion among women who have worked in the game industry. This case represents one of the few times a significant body of personal stories dealing with issues of harassment was shared by women in the industry, highlighting the systemic nature of the problem" (2012, p. 2). Because this discussion was unique in many ways, the authors collected a week's worth of tweets using this hashtag, focusing on the week with the most extensive discussion, and analyzed the collected tweets for themes. They found that rape and sexual harassment, overt sexualization, general harassment, silencing, and gendered assumptions were the five most common reasons female developers gave for leaving the games industry or for feeling excluded by it.

Online Environments and Trash-Talk

Other researchers have focused on the online environment of video game play, a particularly significant sphere given the increasingly networked nature of games. They have found not only that online gaming tends to have a "toxic" (Consalvo, 2012) environment, but also that the types of language and insults employed in online gaming can be particularly off-putting to players who do not fit the traditional "gamer" stereotype. Because video gaming is seen as a male space, it tends to be dominated by a masculine rhetoric which "encourages the overt privileging of masculinity over femininity and discourages women from engaging in gendered discourse within the community" (Salter and Blodgett, 2012, p. 401). Two specific trends in multiplayer gaming, the key arena for social interaction, can be particularly unwelcoming to women. The first is the overall prevalence of trash-talking in multiplayer gaming, and the second is the use of specifically sexualized terms such as "rape" as casual stand-ins for "defeat", "overcome" or "kill" (i.e. "I totally just raped you with this shotgun").[14]

Multiplayer gaming, both in person and online, is dominated by the presence of interpersonal trash-talking, particularly if the game pits players against each other (although trash talking can also appear in cooperative teams, especially if a member is not completing their assigned tasks effectively). This trash talk is seen as a fun but ignorable aspect of competition; players are expected to respond in kind, and those who react poorly to trash talk are considered to be taking it too seriously. However, trash talk often takes on particular forms or themes, tending towards racism, sexism, and homophobia (Nakamura, 2012; Salter and Blodgett, 2012).

[14] There is currently little to no research on *why* this type of language is so prominent in games, although it is likely a result of players' drive to express dominance over the individuals they are competing against. Use of "rape" and sexualized insults could be a means for verbally expressing a capacity for physical dominance that cannot be shown in other ways through the voice-only chat mechanisms of video game systems. Game culture's tendency to dismiss femininity may also be a factor, as rape is culturally constructed as a larger threat to women than men. Threatening to rape someone then associates that individual with women and femininity, despite their actual identified gender.

When women and other targeted groups complain about these trends, they are told that trash-talking is just a facet of the community, and they should be less sensitive to harassing statements. In fact, the community actively defends their right to trash talk, despite the fact that it is seen as ignorable speech. In researching online harassment, Nakamura (2012) found "a key paradox of race, gender, and game studies rose to the top: while profanity and abuse are 'trash talk,' a form of discursive waste, lacking meaningful content that contributes to the game, many identified it as a distinctive and inevitable aspect of videogame multi-player culture, and thus to be defended" (p. 4). The content of trash-talk is seen as non-serious, but the act of trash-talking itself is considered an inalienable right.

This conflicting view results in a community that generally agrees people who are offended or hurt by trash talking are overreacting. Such a perspective ignores the fact that the particular forms of harassment directed at women differ from those targeted to other groups, often being more personal, virulent, and physically threatening due to the prominence of rape or assault-based threats (Nardi, 2010; Salter and Blodgett, 2012). These threats are casually stated, often phrased as descriptors of in-game action, such as the use of "you just got raped!" to stand in for "your character was just killed", rather than as direct personal attacks. Even careless comments of this nature can be upsetting, however, especially to people who have been assaulted.

Research into sexual assault has demonstrated that it can result in post-traumatic stress disorder and that rape-related cues, such as language, can serve as trauma triggers for affected individuals, provoking anxiety and painful memories (Holmes and St. Lawrence, 1983). While treatment can mitigate the impacts of sexual assault, "even in the strongest treatments more than one-third of women retain a PTSD diagnosis at posttreatment or drop out of treatment"

(Vickerman and Margolin, 2009, p. 431). Continued fears or anxiety are therefore likely even among women who pursue therapy, and the linguistic norms of trash-talk may be deeply disturbing to recovering individuals.

Furthermore, women who have not personally experienced sexual assault can also find it concerning. Chasteen (2001) found that women consider sexual assault to be "extremely common" (p. 117). Men, on the other hand, are not socialized to fear assault to the same extent as women. As participant Feather stated, "[sexual assault is] not something that [men] have to really worry about. Guys don't get catcalled on the streets, guys don't have to worry about short skirts, guys don't worry about those things." Women are taught to police their appearance and behavior carefully to avoid the threat of sexual assault in a way that is not true for men. Therefore, even if male players also tell each other, "You just got raped," it may be easier for them to treat this language as a joke than for women. The "just get over it" approach to trash talk falsely limits the impacts of trash talking to the moment of conversation, failing to recognize that offhand comments may have impacts well beyond a single gaming session.

Gaps in this Research

Each of the aforementioned social, audience, and industry characteristics, from a tendency for gaming spaces to be male-dominated to the specific harassment of women through rape-based terminology, can help account for gaming's gender gap. The research done into these areas shows that many facets of gaming are deeply sexist and misogynistic. Furthermore, it does so through a wide variety of methods, such as thematic analysis of a development-based Twitter conversation (e.g. Blodgett and Salter, 2014), environmental observation (e.g. Johnson, 2011; Bryce and Rutter, 2002), interviews (e.g. Kerr, 2003), and more. This diversity of method and similarity of results clearly indicates many reasons why women would opt not to participate in

video gaming or choose to do so on an individual, and therefore less visible, level.

What this research does not do, however, is recognize how or why women would choose to play games and be part of the community. This is a major oversight, as women have always been part of the gaming community. Furthermore, although newer, more contextual audience and industry work has offered alternative explanations for gaming's gender gap, the fact that early studies presumed male and female players would want different elements from their video games often essentialized gender into a binary, which is not reflective of actual player experiences or updated theories on gender and identity.

Analyzing games and game culture from the basis of gendered preferences treats men and women, and boys and girls, as inherently different rather than recognizing that people can share the same gender identity without sharing many other similarities. While the conclusions of this research might be true in many circumstances, i.e. the majority of women might avoid games because they find content characteristics off-putting, studies that focus on gender preferences limit gender to a male/female binary, ignoring other potential expressions. Given the goals of early games research, to explain an existing gender gap, such a result is unsurprising. "The problem of designing for gender and diversity is quite complicated particularly with respect to technology. A variety of forces affect our understanding of gender and make it very hard for us to think our way out of more or less conventional understandings of 'masculinity' and 'femininity'" (Brunner, Bennett, and Honey, 1998), particularly when a measurable difference between male and female audience exists.

However, although treating men and women as distinct groups is reasonable at times, it has real consequences. In arguing that women like one set of characteristics and men like another, researchers often ignore, or pay only cursory attention to, players who do not fit these

gendered expectations. As Jenkins pointed out in 1998, some women have always played and enjoyed "male" games, finding pleasure in the aggression, competition, and hypersexualization researchers expected them to despise. As support for this, he interviewed self-proclaimed "game grrlz", or female gamers who drew on the ethos of the Riot Grrl movement as a means for undermining gender expectations in gaming and in broader culture as well. Specifically, these women modified traditionally masculine games to include female avatars or created female-friendly gaming groups that competed with male players on their own virtual "turf" through online multiplayer games. Game grrlz argued that, "There is nothing wrong with a little girl who enjoys a first-person shooter game" (Jenkins, 1998, p. 329), and that creating specific "boy" or "girl" games did little more than reaffirm gender stereotypes. They even pointed out that many of the gendered preferences game developers saw when studying boys' and girls' uses of games were likely a result of "how we condition girls to be passive" (p. 335) rather than a natural inclination towards competition for boys and puzzles or exploration for girls. And finally, they firmly emphasized the enjoyment they found in aggression, competition, mastery of a game and its mechanics, and victory over opponents, all traditionally masculinized elements of games. As Jenkins states, "Their voices are nineties kinds of voices— affirming women's power, refusing to accept the constraints of stereotypes, neither those generated by clueless men in the games industry nor those generated by the girls' games researchers. These female gamers are bluntly questioning the assumptions being made by the girls' games movement and asserting their own pleasures in playing fighting games like 'Quake'" (p. 328).

The experiences of the game grrlz and their unabashed enjoyment of games, despite games' definition as a masculine medium, illustrate first the limitations of focusing on what *most* boys or girls would look for in games. This approach leaves out many individuals who do play;

one of the game grrlz Jenkins spoke with quoted statistics demonstrating that, at the time, "40 percent of PC gamers and 27 percent of console gamers [were] women" (Jenkins, 1998, p. 338). These numbers have remained steady or risen over time, showing that women are have been part of gaming audiences since well before the post-casual era. Second, the game grrlz and players like them illustrate the limitations of looking only at game content, as early analyses tended to do. This dismisses an individual's ability to interpret a text in a unique way, to read against its dominant meaning, or even just to appreciate different aspects of it. As Bryce and Rutter (2002) state, "In the context of gender and gaming it is overly deterministic to assume that there is a causal relationship between female representation in a text, and the nature of consumption of that text by female gamers" (p. 248). Focusing primarily on content and majorities helped naturalize the idea that men and women (or boys and girls) look for different things in games. In turn, this has affected the cultural norms surrounding the medium and actual players' experiences. As interviewees will outline in chapter four, they are often faced with assumptions about the types of games they play and treated with surprise, suspicion, or overt sexism when they violate these norms.

Although research has moved beyond content alone, the audience and industry-based research that explains why women might avoid gaming has some weaknesses as well. For instance, it overlooks the pleasures inherent in gaming, many of which both men and women enjoy (and some of which may even be specific to women). It also ignores the challenges that women face when they do opt to play games, as their experiences are left out of research that works to establish gaming's sexist nature. And it fails to examine how women structure their gaming choices, environments, personas, and more in order to achieve the most positive play experience possible. Therefore, while the wide variety of research into sexist or misogynistic

trends in gaming provides a strong foundation indicating *why* further examination of gaming culture is necessary, this project draws most heavily on the limited number of studies that explore women's experiences gaming directly to show why they game, what challenges they face, and how they overcome these.

Studies of Women who Play

Following Jenkins' interviews with game grrlz, researchers like Taylor (2003), Kerr (2003), Kennedy (2006), and Nardi (2010) pursued in-depth studies of video game players and spaces through interviews and ethnographic observations of video game spaces. More quantitative researchers then built off these with surveys meant to explore numerically how women engaged with games, such as by tallying or ranking the specific reasons they enjoyed gaming. By speaking directly to women who opted to play games, and frequently were heavily involved with them, these researchers discovered that, contrary to the expected belief that women would find games off-putting, the players they spoke with found extensive pleasure in gaming. This research demonstrates why women have always been part of gaming, despite the many exclusionary forces that mark it as masculine.

Sociability

One often-cited pleasure of gaming is its sociability. Not only are games an entertainment form that can be played with others in person, but they are often networked, allowing players to meet and interact with people from around the world. Therefore, they provide a platform through which individuals can connect. Research has extensively recognized the appeal of games' social aspects in the past; even work that focused on gender differences indicated that women and girls enjoyed social games (Laurel, 1998; Kafai, 1998; Graner Ray, 2004). However, sociability can

be an appealing aspect of traditionally masculine games as well as those targeted directly toward women.

In their ethnographic observations of *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft*, T.L. Taylor (2003) and Bonnie Nardi (2010) both found that the ability to interact with other players draws women to massively-multiplayer online games (MMOs). The content structure of MMOs specifically encourages the development of social ties, as the games' higher levels can only be completed in groups. *World of Warcraft* originally required groups of up to forty people to complete the higher-level raids that players needed to obtain the best gear. Although that number has decreased to a minimum of ten through the game's expansions, the group structure of raids still represents a significant push for players to group together and form social and working bonds. A player who lacks an in-game social network will never be one of the best and will also miss out on significant elements of the game's content.

Subsequent survey studies have broken down the reasons why players enjoy sociability, finding many different factors. Some players enjoy the ability to keep in touch with real-life friends and family, playing with them across long distances to maintain offline relationships (Hussain and Griffiths, 2008) or using them as a shared interest in romantic relationships (Williams et al., 2009). Others use online friends to help them cope with careers or life situations that require them to move frequently, stating, "Online friends are always in the same place" (Hussain and Griffiths, 2008, p. 49). Games can also be a means for meeting other people who enjoy similar interests to the player, a particularly relevant element for women who frequently don't know other female players in person (Taylor, 2003; Axelsson and Regan, 2006; Sherry et al., 2006; Eklund, 2011). Through these various approaches, gamers use video games to account for social needs that offline interaction may not meet (Hussain and Griffiths, 2008).

Narrative Exploration and Identity Play

Video games also offer numerous possible pleasures in exploring the feelings and experiences of another person or entity through a narrative storyline (Taylor, 2003; Frasca, 2003; Bryant and Davies, 2006; Shapiro et al., 2006; Squire, 2006; Vorderer et al., 2006; Simons, 2007; Dubbelman, 2011; Gee, 2011). Narrative theorists consistently show that immersing one's self in a narrative story allows one to experience situations from a new perspective (Simons, 2007). This is particularly relevant to the study of video games due to their unique interactive capabilities. Not only do video games create in-depth worlds and storylines for players to explore, but they also allow a high level of freedom regarding the particular order or means for that exploration (Frasca, 2003, p. 227). The openness of many video game worlds means that the player is not so much experiencing a story as they are living it in real time; they may therefore identify heavily with their character's experiences and emotions. Furthermore, video games can offer players fantasy scenarios, where they can battle dragons and ogres, save princesses and more, but games can also offer facsimiles of real life scenarios (Gee, 2011). For instance, although it relies on many damaging stereotypes, the *Grand Theft Auto* series may allow upper-class gamers to experience some of the challenges of low-income neighborhoods, while games like *Civilization* can introduce players to some of the many factors affecting national and international politics and historical development (Squire, 2006).

This type of identity play and narrative exploration appears to be particularly appealing to women, who frequently gravitate toward role-playing games where they take on a specific character role to play through a storyline (Schott and Horrell, 2000). This could be because vicarious playing in games allows women to overcome real-life gender limitations. For instance, women are often socialized not to express anger, making it difficult for them to show frustration

in daily life. The enactment of calculated aggression within games can offset this difficulty, using angry characters or aggressive scenarios as a safe outlet for real-world feelings (Taylor, 2003). This also illuminates the ways in which role-playing games can appeal even when the main character has little in common with the female player; identification does not always depend on similarities, particularly when women are specifically looking for an experience that differs from their real life. Each player brings their own needs, expectations, and individual readings of a character or situation to the text they are enjoying (Bryce and Rutter, 2002; 2003).

Exploration

Related to the idea of narrative exploration, but unique in some ways, is the pleasure of exploration. Virtual worlds and games present many carefully crafted worlds and environments with numerous possibilities for exploration. Even if the main storyline of a game can be used to progress along a specific path, side quests and collectable items offer alternative methods for play. In the real world, women are trained to avoid dangerous situations and putting themselves in harm's way. As Taylor writes regarding the pleasures of *World of Warcraft*, "While men and women alike can enjoy traversing these spaces, women are afforded an experience they are unlikely to have had offline. While both the landscape and its creatures might threaten the explorer, in the game space this threat is not based on gender" (2003, p. 32). This offers women a contrast between their virtual freedom and their real life limitations. Furthermore, the player has the ability to fight back against the forces that threaten them, granting them agency and capabilities that are both reassuring and empowering.

Mastery

This also explains women's enjoyment of game mastery, such as that described by the

game grrlz (Jenkins, 1998; Taylor, 2003; Sherry et al., 2006; Klimmt and Hartmann, 2006; Williams et al., 2009). Again, while early gender-based research tended to show that girls avoided games that were goal-oriented or required deep competition, more recent research shows that some girls and women do find enjoyment in these factors. “The excitement over reaching a new level or getting out of a particularly bad one (a ‘hell level’) is not lost on any player including the women” (Taylor, 2003, p. 28). The sense of accomplishment that comes along with improving one’s character or gear, learning a new skill or defeating a new boss can be a powerful incentive for play. This appeal crosses game genres and consoles as well as both online and offline contexts, meaning that women can enjoy the process of mastery in almost any setting.

Mastery can also help women subvert the masculine-gendered expectations of gaming; although skill building is appealing to both men and women, “succeeding in a male forum [can provide] a sense of achievement and respect and recognition” (Beavis, 2005). The possibility of beating the boys at their own games is an empowering one. For instance, female *World of Warcraft* players describe dueling with male players “to prove their value as gamers”, using their ability to defeat men in combat as a means for garnering respect (Eklund, 2011, p. 334). Technical skill building may not appeal to all players and may not be an important component of all game genres, but it does act as a draw for at least some women.

Gender Equity

Finally, women display the ability to read pleasure into even potentially exclusionary forces, such as the representation of gender in games. Many studies have argued that the under-representation of women or their hyper-sexualization should be off-putting to female players; however, women who look beyond these areas find that many female characters are equally powerful to male characters or even more so, allowing players to experience this characteristic

for themselves. Through interviews, Eklund (2011) found that female MMO players "make their characters as powerful as the game allows" (p. 330). They enjoy the fact that their characters' physical capabilities and special powers are equal to those of their male counterparts, especially given that real life women are typically not as physically strong as men. Video game characters do not face similar limitations, as evidenced by characters like Lara Croft, who can pull themselves from a hanging position directly into a handstand (Kennedy, 2002).

Not only are playable female characters as strong as male characters in many games, but opposing characters or villains can also be tough. As Nardi writes of *WoW*, "*WoW* was populated by powerful male and female NPCs (non-player characters). Some of the biggest bosses were female... Male and female characters deployed the same powers, delimited by class not gender. There were neither princesses to be rescued nor dashing male heroes saving the day" (2010, p. 168). Powerful female villains are not new to entertainment, but they may allow female players to escape video games' overall gender disparity for at least a short period of time.

Despite earlier evidence that games tend to leave power in the hands of men, the fact that there are exceptions may indicate why some styles of games, such as MMOs, have less of a gender gap than others. These games, which do allow female power rather than just female victimization, introduce a role that women may not get to experience in their day to day life.

Embodying Conflict: Women as Part of and Excluded from Gaming

These various pleasures, when coupled with the in-depth research showing why women might want to avoid gaming, start to outline the many conflicts and challenges they face when trying to identify as gamers, be part of the gaming community, or simply enjoy games. With this in mind, it is insufficient to study women's enjoyment of games and gaming culture's sexist background separately; both these elements are mixed together every time women try to game.

This comes through clearly in some of the recent contextual work on gaming, which demonstrates women's negotiated stances with regards to game content, culture, and play. For instance, women may find that games both welcome them in and exclude them, or that they need to defend their presence in gaming even as they develop their skill. This occurs across many different aspects of gaming.

One conflict for marginalized players occurs when considering how others will think of their decision to game; given gaming's masculinized history, women often find that others do not expect them to game. The majority of female gamers Kerr (2003) interviewed felt that gaming was not necessarily a boy's pastime. Although most had been introduced to games by men, and relied on offline social networks to maintain their interest in games, the skill and experience they had cultivated made them view games as more gender-equal than strictly masculine. However, they also believed that most non-gamers considered games to be strictly for boys, and even more importantly, that game companies primarily marketed games to men. Because of this, their enjoyment of games was tinged with frustration at being left out of the intended audience and at the ways in which even games they enjoyed, such as Tomb Raider, were marketed by sexualizing the main character in an attempt to appeal to men. These aspects continually reminded them that although they considered themselves gamers, they did not really fit the constructed meaning of that identity.

At other times, players have to negotiate their self-presentation within a gaming space. When Taylor et al. (2009) observed a professional gaming event and interviewed attendees, there was only one female player participating in the competition. During their interview, the researchers found that her approach to gaming and self-presentation was extremely different than that of her male peers. Specifically, she took greater pains to legitimate her play. "By her own

account, [female competitor] Fatal Fantasy does well in school, and as she described to Taylor, her parents allow her to participate intensively in competitive Halo 3 play (including attending Major League Gaming tournaments all over North America) so long as she maintains good grades. This disclosure is in stark contrast to the majority of male NerdCorps participants Taylor talked to, who neither mentioned their schoolwork nor seemed to have their competitive gaming activities parentally fettered by or contingent upon schoolwork" (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 244). Fatal Fantasy recognized that her role as a professional gamer was unusual and worked to present herself as "normal" or successful in other areas of life. She also, the researchers noted, embodied a dual role in the gaming space. As an attractive female and a competent gamer, she had to negotiate the space between women as objects or cheerleaders and her own high level of skill. Despite being a competitor like any of the others, her gender deeply affected her role in the gaming space and the ways in which she navigated that.

Eklund (2011) found similar contradictions in her work on *World of Warcraft*, discovering that female players cautiously navigated their gender performance and their displays of power. In terms of their avatars, many made the character they played female and attractive. At the same time, they drove that character to be as powerful as possible, claiming both femininity and power through their avatar's performance and success in the game (p. 330). The players accepted *WoW*'s sexualized female avatars and then used them to perform strength. This demonstrates their ability to read pleasure into oversexualized and unrealistic female avatars through their control of their character's sexuality and skill. In their interactions with other players, however, female gamers find they have to navigate the line between power and harmlessness. Eklund's interviewees were happy to express their power and capability within the game through duels with male players, but also found that they often used linguistic tactics such

as smiley faces to moderate their presence in the game's social spaces (p. 333). This kept them from appearing too threatening to male players, despite their skill. Participants also found that their gender affected the roles their guildmates expected them to take on. Peers expected female players to solve disputes or regulate behavior in their guild more frequently than male players (p. 333), assigning them a traditionally feminine role as a mediator. Furthermore, Eklund's participants who asked their gaming boyfriends for input when choosing their character at the start of the game were also directed to play as characters that could heal others, suggesting that women are expected to take on an in-game support role more than they are expected to be the fighting character that directly combats the enemy (p. 329). All of these factors indicate that, even in video games, "gender is not performed solo; but inside a heterosexual social context where others assist in creating a coherent gender performance that can be understood according to normative values" (p. 329). Both game structures, such as character appearance, and social structures drove women towards certain roles in *WoW,* roles they then had to accept or resist.

Even the structure of games themselves can display strong conflicts between welcoming and exclusionary forces. In studying *World of Warcraft*, Nardi (2010) found that the environments and audiences of the game appeared to be engaged in a fundamental conflict; "Gendered experience in World of Warcraft was constructed in two distinctive ways: through patterns of discourse and through the design of the game. I argue that discourse practices created a 'boy's tree house' but that the game itself countered with surprisingly feminine, domestic nuances" (p. 152). Although players were often competitive, rude, and aggressive, the environments of the game were frequently dominated by soft color palettes and an emphasis on natural beauty, feminizing the spaces players were occupying. Many in-game activities, such as combat, were also traditionally masculinized, but the game countered these with domestic

pursuits such as cooking and crafting, or using materials like leather and cloth to form bandages or clothing for players to use. This offered opportunities for both male and female players to diversify their experiences and contradict gendered norms. At the same time, Nardi found that the dominance of masculinity in the social spaces of *WoW* limited the ways in which women could exert power; men set the rhetorical tone of conversations and events, while women were forced to adopt similar tones and subject positions or leave spaces and conversations where they felt uncomfortable. As Nardi put it, "the [female] player can play along and continue to play the game or she can leave. There is no opportunity for reasoned discourse or a way to win through humor" (p. 155). The conflicts between gender-diverse and gender-exclusive aspects of WoW demonstrate women's complicated relationship with games and gaming.

The varying means of acceptance and exclusion that marginalized audiences like women encounter can deeply affect their experiences to the point that they, as Shaw (2012) points out, opt out of identifying with the term gamer at all, even if they play games frequently. Drawing on Foucault, Shaw argues that the subject position of "gamer" is created and normalized by the games industry and has a particular set of implied meanings attached to it— young, white, male, and more. When she then spoke to game players who did not identify with these identity categories, she found their identification with "gamer" to be heavily negotiated. In the case of gender, Shaw found that "male interviewees were much more likely to identify as gamers than female, transgender or genderqueer interviewees were" (2012, p. 34), and posited that this was likely a result of discourses that frame games as masculinized and the lack of female characters in games as a representation problem. Because gender was discussed so frequently, and in ways that normalized the masculine nature of the medium, a joint female/gamer identity became a difficult and contradictory subject position to inhabit. Another influential factor was the

existence of negative stereotypes around gamers, such as the idea that they are nerdy, anti-social, or unhealthily obsessed (Shaw, 2012, p. 38). These associations further drove players to disassociate from the identity of a gamer.

This collection of work has started to prioritize the experiences of female gamers, rather than assuming that they generally do not exist. In doing so, it shows that they are in a conflicted position, sometimes identifying strongly as gamers and sometimes, as Shaw shows, not doing so. This research has also started to lay out some of the ways in which women navigate game spaces, working to find a place in an arena heavily marked as not "for" them. For instance, Taylor et al.'s (2009) interview with Fatal Fantasy found her deploying both skill and a calculated persona of desirable femininity, while Eklund (2011) saw her interviewees fighting for power while simultaneously moderating their language to be less threatening to their male peers.

Many of these projects, however, focus specifically on individual game spaces, such as *World of Warcraft* (e.g. Nardi, 2010; Eklund, 2011), or only briefly touch on women's strategies for entering and manipulating game environments. These conflicts and strategies deserve detailed attention, as they can show more broadly how women, or any marginalized group, could be capable of managing environments where they are excluded or deliberately driven out. And while Shaw necessarily demonstrates how seeking out "gamers" for a research study may end up excluding many players who opt out of this identity, it does not completely address the situation of women who *do* identify as gamers, who prioritize and desire this identity even when it seems fundamentally incompatible with their gender identity. It is the situation of these women that this dissertation focuses on and brings to game studies' existing conversation about gender.

Contributions of the Current Work

By emphasizing the lived experiences of women who identify as both female and gamer, this project first builds on Shaw's (2014a) call to diversify games research focused on marginalized audiences. In speaking to non-traditional gamers, Shaw found that their attitudes towards representation in games differed heavily from how developers and researchers discussed representation. These groups frequently focused on proving that game audiences are more diverse than expected, calling for better representation in games in order to respond to these players (p. 15). They expect that better representations are "the end goal for audiences and producers who are members of these specific marginalized groups" (p. 15). What Shaw found, however, is that this view is particularly market-focused, and that players are used to and capable of identifying with characters that do not share their out-of-game identities. Even more importantly, she argues that "the issue of representation in games and indeed, in all media industries is too often focused on what a 'good' representation of a given group would looks like. Such concerns are inevitably limiting. Races, genders, and sexualities are not fixable, knowable, static entities that can be described" (p. 230). Because of this, both a different perspective on representation and on identification is necessary to the updated study of games; Shaw recommended not only diversifying representations for the sake *of* diversity rather than in pursuit of a "good" representation, but also further analysis of how games are talked about, constructed, and themselves marginalized (p. 227).

Similarly, this project pushes beyond the idea that representation is or should be deeply significant to participants.[15] Although it asks about representation and categorizes female

[15] When starting this project, I did expect representation to matter deeply to participants and spent my first few interviews surprised at how dismissive they were of most representational trends and limitations in games. Interviewees consistently recognized in-game representations of women as "bad" or "limited", but then generally moved the discussion to why this mattered from the perspective of audience construction or their interactions with

gamers' reactions to female characters in games, it recognizes that these concerns or reactions are part of a broader discourse working to maintain game culture and communities as primarily homosocial spaces for men. This project prioritizes women's lived experiences as gamers and draws conclusions directly from their statements. Because of this, it broadens the existing research on women's conflicted positions, providing an analysis of cultural components and their relationship to identity, gender, and feminism in technological spaces rather than focusing primarily on content or majority audiences. It also offers a new perspective on feminist interventions into masculinized spaces; as Kennedy (2005) argued about female *Quake* players, women who game undermine stable gender norms and dominant discourses around who can be a gamer or who can engage with technology more generally.

This central focus on women's experiences in gaming culture is particularly significant in the post-casual era, another contribution this dissertation makes to the existing literature. As evidenced in the above sections, the idea that gaming is a masculine pursuit has largely gone unquestioned; even work that has aimed to diversify gaming audiences has started from the perspective that to do so would be a change to gaming's perceived insularity. However, recent industrial changes such as the rise of casual games have undermined this assumption; industry members who previously prioritized male audiences have begun to recognize the benefits of targeting their games more broadly, and in doing so, have introduced an era where women who game are becoming less unusual. At the same time, gaming discourses still construct women as marginal, as casual rather than core gamers, and as new to gaming audiences. The impact of these discourses on women's experiences and subject positions merits further exploration, especially as such a perspective ignores their long-standing contribution to game communities

other gamers. Representation mattered as an aspect of an overall culture excluding women, rather than as a major force on its own.

and culture. The newness of these discourses also means that even relatively recent work on games may be in need of update, as casual games have fundamentally changed the conditions for being a gamer and as elements of the gaming community have displayed more obvious sexism and misogyny.

Finally, this work addresses the overall lack of research that focuses on women's specific strategies for managing their treatment within gaming communities. Although there is extensive evidence that gaming communities are toxic and that they contain specific linguistic norms and behavioral patterns that target female-identified players for harassment, little to no work explores how women cope with this when they opt to play games and enter game spaces. Understanding these strategies is critical to understanding both the power of marginalized groups and the limitations on their power; how and when they can manage harassment and marginalization in games can then also provide insight into managing exclusionary forces in other areas of society as well. Therefore, this dissertation draws on workplace harassment research, as it is the most heavily studied type of harassment, to analyze the coping strategies participants described and their potential effectiveness. This should deepen understanding of how inequality perpetuates not only through gaming but also other masculinized social spheres.

Broader Media and Gender Studies

In addition to the video game studies that look at women's engagement with media, this dissertation draws from and builds on similar studies that have been conducted on other media. Specifically, it works from some of the methods and research questions of projects like Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984; 1991) and Ann Gray's *Video Playtime* (1992). Each of these studies focuses on a deep exploration of women's interactions and constructions of media.

Radway's project addresses how women engage with romance novels, analyzing their

relation to patriarchal systems of oppression through their consumption of marginalized, feminized media. Women's romance reading appeared to be a paradox; although romance novels are a deeply sexist medium on the surface, Radway's participants found extensive pleasure in reading them and also used them as a way of separating themselves from the pressures of housework and home management. In her own words, "It was the women readers' construction of the act of romance reading as a 'declaration of independence' that surprised me into the realization that the meaning of their media use was multiply determined and internally contradictory, and that to get at its complexity, it would be helpful to distinguish analytically between the significance of the *event* of reading and the meaning of the *text* constructed as its consequence" (Radway, 1991, p. 7). Looking only at the text of romance novels, it would be easy to assume that readers were cultural dupes, tricked into buying into self-destructive themes. But the ways they discussed their romance reading habit, and the specific guidelines according to which they selected novels to spend their limited leisure time on, demonstrated much more complex attitudes and behaviors.

Radway sought to break down their engagement with romance novels in greater detail though surveys, group discussion sections, individual interviews, and of course, through reading and analyzing some of the popular or unpopular novels the participants mentioned. Through these varied approaches, she discovered that participants tended towards specific types of romance novels and avoided others. In other words, "despite the overtly formulaic appearance of the category, there are important differences among romance novels *for those who read them* that prompt individual decisions to reject or to read" (p. 50). This marks audiences not as powerless individuals forced to interpret every text a certain way but as intelligent consumers capable of navigating the nuances of a medium.

Radway also found that the *act* of reading was particularly meaningful for readers, in that they used reading as a means for managing the stresses of their day to day life. “What reading takes them away from, [readers] believe, is the psychologically demanding and emotionally draining task of attending to the physical and affective needs of their families, a task that is solely and peculiarly theirs” (p. 92). Because the women Radway spoke with were generally housewives in low- to middle-income families, most with children under eighteen, the home was their primary sphere of labor, raising challenges when they wanted to take a break from work. The act of reading allowed them to mentally escape from their homes, while the physical book acted as a momentary shield against other demands on their time.

Through selective choice of texts and through the act of reading, Radway argued that romance readers were using the medium for their psychological well-being, but in a deeply conflicted way. In turning to romance novels that had a strong and active protagonist, but also ended with a heterosexual romantic partnership where the male hero took care of the female heroine, readers, Radway argued, were defending and normalizing their own location in heterosexual relationships while also affirming their need or desire to be nurtured. “[Readers’] temporary reveling in [the heroine’s] intelligence, independence, self-sufficiency, and initiative is as important to their experiencing of the book as the fact of her final capture by a man who admits that he needs her” (p. 80). Readers used narratives to both resist hegemonic ideas about relationships and gender, through female and male characters who subvert expectations about power and independence, and to reinforce the idea that ending up in a loving, heterosexual marriage is an acceptable norm.

This same type of conflict appeared in the act of reading as well. Readers recognized their need for self-care and personal time, but often experienced guilt because reading took time

and resources that they often felt they should spend on their family. In this way, they again both combated and reaffirmed hegemonic notions of the patriarchal family, taking time for themselves but also recognizing that doing so was contrary to expectations about what they should be doing. Because of this, “the struggle over the romance itself is part of the larger struggle for the right to define and to control female sexuality” (p. 17), family structures, and gender roles and expectations.

Through Radway’s in-depth research methods and focus on exploring what women were doing in the spaces they were already part of, even when these spaces were culturally trivialized, *Reading the Romance* accounted for women’s lived relationships with patriarchy and power, as well as with gender roles and identities. Following her project, many other researchers have done similarly useful, nuanced studies on media, gender, and their mutually constituted nature. Ann Gray’s *Video Playtime* (1992), for instance, drew on in-depth interviews with British women whose families owned or rented a video cassette recorder (VCR) in the late 1980s. This was a relatively new domestic technology, and her project sought to determine how women engaged with the VCR as both a means for viewing television, as a part of the home, and as a technology. To do so, she focused on “the domestic division of labor, organization of and differential access to spare time, technology in the domestic environment, as well as the more immediately related activities of television and VCR viewing” (Gray, 1992, p. 238). Like Radway, her deep contextual study found that women’s relationship with technology and media was conflicted.

For instance, when asking women to color-code the gender of home technologies like the VCR or the washing machine (blue for masculine and pink for feminine), Gray found that the VCR was a strange and detailed mix of both. “The ‘record’, ‘rewind’ and ‘play’ modes are generally lilac, but the timer switch is nearly always blue, with women having to depend on their

male partners or their children to set the timer for them. The blueness of the timer is exceeded only by the deep indigo of the remote control which in all cases was held by the male partner or male child" (p. 248). Analyzing this even further led to more complication; many women did not know how to use the timer, as their partner's lower level of domestic responsibilities had given him the time to learn the technology better, while women continually faced more demands on their time at home that made learning the VCR difficult. But other women deliberately avoided learning to use the VCR as a means for avoiding yet more responsibilities in the home, such as being expected to record shows the family would watch together. Thus, women's interactions with the VCR revealed both their continued burdens of housework and the nuanced strategies they employed to manage these.

Continued critical studies that analyze the relation of gender and media, and their related tensions, have focused extensively on women's relationship with feminized forms of entertainment, asking how or why women take pleasure in these areas, and how their actions both support and resist existing ideologies about gender.[16] Where further work needs to be done, and where this dissertation offers an intercession, is in the area of women's engagement with media forms that are not feminized, but indeed are masculinized and structured in a way that excludes women. Conducting the same type of contextual, in-depth research on actual media users, this project similarly demonstrates how women sometimes resist and sometimes support existing ideologies about gender, but in this case through their engagement with a medium that is marked as not for them. This adds a new element to the existing canon of work.

Furthermore, many past studies of media and gender have focused on largely individual

[16] Works on this topic range from older studies, such as Watching Dallas (Ang, 1985) and Defining Women (D'acci, 1994), to very recent works like Reading Celebrity Gossip Magazines (McDonnell, 2014), and Cupcakes, Pinterest, and Ladyporn (Levine, 2015).

consumption. Radway, for instance, found that until her participant Dot gathered a group of romance readers for her to talk to, most of them did not know each other, and they rarely discussed their romance reading "with more than one or two individuals" (1991, p. 96). Games, however, tend to be more social and interactive. Although many participants preferred single-player games, or to play only with friends they knew from off-line contexts, some played only online or multiplayer games. Because of this, their engagement with the medium was necessarily more public than Radway's romance readers or Gray's VCR users. These interviewees often have to navigate reactions and pressures from strangers, friends, and family members, rather than just their immediate relatives. Therefore, this project explores not only conflicts women face in terms of texts and time management, but also interactivity and sociability.

Identity Theory

The third large body of research and theory that this dissertation draws on is work on identity and identification. Specifically, the project views identity as flexible and ever-changing, as well as non-essential, to demonstrate how discourses around gender and gaming are also non-essential. Although exclusionary forces work to maintain gaming's core as limited to specific kinds of games and gamers, identity theories demonstrate how it is actually a process- and performance-based means for creating an in-group and an out-group.

Beginning with a cultural theory approach to identity, "the concept of identity deployed here is therefore not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one… identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses, practices and positions" (Hall, 1996c, p. 17). In other words, cultural theorists like Hall argue people are made up of a wide variety of different identity components rather than a single unified self.

Furthermore, they have the ability to draw on these different aspects and prioritize individual identity components separately depending on the situation they are in. While this allows people to adapt their self-presentation to different situations, it can at times also complicate matters. Specifically, this occurs because identities and identity components are not entirely internally formed. Rather, they are influenced both by the individual crafting the identity and by outside forces such as representation, social norms, and power structures. This sometimes means that an individual's identity components do not fit together neatly. As Hall elaborates in a separate piece, "within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about" (Hall, 1996b, p. 598).

When an individual is engaging in the process of identifying who they are and how to communicate that self to others, the process we call *identification*, representation and cultural conceptions play a significant role by showing them potential identities they could embody and how these fit into different social situations and norms. Scholars like Hall (1996a) argue that the world is continually understood and defined not simply through reality, which is too large for an individual to process in its entirety, but through the interplay of representation and lived reality. Hall describes these two factors as "mutually constitutive"; that is, what exists in reality influences and affects the representations that we see in media, but the trends that appear in media in turn influence how people perceive reality. In other words, the way in which an individual can envision and define themselves is at least partially related to the way in which they see people like themselves represented both in media and in cultural associations with media. "Media representation makes certain identities possible, plausible, and livable" (Shaw, 2014a, p. 67).

This is significant because representations and identifications are not constructed in a

vacuum. Rather, they reflect existing systems of power and control, which often work to exclude people from identities that they desire or to complicate their relationship with their existing identity. In terms of video games, this means that the consistent representation of gamers as men in news, marketing, and other media presents for men a simple point of identification where they can plausibly see themselves as taking on the identity of a gamer. This same representational trend can exclude women by making their connection to that identity harder to envision. For instance, a woman who plays games frequently, has a long history with gaming, and who enjoys both games themselves and discussions about them may self-identify as a gamer, as many participants in this study did. However, continually seeing largely male representations of players can indicate that she does not fit the socially constructed idea of what a gamer is; she may struggle to reconcile her gender identity and her gamer identity. In other words, and drawing on the work of Foucault, the discourses around gaming and gamers allow limited subject positions (Foucault, 1982; Hall, 1997). Masculinized subject positions make more sense than feminized ones when interpreting the meanings, power, and management of gaming, and therefore are easier to embody.

Limited or exclusionary representations can also affect overall relationships with media. For instance, in Linda Williams' (1984) analysis of the movie *Stella Dallas*, she argues that women's relation to media and representation is deeply affected by their position *as women*, and therefore as audiences that are often tangential to the concerns of media industries. She points out the many ways in which movies, among other media, leave women little space to identify with protagonists and narratives that are not made for them. When women are addressed, media messages for them are mixed and often contradictory (Douglas, 1994, p. 9). Because of this, Williams argues, women have developed different forms of identification than men; specifically,

they have developed the ability to identify with multiple characters at once, or as Douglas describes it, "to identify with ambivalence itself" (1994, p. 74). Williams sees this reflected in the structure of media made for women, such as soap operas, arguing that "The very form of soap opera encourages identification with multiple points of view. At one moment, female viewers identify with a woman united with her lover, at the next with the sufferings of her rival" (1984, p. 17). Her own analysis of *Stella Dallas* shows that the viewer is meant to identify simultaneously with Stella, her daughter Laurel, and even her rival Helen, understanding the struggles and triumphs of each at the same time. This process of multiple identification, however, is not always easy to maintain. Trying to reconcile different identity components, choose which aspect to identify with in which circumstances, and navigate the social norms around each requires real work, and can leave individuals exhausted. Moments where they fail to present their identity properly can also incite backlash.

Finally, cultural theories of identity argue that a lack of representation or limited representations of certain groups connects to socio-political power, in that unrepresented groups struggle to connect to others like them, to pursue broader socio-cultural recognition as a meaningful identity group, and to turn that recognition into political representation and power. Because of this, researchers and activists argue the need for diverse representations, so that different identities and ways of being can be made possible. Media representations can help individuals develop a connection to a particular identity, which can then help them publicly express solidarity and a call for recognition. As Mary Gray (2009) points out in discussing LGBT visibility movements, "LGBT Lobby Day events are quintessential examples of how a politics of visibility can work as a political force in public life. Private citizens coalesce as a community of LGBT people at these events to demonstrate their strength in numbers. Together,

they seek to effect change through a public call for social recognition and equal representation" (p. 2). By making identities plausible, representation can make them powerful.

One weakness of these identity theories, pointed out and addressed by feminist theorist and particularly women of color feminist scholars, is that they posit identity as contextual and flexible, but still connected to a real-world referent, an existing identity that needs representation and that can be represented. Feminist theorists like Judith Butler and Donna Haraway, however, argued that this perspective can limit both representation and power by requiring individuals to define themselves as subjects. "The domains of political and linguistic 'representation' set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended" (Butler, 1999, p. 4). The challenge of this is that, in constituting who a subject is, one is also constituting who a subject *is not*, making subjecthood an inherently exclusionary practice.

To undermine this, scholars like Butler, Haraway, and Chela Sandoval argued that identity was not related to a preexisting "real" identity, but rather constituted through performance and through collective social work or identity labor (Gray, 2009, p. 21). From this perspective, politics of visibility, resting on increased representation of different identities, was insufficient for altering political power structures because it necessarily required exclusion and the limitation of "identity" to a partial representation. As Haraway points out, drawing on Sandoval's call for a woman of color consciousness, "The category 'woman' negated all non-white women; 'black' negated all non-black people, as well as all black women. But there was also no 'she', no singularity, but a sea of differences among US women who have affirmed their historical identity as US women of color. This identity marks out a self-consciously constructed

space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship" (2000, p. 296). Sandoval posited that politics require conscious recognition of similarities and shared goals, rather than reliance on identity and the visibility of that identity as a means for progress.

Drawing on both cultural theories and more specific feminist approaches simultaneously, this dissertation argues that discourse, and how an identity is constructed through its representation and through conversations around it, does still matter to individual experiences. This is not because it is a natural, essential referent to a real-life entity, but because participants often have to choose how they intend to self-present, and the possible representations offered to them can aid or limit them in this process. A diverse set of representations offers more potential identifications to draw on than a highly limited one. Furthermore, discourse works to structure certain subject positions as logical and available; "the discourse itself produces 'subjects'—figures who personify the particular forms of knowledge which the discourse produces…. But the discourse also produces a place for the subject… from which its particular knowledge or meaning most makes sense (Hall, 1997, p. 56). Cultural constructions of gaming as masculine, evidence from participants shows, complicates women's engagement with games and game spaces, as well as the subject positions they take on while navigating these areas.

At the same time, viewing identity as non-essential provides an entryway through which the historical construction of games as masculine can be questioned and subverted. By analyzing gaming through the lens of "core", meaning through the lens of in- and out-groups and the forces deployed to maintain these, it is possible to show how marginalization is a continual, flexible process. In her research on how rural LGBT individuals navigate their identity, Gray (2009) wrote about identity as *work*, arguing, "The authenticity of identity from this perspective reads as

an ongoing, at times exhausting, dialogue rather than a reflection of reality. It refuses the inclination to be lodged in a singular person, place, or thing" (p. 26). Similarly, female gamers' simultaneous desire for a gamer identity and rejection of many aspects of that identity reveals identity itself to be partial and contested. This undermines gaming's masculinized history at the same time that it demonstrates its continued problems with misogyny and sexism. It also calls for a recognition that, in masculinized or otherwise exclusionary spaces, moving beyond dualisms or referential identities may be key to true understanding of these areas.

Feminism, Anti-Feminism, and the Cultural Contexts of the Post-Casual Era

Finally, the cultural contexts of feminism and anti-feminism need to be taken into account in order to understand why gender in gaming, and gender in the US overall, requires further study at this moment. Since the 1980s and 1990s, the US has been facing a strong push-back against the feminist movement. This can be seen in media portrayals of women as miserable, stressed by the demands of their careers and lacking love and family due to their ambition (Faludi, 2006). It appears in increasing regulations on abortion access, women's health care, and reproductive rights, particularly since the 1992 Supreme Court case "*Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey*, which allowed states to restrict access to abortion as long as the requirements did not place an 'undue burden' on women's ability to obtain an abortion" (Rohlinger, 2016). Twenty-three states have passed dozens of laws specifically focused on abortion access, referred to as Targeted Regulation of Abortion Provider or TRAP laws, since 1992 (Rohlinger, 2016; Pandit, 2016). In many of these areas, access to abortion and reproductive care has become practically inaccessible. Finally, the push-back against feminism can be seen in the argument, advanced by writers like Hanna Rosin, that women have not only achieved equality but have actually begun to supersede men in terms of

economic, social, and even political power (Rosin, 2010; Rosin, 2012; Sommers, 2013).

These elements are part of an overall socio-political milieu known as post-feminism. Post-feminism can be used in many contexts, but for the purpose of this dissertation, it can be understood as the socio-political moment in which feminism has been "taken into account", treated as something that has achieved its goals and is therefore outdated (McRobbie, 2009, pp. 11-12). In other words, post-feminism argues that structural barriers to female achievement have been removed, and "young women are able to come forward on the condition that feminism fades away" (p. 56); further political assistance is no longer necessary. In fact, individuals and movements who push for continued political change are seen as over-reaching, trying to co-opt the rights of other groups, specifically men, in order to become superior to them, rather than simply equal.

Feminist scholars have, of course, emphasized the ways in which feminism has not achieved all its goals; there are still numerous structural barriers to full gender equality. Rather than vanishing entirely, barriers have merely shifted form, taking on new appearances while ensuring that the glass ceiling remains intact. For example, standards of behavior remain different for men and for women, often placing extra pressure on women and encouraging them to engage in constant self-assessment. McRobbie (2009) describes four main areas, what she refers to as "luminous' spaces" (p. 59), in which norms of racial and gendered hegemony are reinscribed in the post-feminist world— the fashion-beauty complex, education and employment, sexuality and reproduction, and globalization. In each area, women are invited to come forward and achieve success or recognition, but only under carefully managed conditions.

In the areas of employment and education, for instance, McRobbie argues that social pressures limit the ways in which women are able to act, take control of their careers, and even

spend their earnings. Young women "now are expected to not just have an occupation, but to prioritize earning a living as a means of acquiring status, ensuring an independent livelihood, and gaining access to the world of feminine goods and services" (2009, p. 72). At the same time, women have not been freed of their domestic obligations as mothers, leading to unrealistic demands on their time and "the scaling down of ambition in favor of a discourse of managing following the onset of motherhood" (p. 80). Women are expected to be ambitious, to pursue education and a career, and to support themselves, but only to the point where it does not interfere with their abilities in the home. Should they be unable to take on the role of primary caregiver, it is work, not the family sphere, where they are expected to sacrifice. This prevents equal access to high levels of business between genders, as men do not face similar pressures to rein in ambition in order to care for family.

Although women face continued difficulties in achieving full equality, these challenges are not necessarily obvious in daily life. This is due to the forces of embedded feminism, or "the way in which women's achievements, or their desire for achievement, are simply part of the cultural landscape" (Douglas, 2010, p. 9). Many women have achieved high-powered positions; Hilary Clinton, Madeleine Albright and Condoleeza Rice have been Secretaries of State, and Fortune 500 companies contain twenty-four female CEOs as of 2014, a historic high (Fairchild, 2014). With these prominent examples of success, it can appear as if women's overall lower representation in the business and political worlds is the result of individual choice rather than systematic discrimination. This, however, masks continued problems. For instance, while individual cases of women choosing to leave the working world to stay at home as parents can seem like personal decisions, treating them as such ignores persistent social pressures surrounding parenthood and gendered pay differentials. When families choose who will work

and who will stay home, these factors may influence those decisions to make opting out of the workforce seem to be more logical for women than for men. Therefore, personal choice becomes a shield behind which systematic differences hide.

Feminism's dismissal is also a function of media portrayals of women. As Douglas asks, "How do we square the persistence of female inequality with all those images of female power we have seen in the media…?" (2010, p. 3), citing examples of female characters as cops, top medical professionals, and high-ranking politicians to support her point. Mediated displays of "girl power" hide the ways in which the "real world" (not the TV show) remains dominated by inequality. Many aspects of gender relations have improved since the original introduction of feminism, but all of its goals have not been achieved.

Because continued gender disparity is often masked by representations of feminine power, however, campaigns such as the men's rights movement are able to focus solely on the successes of feminism, trying to limit further changes due to fears of losing their privileged position. Kimmel (2013) compared men's perspective to a race; "You'd expect that everyone plays by the same rules— start at the starting line, and run as best you can, and that the fastest runners win the race… It may be hard for white men to realize that, irrespective of other factors, we have been running with the wind at our backs all these years and that what we think of as 'fairness' to us has been built on the backs of others… Efforts to level the playing field may feel like water is rushing uphill, like it's reverse discrimination against us" (p. xiii). Kimmel rightly acknowledges that privilege has always been invisible to its bearers. Because of this, awarding the same privileges to others can appear to be giving them undue advantages. This is further affected by the fact that, while men, and white men specifically, are privileged as a group, there are still distinct disparities in how successful they are and how much power they obtain

individually. Therefore, many do not feel the impacts of their lived privilege, believing that if it truly existed, they would feel more powerful or more successful. In short, they feel entitled to more than they possess (p. xiii).

For some men, this has led to a push-back against further changes to the socio-political environment and even a desire to reverse feminism's gains. To this end, the past decade or so has seen a rise in websites and online communities devoted to topics of men's rights, the most prominent being Paul Elam's "A Voice for Men" (AVFM). This site's "About" section includes goals such as "the dissemination of information that will expose misandry on all levels in our culture" and "to educate men and boys about the threats they face in feminist governance and to promote an end to that governance", among others (Elam, 2015). Members and writers overtly see feminism as a movement that has limited men's rights.

In comparing the feminist movement to the men's rights movement (MRM), site writer Jared White states, "There is only one way common ground can be reached between the MRM and the feminist movement. Feminists will have to first acknowledge that their movement has spread anti-male bigotry throughout western governments" (White, 2011). He goes on to detail how men and their children are turned away from domestic abuse shelters due to their gender, how women primarily receive custody of children in a divorce while men are forced to pay child support, how men who suffer domestic abuse are not given the same level of help as women, and how men are more likely to be accused of rape than women are, at times even falsely (White, 2011). In these ways, White argues, the feminist movement's attempts to protect women have decreased protection for men, to their detriment. While organizations such as the Southern Poverty Law Center have combated claims like those White makes (Potok and Schlatter, 2012), many men gravitate to these allegations as evidence of reverse discrimination, and their anger

and frustration over these points “is ‘real’— that is, it is experienced deeply and sincerely” (Kimmel, 2013, p. 9). Despite all the arguments that can be made regarding how men are still privileged, large subsections truly feel that their position in the world is being overtaken, and that they are not free to be the kind of men they want to be.

It is within this post-feminist environment, in which some men’s movements argue that feminism has achieved power for women at the cost of men, that the post-casual era of gaming and its associated trends towards misogyny have occurred and need to be understood. Specifically, men’s concerns about loss may be a contributing factor to the severe misogyny that has occurred in the post-casual era. Because of video game’s masculinized history, gaming has frequently served as a homosocial space for men to bond with other men. Men’s homosociality, or “the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex” (Lipman-Blumen, 1976, p. 16), often takes place in specifically gendered spaces, such as sports bars and locker rooms (Wenner, 1998), or through masculinized media such as male-hosted talk radio or sports talk radio (Nylund, 2004). Interactions in these areas, researchers like Nylund have shown, serve both to reaffirm traditional masculinity, through interpersonal behavior policing, but can also provide a space in which to talk about gender and sexuality in meaningful ways without surveillance by women.

In other words, homosocial spaces allow men to be men, but also allow them to develop who “men” are or should be. The loss of these spaces, through the entry of women, could therefore be seen as threatening to men and masculinity more generally, provoking a reaction like that seen in the post-casual era of gaming. For instance, Harley, one of this study’s longest-playing gamers, argued that the high levels of misogyny currently present in gaming were a relatively new development; although gaming had always been a male-dominated space, specific

efforts to keep it that way only started occurring in the post-casual era, according to her account. This raises the possibility that, until the masculine orientation of gaming was questioned, it did not need to be firmly protected or established through overtly exclusionary measures like sexist harassment. It is also possible that this shift towards greater misogyny in gaming is a reflection of overall anti-feminist, and often anti-women, trends in modern politics and culture, such as those motivating the increased restriction of abortion access. Regardless of the specific nature of the relationship between games, gender, and overall socio-political movements, however, it is clear that gaming's current struggles do relate to broader cultural trends and can perhaps serve as a small microcosm through which to examine these.

Conclusion

Although games studies has advanced dramatically from its earliest years, recognizing that initial quantitative work did not account for the experiences of all players and also often essentialized gender in unfair or unsupportable ways, many gaps remain, demanding further exploration. Not only does previous work need to be updated to account for the industrial, audience, and content changes of the post-casual era, but games studies work needs to assess broader social trends, such as the rise of post-feminism, and how they might affect women's experiences in venues historically marked as masculine. The rise of greater sexism that has been occurring in gaming over the past decade suggests that masculinized areas like video games can serve as a bastion of misogyny in which inequality persists and from which it can expand out into other areas as well. Understanding the forces that allow for this and how they then affect women individually and at a broader cultural level is a key goal of this project.

In addition, using the framework of identity theories that posit identity as contextual and flexible accounts for the contradictions and complications inherent in women's use of media,

allowing for a more detailed picture of their lived experiences and the impacts of these. In the context of this project, this is particularly useful and significant given that women's interactions with masculinized media are understudied. Although researchers like Radway and Gray have provided in-depth, nuanced views of how women use, view, and struggle with feminized media like romance novels or new technologies like VCRs, little work has shown how women interact with media that are historically marked as "for men". This lack of research obscures the fact that they do use these types of media and indeed find a great deal of pleasure in them. Bringing attention to women's participation in areas set up to exclude them provides a deeper view into their strength as members of interpretive communities, who can read pleasure into potentially complicated and off-putting material or spaces, as well as into the struggles they face in doing so.

By addressing these gaps in existing work, this dissertation provides necessary insight into gender, modern video gaming, and power. Specifically, it helps illuminate the challenges women face when gaming, as well as the many strategies they employ to manage these. At the same time, the dissertation responds to post-feminism and to the changes of the post-casual era. In doing so, it works to provide potential pathways along which longstanding gender inequalities, and newer trends towards sexism and misogyny, can be reversed or undermined. This can in turn influence not only gaming, but masculinized or exclusionary spaces in general.

Chapter Two: "Core" and the Video Game Industry

What Are "Core Games"?: Defining the Key Concept

Hardcore in Other Areas

To analyze the interactions of gender and gaming in the post-casual era, and to indicate how the post-casual era differs from games' previous status, I employ the idea of "core" as a means for discussing games' center and margins. I have chosen this term and concept specifically because it is already frequently used within gaming spaces, but as a primarily industry-motivated adjective for specific types of games and gamers. At its simplest, the term "core", as used to refer to video games, comes from "hardcore", an adjective describing a level of commitment and a particular kind of content. A search of academic journal and newspaper articles reveals that "hardcore" was first used to describe games and gamers in the early to mid-1990s. In October 1991, *Dealerscope Merchandising*, a monthly business publication focusing on technology sales and marketing, described video game company Konami's decision to market a new game entirely in gaming magazines as a deliberate attempt to court "the more advanced and hardcore gamer" (Hogan and King, 1991). This indicates that the term was already used enough to be familiar to business analysts, but it was not yet common enough to appear frequently outside gaming magazines. By 1994 and 1995, however, it had made its way into the vernacular of journalism as an adjective for committed gamers or difficult games. For instance, the Chicago Tribune described the magazine *Electronic Gaming Monthly* as the perfect gift for

“a hardcore gamer” (Carter and Carter, 1995), while *Business Wire* referred to the development team that created video game Warhawk as “people who used to make high-tech flight sims for the military and hardcore gamers” (”Warhawk”, 1995).

As Merriam-Webster defines it, hardcore means “a central or fundamental and usually enduring group or part: as a: a relatively small enduring core of society marked by apparent resistance to change or inability to escape a persistent wretched condition (as poverty or chronic unemployment), b: a militant or fiercely loyal faction” (”Hardcore”, 2015). Hardcore gamers, therefore, are the most committed, experienced, skillful, and obsessive players; hardcore games are the ones that require this level of obsession in order to complete.[17] Describing them as hardcore also implies that these players and games are central to the development and existence of the gaming industry and game culture more broadly, given the term’s association with “enduring” and “fundamental”.

Assuming that “hardcore” and “core” are *only* based on this dictionary definition of commitment and loyalty, however, ignores the subtle connotations attached to these terms. Core gaming has developed particularly masculine undertones that serve to bar other groups from full participation in the community by seeking to limit them to one subset of gaming, the area of casual games. While the core/casual divide has only recently become prominent in gaming, the development of masculine connotations regarding “hardcore” is not new. Similar changes have occurred in many industries that have used this term, such as pornography and music.

Specifically, although “hardcore” seems to be a simple adjective, for a type of punk music or a variation of pornography, a closer analysis reveals that it encompasses many levels of meaning beyond this. Its most obvious use is, not surprisingly, as an industrial category or as a

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[17] This use of hardcore remained relatively unquestioned until the mid-2000s, when the rise of casual games provided a new counterpoint for this term.

genre tag. But “hardcore” or “core” also indicates a style of masculinity, generally based on physicality, violence, or sexual explicitness, depending on context. Through these more subtle meanings attached to the term, and often only apparent to those within the described sphere, “core” can serve as a political tool. When deployed by musicians or music fans, by pornography creators or consumers, “hardcore” prioritizes a version of hegemonic masculinity based on an ideal of toughness, aggression, and dominance over women and other, non-hegemonic men. Hegemonic masculinity also often involves sexual prowess or power over women as well as mastery of technology, including weaponry, vehicles, or, in the case of music, instruments like drums and guitars. Finally, it can include an emphasis on the male body, its musculature, strength, and ability to withstand injury and pain (Brod, 1987; Hanke, 1992; Connell, 2000). Put simply, hegemonic masculinity prioritizes men’s power and control over their environments, selves, and others. In tapping into, reproducing, and inflecting these elements of masculinity, “core” marks out who belongs in a cultural sphere and who does not, who can possess power in that area and who cannot. Specifically, it equates “power” with “men”. “Core” serves as a subtle but forceful means for determining centers and margins in diverse cultural spheres.

Take, for instance, the use of “hardcore” in punk music. From a purely definitional standpoint, “‘hardcore’ was a purist style of the music developed initially in Washington, DC and Southern California in the early eighties. This, the music’s essential, ‘classical’ mode mounted a deliberately anachronistic attempt to sustain early punk’s negativity against its diffusion and assimilation by the music industry” (James, 1988, p. 35). Hardcore was a movement to return punk music, which had been affected by corporate interests, to its original anti-establishment rhetoric and political beliefs. The music was faster, louder, and more abrasive than much of the original punk movement, in order to make it more extreme and less mainstream

(Blush, 2010). Hardcore punk culture also tried to be abrasive and deliberately fringe, setting itself up against mainstream society and popular culture. Because of this, it ostensibly rejected social constructions of gender, race, sexuality, and more, fighting against "the isms" associated with these constructions- sexism, racism, etc. However, the particular ways in which hardcore identity was expressed ended up excluding many of the groups that should have been welcomed by hardcore's open-minded and anti-establishment definition.

In her study of "straight-edge hardcore" fans, who rejected drugs, alcohol and sex as a means to avoid consumer culture, Jamie Mullaney (2007) wrote, "Even as they express commitment to the idea that gender does not play a role in the scene, [third-wave] sXers simultaneously offer a plethora of anecdotes detailing the ways the scene marginalizes women" (p. 386). She continues on to describe how many straight-edge men, who were avoiding casual sexual encounters or abstaining from sex altogether, were suspicious of women's intentions in the hardcore scene. Many felt women were only "hardcore" as a ploy to get a boyfriend, and that this made them a potential threat to men's ability to remain straight-edge[18] (Mullaney, 2007, p. 401). She also explores how, while many hardcore bands did include women, they were frequently limited to the role of bassist, rather than taking on more prestigious positions as a lead singer or guitarist. Mullaney argues, "Women's overwhelming specialization in the bass points to women's ghettoization within bands. Rather than disrupting the established gender structures, women bass players fill positions men have deemed less desirable and have begun to abandon" (p. 387). This limitation of women's participation to only specific areas prevented them from becoming full members of the hardcore community, ensuring that they remained on the margins despite hardcore's ostensibly open-minded nature.

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[18] Female gamers encounter similar challenges to their authenticity through "girl gamer" stereotypes, which posit that women only play video games in order to meet and attract men.

Limitations like this were not only part of straight-edge hardcore. Rather, they echoed throughout the genre and its scene. The very physical style of hardcore dancing, also known as slam dancing or moshing, for instance, restricted the extent to which women participated as audience members at shows. With moves such as “the floor punch”, where a dancer would lean forward and violently punch towards the ground, or “the windmill”, where dancers flail their arms in wild circles, slam dancing often resulted in dancers accidentally or intentionally hitting those around them. Crowd surfing, pushing others out of the way to get closer to the stage, and jumping up and down in time with the music also made being in the crowd at a hardcore show a physical and potentially dangerous option. Because of this, many hardcore fans were relegated to the margins of convert venues. “Hardcore made [concert-going] more like a sporting event than music— with like the worst jocks you’ve ever seen. It excluded women. It became exclusionary only because it was violent— people couldn’t handle the physicality” (Blush, 2010, p. 25). While some women no doubt became well-practiced slam dancers, anecdotal evidence seems to show that most avoided “the pit”, the area in front of the stage where hardcore audience members tended to be most violent (Fenster, 1993, p. 81; Willis, 1993, p. 372; Blush, 2010, p. 37). “As Ian MacKaye, former lead singer of Minor Threat, a hardcore band, laments, ‘I stated to notice this drift—women at the front of the stage drifting towards the back… and eventually out of the fucking room’” (Mullaney, 2007, p. 385).

It was only in the area of style, the very consumption-based practice that hardcore was supposedly against, where women and men achieved parity. In terms of dressing the part, “hardcore chix enjoy more socioeconomic parity with their subcultural male copractitioners than any other female component of a previous subculture group. If anything, teenage girls (subcultural or not) have more opportunity to be employed by the expanding sales and service

industries than their male peers" (Willis, 1993, p. 372). Therefore, women could look hardcore and were definitionally invited to be part of the hardcore scene. In practice, however, they remained on the margins, limited to participating in only a few, carefully delineated ways. Hardcore music, therefore, was overall a male sphere, enacted in masculine ways that excluded others.

Another area where "hardcore" has been masculinized is in pornography, where it describes material in which there is "explicit sexual expression" (Escoffier, 2009, p. 1). Within the industry, this generally means the display of erect male genitalia (Hirdman, 2007). Because of this, the material naturally requires male actors and a male presence; "the female body cannot, or very seldom can, by itself express hardcore pornography" (Hirdman, 2007, p. 162). Hirdman also emphasizes the ways in which narratives around hardcore pornography focus "mostly [on] where the penis penetrates (anal, oral) and how (hard or soft, fast or slow) and which kinds of women get to 'get the cock'; schoolgirls, big breasted, virgins, etc." (p. 165). This further indicates how male genitalia is a necessary component in, and indeed the main character of, the hardcore genre. While hegemonically masculine elements like the direct domination of women are not specifically necessary for pornography to count as "hardcore", hardcore pornography is still inescapably gendered male, due to its requirement of male body parts in order to qualify.

Drawing on these past industries and how they have defined "hardcore", many similarities with video games become apparent. As with music or porn, "hardcore" or "core" is a term ostensibly defined in ungendered terms. In porn, hardcore refers to a level of graphicness. In music, it means a more political, less consumeristic form of punk music, usually with sped up rhythms and vocals. And in games, hardcore nominally refers to a level of time or skill investment in gaming. However, each of these areas has also come to be gendered masculine

through different forces, such as the physicality of hardcore dancing. In doing so, they have limited women's power in and influence over the futures of these areas.

Core in Gaming

In gaming culture since the mid-2000s, "core" has been primarily deployed not on its own, but as part of a binary— core vs. casual. As Juul (2010) explains in A Casual Revolution, "the idea of casual games has appeared specifically as a contrast to the idea that video games could only be made for a hardcore game audience" (p. 26). Therefore, this binary not only splits games into two separate types, but it also divides players into two groups of people, separating the traditional straight, white, male market from newer, broader audiences. Furthermore, it attempts to define core games as the more serious and important segment of the gaming community, taking on core's connotations of "central", while framing casual games (including social and mobile games as well as casual console games like those played on the Wii) as non-serious entertainment. As Anderson refers to them in his discussion of mobile games like *Angry Birds*, casual games are "stupid games" (2012). This politicizes seemingly simple descriptors, endowing one with importance and the other with frivolity. Further, it reserves cultural power and significance for traditionally male audiences and games, maintaining a hierarchy that excludes women and other "new" audiences from control over gaming culture. Although casual games are economically significant, the discourses around "core" and "casual" set them up as peripheral to "real" (that is, straight, white, male-oriented) games.

It is important to recognize, of course, that these definitions of casual and core, and the associated expectations thereof, do not necessarily play out in the lived experiences of players. For instance, Juul and other scholars have shown strong evidence that "casual" games can be played in hardcore ways and vice versa (Juul, 2010; Chess, 2014; Shaw, 2014b), arguing that a

game's design and its actual impact may differ dramatically when players engage with the game.[19] However, popular understandings of the terms have not changed greatly as a result of this research. Media and audience discourses continue to treat "casual" and "core" as polar opposites, ignoring the heavy overlap between these areas (Shaw, 2014b). Interviews and surveys of developers and players show that these groups stereotype casual gamers as older, female, and disinterested in a challenge (Juul, 2010). The success of games such as Farmville, where friends help you care for your farm, or Words with Friends, a social media version of Scrabble popularized by mobile game company Zynga, has also led to the stereotype that casual gamers prefer social games that require interaction between players. Finally, developers do not expect casual players to have or to desire in-depth knowledge of games. As puzzle designer Scott Kim states, "Expert gamers play for the longer term rewards of competition and rankings, whereas casual players play for the shorter-term rewards of beauty and skill" (Juul, 2010, p. 25). This implies that casual gamers play games in short bursts, have little knowledge of mechanics or game history, and look primarily for entertainment rather than deep storylines, quality graphics or gameplay, and intense challenges. Regardless of their real play habits, these discourses around gaming construct casual gamers, as their name itself suggests, as non-serious players who are only tangentially involved in gaming culture.

Hardcore gamers, in contrast, are not any of these things. Discourses around gaming portray hardcore gamers as young, steeped in game history, devoted to quality graphics, and looking for storylines in which they can invest time and energy; these are people who take their games seriously and live and breathe gaming culture. Rather than focusing on sociability or entertainment like their casual counterparts, hardcore gamers prize competition and strive to be

[19] For a visual breakdown of expected casual/core values and actual, measured casual/core play habits, see Juul 2010, Figs. 2.1 (p.29), 2.2 (p.30), 2.15 (p.51) and 2.16 (p.52)

the best, by any means necessary. In fact, this sometimes leads to them being anti-social, as trash-talk and insults are a standard strategy for gaining an advantage over other players. In this way, core is constructed as the opposite of casual on many levels. Perhaps even more importantly, developers and journalist still almost invariably describe hardcore gamers as male, gendering the divide between sides.

Through the characteristics illustrated above, it becomes clear that core maintains its original meaning of "hardcore as investment" through expectations regarding play, but it also includes additional expectations regarding *who* plays and in *what* way. Core and casual become terms defined, not simply by time, but by an interaction of game type, audience, and anticipated play style. For example, first person shooting games such as *Call of Duty* (CoD) are considered "core" games despite taking only seven to ten hours, on average, for completion of the main story line and some of the optional quests ("Call of Duty", 2014). On the other hand, games like *Super Mario Galaxy* (SMG), which is a cartoon-based platform game, take between fourteen and thirty hours of play yet are not generally considered to be "core" ("Super Mario Galaxy", 2014). This indicates how level of investment alone is not the determining factor in defining a genre.

When masculine standards and the expectations for core/casual players are entered into the equation, however, it is easy to see why *CoD* is "core" and *SMG* is not. *CoD* is violent and graphic, requiring players to take on the role of a soldier and play through realistic battle scenarios, using a variety of weaponry to defeat enemies. This aligns it with traditional expectations of men as aggressive and macho, often relying on physical power or violence to solve problems (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). It also ties into associations of masculinity with control over technology (Brod, 1987; Hanke, 1992; Connell, 2000). Furthermore, the game's online environment has grown to mirror stereotypical expectations for players and their

behavior, with trash talking and the harassment of other players seen as the standard. In fact, a simple Internet search for “Call of Duty trash talk” reveals that players have gone so far as to create “how to” guides for insulting each other most effectively. These verbal demonstrations of dominance connect strongly to hegemonic masculinity’s need to exert power over others and over one’s environment (Messerschmidt, 1993).

On the other hand, *SMG* is largely nonviolent and forgoes realistic desert warfare for simple cartoon graphics and bright colors. Mario faces many enemies in *SMG*, but they are cartoon mushrooms, turtles, or ghosts, for instance, rather than human beings. He also generally avoids the use of weapons, jumping on enemies to vanquish them. A player who wants to limit conflict can even avoid many enemies entirely; in *CoD*, direct conflict with enemies is the main goal. Finally, Mario himself is a short, chubby plumber, a far cry from the well-muscled, very physical characters of *CoD*. Because *SMG* steps away from direct aggression and employs cute cartoon graphics, it does not meet the masculine expectations of “core” games. In other words, “the trappings of the game, the look, the gameplay, the ideals and objectives, do not fit the established patterns of hardcore. And part of the reasons why these games do not conform is because these games do not have the trappings of masculinity, the style” (Kubik, 2010, pp. 62-63). *SMG* is also deliberately marketed widely and for social purposes, through Nintendo’s focus on whole-family play (Inoue, 2010). This further indicates that it is a “casual” game, despite its difficulty and the time commitment required to completing it.

In addition to these two examples, the masculinized nature of “core” can be explored clearly through a particular subgenre of gaming that uses the term within its title, the area known as “masocore”. “Masocore”, a portmanteau of “masochism” and “hardcore”, refers to games developers specifically make to be almost impossible to complete. In these games, players must

take pleasure not in beating the game, but in proving their skill by making infinitesimal progress through intense time commitment. Masocore games are generally platformers[20] that provide players with unlimited lives, but then set them against difficult game mechanics that require extremely fast reflexes and precise movements. Even the smallest misstep on the part of the player will lead to their death and send them backwards in their challenge. These are games one uses to prove that they are the best, not games one plays for relaxation or enjoyment. Because of this, masocore games possess many masculinized characteristics, such as a desire to dominate game environments and other players through ones' skill, and an extreme focus on competitiveness. These elements, combined with their deliberate difficulty and appeal to only a small contingent of obsessive players, further link masculinity to "core", tying together hegemonic gender expectations and the idea of commitment to gaming.

Impact and Use as a Conceptual Framework

The association of casual and core games with different audiences serves to maintain an unequal hierarchy of power, first by ghettoizing women to the casual margins of game culture and then by dismissing these games as frivolous and unimportant. "Together, sectors of commercial culture and core gaming culture work to position casual games as first feminine and then, tacitly if not vocally, as inferior and lacking when compared to masculinized hardcore video games" (Vanderhoef, 2013). Although new types of games target and introduce new audiences to gaming, they do not validate these players as *real* gamers or their games as significant. This identity remains masculinized and connected to specific types of games and audiences. This both ignores existing female gamers' longstanding presence in and contribution

[20] Platform games or "platformers" require the player to maneuver a character through an environment by jumping across suspended platforms, over obstacles, or both. The famous and extremely popular *Super Mario Bros.* series is an example of a platform-style franchise.

to gaming and prevents their future access to gaming communities and the identity of a gamer. Because of this, “core” and “casual” need to be seen as strategic rather than natural; they are used as a tool for valorizing certain types of games, and certain types of players, while dismissing others.

Within gaming, “core” serves as a marker of centrality, an ideological means for determining boundaries regarding what qualifies as a game (or a “good” game), who qualifies as a gamer, and what gaming culture should look like. “Core” performs labor in gaming culture, working to elevate specific play styles, types of gamers, genres, and more, while relegating others to the margins of game culture, defining them as less important. “Core” also deeply connects to relations of power, in that members of an area’s margins generally lack access to socio-cultural power in the center. When marked as tangential or less important, non-core gamers have little ability to control or affect the behavioral, linguistic, or content trends of gaming culture. Given the rise of sexism and misogyny that has permeated the post-casual era, power to redefine what gaming means or how it is developing matters, as does the inability to change it. If discourses of “core” effectively police the boundaries of gaming and maintain its alleged superiority, they will likely also maintain its misogynistic norms.

At the same time, the fact that “core” and “casual” are not nearly as simplistic as they appear on the surface offers up a new way of thinking about games, gamers, and gaming. Specifically, an analysis of “core” quickly demonstrates that it is a flexible and paradoxical concept. For each possible indicator of what “core” is, there is an example of a game or player that undermines that definition. If “core” is marked out by time investment, the many players who spend hundreds of hours on social media games like Farmville would seem to indicate that this game should count as core and they should count as core players. If “core” is decided by

platform, with PC games and console games as the locus of “core”, then Solitaire and Wii Sports would both be included, while detailed, complex mobile games like *Injustice: Gods Among Us Mobile*[21] or *Horn*[22] would not. If “core” is determined by player gender, the many experienced, skillful women interviewed for this study would be ignored or left out, while any male player would be included regardless of play style, game preferences, or skill. “Core” and “casual” are extremely complicated terms that encompass many different elements at once.

Because of this inherent flexibility, we can see that “core” is a key force working to maintain hegemony in gaming. As Gramsci argues, hegemony is a process, a continual struggle between the ruling class, which works to make its culture appear to be common sense, and subordinate classes, who sometimes consent to and sometimes resist this construction (1971). “Core” is one of the areas in which this process takes place. Specifically, hegemonic gamers and developers use notions of “core” to bound and police a hierarchy that prioritizes them. They expand or retract the perimeters of “core” as needed to deliminate what matters to game culture, their game culture, and what does not. At the same time, the flexibility of these boundaries allows subordinated gamers to take on some core characteristics while ignoring or deliberately avoiding others. This is a necessary step in breaking down and altering the gaming’s current gender hierarchy by denaturalizing it and showing how it can be constructed in different, more inclusive ways.

Drawing out the characteristics of “core”, what it means, and how it is constructed and maintained can demonstrate how relations of power are similarly maintained or challenged. This

[21] *Injustice: Gods Among Us Mobile* was released in 2013. It is a trading-card based fighting game, where players collect cards showing different DC Comics characters and use these to battle other players or computer opponents. The game draws from the conventions of analog trading card games and therefore relies on a high degree of player knowledge and experience.
[22] *Horn* is a mobile action-adventure game (RPG) released in 2012. It draws on fantasy themes and English mythology to offer an immersive environment, hours-long quests for players to complete, and many other trappings traditionally associated with core rather than casual games.

dissertation, therefore, offers an analysis of how women who play games encounter the boundaries of "core"— that is, which forces work to uphold gaming's existing masculinized nature— as well as how their entry into gaming as skilled, experienced players subverts those same boundaries. Understanding *how* and *when* essentializing forces are deployed, undermined, or changed in gaming offers a means first for analyzing relations of power in similar ways, and second for understanding other masculinized or exclusionary spaces in greater detail.

This conceptualization responds to Shaw's (2010) call to approach game culture from a critical cultural perspective; that is, as a process through which different contributors affect and navigate norms, expectations, and relations of power. Shaw points out that even as popular discourses around video games and gaming might change to recognize new audiences, "New definitions of game culture are never used to question the constructed past of video game culture's insularity, maleness, and youthfulness" (p. 408). This project aims to alter this limitation by addressing gaming culture, games, and gamers from the perceived margins of these spaces and by demonstrating how those margins can be seen as integral to the "core" of gaming.

"Core" and the Changing Video Game Industry

To begin the process of deploying "core" as a conceptual framework and as a means for understanding hegemony, the remainder of this chapter will present an analysis of the gaming industry in the post-casual era. In addition to the rise of casual, social, and mobile games described in the introduction, the post-casual industry has undergone a number of other changes, such as new sources of funding and distribution for developers. These developments have in many ways shaken longstanding "core" ideas about who makes games, what "good" games are, and what the gaming audience looks like, allowing for potential diversification and also demonstrating clearly how "core" is a constructed rather than natural concept. Rather than being

permanent, “core” can change and is even in the process of doing so now.

At the same time, the industry’s push towards broader audiences and new games appears to have provoked resistance from “core” players who want to see the status quo of gaming maintained. Because of the tension around what “core” means, or what the center of video gaming should be, the industrial change occurring in the post-casual era has motivated a Gramscian crisis of authority. Previously hegemonic “core” players see changes in the industry potentially decreasing their power, and they then work to police their privilege and the existing boundaries of “core” through sexism and misogyny. To explore these elements further, this chapter provides necessary background on what defines the post-casual era of gaming, why “core” players may see it as a threat, and why this has motivated the increase in negativity that marginalized players are currently facing.

Struggles of the AAA Industry

Prior to the mid-2000s, the video gaming industry was dominated by large studios, known as “Triple-A” or “AAA” studios. This term describes the studios with the largest budgets, extensive development staffs, and technically and graphically strong games. Including studios like Electronic Arts, Bungie, Rockstar, and more, the AAA sector of the gaming industry produced regular hit games for home video game consoles, the traditional bastion of the home gaming market[23], that were targeted to traditional male audiences. These studios possessed almost unquestioned power within the gaming industry; they even were briefly thought to be

[23] Although video games can be produced for many platforms, including living room consoles that connect to home televisions, personal computers, handheld devices, and more, the gaming industry’s revenue has generally come primarily from console games. Only recently have other sectors, like mobile and casual PC games, become competitive with console games in terms of revenue (Rayna and Striukova, 2014). Consoles and personal computer are also the platforms used for “hardcore” games like first person shooters, helping to centralize these systems as the heart of gaming culture.

recession-proof following the 2008 economic crash, as video game revenue stayed high while most other media industries' did not (Huntemann, 2010b). Because games were less expensive than vacations, and because many families already owned consoles, industry members considered the possibility that gaming revenue might even rise in the recession, due to the increased appeal of the "staycation" and at-home entertainment (Huntemann, 2010b, p. 199).

This did not, however, prove to be sustainable. Shortly after the economic crash, the video game industry also started to suffer losses. Today, it is almost taken for granted among games journalists and scholars that the era of AAA is over, a change many see as overdue. As Huntemann (2010b) stated, "Shifts in the industry were the result of an untenable production, distribution, and marketing structure that had not yet responded to its own success. The recession perhaps quickened the transition, but eventually the top-heavy, hit-driven, bloated development model of game production and the segmented, retail-oriented distribution and marketing approach were falling apart" (p. 199). On top of the recession, stagnating console technology and rising mobile technology, the growth of new distribution and funding mechanisms, and increasing awareness of problematic work structures within the industry all contributed to rising competition from smaller producers and a collapse of AAA power.

Not only has this changed the games industry, allowing for diversification in business models, products, and targeted audiences, but it has also deeply challenged the idea of what makes a "good" game. Under the AAA system, good games had a particular look and feel to them— they focused on top-of-the-line graphics and mechanics, for instance. Traditional expectations for games state, "In video game development, there is nowhere to save money without sacrificing quality. 'B' games look, to the consumer, like bad games. There is no market for 'straight to DVD' or 'second run theater' titles. There is no 'made for TV.' In games, if it

isn't AAA, it's bargain bin. There is no middle ground" (Polygon Staff, 2012a). This type of definition made it easy to determine what was a good game and what was a bad game, but it also severely limited the title of "good" to expensive-to-produce content that only a few studios could make.

The post-casual era, however, has seen this assumption deeply questioned. Industrial changes have opened the gaming industry up to smaller developers, independent studios, and even individual creators who leverage the falling costs of game production to introduce new titles. Furthermore, the rise of casual games has introduced new sections of the industry that are extremely competitive financially and in terms of audience with the formerly dominant AAA console and PC games. With these new entrants into the gaming market, the best games now are not necessarily the ones with the most cutting-edge graphics or the ones that sell the most; developers, journalists, and even players are paying increasing attention to other aspects, such as creativity, narrative depth, and a focus on telling new stories. This means that quality is no longer exclusive to AAA studios.

The fact that being the most expensive is no longer necessarily an entryway to being the best demonstrates the fundamental fluidity of games and their core; even after decades at the top of the industry and in the center of gaming culture, the fall of AAA studios has not meant the death of quality games or of gaming more generally. Rather, the decline of the AAA studio has simply shifted expectations for games, allowing new types of producers and content to be seen as central or core components of the industry.

At the same time, complaints and backlashes against these same changes show how changing expectations about "core" and what the core of gaming is or should be is a process, rather than a conclusion. Moreover, it is a process that is heavily resisted. Even as new types of

games receive accolades, they often face critiques that they are not “real” games. Other games are marked as casual, feminized and dismissed as described earlier. Analyzing the tensions around changes to core, particularly when they are changes motivated by and taking place within the games industry, shows how the desires of players and the future of the industry do not always coincide. It also starts to reveal how the boundaries of games’ core and margins are policed, reinforced, and undermined simultaneously in a complicated and slow process of change.

Forces Altering the Gaming Industry

Changing Technologies

Although the rise of casual, social, and mobile games is arguably the biggest industrial change gaming companies have faced in the past decade, a number of other, more subtle changes have also contributed to the decline of AAA and the redefinition of the industry’s “core”. The first of these is the video gaming consoles’ loss of technological superiority and slow development cycle. As of late 2012, video gaming entered its eighth generation of consoles. The Nintendo WiiU was the first updated system to be released, debuting in 2012. Microsoft and Sony then introduced their eighth generation systems, the Xbox One and the PlayStation 4 (PS4), in November 2013. With these three releases, the console market exited its longest generation since the introduction of video games in the 1970s. The previous iterations from Nintendo, Microsoft and Sony, the industry’s console producers, came out in 2005 or 2006 and have been staples of the market ever since. By the time their replacements entered the market, they were between seven and eight years old. For digital technologies, where processing speeds and graphics capabilities continually improve, seven to eight years is an extremely long time, and this extended life cycle has meant limited innovation in game development, increased power in non-

console areas, and changing expectations for new gaming platforms.

Producing games for the same consoles for seven years greatly limited the amount of innovation developers could achieve, as well as their desire to continue producing new material. "On the one hand, the longevity of the current generation is a sign of the popularity of the games for the generation. In theory, it makes developing AAA games for these consoles relatively low-risk and somewhat less expensive. In practice, however, these gains are marginal, and are offset by the reduction in 'wow' factor of games that look so much similar to games released almost a decade ago" (Polygon, 2012a). Players who were originally astounded by the graphics quality and mechanics available through the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 (PS3) are now used to that level of detail and are seeking new innovation. The sheer technical capabilities of the systems are becoming outdated.

On top of that, developers who invest millions of dollars in a game want to be assured of its success. When they knew that a new console system was on the horizon, due to the age of the seventh generation, it is likely that their desire to produce further games for the 360 or PS3 declined. No developer would want to release a game that would be outdated within a few months. Because of this, low-risk franchise games dominated the later years of the seventh generation. Writing in 2013, games journalist Nick Statt said, "A handful of big-budget, triple-A games are slated for the end of the current generation of consoles this year… But a lot of these titles - and a healthy chunk of what Sony debuted at its PS4 event in February - were sequels within established franchises that are only confirmed and shown off because publishers know they will sell. After all, your annual *Call of Duty* or *Assassin's Creed* take an international team of developers only a year to churn out and still make hundreds of millions of dollars in sales" (Statt, 2013). Developers edged away from innovation as consoles aged and instead relied on

trusted favorites that were near-guaranteed hits. "What this leads to is an industry structure that is constantly preying on itself. The games industry, like any creative industry, thrives on new titles to become the next franchises or hits. Yet, simultaneously they are choking off their supply of new games available by favoring investments in 'proven' titles" (Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 294). Low-risk strategies are preventing further growth in the industry.

Although this may change as new consoles hit the market, both the lack of innovation and the reliance on tried-and-true franchises over new offerings have impacted the success of consoles and console games, with sales of both dropping over the years (Statt, 2013). To make matters worse, other technologies have improved even as consoles stagnated, giving gamers new incentives to move away from their living room systems, the bastion of the AAA game. Mobile gaming, for instance, made enormous strides in this time period. When the seventh generation of consoles hit the market in 2005 and 2006, mobile gaming was largely limited to specific systems like the Nintendo DS or the PlayStation Portable (PSP). However, the spread of smartphones and game distribution channels like the Apple App Store changed this. Mobile has become a huge competitor for traditional gaming, due both to the spread of the technology and its continual improvements. As Chris Akhavan, a vice president for the mobile monetization company TapJoy, argues, "The reach of mobile games — 207 million iOS and Android devices combined, compared to the 70 million PS3s in the market, is the first driver. And mobile hardware is constantly, iteratively improving, while consoles only refresh every seven years or so" (Hachman, 2013). While mobile games cannot offer the graphical quality of console games, their high level of innovation and easy access make them appealing to many players, especially as they demand less investment than more time-intensive and expensive traditional games.

Personal computers also offer a new threat to the technological benefits of the living

room console. PCs have long competed with consoles for players' time, especially as many PC games come in similar genres to console games. Originally, however, top-of-the-line gaming PCs were far more expensive than consoles, often costing thousands of dollars. The few hundred dollars required for a console was minimal by comparison, especially when the seventh generation brought multimedia capabilities like video streaming, DVD or Blu-ray players, and Internet radio to the living room television in addition to games themselves. As the console cycle lengthened, however, PC capabilities made dramatic improvements. Not only are they now competitive in terms of graphics quality, genre offerings and more, but PCs have become much less expensive. In 2013, PCMag branch ExtremeTech ran a test to see if they could build a gaming computer competitive with the PlayStation 4 in terms of both performance and price. The magazine staff concluded that it was possible; ExtremeTech built a computer for barely over $400 that had comparable technical specifications to a PS4 (Anthony, 2013). It is true that they did not include the cost of a gaming keyboard or mouse, but PC capabilities have become a close match to those of consoles.

This also demonstrates how the release of the eighth console generation will not necessarily save this key area of gaming from falling. TechCrunch writer Natasha Lomas, quoting a veteran game designer anonymously, wrote, "The PS4/XB1 is the first generation to have technology that is worse than what is already out there. There are 2+ year old [graphics processing units] (GPUs) that outperform these boxes, and even budget GPUs releasing now in the $150 range outclass these machines… This is unprecedented. This means whilst the casuals are moving to mobile/web, the high end enthusiasts are moving to PC where games are better looking. The traditional consoles are caught in a pincer movement" (Lomas, 2014). Some writers even believe that current consoles are maxing out the possibilities for the medium, and that

future improvements will be much more minimal than the differences between past generations (Polygon Staff, 2012a). Therefore, technological improvements may not be enough to draw gamers' attention back to traditional console games.

The AAA industry has historically been very console-dependent. The console market was the main method for reaching "gamers", the audience for which AAA studios created games. On top of that, consoles were economically smart choices for people who spent millions on development, as console games are more difficult to pirate. "Multiple sources speaking anonymously have pegged the PC game piracy rate at close to 90%, meaning only 10% of the people playing AAA games in the PC platform have actually paid for it" (Polygon Staff, 2012a). While these numbers may be on the high side, they do indicate that piracy is a real concern for PC producers. Therefore, if AAA games do not have a safe home in console gaming, studios will likely produce them far less frequently. They represent too large an investment to risk losing money to piracy.

New Means of Funding and Distribution

At the same time that technological changes have potentially undermined the ability of AAA developers to produce for consoles, new means of funding and distribution have changed the stakes for game development costs and pricing, again forcing a reconsideration of traditional industry structures.

One major change has been the growing role of digital downloads as a means for distributing games. For instance, although mobile game technology existed on PDAs and Blackberries as early as the late 1990s, these brands marketed primarily towards business purposes. The launch of the Apple App Store in 2008 changed expectations for phone technology. Where Internet-enabled phones had previously been tools for working remotely,

Apple clearly indicated that the iPhone was an entertainment tool, and that it was meant for anyone rather than just working professionals. The App Store made low cost casual games widely available as part of this marketing push. When consumers responded enthusiastically, Apple's competitors moved to emulate their success, and other phone providers rebranded and sought out gaming markets. This created an entire sphere of gaming that occurred solely through digital distribution.

Digital distribution has also made major inroads into both PC gaming and console gaming, which were traditionally dominated by physical game copies. Steam, the largest market for traditional PC downloads, has been open since 2003, but their addition of a Macintosh platform in 2010 greatly increased their reach and capacity. In the same year, Wolfire Games introduced the first Humble Bundle. Humble Bundles are small, privately curated collections of digital content such as video games that players can purchase for highly discounted rates. Buyers choose what they want to pay for the bundle, with extra content offered to those who pay above the average contribution or above a certain cut-off point. These mechanisms and others like them have offered smaller game developers new opportunities to get their games to an interested market, often at lower cost to themselves. This opened up the potential for non-AAA studios to take new risks and innovate in their game designs (Spock, 2012).

As game designer Chris Swain explains, "digital distribution cuts out a tremendous pressure: games purchased from a retailer retain only 17% of the price for the publisher, along with the complete lack of profit from used game resale. Digital distribution… would retain 85% of the retail price, along with removing limits of selling the long tail back-catalogue of previously published titles that a brick-and-mortar store cannot stock" (Lipkin, 2013, p. 12). Digital game producers save heavily on this distribution method, cutting out the high overhead

that comes with CD printing and the physical distribution of games. Furthermore, they never risk overproducing or underproducing their games; no retailer ends up with empty shelves or unpurchased copies. They also benefit from the lack of a used game market; rather than losing customers who share game copies with friends, digital distributors are able to make more potential sales.

The same is true in a console setting. As the seventh generation of consoles offered Internet connectivity across the board, each also developed a means for Internet-enabled game distribution. Microsoft introduced the first major network, Xbox Live, on the original Xbox in 2002, then continued this service onto the Xbox 360 and the Xbox One. In order to compete, Sony and Nintendo introduced the PlayStation Network and Nintendo's Virtual Console in 2006. All allowed players to explore new games, download material, and update their physical game copies via the Internet. While big-name AAA games still tend to be distributed via CD, console networks allowed new types of games to make inroads into this venue. Low cost games by independent producers were able to reach gamers who may not have considered them previously, due to a preference for living room gaming over other methods. Therefore, the bastion of the AAA game saw new diversification. "The growth of social and mobile games, as well as digital distribution methods, evidence a pushing against the system in response to constraint, sending game developers moving in new and innovative directions." (Whitson, 2013, p. 124)

Funding methods have also changed in this time period, further allowing the development of new game forms that help undermine the dominance of the AAA game and studio. "Perhaps the most promising form of opposition is the rise in popularity of crowdsourced funding platforms, such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo. Rather than forcing developers to develop projects on the side or push unfinished goods to market and finish them over time, platforms like

Kickstarter enable money to come in up front — a luxury previously reserved for large established developers and those under patronage of major publishers” (Lipkin, 2013, p. 20). Crowdfunding allows new ideas to have a chance to reach the market; rather than having to pass proposals through potentially risk-averse large developers, who also want to avoid competition with their own titles, crowdfunded games need only appeal to potential players. Because of this, new ideas and mechanics may be more successful.

Furthermore, crowdfunding helps designers interact more closely with their potential markets, to see what types of gamers support their project and to market even as they are producing the game itself. This allows for better tailoring of the game to the intended consumer, as well as the potential to change who expected markets are. While AAA games still tend to focus on the young, white, male market, crowdfunded games can, and often do, move beyond this stereotype. It is true that not all games succeed via crowdfunding options, and those that do may still receive disappointing reviews or feedback if they veer too far from the proposed design (Hiscott, 2014). They can also struggle with the sheer number of competitors who also seek funding via the same sources, splitting the potential investments a single market is likely to make. However, crowdfunding still offers a completely new approach to game development that reduces the personal investment needed up-front, allows for greater innovation, and provides a means of reaching the gaming market without needing traditionally established developers.

Resistance to Industry Work Practices

The final piece contributing to the decline of AAA gaming as the dominant industrial form has been a growing recognition that these studios engage in unhealthy work practices, driving many developers to seek employment elsewhere and to develop new studios that give them control over their work and schedules. The video game industry’s structure and work

practices, particularly in AAA studios, emphasize post-industrial trends, being flexible and project based. Game development is characterized by a system of uneven working hours, just-in-time production, and jobs based on contracts rather than full term employment (Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2006; Deuze et al., 2007; Huntemann, 2010a). Because of this, careers are inherently uncertain, with studios hiring or firing in line with the number of projects they currently have in progress and the particular skill sets needed for the different steps of each development cycle (Deuze et al., 2007; Huntemann, 2010a). Production also frequently relies on a system of "crunch time", where the time period just before a game's release can see employees facing work weeks of eighty hours or more, to iron out final bugs and problems (Deuze et al., 2007; Huntemann, 2010a). While crunch time is supposed to be a temporary measure used to speed up projects that may have fallen behind, voices from within the industry have indicated that it has become a normal tool to take advantage of employees, with companies putting them on a crunch-time schedule for extended periods of time even when projects have consistently been meeting deadlines (Hoffman, 2004; Rockstar Spouse, 2010).

On top of this, games are a passion-based industry, full of people who grew up playing games, loving them, and wanting to take part in their production. This same passion can unfortunately trap developers into unhealthy relationships with work, where they are at times taken advantage of by employers. Passion leads to a greater supply of employees than demand, making it easy for companies to replace workers, decrease salaries, and increase competition for positions. Those workers who do manage to get jobs, especially at large studios, may consider themselves lucky to be employed, limiting their ability to resist unrealistic demands. "Because of their passion for games, developers are often willing to overlook working conditions that are less than ideal, profit models that benefit those that sell and market games rather than those that

create them, and contracts that stifle creativity in favor of less risky clones and more profitable sequels" (Whitson, 2013, p. 122).

In 2004, a blog post by a woman calling herself "EA Spouse" criticized the working practices of Electronic Arts, one of the largest video game development studios in the world. Erin Hoffman, the author of the post, believed that EA was overexerting their employees, using crunch time in situations where projects were on schedule, and under-compensating workers for overtime (Hoffman, 2004). She argued that a consistent environment of long hours and little pay was negatively affecting the physical, mental, and emotional health of the company employees, but that the overall response to any complaint about this treatment was, "'If they don't like it, they can work someplace else.' Put up or shut up and leave: this is the core of EA's Human Resources policy" (Hoffman, 2004). This attitude reflects the high supply of potential workers; while experience is valued, the ability to put in long hours and not complain about them seems to be valued even more highly (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2006; Deuze et al., 2007; Huntemann, 2010a). Therefore, employees have little recourse against unrealistic company expectations.

This is further obvious in that, although Hoffman's letter helped lead to a series of class-action lawsuits allowing employees to collect on unpaid overtime, the problems she raised in 2004 have not entirely subsided. In 2010, a group of spouses whose partners worked for Rockstar San Diego, another AAA studio, crafted a similar letter and published it on Gamasutra, the online branch of *Game Developers Magazine* (Rockstar Spouse, 2010). Again, the spouses claimed that intense, extended periods of crunch time were affecting the mental and physical health of Rockstar employees, and even went so far as to claim that employees who sought medical help on Saturdays were treated as "a hindrance" for being out of the office. This letter closely followed a class-action lawsuit over unpaid overtime that had been filed against Rockstar

in 2009 and was settled out of court in 2010 (Gilbert, 2010), indicating that problems were persisting throughout the organization. More recent updates show similar issues, as layoffs and unstable conditions continue for workers (Sinclair, 2012; Schreier, 2014; Schreier, 2015).

Employees also have few possible avenues for addressing issues other than public complaints and class-action lawsuits. In their 2014 Quality of Life survey, the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) found that most employees were only able to raise concerns "directly to their managers. Just over one-quarter of the survey respondents felt comfortable with this approach" (Edwards et al., 2014, p. 31). Over 40% stated that they would rather have the ability to approach issues as part of a collective, through a union or professional organization (p. 31). Furthermore, they appear to prefer the idea of an industry-wide union, like the Writer's Guild of America or the Screen Actors Guild, to individual workplace unions, which many seemed to think would not effectively address their problems. When asked about the possibility of forming a union within their individual workplaces, "Just over one-third said that they would vote for the union, 20% said they would vote against the union and 10% said they would not vote at all" (Edwards et al., 2014, p. 31). The remaining responses were divided between "not applicable" and "prefer not to say". More developers supported the possibility of an industry-wide union. "Over 55% said they would vote in favor of an industry-wide union, 14% said they would vote against, 9% would not vote at all" (Edwards et al., 2014, p. 32).

This contrast between workplace unions and industry-wide unions could be a result of the industry's current flexibility, where employees move between companies frequently as projects change. An industry-wide union would help them address issues as they move through positions, rather than having to deal with employers on a case-by-case basis. Despite support for potential unionization, though, little serious discussion around the possibility occurs within the industry,

due to industry norms and the surplus of workers. Because crunch time, for instance, is the norm at many studios, employees who want to speak out against long, unrealistic hours fear that their company will see them as lazy or replace them with another worker who does not complain (Sinclair, 2012). While employees recognize the potential benefits of unions, they see significant barriers to actually creating one. But without collective organization or changes to the industry, working practices remain the same.

Unpaid overtime, flexible contracts and unending crunch time are somewhat normal for a creative, post-industrial industry, and do respond to the ebb and flow of the production cycle to the benefit of the development companies. However, they also deeply affect the industry's appeal for potential and current workers. "As reports of crunch increase, and creative autonomy decreases in favor of risk management strategies imposed by publishers, developers are realizing that their own work has been effectively instrumentalized. Most developers burn out quickly and abandon the industry within five to ten years" (Whitson, 2013, p. 124). The IGDA's updated survey in 2014 shows similar timelines. Although surveyed developers' average time in the industry was nine years, the researchers realized that a few long-term employees skewed this number. The mode, or most commonly reported time in the industry, was only three years, and the median was six. Therefore, evidence still shows that many employees exit the industry quickly (Edwards et al., 2014, p. 17). Furthermore, when surveyed employees were asked why they left or wanted to leave the industry, the top response was "I want a better quality of life" and one of the secondary responses was "burned out" (p. 18). Overall, the working practices of the industry are unsustainable for many employees despite their passion for games.

Because AAA studios have been at the heart of past problems and have been slow to make requested changes, some former AAA developers have moved to or created their own

independent studios, to work in smaller environments where they have more control over their hours or product (Hiscott, 2014; Lipkin, 2013; Martin and Deuze, 2009; Whitson, 2013). For example, "[2011's] Bastion was made by former EA Los Angeles developers; Kickstarter project République is being built by Seattle devs, including some Halo 4 vets; none other than gaming luminary Peter Molyneux left Microsoft in March to start 22Cans, which he hopes can be more nimble than large developers. The list goes on and on" (Polygon, 2012d). The indie scene, although funded and distributed in different ways, often shares core characteristics with the AAA industry, such as slang, past experience playing games, and a passion for their creation. However, this path allows developers to take greater control over their work and avoid feeling like a "cog" in a larger machine (Whitson, 2013, p. 124). They are taking greater personal risks, due to the challenges inherent in finding their own funding and in self-marketing, but they have greater input over the final product and what happens to it. When crunch does have to occur, it occurs within self-imposed limits, rather than being forced (Lipkin, 2013, p. 11). "The desire for more authentic and autonomous creation, the feeling of an impossibility of upward mobility (within the company's hierarchical organization of work), and a discontent regarding accreditation and top-down management are common complaints found in the reasons developers give for leaving their (relatively) more stable jobs for indie game production" (Martin and Deuze, 2009, p. 287). With this flight from traditional studios, combined with the success some indie studios have achieved, game workers are seeing more alternatives to AAA work, potentially threatening the plentiful labor source that has allowed it to thrive in the past.

Rising Competition and Changing Assumptions

Although these changes in technology, distribution and funding, and work practices have only become prominent in the years since in mid-2000s, they have already resulted in the

revision of industry expectations and even in economics. For instance, digital distribution is expanding in terms of market share and revenue. "Sales numbers show a consistent growth in non-traditional sales, like subscriptions, digital full games, add-ons, and apps. These non-boxed copy sales now make up 31 percent of the industry's software sales, according to the NPD Group and Games Market Dynamics" (Polygon Staff, 2012c). This movement is diversifying the market and providing new opportunities, at the same time that it is contributing to the decline of the large game producers who face increasing competition with each new, successful company that relies on digital distribution and personalized funding in order to create innovative material. Independent game *Journey* provides a prime example; it was produced by a team of fourteen people and went on to win the Game of the Year award at the Game Developer's Conference in 2012. It was also nominated for a Best Soundtrack Grammy, the first in video game history (Statt, 2013).

Because of this rising competition, the AAA market is seeing its role in gaming challenged. Its previous dominance allowed AAA to serve as a key determinant of "core", using its prominent role in the industry to mark straight, white, male audiences as deserving of targeting (i.e. as "real" gamers) and genres like first-person shooters as central to gaming culture. As AAA studios lose market share and income to new competitors, however, players, journalists and other developers are questioning their fundamental assumptions about who plays games, and, from a culture standpoint, they are losing their function as the origin of game quality and the power that comes with that role. Previously, cutting-edge graphics, technical superiority, and an AAA studio label were general markers of a quality game. However, the success of mobile games, casual games that focus on easy playability rather than technical specifications, and indie games that showcase lower quality graphics in innovative ways has altered this perception.

For example, the popular indie game *Fez* uses blocky, 2D graphics as a key component in the game play. In *Fez*, "you play as Gomez, a 2D creature living in what he believes is a 2D world. Until a strange and powerful artifact reveals to him the existence of a mysterious third dimension!" Although the whole game is portrayed in 2D graphics, the player can rotate the environment to view 3D space from different sides, using this ability to help the character navigate through and solve puzzles. Fez received several awards, such as the Grand Prize at the 2012 Independent Games Festival and the Game of the Year award from Eurogamer (Independent Games Festival, 2012; Bramwell, 2012). Games like *Fez* necessarily force a redefinition of gaming's "core" values, due to their critical and popular success despite their lack of high-caliber graphics or an AAA studio label.

At the same time, mobile games and indie games are redefining assumptions about who plays games or deserves to be a "core" audience. *Journey* was incredibly successful, and achieved this success without following traditional industry expectations for the production and distribution process or for audience targeting. The game, in which players control a robed figure on a quest to reach a distant mountain, has little in common with AAA games of the past, and decidedly did not target a stereotypical "straight, white male" audience. Through its success, it is altering expectations for who plays games and what they should look like. And it is not alone in doing so. As *The Last of Us* director Neil Druckmann points out, indie games focus on non-traditional audiences far more than AAA games do, something that he sees as a benefit (Sinclair, 2013). "He specifically called out *Gone Home* and *Papers, Please* as two games with impressive narrative components, saying he was 'blown away' by the kind of stories they told, and the mechanics used to tell them" (Sinclair, 2013). *Gone Home* is an interactive story game in which the playable character returns home from a year long trip to find her house empty and her family

gone. As she explores the house, she finds objects and clues that reveal her sister's relationship with a girl from school, exploring deep questions about relationships, family, sexuality, and coming out. *Papers, Please* puts the player in the role of an immigration officer who needs to evaluate applications for entry into their fictional country, trying to screen out terrorists or other undesirables while allowing legitimate applicants through. These games deliberately focused on telling new stories and exploring the experiences of straight and LGBT women and immigrants. In doing so, they targeted new audiences, extending past "gamers". "Games allow us to walk a mile in the shoes of another, and thanks to indie games, those shoes no longer belong solely to white beefy men" (Polygon Staff, 2012b).

The same is true of mobile or social games, such as *Farmville, Angry Birds,* or *Candy Crush Saga*. Taking advantage of the many alternative platforms players can access now and the low-cost nature of digital distribution, these games have reached audiences in the hundreds of millions and brought in billions in sales (Anderson, 2012; Shanley, 2013; Dredge, 2015). They cut down on overhead and can be downloaded and played entirely for free, with optional purchases to speed up slow processes, to help players beat a difficult level, or to get extra experience or items. But perhaps most importantly, they deliberately aim for the widest possible audiences. Their success through this approach necessarily changes the conditions for game production and subverts the idea that "gamers" are the only people who play video games.

Because the indie development industry and the rise of mobile games has started to break down many long-standing ideas about "core", gamers and industry members have had to start redefining what makes a good game and who those games are for. In other words, industrial changes have undermined the expectation that gaming only exists to target a "core" audience and that the best games come out of "core" studios. Many developers and players see this as a

positive change, both for players who are now discovering the fun of gaming and for developers who have new markets to tap. Overall, they draw on these changes as evidence that gender problems in gaming will decrease, as the industry diversifies and traditional concepts of "gamers" relax.

Furthermore, there is little reason to believe that game companies will return to their prior practices and to more specific ideas of "core"; developers who target broader audiences see many benefits from this practice. Video game's historical insularity is, in fact, unusual from an industry perspective, as every media industry from radio to books to film has previously recognized the benefits of extensive markets. Given the success of mobile games, indie games, and other newer additions to the gaming industry, it is unlikely that a return to the era of dominant AAA studios will occur.

Resistance to Change

At the same time, industrial changes have not simply been able to redefine games and gamers without resistance, and the rise of alternatives to traditional games and studios has seen many challenges. Although new games are critical hits and economically successful, players and critics often treat them as less serious, less significant, and less important than older styles of games. Furthermore, new games are heavily feminized, while older game styles maintain their traditional masculine associations. For example, although *Gone Home* is one of the games Druckmann specifically praised for its inventive storyline and although it won game site Polygon's 2013 Game of the Year award (Grant, 2014), critics, particularly "core" gamers, often claim that it does not actually qualify as a game[24] (Kohler, 2013; Gaynor, 2014; Sheffield, 2014).

[24] Games journalists and developers have largely reacted positively to *Gone Home*; this critique primarily comes from game players. Their arguments as to why *Gone Home* is not a game can be widely found on Twitter and online games forums, but generally include the fact that it doesn't have a way for the player to fail, that it is not long

Many are quite negative about *Gone Home* because of this, arguing that is it overrated, too expensive, or simply distracting players, developers, and journalists from "real" games.

What is important here is that even when players do speak positively about their experience playing *Gone Home*, insisting that it is not a game is an attempt to maintain gaming's status quo, as a medium for a specific "core" audience and specific "core" games, in the face of industrial changes that broaden or redefine that core. It is an attempt to maintain exclusivity and to continue to define gaming boundaries in the way they have always already been defined. And although it is a more positive way of defining boundaries than the sexism and misogyny described in the introduction to this dissertation, it is still a mechanism for maintaining gendered hierarchies among games.

More interestingly, players seem to deploy the "not a game" argument at games that do not target "core" gamers or that tell different stories; for example, although popular sandbox game *Minecraft*, like *Gone Home*, doesn't necessarily have a way for the player to fail, or combat or puzzles for a player to face, its gameness is rarely or never questioned the way *Gone Home*'s has been. This could simply be because *Minecraft* does offer options for elements like combat if players seek them out, but evidence suggests that the negative reaction to *Gone Home* (and *Journey*, *Flower*, *Her Story*, or other recent offerings that face the not-a-game argument) is at least partially due to its focus on new audiences and storylines (Gray, 2015). In the face of changing industry standards, some players, especially players who are part of gaming's longstanding straight, white, male audience, are working to deploy ideas of quality and what constitutes a game as a way to continue valorizing games that target them, and that have always

enough to qualify as a game, that is has no combat or puzzle challenges for the player to engage with, and that the storyline doesn't branch (Gaynor, 2014. Because of this, player critics argue that *Gone Home* is an interactive story rather than an actual game.

targeted them, as more important than newer offerings.

Although researchers have not fully explored men's, or "gamers", experiences in the post-casual era, there is some evidence that this reaction, and some of the rampant misogyny that has arisen in gaming, is due to traditional players' fears that the gaming industry may be a zero-sum game. In fact, "some players are explicit in their complaints that growth in some areas — such as casual and social games, which are often targeted to women — means that fewer budgets and development teams will be focused on traditional titles and genres such as First Person Shooters and Action games" (Consalvo, 2012). "Gamers" see casual games' normalization of gaming (Juul, 2010) and the ensuing increase in non-"gamer" players as a potential threat to the kinds of games they enjoy or prefer.[25] Because of this, they are deploying many forces in an attempt to maintain gaming's "core" as exclusive and exclusionary in terms of both content and broader culture. Defining the quality of games in specific ways is one attempt at this. The rise of greater misogyny in gaming is likely another, especially as participants for this study, particularly those with long histories as gamers, argue that gaming's blatant sexism is a relatively new development.

Conclusions

Although it may seem obvious to conclude this section by stating that changes in the video gaming industry have resulted in a medium in flux, such a realization is a necessary foundation for the rest of this project. As Shaw (2010) reminds us, the masculinized nature of gaming culture often goes unquestioned. Other than small, relatively unsuccessful attempts like

[25] As Consalvo (2012) points out, little research has analyzed why "gamers" believe gaming is a zero-sum industry or whether these concerns have a basis in the actual economics of gaming. However, even if these are unfounded fears, the fact that they are deeply felt by at least some members of the gaming community, who are then working to defend their space using forces like sexism and misogyny, matters to the questions of this project and the trends we are seeing in gaming culture.

the girls' games movement of the 1990s, little has been done in the past to change or undermine the idea that gaming is a hobby for boys and men, not for women and girls. The aforementioned industrial changes, although aimed simply at increasing revenues for companies or improving work-life balances for individuals who move to indie studios, have provided a foundation upon which a real attempt to undermine games' masculinized history can take place, a basis from which "core" can be questioned and redefined.

The maintenance of power is a continual process of negotiation. Gramsci argued that the ruling class works to create a cultural hegemony, whereby they draw from the aspirations of non-elites and/or manipulate the values and beliefs of society in order to create a "common-sense", self-justifying worldview that supports their continued power (Gramsci and Hoare, 1971). However, this hegemony requires constant attention, as members of both the ruling and subordinate classes at times realize the constructed nature of their positions. When they make this realization, either through personal experience or group education, subjected groups push for more power, obligating the ruling groups to deploy greater force in order to maintain divisions. At times, the dominant group will engage in what Gramsci calls "passive revolution", making small concessions to the oppressed in order to maintain overall control and convincing them that change is possible while limiting the extent of it. At other times, moments Gramsci referred to as "crises of authority", real power shifts can occur. In these moments, extensive pushes for change can redefine the dominant order, although the previously hegemonic group will deploy all the forces at their power in order to try to prevent this.

Specifically, Gramsci argued that the "crisis of authority" was the time when the veneer of common sense would slip away and the established order would no longer be taken for granted. At this moment, the ruling group would resort to pure force in order to maintain power.

In the case of gaming, we can see the post-casual era as a “crisis of authority”, in that numerous forces have drawn attention to the constructed nature of “core” and games’ exclusivity, undermining the common sense notion that gaming is a hobby specifically for men and boys[26]. This has led to a moment where “the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e. is no longer ‘leading’ but only ‘dominant’, exercising coercive force alone” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 556). The hegemonic class’s loss of common sense ideologies, and subsequent reliance on coercion, means that the current crisis of authority has the potential to shift power in gaming from a small contingent of “gamers” and AAA studios to a much broader and more inclusive base, but only if resistance to change can be overcome.

The post-casual era is also defined by the ways in which previously marginal players, game types, and producers are striving to be taken seriously and to redefine the cultural hegemony of gaming in their favor. But they are doing so in the face of force; sexism and misogyny, specifically in the forms of harassment and threats, are blatant attempts to drive out new types of players and maintain the status quo of “core”. More subtle forces, like the not-a-game argument, are also doing this work. In these ways, Gramsci’s predictions are playing out as expected. And while we have yet to see the results of the current struggle, a crisis of authority has two outcomes— the exertion of enough force for the subjected class to resume their position of powerlessness or the success of the alternate hegemony.

The industrial changes occurring in gaming, although simply based in game companies’ attempts to increase revenue through the introduction of broader audiences and new content, can

[26] Gramsci discussed hegemony and developed the idea of a crisis of authority in reference to major socio-political shifts, such as the rise of fascism in Italy. Because this project is focused on gaming, and shifts in a segment of the entertainment industry, its stakes are clearly much lower than those Gramsci was working with. However, his analysis and theoretical framework map strongly onto gaming’s current issues with sexism, providing a useful structure despite the differences in scope and significance.

be seen as the motivating force behind the post-casual crisis of authority in gaming, where "core" ideals are being questioned in new ways, sometimes for the first time. At this moment, therefore, the interventions female gamers make into gaming's gender exclusivity potentially matter more than ever, while the future of gaming power is being decided. It is therefore from this foundation, this understanding that gaming is in a crisis of authority around the idea of "core", that the remainder of this project builds.

Chapter Three: Maintaining “Core” Power via Overt Sexism

Although the gaming industry has started to diversify its targeted audience, and although journalists are paying more attention to non-traditional gamers, the interviewees for this study related significant forces that still work to bar them from gaming. Female gamers deeply identify as just that— gamers— individuals who are invested in playing and enjoying video games, and who have extensive knowledge about these texts. However, their self-identification as gamers runs contrary to the overall cultural, ideological definition of “gamer.” Ideology, or the “images, concepts and premises which provide frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (Hall, 1995), works to naturalize specific definitions of social situations and what constitutes common sense. In terms of video games, cultural ideology has long defined “gamers” as straight, white men, who are usually young, affluent, and who may be socially awkward or isolated. Although this definition ignores the legions of players who are not white, not male, and who are socially adjusted, it has had many years in which to be naturalized by mass media coverage that assumes gamers are men. This prioritizes male audiences and reserves hegemonic power for them, while marginalizing others.

Furthermore, when journalists or academics address other types of players, they primarily talk about them in relation to stereotypical “gamers”, perpetually centralizing straight, white, cisgendered men as the “core” of gaming (Shaw, 2010). What this means for female players is that, although writers like Leigh Alexander are proclaiming “‘Gamers’ are over” (2014), women’s choice to self-define as a gamer directly combats pre-established ideologies about

games, gamers, and technology in general. Because of this, they face a variety of forces that challenge their self-perception and continually indicate that they are *not* true gamers, or that they shouldn't be.

Interviewees regularly encounter both overtly sexist problems, such as character representations and the harassment women face in many gaming spaces, and more subtle, implicitly sexist forces, like being treated with surprise by others while they are gaming. Each of these serves as a barrier between women and gaming's "core", in that they mark female gamers as "other". More specifically, gaming's sexist components encourage women to see games and gaming as masculinized, push them to embody masculine subject positions, provide them with little recourse for addressing sexist depictions, and motivate them to hide their gaming from others. This occurs despite the fact that female players' own self-definition as gamers counters some of these assertions. Because of this, players find themselves in a paradoxical position, where they simultaneously reject and buy into existing ideas of "core" that marginalize them. They also both strive for and are barred from power in gaming spaces, in that they believe more equitable games and gaming spaces are possible, but find that their own ability to create or encourage these is limited by their gender identity.

The next two chapters use participants' concerns about gaming spaces and gaming culture, and their anecdotes about exclusion, to relate how the post-casual era of gaming, despite its narrative that "everyone can be a gamer", still has significant barriers to true gender equality. Each of these obstacles works to maintain a masculine "core" in gaming, and even female players who reject the idea that games are solely for men can struggle to move beyond this ideology. Because of this, many factors in gaming preserve power and privilege for male, rather than female, players despite the industrial changes described in the previous chapter. A number

of the ideological bases on which the gaming community rests have not fundamentally changed, placing undue pressure on minority audiences like women to prove their worth and preventing the development of a more equitable culture in games.

Overt and Implicit Sexism in Gaming

During their interviews, female gamers mentioned numerous challenges they encounter while playing games. In the past, researchers have often divided these according to the traditional media studies lines of text/content, audience, and industry. While this was originally my intention as well, it did not resonate with the experiences of the gamers I interviewed. To them, these areas were inextricably linked. For example, if they were concerned about the hypersexualization of female characters in games, they first worried about how this was off-putting to women who would seek other content. But they also feared that hypersexualization would affect their interactions with male players, who would be more likely to objectify or harass female players if the texts they were consuming continually indicated that women were there for their pleasure. And they were frustrated with the fact that rampant hypersexualization revealed deeply seated industry practices that prioritize male players over female and promote sexism through this uneven hierarchy. This one area of concern spread across text, audience, and industry.

Rather than dividing by production, content, and reception, therefore, I draw on Stuart Hall's concepts of overt and implicit racism to categorize exclusionary forces in gaming according to their overt or implicit sexism. In discussing race and media, Hall divided racism into two categories- overt racism, where the racist nature of a policy, argument, or narrative is clearly evident, and implicit racism, where the racist nature of a policy, argument, or narrative functions due to unquestioned, naturalized assumptions that have a racist basis. Although both

forms of racism are potentially damaging to cultural relations between groups, Hall and others have argued that implicit racism can be a more insidious problem, because it "is the kind of racism that doesn't explicitly declare itself as such, yet still forwards damaging racial stereotypes— stereotypes that are made all the more damaging by the casualness with which they are forwarded, and by the speaker's unquestioned assumption that their statements couldn't possibly be racist because they are, at least according to the speaker, *true*" (Phillips, 2015, p. 95).

Similarly, the cultural environment of video gaming is rife with obviously sexist themes, such as the lack of female characters, the hypersexualization of the female characters that do exist, and the direct harassment of female players in gaming's social spaces. On the one hand, academics and industry activists who argue for a more inclusive atmosphere have long recognized these overtly sexist elements. Although they are still problematic and exclusionary to many players, their sheer obviousness may make them easier to combat in the long term and can also make it easier for affected players to argue against them or demonstrate how they are unfounded.

On the other hand, gaming also contains many implicitly sexist elements that have not been recognized as clearly, but which female gamers describe as equally frustrating or off-putting. In these cases, they face content themes, audience members, or industry trends that are not meant to be negative or sexist. However, these elements rest in deeply naturalized assumptions about "gamers" and who plays games. Specifically, they rest on the assumption that "gamers" are and should be men. Collectively, overt and implicit sexism reaffirms the masculinized "core" of gaming, requiring female players to assume multiple and contradictory subject positions in order to navigate these spaces. In many cases, identifying as female precludes identifying as a gamer, and vice versa. Women work to combine these identities, but

they face extensive struggles in trying to do so.

When I asked participants specific questions about their experiences gaming as women, it quickly became clear that all of them had previously encountered sexism within games and gaming. Because the overtly sexist forces currently at work in gaming have received extensive coverage in the past, it makes sense to start by updating these topics, detailing why they are of concern to female gamers. The remainder of this chapter will therefore address the overtly sexist elements of gaming culture that interviewees marked as problematic. It will also analyze how and why these elements affect power structures in gaming more broadly. Following this, chapter four will explore the implicitly sexist aspects of gaming culture that participants argued made it difficult for them to conceive of themselves as a "core" part of the gaming community, as well as how the subtle nature of these factors makes them potentially more damaging to gender relations.

Overt Sexism

The Hypersexualization of Female Characters and its Impacts

When interviewing video game players who did not fit traditional "gamer" expectations due to their race, gender, or sexuality, Shaw (2014a) found that representation of game characters was not necessarily important to them, which goes against traditional industry expectations that gamers want to or need to identify with their characters in order to enjoy games to the fullest (p. 97). Shaw found that characters were often too shallow or underdeveloped for participants to identify with, that players liked to use characters to try out different ways of acting or being, and that game context mattered deeply to how players looked at game characters, among other things. She then asked, "If players do not think that much about the character on the screen, then can we still talk about the way representation is important in

games?" (p. 142). Shaw used this finding to argue that developers should diversify representations in games specifically because they do not matter to participants as much as previously thought; because of this, more diverse representations can improve cultural perspectives on differing groups and identities without ruining the game experience.

In my study of female gamers, however, I found that representation as it stands does matter to participants. The issue was not necessarily that they could not identify with female characters; like Shaw's participants, my interviewees' desire to identify with or as a game character was not fixed, but rather contextual and fluid. Sometimes they sought identification, but other times they sought a game that would help them relax, a game with in-depth puzzles, or a game with beautifully crafted environments. What gamers worried about were the messages both male and female players would take from female game characters who were highly constrained, overly sexualized, and often tangential to the game that they were in. Interviewees commented in detail on the overall lack of female characters and on their potentially problematic nature when they were represented. As Helix stated, female characters were "a vast indistinguishable pile of boobs and ribbon", built to unrealistic proportions, hypersexualized, and overly girly. To participants, these trends were not necessarily exclusionary, as they obviously chose to play games anyway, but they were frustrating, often affecting players' choice of games and their enjoyment of them.

These representations mattered because they contributed to the masculinization of games and game spaces, and they encouraged players to embody masculine subject positions rather than allowing for more diverse interactions with games. Interviewees were deeply discouraged by the industrial assumptions that dictated female characters should be heavily objectified and that men, rather than women, were the most important audience for gaming. They also found that their

means for managing these representations were limited— they generally could only choose not to play potentially off-putting games, rather than being able to change or undermine their sexist natures. Furthermore, interviewees feared that factors like hypersexualization could negatively influence the social spaces of games, changing men's expectations for female gamers and women more broadly. These forces collectively challenged women's self-identification as gamers, continually indicating that this space was not meant for them despite their desire to be part of it. This often forced them to embody contradictory positions where their pursuit of gaming meant sacrificing personal comfort or a degree of gender identification.

Overall Lack of Female Representation

Participants noticed that many games do not offer female characters, at least not as playable options. As interviewee Emily said, "I definitely have noticed that a lot of times I'm forced to be a boy in a game. And then it's ok, but there's definitely not as much of a feeling like this is a real story action-adventure about me." She went on to describe how this affected her experience playing *Harvest Moon*. "When they get to storylines where you have to court a girl, it's not really as exciting for me because it doesn't quite apply… In Harvest Moon I'm thinking you have to buy nice jewelry for the girls, so it's very stereotypical but it's also kind of a simple game so I don't really hold it against the game, I just don't really get absorbed in that part of it". *Harvest Moon* is a farm simulation role-playing game, sharing many characteristics with games like *Farmville* that are played primarily by women. Because of this, the lack of a playable female option seems particularly short-sighted, as it leaves female players in the position of having to engage in storylines that may not match up to their identity.

Female players find that games, even ones that seem gender equitable on the surface,

often presume a male subject and interpellate the player as if they identify as male.[27] *Harvest Moon* is far from the only game series to have this limitation. The *Assassin's Creed* series, for example, was popular with participants, but its main installments almost exclusively feature male protagonists.[28] As content analysis research has shown, men appear almost three times more frequently than women in games (Scharrer, 2004; Ivory, 2006; Burgess et. al, 2007; Dill and Thill, 2007; Jansz and Martis, 2007; Miller and Summers, 2007; Downs and Smith, 2010). This lack was frustrating on its own, because of how it affected player's immersion into and enjoyment of games, but it was made even worse by trends in female representations—specifically, the hypersexualization of female characters and the ways in which, even when they appeared in games, they were frequently limited in terms of role or capability.

Issues with Existing Representations

When they do appear in games, female characters are frequently hypersexualized, a trend many interviewees commented on. More specifically, female characters are often given skimpy clothing and exaggerated body types, and they can also be heavily objectified in terms of appearance, in-game role, and treatment by the gaming community. For example, Angela related an anecdote about playing a female character who, even though she embodied the same role as similar male characters, had a very different appearance. She said, "I remember playing *Persona 3* and getting an awesome armor piece that worked for the female character on my team which,

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[27] Players also face the same limitations in terms of sexuality or race, where games often presume a player is heterosexual, cisgendered, or white. These assumptions have provided interesting opportunities for players to deliberately queer games (unfortunately not a focus of this project), but they also demonstrate how narrowly "gamers" are defined by most developers.
[28] Two spin-off games in the *Assassin's Creed* universe have contained playable female characters— Assassin's Creed: Liberation, which was originally released for the PlayStation Vita (a handheld system) and later made available as a downloadable PC and console game, and Assassin's Creed Chronicles: China, which was released for PC and console in April 2015. The recently released Assassin's Creed: Syndicate (Oct. 2015) is the first main-storyline game to feature a female character, although she is one of two protagonists, alongside her twin brother.

when equipped, basically looked like a bikini. Which was irritating, because it's cool to have that option, but to have the equipment with the better stats pretty much default to bikini is very… limiting, I guess". The same armor, when equipped on a male character, was not revealing. Rather, it appeared to be a normal suit of armor, covering essential body parts to protect the wearer in battle. Many other participants discussed experiences like this, where the same equipment was portrayed very differently on male and female characters despite similar abilities.

Body type was also a concern, in that the majority of female characters, participants argued, were similarly built. As one interviewee said, female characters were almost always "the big-breasted, scantily-clad, tall, tiny-waisted woman" (Spinach). This meant that participants, if they wanted to play as a female character, were required to play as a specific type of character, one with which they often did not identify. Participant Feather expressed this clearly, and with evident frustration, when she said, "I would like it if there were more variation in characters especially for female characters. Female body-types upset me because I do not fit very many… I'm a curvy, sort of short girl, and there are very few video game characters that look like me that aren't hobbits and trolls and squat, gangly things. Maybe I'm a squat, gangly thing but I'm a pretty, squat, gangly thing. […] Why can't we have more than the set 5'10", 200 pounds, non-realistic, big-boobed anime girl?" In her opinion, women were limited to playing overly sexualized, model-pretty characters or deliberately ugly characters, with few options in between.

Helix made a similar argument, stating that if the only female options were characters she could not identify with, she would often pick a male character instead. "For example, in Diablo III, there's a vast plethora of gear for the wizards and demon hunters. But all the female wizard gear shows the 'panties' portion and all the demon hunter gear has high heels. In situations like that, I'd often consider playing a male character instead, because the kinds of women that are in

the game don't have enough in common with ME for me to strongly identify with them". When players did seek identification with characters while gaming, the limited body types female characters possessed and the hypersexualized personas they demonstrated often made this identification difficult for women who did not share or desire these characteristics.

Finally, participants recognized that women's roles in games were often limited, with many being damsels in distress and others represented as "hot side objects" (Emily) for male players to admire or sleep with. When Caddie played *Star War: Knights of the Old Republic 2* (KOTOR 2) as a male character, for instance, she found that, "as soon as you meet every single female character, they're throwing themselves at your feet. Which, I suppose I could see why, if you were a male playing that, it would be nice, but as a female playing as a main character, you're just like, 'This is weird. Women would never do this.'" Although she argued that other games allow women to take on empowering roles as the main character, games like KOTOR 2 objectify them by presenting them as prizes. This is another clear instance where the game interpellates the player as if they are a heterosexual male. Game designers are making the assumption first that players identify as male and second that men would appreciate having female characters pay them attention and appear sexually available, drawing on patriarchal masculinity's notions of men as sexually voracious (Lotz, 2014, p. 35). Ensuing development choices then encourage players to embody a masculine subject-position, as game narratives and content make the most sense from this perspective. Although players could avoid this, doing so put them in conflict with the game they are engaging with.

Feather described a similar situation she encountered when playing *Dynasty Warriors*, a game series where the player controls different individuals in China's dynastic history and engages in nationalistic wars to advance the goals of the empire. As the series has progressed,

each game has added new characters, with the most recent installment *Dynasty Warriors 8* featuring 82 separate offerings. Of these, the majority are male, at a ratio of approximately six to one.

In addition to that, Feather argued, the characters' motivations differed systematically according to their gender. She said, "I hate that there are seven girls to choose from and all of their ending stories involved them being in love with their husbands, because that's what all of them are. It's like, 'Oh husband, I love you and you're dying.' Pretty much because most of these guys died in war. So it's like, 'Oh, I will support my husband. Oh husband, I love you! Dadah dadah…' instead of all of these other guys are like, 'Oh yeah, I fought a really great battle, the land is now at peace.' And it's like, 'Oh I will support my husband, as he rules this land.'" While the male characters were leaders who took control of the country at the end of the game, Feather felt that the female characters were relegated to side roles after the fighting was done. They served as support for the male characters rather than taking action on their own. Furthermore, any action they did take seemed to be externally motivated by the male characters around them, rather than intrinsically motivated by their personalities, morals, or beliefs. This frustrated Feather, who wanted her female characters to be as interesting and complex as their male counterparts, but found they often fell short of this.

Thinking about these limitations on female characters from the perspective of "core", it is clear that they work to maintain gaming culture as masculine. Games primarily present masculinized subject-positions for players to embody, expecting them to admire scantily-clad characters, to enjoy rescuing damsels in distress, and to desire attention from female companions. Because these expectations rely on stereotypical conceptions of masculinity, female players can clearly identify see that game content does not mean to interpellate them. When they

choose to engage with games anyway, women are forced to make concessions.

Overall, women are given only three options for identification. They can embody the male subject position, engaging with games on the terms that they offer while minimizing their identification with their own chosen gender identity. They can inhabit a female subject position that is passive and deferential to men, where men take action while women wait to be rescued. Or they can take on a powerful, active female persona, but must expect that at least some of this power is due to hypersexuality and the character's ability to control men through their objectification of her. Drawing on Douglas' (2010) concept of enlightened sexism, this third subject position posits that "it is precisely through women's calculated deployment of their faces, bodies, attire, and sexuality that they gain and enjoy true power" (p. 10).

Although female characters often have the same strength or skill with weapons that male characters have, the emphasis games place on their bodies implies that sexuality is an inextricable part of female strength. Participants struggled with these limited positions, desiring greater diversity and the ability to take on less traditional gender roles, ones that allowed them to have power both as male and female characters and that did not necessarily rely on sexuality as a means to achieve their goals. Because such a position was a rarity, they frequently found game narratives off-putting. Identifying simultaneously as both female and gamer is made inherently contradictory by many aspects of characterization and representation.

Obviously, given interviewees' self-defined status as gamers, these issues were not enough to stop them from playing games entirely. But many did find their choices of games or their role in the gaming community constrained as a result of these design choices and the assumptions they reveal about the industry. In other words, content itself was not enough to drive women away from gaming, at least not entirely. However, it did interact with other factors in the

overall gaming environment, limiting how other players perceived female gamers and how important they felt they were to the gaming industry as a whole.

Why it matters

Lack of Diversity

Because interviewees are all women who already play games and who have extensive knowledge of them, some were able to ignore the hypersexualization of many characters. They recognized that it was a trend, but they were able to choose games that avoided this problem. Taylor Ryan, for instance, stated, "I think a whole lot of fuss is made over the supposed over-sexualization and powerlessness of females in video games, and, sure, there are some definite examples of this within the game world-- LOTS of examples. But for each negative example, I can always think of several incredibly strong, powerful, dynamic female heroines as well. They're not always the protagonist, but I would absolutely say that there are many, many positive female role models in the video game world." For her, these positive character examples were more than enough to make up for the negative choices. Other players were also able to find games that they would enjoy, either by carefully seeking out positive representations of women or by focusing on other aspects of a game that made it enjoyable. Many participants explicitly stated that they avoided games if they felt they would dislike playing as the main character. As Anna said simply, "If I can't identify with a character at all— like in *God of War*— then I usually won't be interested in the game".

Although they were capable of avoiding representations that were negative, however, some participants still found the overall industry trend towards objectified women to be very disheartening, simply because of its prominence. While a few individuals, like Taylor Ryan, felt

that there were more than enough alternative representations of women, most believed that poor representations greatly outnumbered positive ones. This was true even for the few who really enjoyed playing as sexualized characters. Bear said in her interview that she played games for the gratuitous violence and sex. However, when asked how she felt about women's overall representation within games, she argued that the ubiquitousness of sex was a problem. "I think games are entertainment and porn is entertainment and it's fine for them to overlap. The thing is, there's very few exceptions. I'm tired of playing a conventionally attractive character ALL THE TIME if I choose to be a lady. I want to talk [strategies] without talking boobs." Participants like Elayne agreed, arguing, "I think it's not news to say, but women are definitely hypersexualized in video games. I don't necessarily think this is a bad thing, but the problem is that there's very little… like, there's not much else. If it was present, but we also had plenty of well-rounded, like a whole other variety of things to choose from, then okay, sure. But because it's just so dominant in video games, it's just not a very good thing".

Because of the preponderance of such imagery, avoiding negative representations of women entirely was potentially exhausting and limited female players' choice of games. Elizabeth revealed the deep conflicts between enjoying the act of playing and disliking women's representations when she said, "I've realized kinda how messed up it is, but… then again, what are you gonna do? Not play a game because the girls are all half-naked? You just play it and… I don't know, I guess not really pay attention to it. But it just kinda does suck because it's like, if it's a woman, she has to be dressed provocatively, or be wearing pink, or flowers, or something. I think it's just a wrong way to represent women, and it just keeps getting reinforced." Laine agreed, arguing, "I hate the overly sexualized nature of females in video games. Will that make me stop playing them? No. Will the way a particular character is portrayed make me choose

another game (such as the case of Lollipop Chainsaw)? Yes. I think the industry is getting better in creating stronger female characters (Lara Croft, Elena in Uncharted), with worthwhile attributes, but I still think the industry is backwards in the way that women are dressed in games. It's obnoxious that if you want to play as a female character, you're most likely going to be portrayed in little to no clothing while the male characters are fully dressed." Games themselves had many inherent pleasures, but there were times when enjoying these required participants to ignore offensive factors. And while these individuals were willing to make the effort to do so, they felt that other women might not, or might not have the experience needed to find positive games. As Emily said, the hypersexualization of female characters "would probably turn some women off of playing those games", excluding them from the community before they got a chance to develop the skills needed to sort through different game offerings to find ones they would enjoy.[29]

This reveals one of the specific elements helping to maintain gaming as a masculine space and power for male gamers— the more extensive knowledge base women need in order to navigate games in comparison to men. When first starting to game, the predominance of male characters and their more developed roles and personalities means that male players can choose almost any game and, even if they don't enjoy it, at least not find it offensive. Rarely are male characters objectified or tokenized in the same way as female characters.[30] Male players therefore need less knowledge of games in order to start playing them; because female players

[29] Participants also linked problems with women's representation in games to overall diversity issues, making statements like: "It would be cool if there was more diversity in games. Right now it's still mostly white and mostly male. It's weird to have four or five character options and all but one of them are white men" (Angela). While their main focus was on the representation of women, both due to the goals of the study and their status as female gamers, players recognized that issues spread well beyond gender alone, affecting racial and sexual representations as well.
[30] This is again simplifying the impact of race and sexuality to maintain a focus on gender. Most video game characters are white and heterosexual, complicating identification and enjoyment on the part of players who identify with other races or as LGBT.

are more likely to encounter demeaning or sexist representations of characters that share their gender identity, they need more existing knowledge in order to avoid these. This acts as a barrier to entry into gaming culture, in that women have to develop repertoires for reading games and choosing what they might want to play well before they even start to play. Without this skill, they risk encountering distasteful material.

Furthermore, women often have to seek the knowledge they need to navigate games from men. Not only can men game more extensively without likely being offended, but they are also socially encouraged towards games more than women are, as discussed earlier. This gives them a privileged position from which to develop a strong knowledge base about gaming and from which they can invite others into gaming spaces. As researchers like Kerr (2003) and Eklund (2011) have shown, most women who game are introduced to video games by male friends and relatives. This was also true among participants for this study. Although all now considered themselves committed gamers, most had been introduced to games by a male relative or friend, who helped them find games they would enjoy and avoid games that would be offensive, demeaning, or just not fun. Without this introduction, it would be unclear where to start. This need for greater knowledge, and tendency to get that knowledge from men, helps bar women from equal power in gaming. They frequently have to work harder in order find a safe space from which to game, or they have to rely on assistance from male gamers. This encourages a mentor/mentee relationship, where male players are presumed to be more knowledgeable and experienced.

Games' character representations also encourage women to develop a mentality of avoidance, where they do not play sexist games or deliberately ignore sexist aspects of the games they do enjoy. As Elizabeth stated, "What are you gonna do? Not play a game […]?" Female

players are given the option of put up or don't play, with little middle ground. Some games do offer the opportunity for players to develop their own character, customizing elements like appearance, gender, race, and in-game abilities, but for games that do not, the only choices are to play or not to play. This can exclude women from large parts of gaming culture and the gaming community by making it uncomfortable or difficult for them to play popular games. In turn, this perpetuates a cycle where women's avoidance of certain games can then mark them as "casual" or not "real" gamers, because they lack direct knowledge of a cultural touchstone.

The *Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) series, for instance, was one interviewees referenced as disagreeable, due to its frequent inclusion of violence against women. However, GTA is an enormously successful and popular game series. It has been critically acclaimed for its use of satire and humor as well as its open-world nature, where players can move freely through detailed landscapes and play as they choose to. Players have the ability to complete objectives and missions assigned to them by the game, or they can simply drive around in fun cars listening to the radio. The game makes multiple playstyles possible. Due to its positive critical feedback, its sizeable audience, and its economic success, the GTA series is a large part of video game history, and committed gamers, who often compare their knowledge of games and their experience playing, may feel pressured to play at least part of the series. Female gamers may find this more difficult and opt to avoid the series instead given GTA's violence against female characters. Doing so, however, can leave gaps in their skill and experience that other gamers can exploit to dismiss their commitment to gaming.[31] Avoiding sexist but popular games can mark women as not "real" gamers, again masculinizing gaming's core and working to dismiss women as part of it.

[31] Some female gamers use high levels of skill and experience to defend themselves against harassment. Avoiding popular but sexist games may weaken their ability to employ this tactic.

Because the lack of diversity among game characters is overt, and has been pointed out and studied extensively by both journalists and academics, it may at first appear to be less problematic. This is especially true as many recent games have worked to move beyond limiting tropes of femininity. Players cited games like *Portal*, an innovative 2007 game that combined shooting game and puzzle game mechanics, as positive examples. In *Portal*, players take on the role of Chell, a human female who is working to escape from a laboratory controlled by an amusing but homicidal female artificial intelligence named GLaDOS (for Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System). In the game, players use physics and a gun that places portals, or rings that connect space together, to move through walls, over pits, and around other obstacles. The player can only see that they are a female character if they angle the portals in a specific way; without doing this, they can see only a first-person perspective of the portal gun they are carrying. *Portal* makes gender a non-issue through its gameplay, but used this as a way to increase the representation of women in gaming. As both Chell and GLaDOS are female, and the only real characters in the game, Portal is an unusual example of a female-dominated game. Other games, like the *Mass Effect* series, allow players to choose a female character, and even more, like the *Tomb Raider* series, have updated their female characters to be less objectified in new releases than they were in previous installments.

Despite this, interviewees' discussion of their struggles with game character trends, and the fact that these require extensive knowledge to navigate easily, demonstrate how this area of game content works to maintain the status quo of "core" by providing primarily male subject-positions for players and presuming that players will fit into these. Many games still only make complete sense if the players is male-identified, and male players subsequently possess more control over gaming knowledge and power. Female gamers who try to attain this same

knowledge or power often do so at the cost of their own comfort or gender identity; they are continually inhabiting a fragmented position, negotiating between gamer and female rather than comfortably embodying both.

Revealing Industry Assumptions

The overt sexualization and objectification of female characters was also frustrating and potentially off-putting to participants because it revealed deep-seated industry assumptions that prioritized male gamers over female gamers. Interviewees consistently felt that, even if game content itself was not exclusionary because they were able to find alternatives, the motivation behind negative content *was* exclusionary, because it showed that industry members were willing to alienate women if they felt that sex and violence would help draw in more men. Furthermore, although female gamers objected to this trend both through their presence and through explicit statements, they often still bought into the idea that men were justifiably central to gaming— that they were the "core", while female players were part of the margins.

Participants interpreted the dearth of female characters in games and the overt sexualization of the ones present as an attempt to appeal to male players, who they thought would prefer playing as a man and who would enjoy viewing sexualized female characters. For example, Katie Tyler said, "I think that because most guys play video games and most guys design video games, the women are always going to be more sexually objectified. And the men are going to be bulky and strong because that's how in their mind they see themselves. And they kind of want all the girls to be the damsel in distress that gets rescued and falls in love with them. I'm not always a fan— I wish you could design it your own way and that way you're not like a pair of breasts hanging out with your face ten miles behind. But I don't think most people will customize, or make games customizable like that, just because there is a lot more programming

that has to go on to it and that's not what's going to attract their guys gamers."

Her comments, and similar comments from other interviewees, show first that even though female gamers' presence undermines that idea that games are specifically made for men and boys, or that men and boys enjoy them more, they still buy into the idea that men are and should be central to gaming, at least in some ways. Katie Tyler is arguing that men's majority presence in gaming justifies the type of sexist depictions that many games put forth, because these games are made for them and made to target them. Another interviewee, Eva, argued the same thing when she stated, "Mostly guys play video games, so I think the way [developers] deal with that is they advertise, they try to appeal to the male gender more than the female gender – I know there's some companies out there that are trying to attract girls more, but this is a business. I guess they wanna keep their customers happy, so they appeal more to guys than girls, because of that. And I think there is progress, you know, trying to advertise to girls and getting girls to game, but it's a very, very slow progress, I don't think any company wants to make a big jump for it… 'cause they don't want to, you know, lose their main target, which is guys." Eva, like Katie Tyler, is presenting the idea that sexist themes in games, although not good, are understandable as they bring in men, the target audience of developers.

These statements demonstrate the degree to which longstanding ideologies about games normalize their masculinization. Even as female players argue against sexism in gaming and describe in detail why these trends are difficult for them to deal with and damaging for gender relations overall, they still see justification for these same sexist elements. Ideology works to explain away sexism, rather than to deal with it directly. Like the industry itself, female gamers have internalized discourses around gaming as masculine and the gaming "core" as made up of men. Attempts to then target this core are seen simply as the standard, rather than being fully

assessed for their impacts on power and on gender norms. While other factors likely also contribute to this perception, such as the fact that female gamers' participation in gaming culture tends to be less public than that of men and that female gamers often do not know one another (Bryce and Rutter, 2002; 2003; Jansz and Martens, 2005; Taylor et al., 2009; Eklund, 2011), the role of ideologies around "core" and gender should not be overlooked. Even dedicated female gamers still see gaming as at least partially masculinized and male-dominated, allowing sexism and misogyny to propagate.

The industry's approach to targeting male audiences also perpetuates sexism by reaffirming hegemonic stereotypes *about men*, leaving women conflicted about how they view male gamers and masculinity. Participants frequently argued that male players deserved more credit from developers and that men did not just play games to objectify female characters. Rather, they felt that men, like women, could take deep pleasure in a well-crafted storyline, the ability to take on another persona, and quality gameplay, among other elements. Heavily sexualized characters, they contended, were not necessary to men's enjoyment of gaming. At the same time, participants took for granted and accepted industry marketing strategies that relied on the objectification of women. In other words, female gamers questioned, but also at times bought into, the common sense notion that sex sells and that men are sexually-motivated creatures. This reaffirms troubling stereotypes about masculinity rather than allowing for more diverse expressions of who men are. Assuming that men need an attractive damsel to save, for instance, implies that they only want to protect someone if that person can offer sex in return, not because of empathy. The persistence of this representation makes men appear to be inherently sexist, using women rather than treating them as equals. Such an essentializing perspective is, of course, as unfair to men as the assumption that all women are overly emotional or frivolous is to women.

However, it contributes to participants' concerns that men will be negatively affected by game representations and that they will harass or objectify female players the same way they are encouraged to objectify female characters in games.

To complicate matters further, even when women were included in games, they were often not the type of character that female players wanted. Rather, participants frequently saw them as afterthoughts— "token" characters that designers would include to try to draw in a small female audience without sacrificing their attention to men. "Token" characters were flat, lacking personality, backstory, or character development. As Helix argued, "There's a large variety of male characters and body types out there— but very few if any of those seem to be designed to appeal to women (just because a man is good-looking doesn't make him designed to appeal to women). Women, on the other hand, show a very limited range of personalities and body types, and also rarely seem designed to appeal to women. I think the industry is starting to realize they need to cater more to female players, but are currently stuck at 'If we stick a girl in it, it's good!' Hopefully things will continue to get better. (I'd like to commend a few games, like *Dungeons of Dredmor* and *Portal,* for being a little ahead of the curve there)".

Because of this, participants in some cases preferred a game that completely lacked female characters to one in which they were included just for the sake of having a female character. For example, Alissa, when asked to describe any characters she disliked, could only think of token characters. She said, "I think that really is the only character type I don't like, the ones where they put them in just to have another female or just to have another person to fill that demographic of cute young person. You don't have to have that. You don't have to pander that much, you know?" In her experience, a smaller set of well-developed characters was more appealing than a cast that was diverse on the surface, but extremely stereotypical or

underdeveloped from a story or personality perspective.

As Shaw (2014a) found, “interviewees did not always see identification [with game characters] as an important goal. In part, not needing to identify with characters occurred because individuals fulfilled different needs through their media use” (p. 87), such as relaxation or competition. Shaw even found that many players were embarrassed if they identified too heavily with a game character, although she did not posit why this might be the case. And interviewees for this study agreed— they would happily sacrifice identification for other enjoyable aspects of games, such as when the rich storyline and environments of an *Assassin’s Creed* game made up for playing as a womanizing young Italian man. With this in mind, the fact that female characters are so tokenized may not appear to be significant; if players don’t really need to identify with them, their limited storylines and personalities are not necessarily a barrier to enjoying gaming and being part of gaming culture.

What these types of characters signal more broadly, however, is a dismissal of women’s importance in gaming and of the importance of diversity more generally. Developers assume first that their audience is male, and second that this audience prefers traditional gender roles and expectations. The resulting content trends limit the types of stories told by games and the identities made possible through this medium. Identity is a flexible, contextual entity; individuals can and do inhabit different subject positions dependent on their circumstances. However, identity and identifications are partially shaped by media representations. Because games so frequently rely on the male hero/female reward dichotomy, defining masculinity as active and femininity as passive, they offer only limited, retrograde gender identities to players. This is not to argue that games inherently make people identify in these ways; such a point would oversimplify the process of identification and would also be untrue for most players. But it does

mean that in circumstances where players *want* to identify with their characters, where it would add to their experience of playing games, they have few options for diversity. Furthermore, one of the pleasures of gaming that participants clearly identified was the ability to take on different personas, to try out new ways of being. Players enjoyed even some male characters in games, but they sought options and variety; continually telling the same stories about stoic, muscular, white men potentially decreases players' enjoyment of games, at the same time that it limits the types of identities players can imagine or embody. Because of this, player identification with characters is not a necessary condition for concern about representation in games. Even without direct identification, representation constructs unequal power structures in games and sends the message that men, not women, are important to developers and gaming culture. This maintains the masculinized "core" definition of who can be a gamer, but it also helps gaming serve as a bastion of inequality that can then affect broader culture.

Impact on Men

Finally, participants were deeply concerned about the potential impact sexualized content could have on their fellow gamers, particularly men. Put simply, participants felt that playing games could impact men's expectations for women's appearances and anticipated roles in the gaming community and in society. For instance, Anna said that representations of women in games was not really a concern for her. However, she elaborated, "The community's treatment of women bothers me more than how women are represented in games, but both are issues that feed into each other". Other participants agreed. Elayne stated, "I think it really twists how men perceive women when in every video game, they're playing it, and all the female models look the same". Jessica supported this by describing men's treatment of female characters as attractive objects added to games specifically for their enjoyment. She said, ""I know a lot of guys who are

like, ‘I always play as a girl so I can stare at her ass as I run!’” In this case, the benefit of playing as a female avatar over a male avatar was the ability to objectify and sexualize one’s character.

Another participant, Kay, used *League of Legends* to illustrate specifically how she felt games and character design could negatively impact players, especially male players. She said, “*League* has come out with a stream of female characters right now and they all look really similar. This Zyra character, this Elise character that looks like a spider, they’re all just really awkward angles on female bodies and they just look like femme fatales, ‘cause that’s what they are. Those I’m not a big fan of, because it’s creepy to see the community on League like, drool over these drawings… It creeps me out, because, both women think that they should look like that, and then all these guys are commenting about how they wanna have, like, spider sex with the ladies, and it’s kinda creepy, that just this image is out there, and that’s the power it’s getting.” Because character representations were so highly sexualized, Kay was concerned that they would make female players, who did not match the characters’ unrealistic body proportions, feel self-conscious. She also saw evidence that male players objectified them. This created an environment focused on male sexual pleasure at the expense of women’s comfort.

Harley had similar concerns, and she took it upon herself to combat them when she could. She said there were times where she felt she needed to prove herself as a gamer and show her opponents that she was better than they were. When asked why she felt this way, she said, “When I open up a gaming magazine and all I see is girls that have boobs, ass, curves. Not all girls have boobs, ass, and curves. You know, they gotta make themselves look like sluts. And then, guys perceive it like that, especially, you know, the 12 year olds. They perceive girls as sluts. They open this magazine, and there they are”. Harley went on to detail her fears that games and gaming paraphernalia would negatively affect her nephew, a young, burgeoning gamer.

Specifically, she worried that he would have unrealistic expectations for women's body types and social roles, seeing them as sexual objects rather than as peers. By presenting herself as a skilled gamer and an equal to her male colleagues, Harley felt she helped combat the objectification of women by diversifying the game environment.

This appears at first to demonstrate that female players can combat the stereotypical and limiting representations of women in gaming culture and media. However, relying on their skill as a protective barrier against sexism "perpetuates meritocratic ways of thinking about freedom from racism and sexism within games that make these things seem not rights at all, but rather privileges to be earned" (Nakamura, 2017, p. 2). Because games present women primarily as damsels in distress or as sexualized objects or rewards, female players like Harley see their own presence in gaming as key to providing more diverse gender perspectives. Without their intervention, they are concerned that male players in particular will develop sexist perceptions about women. Demonstrating women's strength and capability is one way to combat this, but this perspective again works to justify or explain away gaming's sexism by bringing forth the notion that women can sufficiently undermine it.

Although they can perhaps limit some of the impacts of sexism, it is unlikely, given the breadth of their concerns about games, that simply being present in gaming spaces can completely undermine the systems of power that prioritize men and marginalize women. Furthermore, this perspective puts the onus of equality on the marginalized group, rather than on the developers, journalists, and other cultural contributors who are reaffirming and recreating sexist depictions. Expecting the individuals who are most affected by gaming's sexism to undermine that same system is largely unrealistic. Finally, such an approach, as Nakamura points out, incorrectly situates equality as something to be earned by *being good enough* rather than as

an inherent human right to be treated well by others. As such, women's skill may combat an individual instance of sexism, but it fails to change the actual system of inequality upon which sexist behavior in gaming is based, allowing misogyny to continue.

It is important to note that concerns about the impact of sexist depictions were not consistent across the board, even among people who brought them up. While some participants were concerned about the overall representation of women in games, others only felt it was a problem in specific circumstances. For instance, the sexualization of characters only bothered Nina when they were young. She said, "I don't like the way younger girls are portrayed in games sometimes, 'cause I feel like that's a huge… power imbalance, I guess. Some younger girls in games are put in adult situations, and I'm not sure I really like that." For her, encouraging players to see younger girls as sexual objects was crossing a line, because of real life power imbalances based on age and gender. Other players considered the context of the game and how players were likely to interpret it. Emily argued, "Games that are fantastical, like Mario… Princess Peach is obviously a weak character and they don't have a lot of females in that one. […] But it doesn't bother me as much in that, I guess. But the games that are really realistic in terms of graphics and all the women are just side objects or you sleep with them and that's like a big perk of the game, that you can actually do that, or they're ridiculously out of proportion and good looking, I think it's degrading to women. I don't really appreciate that, and I think it would probably turn some women off of playing those games. And I would hope that the guys I know that would play those games wouldn't let that affect their view of women, but it probably kinda factors in that, you know, women are meant to be hot side objects in games". In her opinion, the realistic nature of some characters and the explicitness of their role as rewards or sex objects changed the impact they were likely to have.

Despite the sometimes limited nature of participants' worries, they did express a deep desire for industry members and game companies to take responsibility for the ways their games could affect audiences. For example, Bear, who was one of the most sex-positive participants in the study and who took pleasure in the hypersexualization of games, still argued that game makers needed to pay more attention to what their creations meant in a wider societal context. "I think the developers have to be more intelligent about it. I think they have to realize that they're building communities and that those communities are their responsibility. The games are fine, but denying responsibility for the culture and community they create isn't. I feel like claiming you're not sexualizing women in society by sexualizing your characters is stupid— it's like a porn company saying they totally don't portray a skewed version of women." Bear felt that the overall gaming community was likely to see women differently after intense exposure to hypersexualized female characters and that, while this was not necessarily a bad thing in all cases, it was at least something that companies should recognize and consider while creating new content.

Furthermore, women wanted this change not only to improve their own situation as players, by decreasing the male-oriented sexualization of video games, but also for the benefit of male players, who they felt were being unfairly limited. Although participants did at times buy into the industry's construction of men as hyper-sexual, they temper this acceptance by simultaneously arguing that such a construction is prejudiced and essentialist. Kay said, "someone wrote this great article about like, 'You know when we just subscribe to loving these female characters for their boobs or butts, that just makes us a pair of balls,' and I thought that was this great line, because… it's not just, negatively affecting women, but it's portraying men as who they should be". Specifically, she felt games' use of objectification portrayed men as

people who were unable to focus on or enjoy anything that was not sexually motivated. By catering solely to their sex drive through attractive but flat characters, video game content limited men's ability to interact with different ways of being and present themselves as anything more than "a pair of balls".

Participants argued that more diverse games and content could allow both male and female players to understand or present themselves in new, non-stereotypical ways. As things stood, however, they saw character representations as limiting both male and female players to specific, stereotypical identities. This is one of the ways in which, although female gamers buy into the idea of gaming's "core" as still masculine, they push back slightly against this conceptualization. By showing that "core" is restrictive to both men and women, they encourage men to demand new types of games and narratives alongside women's own requests for these. They also recognize that men, like women, are not an essentialized, unified group, and that many of them can potentially be allies rather than opponents when it comes to changing gaming culture. Participant's call for greater outside help, from developers and cultural creators as well as from "core" male gamers, can undermine the existing system that encourages marginalized players to face sexism on their own. As matters stand, discourses around changes to gaming primarily focus on how they could improve matters for marginalized players; recognizing the benefits to *all* players may be a necessary step for altering systems of power in gaming.

Harassment in Gaming Spaces

In addition to their concerns about how games represent women, female players found many problems with how other players treated them in social spaces surrounding gaming. As past research has shown, the gaming community overall, particularly in online spaces, often demonstrates deeply negative behavioral or linguistic patterns. Many players trash-talk others,

behavior which interviewees seem to expect and take for granted. Elayne summed this perspective up, stating, “The levels of anonymity plus, you know, no consequences, yields what you would expect just as far as obnoxious behavior”. She believed that players’ ability to hide their offline identities and the challenges of punishing offenders effectively meant that “obnoxious behavior” was almost a guaranteed part of gaming. Gamers are also highly competitive, which can drive them to be hostile to others.

For example, Adrianna brought up a common perception about gamer behavior when she said, “My boyfriend in college was addicted to Halo and he really became kind of an asshole when he was playing multiplayer matches. You know the stereotype of the 12 year old with an Internet connection screeching racial/homophobic slurs in Halo? He gave it right back and thinking about it now just turns me off to Halo and FPS’s in general”. Adrianna’s boyfriend encountered very negative players in online spaces and responded in kind, creating a cycle of derogatory profanity. Because this occurred so regularly when he was playing FPS games, Adrianna still finds it hard to unlink FPS games from verbally abusive behavior, making the whole genre unappealing to her. Other players also avoided FPSes and sometimes even online games in general. As Feather stated, “I don’t really like the culture that’s involved with multi-player games”. She played only single-player games and in-person multiplayer, in order to avoid online harassment altogether.

Of course, not all interviewees avoided online games. After all, there are multiple game styles and genres that require many players, such as MMOs, multiplayer online battle arenas (MOBAs) like *League of Legends*, and others. Online games also provide a wider competitive outlet for players who want to prove their skills against others. Because of this, many interviewees chose to play online or multiplayer games despite their culture of harassment. As

Kay said, “Usually [online] games are kinda hostile. Lots of like, rape metaphor, insults, and things like that, but, I dunno, I like… probably just the competition, in those games”. The competitive nature of games played against other people drew her to online spaces despite their toxicity. This demonstrates that harassment culture is not necessarily exclusionary to everyone. However, even players who opted to join online spaces recognized the potential downsides. Although they could choose to focus on elements they liked about multiplayer, the decision to play online games also required them to ignore as best they could many aspects of gaming culture that were not only offensive, but specifically offensive to women.

Participants presented strong evidence that the harassment faced by women differs from that faced by men and that it is often more virulent. Female players speak extensively about the day-to-day issues they face, particularly when they play video games online. Because players still perceive online gaming, and gaming in general, as primarily white male spaces, interviewees argued that players who were not members of this group were treated as interlopers and were more heavily targeted for harassment. Some participants stated that male players treated them as a “nuisance” (DT) or assumed that they were bad at gaming simply because they were female. When Helix first joined World of Warcraft, for instance, she found that members of her guild “assumed I was bad or couldn’t play, with absolutely no evidence”. Although a display of skill was often enough to halt further assumptions or questions, associating gender with skill or a lack of skill was very insulting to interviewees, who tended to be highly experienced gamers.

Participants faced other, more offensive experiences as well. Players who attended in-person gaming events were often touched or photographed without their permission (Elayne, Feather), while those who played online recounted many sexualized insults such as “slut”, “whore”, and, “cocksucker” (Harley, Alissa). A few players even experienced threats of assault;

Helix described an incident where, during a group raid in World of Warcraft, she won an item that her guild leader also wanted. In response, he "threatened to tear my breasts into bloody shreds." This occurred despite the fact that she was playing in a guild composed of her college boyfriend's high school friends; his offline connection to them was not enough to keep them from harassing her using very violent language. Although interviewees were quick to recognize that many of the players they encountered were perfectly pleasant and were just focused on playing the game, most had experienced varying degrees of negativity.

Gaming spaces were even less welcoming for players with intersectional identities. Eva, who is Mexican, found the gaming community very intimidating, due to her perception of it as a space dominated by young, straight, white men. She said, "I think everyone online, seriously most people online, are just white guys that are from twenty to thirtyish, and that's it[…] They dominate most of the gaming community. I see a lot of homophobic comments, or racist comments and, you know, sexist… So I'm like, unless you're a white, straight, middle-class male who's like in their twenties and in college, you don't really fit in[…] that's really weird to me because I'm not white, I'm Mexican, and I'm not a male, I'm a girl. So I think that's why I've always struggled". Because the gaming community was so homogeneous, Eva's differences made her feel completely disconnected from the other players she encountered and subject to greater harassment as a perceived outsider. Put simply, she described in-game spaces as "very not friendly towards girls" and "mean". Although other participants did not face the joint challenge of identifying as both female and non-white in an environment where these characteristics marked them as "other", they also agree that the community's expectations for players made it difficult to be included. Dealing with trash talk and profanity directed at them by other players can be a challenge for anyone, both male and female. Individuals have to find ways

to ignore or cope with the negativity, as well as to decide whether or not to respond. However, women face an extra challenge, due to the fact that the harassment they face can be more targeted and because their outsider status can draw extra fire.

Research into workplace harassment, one of the most deeply studied contexts for this type of gender issue, shows that sexual and gender-based harassment of women is more likely in male-dominated environments, particularly those which prize traditionally masculine qualities like toughness, aggression, and competitiveness (McDonald, 2012). Although workplace research may not seem to connect directly to gaming research, the two areas share many motivating factors behind gender harassment. In male-dominated workplaces, some men interpret women's presence as potentially threatening to the masculine status quo. Women are seen as interlopers who will interfere with male bonding or soften the workplace with traditionally feminine characteristics, such as emotionality or sensitivity. Therefore, members of the masculine community try to limit women's input or drive them out entirely.

As many of these traditionally masculine characteristics also appear in gaming communities, particularly those around shooting, fighting, or other competitive genres, it is unsurprising that women could be seen as a threat to the community's structure. Furthermore, although sexual harassment was originally conceptualized as a behavior that men directed toward women they found desirable, in order to win them over, newer research has shown that gender and sexual harassment are actually directed most frequently toward individuals who violate gender norms as a mechanic for "fixing" their behavior (Berdahl, 2007). Given that video games have a longstanding cultural definition as "for men", gaming is a prime environment for gender and sexual harassment. In this context, women's interest in a traditionally male-oriented medium may be seen as an instance of gender deviance that requires correction.

This is particularly significant given gaming's interactive nature. With past media, such as the romance novels Radway's readers engaged with or the VCR that Gray analyzed, women could have a more individual experience. Their husbands might complain that they were spending too much money on romance novels, or their kids might nag them into recording a show they did not want to watch, but these women were generally only navigating a small, private family sphere. And once they were in their novel or once they had put the kids to bed and could settle down to watch their own tapes, they had a private media experience available to them. They interacted directly and solely with the text.

In gaming, this is often not an option. It is true that many women game alone and get extensive pleasure out of individual play, and I do not intend my description of games as interactive to dismiss players who opt for this type of experience. As a gamer myself, I primarily play games on an individual basis, as doing so fits both my busy schedule and my preference for games with in-depth storylines. The fact of the matter is, however, that games are increasingly networked, with many developers adding more and more multiplayer options to new releases. This means that, if they choose to play the hottest new games and engage with gaming culture widely, women are necessarily doing so in a social, interactive way. They cannot access all that games have to offer without encountering other players. This puts female gamers in a position where they almost always have to learn to navigate the type of harassment and sexism that interviewees described here; unless they choose only to play alone, they are extremely likely to face a situation where another player perceives them as an interloper and reacts accordingly.

As forces like character representation maintain gaming's core as masculinized, it is unlikely that the specific harassment of women will decrease. In turn, this harassment frequently drives women to play games more privately, to hide their gender identity, or to leave gaming

entirely. Their less obvious presence then naturalizes discourses that construct men as gamers by helping the audience appear to be more male-dominated than it actually is. This cycle of exclusion is key to maintenance of the status quo and is one of the many forces that will need to be undermined if power structures in gaming are to be altered.

Impacts of Overt Sexism

The aforementioned characteristics of games and gaming culture are, drawing on Hall's concepts, instances of "overt sexism"; their misogynistic nature is obvious. Academic research has long recognized the limited nature of women's representation in gaming and called for improvements in future games. Researchers and journalists have also pointed out the problematic nature of trash-talk and verbal interpersonal aggression in gaming spaces. As a result, some game companies have started to improve in these areas.

In fact, participants remained optimistic about the future of games, and many felt that improvements were coming. For example, they described many recent positive changes in the area of game content, such as the rebooted *Tomb Raider* series. In her original games, Lara Croft, the protagonist of the series and one of the first extremely popular female game characters, had an oversized chest and wore a tight, revealing tank top with short shorts. In the new series reboot in 2013 and its sequel in 2015, however, she was redesigned to be less sexualized. Although she still sports a tank top at times, developers altered Croft's body to more realistic proportions and her standard outfit includes cargo pants, rather than shorts. The success of the new *Tomb Raider* games gave participants hope that industry members will realize that well-designed female characters are not necessarily off-putting to male players and that they can draw in women, increasing a game's potential audience.

Other positively referenced games included texts like *Fallout 3* and the *Mass Effect*

series, where players have the ability to choose their character gender without affecting the depth of the storyline or the progress of the game. Female characters in these games were just as interesting and developed as male characters. In fact, developers even took some steps to ensure that female and male experiences would be equivalent. In Fallout 3, for instance, male and female characters were generally not sexualized, but if they were, it was to similar extents. As Eva described, “in Fallout 3, if there was a skimpy dress for the women, there was also one for the men, like I think there was um… sexy sleepwear, and then if you put it on, it was some leopard-print thing for the girl, and the same – there was like, some boxers for the guy, or, something like that. And I was like, ‘Oh, that’s funny’, ‘cause usually in most games you just leave it for the girl, not for the guy. So it was fun to see both of them dressed skimpy and slutty, but most other games don’t do that”. *Fallout 3* provided realistic armor for both male and female characters, but also provided some joke pieces, such as the sleepwear, that affected all characters in similar ways, as a reversal of general gaming trends.

In the *Mass Effect* series, developers included the option to play as a female character in each of the three games of the trilogy and have allowed players to engage in same-sex relationships, to keep each character’s storyline options completely open regardless of the gender their player chooses. However, for the third game, developers also made sure to include the female version of the main character, Commander Shepard (colloquially known as “FemShep”) in their marketing materials for the game, distinctly promoting her as a feature (Westbrook, 2011). This reveals that, although the developers were already a bit ahead of the curve in their treatment of their female characters and their attention to diverse audiences, they deliberately increased this attention for their newest release, recognizing the changing nature of gaming audiences.

In terms of social improvements, some developers have also moved to address harassment and trash-talk. Riot, the company behind the popular (but toxic) online multiplayer game *League of Legends* has, for instance, started to implement community management measures that punish players for insulting or harassing others (Lin, 2013; 2015). As a result, "incidences of homophobia, sexism, and racism in League of Legends have fallen to a combined 2 percent of all games. Verbal abuse has dropped by more than 40 percent, and 91.6 percent of negative players change their act and never commit another offense after just one reported penalty" (Lin, 2015). Although overtly sexist problems are still extremely concerning, especially given toxic incidents like the GamerGate movement of 2014, the obvious and public nature of these trends can make them easier to combat.

In their interviews, participants called for further improvements in representation and gaming spaces, and for greater assistance from developers, but by and large, they were positive about the future of gaming. They argued that the gaming industry and gaming culture were growing increasingly aware of their problems with sexism and that this would lead to future change and a more equitable environment. In analyzing their experiences more deeply, however, it is clear that some barriers persist. Although industry members are recognizing the benefits of targeting games more broadly, and although independent studios and even some larger AAA cornerstones are working to improve the power balance between men and women in gaming, the optimistic perspective that gaming is definitely on its way to improvement first underestimates the strength of hegemonic ideologies, especially when they are as long-standing as the idea that video games are for men and boys.

The fact that interviewees often accepted sexist trends in gaming because they recognized that industry members were trying to target men indicates how powerful hegemony can be.

Overtly sexist trends, like the lack of representation of women in games and their hypersexualization when they appear, construct gaming as a space for men, rather than for women. Even more so, these trends construct gaming as a space for a specific kind of man, one who revels in power, aggression, and dominance over others. The persistence of this discursive construction then becomes naturalized as "common sense", and gamers are encouraged to buy into it. This can be seen in how, although female gamers argued that men deserved more credit, they still accepted marketing tactics that targeted men based on their sex drives. It can also be seen in female gamers' acceptance of limited subject positions in gaming, and the ways in which they avoid games that will offend them, but understand and accept why industry members would make those games. Overt sexism is one of the more obvious ways in which gaming's hegemonic and unequal power structure is maintained, and changing or undermining an existing hegemony is far from an easy process.

Second, female gamers' optimism unfortunately ignores the fact that sexism and harassment have been on the rise at the same time that change has been happening. Representations may be improving, but the behavior of gamers has largely gotten worse. This is due to the ways in which industrial changes have motivated a crisis of authority on the part of traditional, hegemonic game audiences. The success of new audiences and new games has undermined the idea that men are or must be the most heavily targeted group of gamers. Because of this, some hegemonic "gamers" fear that they will lose their privileged position. As Consalvo (2012) states, some players see the gaming industry as "zero-sum", where the creation of casual games for broad audiences necessarily means a decrease in the number of games made for traditional, male audiences. Although this belief has not yet been supported or disproved with hard evidence, it is at the heart of increasing levels of harassment and overt sexism.

A real threat to the hegemonic order of a cultural system, a crisis of authority, motivates the hegemonic group to deploy all the forces at their disposal in order to maintain power. Although hegemony is usually supported through the construction and deployment of a "common sense" worldview that benefits the dominant class, in a crisis of authority the dominant class falls back on obvious coercion and force to reestablish their privileged position. The increasing harassment of non-traditional players serves as the "pure force" means by which "gamers" work to maintain their power when they see it being undermined by industry changes. It is a means for policing who belongs in gaming and who does not, as well as a means for policing broader access to power along gendered lines.

A number of participants who had long histories in gaming argued that the type of overt harassment they encountered in the post-casual era was relatively new. They felt that women had always been a minority in gaming, and that gaming had long been a masculinized space, but they had only recently started to encounter male gamers who deliberately worked to drive them away from playing. This, combined with incidents like GamerGate and the virulent harassment of public figures, indicates that as the industry has started to welcome in new types of players, some traditional "gamers" have responded with forceful policing of their "core" spaces. Should their attempts to maintain power and exclusivity be successful, female gamers' optimistic outlook on the future of games may not be realized.

Finally, participants' optimism ignores the impact of the more subtle, insidious sexism that is implicit in gaming spaces. Representational change, although it intersects in some ways with audience and industry issues, is only one potential area in which women are separated from the gaming community more generally, especially given the ways in which games' interactivity requires female players to deal with others. Games and gaming spaces contain many implicitly

sexist elements that work alongside overt sexism in order to maintain gaming as a masculine space. These aspects of gaming need to be drawn further towards the surface in order to undermine existing notions of gender and “core”.

Chapter Four: Implicit Sexism and its Impacts

In addition to the obvious problem of overtly sexist forces in gaming, participants brought up many implicitly sexist forces that, at surface level, may not appear to be negative. In fact, if one were to talk to gamers or developers who engage in these practices, they may even argue that they are trying to help. However, the specific way in which women are welcomed into gaming from an industrial/content perspective treats them as minor subgroup— what one participant referred to as a "genre"— rather than a legitimate audience. This ghettoizes them into a small subset of gaming rather than allowing access to all of gaming equally. Furthermore, the ways in which other gamers respond to women's presence, even when they are not being deliberately negative, marked female gamers as just that— *female* gamers instead of simply *gamers*. Because of this, even positive reactions can increase the gap between a woman's self-identification and how others perceive her.

This indicates how, even as overt misogyny garners attention and is potentially addressed, numerous more subtle forces are still at work to maintain "core" as exclusionary. Implicit sexism's less obvious nature makes it potentially more difficult to combat as its assumptions appear to be true or at least not damaging. However, it still acts as a barrier to equality in gaming spaces, and potentially in other masculinized areas, by normalizing masculinity while marking women's desire to enter the space as unusual and deviant. It also works to limit how and where women can be "core", welcoming them into specific areas while barring them from others. This perpetuates unequal access to the heart of gaming communities and culture, and to power over these areas as well.

Women as a "Genre"

The first implicitly sexist force interviewees described was in the creation and marketing of games for women. When developers opted to target women, participants felt that they did so according to very stereotypical gender norms. Specifically, games designed for women relied heavily on traditionally feminine material, such as cooking, dolls, and taking care of families, houses, or pets. The persistent use of essentialized views of gender and femininity, participant Bear then argued, "marginalizes women. It makes women a genre? As opposed to mainstream." She used the term "genre" to refer to how the industry bracketed out women and women's games, treating them as marginal rather than as part of gaming culture as a whole.

Other participants strongly agreed with this perspective. When discussing her experience playing games as a child, Alissa recounted how frustrated she was when, in contrast to adventure games like *Pokemon* or *The Legend of Zelda*, which developers marketed to men, the games that companies marketed towards girls like her were "Barbie Dream World and 'raise a horse'" games. The focus was on fashion or caretaking, rather than on collecting Pokemon and defeating other Pokemon trainers in battle, or on adventuring through a fantasy world like Hyrule to save it from evil. In her experience, boy's games allowed for adventure, creativity, and exploration, while games marketed to girls were overly domestic. Alissa described this contrast as "insulting to the point that it was funny", and references these early experiences as evidence that the video game industry fundamentally misunderstands women and what they want out of their entertainment.

Alissa felt that newer games were improving their approach to girls and women, but other participants believed that they were still limited. Specifically, they argued that "girl games" target children rather than adult women, demonstrating the industry's lack of awareness

regarding how many adult women play games. Emily said, “I can’t think of any game in particular I think is marketed toward adult women. And there’s a lot of games that are geared toward kids in general, and I still like some of them, but you know that there are that set of games for adult men, like intense Iraq games and all of that and Grand Theft Auto, you hopefully don’t let your little kid play. But when I think of girl games, I think of like that dog game and cooking games and things like that, like Barbie games. I think they are intended for little girls”.

Although these games might actually be appealing to smaller children, and even in some cases to older women who are looking for light entertainment, participants found them restrictive or even offensive. In discussing future improvements that would make games and gaming more open to women, Taylor Ryan said, “I think if girl gamers are to be taken more seriously, game companies need to stop patronizing us, with games like the ‘Imagine: Makeover Studio’ sort of DS games. They should just focus on producing more games with strong, appealing female leads, issues that we can relate to, and a plot that is appealing to either gender. That’s all it takes. We don’t need glitter and pink and stuffed animals.” Rather than seeing that they enjoy many of the same game elements that men enjoy and improving the appeal of current game genres for women by adding complex, interesting female characters, designers instead tend to create and promote separate games for women. As Bear said, “Rather than making games appealing to women, [game developers] make games for women.” This divides games, and the gaming environment, into a “girl area” dominated by pink, animals, and caretaking, and a “boy area”, containing everything else.

Overall, the industry’s reliance on traditionally gendered material and the fact that developers specifically invite women into only a small section of gaming made participants feel as if they were afterthoughts to the gaming industry, rather than a key part of their audience. It

was clear to them that the developers working in the industry had little to no idea what female gamers actually thought wanted out of their games. Developers fell back on old, outdated stereotypes instead of recognizing that, like male gamers, women had diverse tastes and preferences. As a result, this narrow targeting dismissed or marked as abnormal women and girls who were not interested in domestic pursuits such as raising children or animals, or who did not want to use games to play with fashion and makeup. It also ignored the possibility that women might want to pursue different interests dependent on context; that is, that they would enjoy both beauty games and action-adventure games depending on what they wanted to get out of their media experience at the time.

The targeting of women through traditional gender norms does provide a specific space through which women can enter into gaming without having their gender identity questioned or without facing some of the overt problems discussed earlier. Like the rise of casual, social, and mobile games, "girl games" mark female audiences as desirable for developers and as a part of gaming communities and culture. However, this trend is a form of implicit sexism that helps maintain "core" as masculinized. First, the separation of "girl games" from all other games constructs a marginal feminine space, rather than undermining or changing video games' overall masculinization. Second, the stereotypically feminine characteristics used in "girl games" and their marketing reaffirms unequal gender roles that treat men and women as fundamentally different and assign women to more domestic spaces. As Vanderhoef (2013) points out, "this discourse promotes notions of difference and distinction that ultimately recreate gender and power hierarchies in games culture and beyond". Finally, the bracketing out of female games and players continues to separate gamer identity and gender identity, making a joint female-gamer position difficult to envision and embody. Treating female games and gamers as a distinct genre

minimizes the impact they can have on gaming culture overall.

More significantly, the game industry's choices when targeting female players perpetuate outdated, essentialized perspectives on gender, which contributes to unequal divisions of power. For instance, as Hochschild and Machung (1989) discovered in the late 1980s, although women were entering the work force in increasing numbers, they were also still primarily responsible for housework and childcare. This illustrates how norms and ideologies around gender roles and responsibilities are slow to change; the feminist movement had encouraged and fought for more equal gender relations in work, home life, and politics, but the lived experience of individuals still reflected numerous pressures from older, unequal gender ideologies that limited both men and women. In a 2014 retrospective on The Second Shift, Hochschild points out that work culture has still not significantly changed, that there continues to be a large second shift burden on women, and that overall economic trends such as the decline of the blue collar job are potentially worsening this situation (Schulte, 2014). Work like this demonstrates how gender inequality persists and can show how games' power structures contribute by dividing men and women into distinct, unequal groups.

Women did push back against their ghettoization in some ways. While they were again encouraged to accept industry perspectives on gender due to game's historical masculinization and the idea that men make up a larger part of the gaming audience than women do, interviewees once again argued that male players should be given more credit. For instance, as discussed earlier, female players frequently have no choice but to play as a male character. However, the reverse was rarely true. Other than *Portal*, participants could not think of a game that required players to be female.[32] The reason for the excess of male characters and the lack of female

[32] In April 2016, *Portal* was joined by the multiplayer survival game *Rust* when developers introduced an update that randomly assigned half of their players a female avatar. A previous update had similarly randomized players'

characters, interviewees pointed out, was an industry-based assumption that women would play games as male characters if they had to, but that men would be too uncomfortable playing as a woman to choose games that forced them into that choice. Therefore, games that only offered female characters would not be successful, at least according to traditional purchasing expectations. Players disagreed.

Lee, for instance, referenced the success of the TV show *Legend of Korra* as evidence that men are more open-minded than the industry often gives them credit for. She said, "I don't know if you've watched the *Legend of Korra* and *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. But the main character in *Avatar* was a guy who was a twelve-year-old kid. The main character of *Korra*, which is this spin-off, was a seventeen-year-old girl, and Nick[elodeon] was worried that it was going to… that it wasn't going to do as well because she was a female character. Boys won't watch shows about girls. So they played it for a test audience and they asked them, 'What did you think about Korra being a girl?' And the guys all said that Korra was awesome and they didn't care[…] She's an example that if you put a whole lot of effort into making them a realistic character that you will still get that kind of attention". Lee admitted that Korra was "a very tomboyish girl" whose creators describe her as "very pugnacious. Kind of in your face" (Farley, 2011). This may have helped her appeal to male audiences by drawing on characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity (e.g. strength, aggressiveness, physicality). But her creators tried to keep her from being a one-sided, strictly masculine character, arguing, "She's

race. This was an unprecedented decision in gaming culture and provoked extensive backlash from disgruntled players. The developers, however, have stuck to their decision, arguing that permanent avatars will make players' decisions more impactful, in that a player cannot "attack another then come back later with a different gender or race and befriend the same player" (Newman, 2016). The developers also argued that "who you are in the game, your race and gender, makes no difference to the actual gameplay", and therefore there is no reason not to make avatars diverse. Since this decision, and in spite of the negative reaction many players had to the change, *Rust* has seen a significant increase in number of players, indicating that gamers may be more attracted to diversity than researchers, developers, and players have previously expected.

also funny and has a lot of charm and vulnerability because she's still growing up and trying to figure things out" (Farley, 2011). Therefore, Korra breaks stereotypes, combining traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics into a complex, interesting package. Lee argued that this multi-dimensionality will draw players, male or female, to a character, regardless of character gender. Flat, one-dimensional characters, on the other hand, will likely avert men and marginalize or irritate women.

Drawing on experiences in other media as evidence, women felt that character and gender role diversity was an area where developers could make progress. They called for greater support in terms of more varied female-targeted games, improved characters, and multi-dimensional stories, believing that these would have cross-gendered appeal. As Shaw posited, "If [marginalized players] learned to enjoy games that did not represent them, it is likely heterosexual, white, cisgendered men could too" (2014a, p. 144). Although they were often harassed or excluded for being female in the masculinized environments of gaming, participants largely remained positive about their fellow gamers overall, assuming that they would be excited about more diverse representations and more diverse games if these materials were detailed, interesting to play, and innovative. This again indicates a way in which "core" could be altered towards greater inclusivity in the future, although progress is currently slow.

Environment

Other implicitly sexist forces are social in nature. As discussed earlier, interviewees recount extensive experiences with harassment, especially in online game spaces, and they describe this as an overtly sexist force they have to overcome in order to enjoy games effectively. However, their accounts demonstrate that specific gender harassment and negativity online are only one of the many potential barriers they face to being key components of the

gaming communities. Female gamers also have to combat constant surprise at their presence and strong stereotypes about “girl gamers” in order to continue playing.

Being treated as an anomaly

Women found that they were seen as a rarity in gaming. Many of them received extra attention when they revealed their gender. In some cases, this attention would be positive. Women found many gamers who thought it was cool that they played games, and many who asked numerous questions about what games they liked, how long they had been playing, and about themselves as people. However, even though this attention was positive, the frequency with which it occurred made players feel like anomalies rather than just regular gamers; because their gender was always a surprise, it made them feel like their gaming habit was abnormal. For example, one of the first times Eva used voice chat when gaming online, she called for help from her teammates in a fast-paced zombie shooter. When she spoke, “He was like ‘Whoa, I didn’t know girls played this game!’ and then his friends were like, ‘Yeah dude, sometimes they play’… it just suddenly all hit me, ‘I don’t think girls play that many video games, I don’t think this is normal’”. The other players were happy to help her and, according to her account, were extremely nice to her after finding out she was a girl, asking her all about herself and how she got into the game. This behavior only made Eva more uncomfortable, however, because it was out of the norm. Players in *Left 4 Dead*, the game she was in, usually followed the typically negative behavior characteristic of online spaces, engaging in trash talk due to the competitive environment. Rather than treating Eva as just another player and behaving in the same way towards her, other gamers almost reversed their behavior, marking her as different even though they were trying to be nice.

Other gamers also got used to surprised responses to their gender, stating everything

from, “I grew up as a hardcore gamer, and guys would be totally shocked to hear that” (Taylor Ryan) to “Of the hundreds of times I’ve used [voice chat] with people who didn’t already know me well, perhaps two or three I felt like it was not a big deal and/or extremely interesting that I was a woman. Usually it was a conversation-halter” (Helix). Some described getting extra attention, similarly to Eva’s experience online. Anna, who was part of a gaming group at her university, said, “Posting on the Facebook [page for the gaming group] can be a little creepy though— women get a lot more attention when they post. It used to make me feel special and awesome, but now it’s just irritating”. Even in a tightly-knit social circle based in offline connections, player behavior differed when they were dealing with a female gamer rather than a male gamer.

Many of these experiences were positive or neutral, but female gamers were frustrated by the fact that they were continually marked as “other”. This position drew extra attention and made them feel like they were out of place. To borrow an analogy from Helix, being a female gamer is “like wearing a Halloween costume when most people aren’t, to work or to class or something. You’re not doing anything against the rules and a lot of people will think you’re cool for doing it, but other people will judge you and look down on you— and EVERYONE will notice you”. Because of this, some players were very uncomfortable revealing their gender, assuming that it would change their experience playing. As Bubble pointed out, when everybody makes “a huge deal out of women playing video games”, it gets in the way of them actually enjoying them, because their gender, rather than the game itself, becomes the relevant topic.

The assumption that women were not normal “gamers” also meant that men constantly questioned their presence in gaming spheres. For instance, Elayne attended many in-person gaming events with a competitive team she helped manage. Because she was the only woman or

one of very few women present at these events, other players frequently interrogated her as to what her role was. She said, “I was a girl in a very ‘masculine sphere’ and like, [my husband and his friends] were fine about it, cuz they were just friends, but whenever we would go out to LANs it was very much a ‘What are you doing here?’, ‘What are you trying to achieve?’”. Other attendees questioned her motivations for being part of the team, in part because she wasn’t actively playing, but also because she stood out due to her gender. These individuals needed to define her position in the event because she did not fit their preconceptions about LAN participants.

Nina has encountered similar responses when she visits friends who stream their games online. Recounting one recent experience, she said, “This weekend I was hanging out with some people who play fighting games, and they play at a pretty high level […] They were streaming their matches online, and they had one of the cameras pointed to the living room. And some person… out of nowhere they were typing, like, ‘Why is there a girl there? What’s a girl doing there?’ And of course, I’m annoyed by that and, [my friends] knew, I guess, that it was making me uncomfortable, and they were like, ‘No, that’s a dude’, and he’s like ‘Why is a dude wearing pink?’ or ‘Why do they have a ponytail?’. And they really wanted to know why there was a girl there, and that really bothered me”. Nina’s friends tried to save her from being interrogated by lying about her gender, but the players they encountered were relentless. Because fighting games have a majority male audience (Lenhart et al., 2008, p. 18) and play into gender stereotypes about competition and aggressiveness, Nina’s gender was contrary to other player’s expectations for the fighting game community. Therefore, spectators called her out as a person who did not belong, despite her close relationship to high level players and a history of playing fighting games herself.

Being treated as unusual is separate from harassment due to its less aggressive, sometimes more positive nature. In instances of harassment, players viewed women as a threatening deviation from the norm, as a force working to feminize games and ruin their existence as a homosocial space for male bonding. Because of this, players deliberately tried to drive them out through aggression and verbal abuse. But as female gamers like Eva related, other male gamers were often genuinely interested in talking with them and hearing more about how they got into games. They were polite and excited to find a female gamer, and they often offered to help rather than to harass. Male gamers' surprise, however, works to reinforce and perpetuate the masculinization of gamer identity by continually questioning women's attempts to take on that identity and enter into gaming spaces.

As Hall states, implicit racism (and sexism) are potentially more insidious and difficult to combat "because they are, at least according to the speaker, *true*" (Phillips, 2015, p. 95). Given the chance, male gamers who react with surprise to female gamers would likely defend their actions by pointing out that men make up the majority audience in most games, and therefore their actions could not be sexist because they reflect the real lack of female gamers. They could also deploy the argument that because they are being polite and honestly interested in helping the women they encounter enjoy games, they cannot be seen as sexist. What such arguments ignore is both the real, felt impact being treated as unusual has on female gamers and the ways in which it works to continue perceptions of male "gamers" as normal and any other type of gamer as aberrant.

Offers of help from male gamers also construct female gamers as *in need of help*, a perspective that most participants would not agree with. Given the barriers they faced to entry into gaming, almost all interviewees were determined to make it on their own, to cultivate skill

and experience with little to no assistance from others. Being offered help just because they identified as female was, in their opinion, deeply patronizing and dismissive of all they had already achieved on their own. This behavior also demonstrates the unequal nature of power in gaming; men's offers of help came from a privileged position where their skill was assumed, where they could "naturally" expect that they were better at the game than the person to whom they offered aid. This was often not true— participants were frequently offered help by people who turned out to be much worse at the game than they were. However, the persistent nature of offers of help and how frequently they occurred clearly shows how long-standing discourses that construct men as naturally better at games than women continue to create unequal power relations in gaming. Men are seen as able to offer help and women are thought to be in need of it.

"Girl Gamer" Stereotypes

Finally, female gamers had to deal with deeply embedded stereotypes about their motivations for gaming and how they should behave in gaming environments. Drawing on what I will refer to as the "girl gamer" stereotype, players generally assumed one of two things about female gamers: 1) they were casual players who avoided difficult games or 2) they played "men's games", such as first person shooters, as a way to get attention from male players. Like most stereotypes, community discourses, media coverage, and diverse other sources have naturalized the idea of the "girl gamer", to the extent that gamers see it as true, rather than as a stereotype. Even many female players internalized this stereotype, despite the fact that their own behavior combated it. Because of this, the "girl gamer" stereotype is a form of implicit sexism that divides male and female players, and that makes women struggle with their game choices, interactions with male players, and connections to female players.

For example, participants like Bubble found that their game choices were constantly

questioned when they discussed video games with others or when they visited a store to purchase games. She said, "A couple weeks ago, I was talking to a coworker about video games off-the-clock. My immediate coworkers know that I very much enjoy gaming, but outside of that I don't usually talk about it so people don't really know. Because I am not a man, he was convinced that everything I play is only because my boyfriend plays it and we only play things together, which is totally untrue. That is just one example. Going to a store to buy a game, they always try to steer me towards some cheesy Wii games or something. Not that there's anything wrong with that, but they don't do that to most people. It almost always happens to me". Because she was female and played games, Bubble was associated against her will with the "girl gamer" stereotype, which dictates that her gaming habits must be either related to the men in her life or strictly casual. Feather felt similarly judged when she entered a gaming store, saying, "I always worry that I have that look that I'm not here for me, I'm here for someone else, and I'm going to add a game for me on top". Feather played diverse styles of games, but was always concerned that video game clerks and other players would see her purchase of shooting games or other "manly" genres as gifts for her boyfriend and her purchase of Nintendo DS games like *Cooking Mama* or other "casual" titles as games for her. In reality, she purchased both varieties of game for herself, but she felt the pressure of stereotypes and assumptions about her gaming habits very deeply.

Others even avoided specific types of games because of "girl gamer" stereotypes. Laine, for instance, said that she avoided playing *The Sims* because of how other players viewed it. In *The Sims* series, players create characters and control them through their daily activities, taking care of their needs, such as housing, food, and social interaction. Although *The Sims* is an extremely popular game series, players viewed it as both casual and feminine, a virtual dollhouse

rather than a real game. In Laine's college gaming club, men outnumbered women, a gap that the men jokingly attributed to the fact that "Sims is not a competitive game" (Laine). Therefore, women who played *The Sims*, and who others assumed *only* played *The Sims*, did not need to join a group where they could find multiplayer opponents. This association of female gamers with series like *The Sims* minimized women's participation in the gaming community and marked them as "girl gamers" rather than "*real* gamers".

When female players broke expectations and played games other than *The Sims,* they faced a secondary set of challenges— specifically, the expectation that they were playing those games in order to meet men and that they would therefore flirt with other players. Female players described this as a barrier to their full participation in gaming because it continued to mark them as different than other gamers, because it meant that their skills were constantly questioned, and because it made it harder to connect with other women. As Vickie argued, "I feel that I should be represented as just a normal gamer too… You'll hear some people talk about like… that was their impression of female gamers, that they always got something for free, or they did it to get help… I always tried to avoid having that connotation." Being a female gamer changed the terms according to which one participated in the gaming community and required women to work harder to be accepted.

This problem was complicated by the fact that women honestly did feel as if many female players bought into the "girl gamer" stereotype, opting to use their gender to get attention and to succeed in the game. Because this subset of women were happily invested in being "girl gamers", the stereotype persisted in the community and was also applied to women who did not want this identity. Feather illustrated this when she said, "I've had friends who are much better looking than I who play video games much more than I, and they fall into that 'gamer-girl'

category very easily where they become very much like, 'I'm a girl and I'm a gamer and get out of my way, I'm gonna use my sexuality to get ahead in games'. I'm not into that but I know that if I get too much like, 'Oh video games, video games, video games…' it's going to be sort of like, 'Oh well, she's cute and she's talking about video games; she's just trying to get guys'." Because men encountered some women who did want attention rather than just the chance to play games, they assumed that Feather wanted the same thing, grouping all women into a single entity rather than recognizing their diverse motivations to play.

This also put women in a position where their in-game successes were questioned. Other gamers were often not sure if a female player was actually skilled or if they, as the "girl gamer" stereotype suggested, had used their gender to get help and advance that way. Because of this, women had to work extra hard to demonstrate that they were actually good players. Elizabeth stated, with great frustration, "You also have to show other people you're good, because a lot of girls use their gender as an advantage, and they like, send fake pictures or real pictures to guys to get things in the game, and therefore they're highly geared and stuff like that. It pissed people like me off, cause it's like, I actually work for what I have, I don't just… fling myself at a bunch of guys." While players of all types have their skill questioned in regular trash talk, women also faced a deeply embedded stereotype that linked their success in games to the amount of assistance they received from men, even when this was not actually the case.

Finally, the "girl gamer" stereotype interfered with women's ability to connect to other female gamers by making them less trusting of each other. While women often wanted to befriend other female players, they also internalized the community's overall perception of "girl gamers". They were afraid that women they tried to befriend would be among the group that embraced the "girl gamer" stereotype, and that they would therefore have very different goals

while gaming. When Elayne attended LAN events, for instance, she often wanted to talk with the few other women present. However, she found herself questioning their motives for attending, just like male gamers questioned hers. She said, "You're just not sure if they're going to use their femininity to try and, I guess, manipulate. I don't know, I've kind of seen it, but for the most part, they kind of just stick with their significant other, or who they're with or whatever. It ended up not really being a big deal, but I really do wish it was easier for me to approach another girl at [a LAN event] and for it to just be cool". Rather than being able to openly associate with her fellow female gamers, the "girl gamer" stereotype and the possibility that they were at the event for men, rather than for the games, interfered with Elayne's ability to interact easily with others.

Participants also mentioned that "girl gamers" were often not happy to see other women playing. If, as the stereotype argues, these women were actually looking for attention, the presence of other female players would likely disrupt this goal, splitting men's attention between multiple women rather than allowing them to focus entirely on one. To quote participant DT, "A small minority of girls who really like attention probably don't like the fact that maybe two girls in a party would sort of take the attention away from them". The presence of other women would also make the "girl gamer" less unique, and therefore less special. Because of this, participants felt, some "girl gamers" were very rude to other women, rather than welcoming them into the community as colleagues. To draw again on DT's description of the situation, "Sometimes I think the girls [online] are worse than the other people; they are horrible to other girls! Which I don't understand because I get really excited when another girl is playing, and I'm like 'Oh cool!' you know? Just someone else who probably understands and they're all bitchy and stuff, which I do not understand at all."

The negative reactions DT and other participants received from other women often made

them wary when they met their peers. Overall, this made it difficult to form social connections between female gamers, a problem Eklund (2011) noticed in her study of World of Warcraft players. Although Eklund intended to find women to interview via snowball sampling, where players she talked to would introduce her to other female gamers they knew, she found that women knew very few other women who played games. This is due to many factors, such as women's tendency to hide their gender to avoid harassment, but it is likely at least partially related to the fractious relationship female gamers have with one another due to the "girl gamer" stereotype.

Like other implicitly sexist elements of gaming culture, the "girl gamer" stereotype persists because players can generally point to one or two instances where it has been true. As Feather indicated, a lot of players do know or have at least encountered a female player who is happy to take extra help from male players and to play up their gender identity as a means for getting attention. They have also been in situations where other female players were dismissive of or outright hostile to them. Although this may not have been motivated by their gender— the other player may just be an aggressive person— the perceived implication that the female opponent resented losing men's attention to another woman acted as support for the "girl gamer" stereotype. Anecdotes about these incidents then perpetuate notions of women as catty, competitive with each other, and in gaming as a means for reaching men. These stereotypes then have extensive impacts on players and their interactions with one another.

Stereotypes and assumptions about female gamers and their motivations for gaming put these individuals into a deeply contradictory position. They want to befriend other female gamers and forge a sense of connection and community with these individuals. At the same time, they internalize particular perspectives on female gamers that makes connecting difficult. Even as

female gamers argue that “girl gamer” stereotypes are untrue, the persistence of discourses supporting these stereotypes leads them to mistrust other female players and doubt their reasons for playing. This is a paradoxical relationship between their own position and how they perceive others, demonstrating the power that marginalizing “girl gamer” discourses have even over those most deeply affected by them. Female gamers fight to be taken seriously but can still struggle to accept others on the same terms.

This positioning also again plays into and supports “core” notions of who can be a gamer. “Girl gamer” stereotypes spread the idea that women are in the gaming community to get attention from men. Therefore, their investment in games appears fake, barring them from fully taking on the identity of a gamer. Because “core” characteristics about gamers include long histories with games, deep investment in playing and learning about them, and high levels of skill, the idea that women are only gaming to meet men undermines their ability to develop these characteristics and the likelihood of others taking them seriously when they do. While men are always presumed to be gaming because they want to, women’s reasons for gaming are questioned or outright dismissed. Therefore, their ability to be seen as just a regular gamer like anyone else is limited.

Conclusions

As scholars like Radway and Gray found in their studies of women’s interactions with media, female gamers’ relationship to video games and gaming was deeply contradictory. Participants clearly self-defined as gamers and possessed many of the characteristics that are associated with “core”, such as extensive knowledge of games and a long history playing them. Despite this, they encountered and struggled to navigate a wide variety of forces that made their desired gamer identity very difficult to embody. Furthermore, the challenges they describe are

those faced by women who have seen the potential downsides of gaming and who have opted to play games regardless. The fact that players who had already overcome many of the social and ideological forces that separate women from technology and gaming had more to face shows that, despite increased attention to diverse audiences, "gamer" identity and video games themselves retain many expectations of masculinity. These are policed through both overt and implicit sexism.

Specifically, limited representations of women in games, the direct harassment of women in gaming spaces, developers' use of stereotypical gender roles, players' continuous surprise at encountering female players, and "girl gamer" stereotypes all helped link "core" gamer identity firmly to masculinity. At the same time, they encouraged women to accept this definition, to take on masculinized subject positions if they wanted to receive the full attention of the gaming industry, to accept or ignore sexist depictions, and to mistrust other female players. In many circumstances, interviewees at least partially bought into the very notions that they found so damaging, such as when they justified and explained away sexist character depictions based on the notion that men are a numerically larger part of the gaming audience.

Overt and implicit sexism, and the cultural construction of games as masculine and gamers as male, also make female players very defensive about their gaming habits. Although Radway was addressing romance reading, a feminized pursuit, her participants and those of this study shared feelings of guilt about their choice of hobby. Radway's readers often had to defend their purchases to spouses or children, as well as to themselves, due to the cultural conception that romances were trashy or a waste of time. Similarly, female gamers struggled with the cultural construction of games as pure entertainment and as masculinized. They felt guilt about their time spent gaming, which was seen as unproductive, and the need to defend their hobby in

the face of cultural norms that indicated they should not be playing. For instance, participants like Bubble played games at night to hide them from her parents, who felt they were a waste of time. Other participants had parents who introduced them to games, but still faced social pressure from friends or colleagues to avoid wasting time or to avoid masculine pursuits. The many forces working to maintain games' masculinization complicated female players' relationship with them and meant that their enjoyment of games was heavily mixed with doubt, insecurity, or a need for concealment.

In addition, the interactive and networked nature of games means that female gamers had to defend themselves not only to family and friends, but also to strangers who doubted that they could be "real gamers". This put participants under intense pressure to prove themselves. As Alissa said, "Honestly I am very insecure about how I play games, because basically since video games have been a big thing online, people have been saying that girls are not as good as guys at them. So I think as a female there's a lot of pressure to make sure that you don't mess up. Like in Wow, I was a class where I was supposed to do a lot of damage, and I was always conscious of trying to outperform the guys in my group because I wanted to make sure that they thought I was an asset that helped out the team. To make sure that they knew I wasn't just playing the game to try to flirt with them or to try to get free gear or anything like that."

When Vickie played a tanking[33] class in WoW, she said, "There were some times that people were surprised that there was a girl being a tank. So it- I didn't feel like I had to do better to prove that I could do better, but I felt like I had to do better to be like… 'F you, girls can be

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[33] In group raids, where a team of players work together to beat a high-level opponent, players divide between three overall types of characters— tanks, damage-per-second or DPS, and healing. Tanks are heavily armored characters that attract the attention of the boss opponent and soak up damage while other players attack. DPS characters try to damage the boss as much as possible, decreasing its health. Healers keep the other players on their team alive by casting spells that give them health points back after that have been hurt. Although any player can play all three types of characters, each class has some associated gender stereotypes— tanks are expected to be men, women are considered more likely to be healers, while DPS is seen as more gender equitable.

better at this' kinda thing". To deal with other players' surprise, Vickie felt she had to prove that women overall could be good in a stereotypically male position within the game, rather than just feeling like she had to prove *she* was good. Other players felt they had to defend their knowledge about games, their long history of playing, or even the types of games they played in order to avoid reflecting badly on women in general; for example avoiding *The Sims* in order to avoid playing into stereotypes, as Laine did.

Players saw little to no benefit from being female. Rather, they viewed it as a severe detriment, both because other players expect them to fail and because they fear that any failure on their part will continue to play into stereotypes that women only succeed in games due to help from men. Elayne argued that when players know a gamer is female, "you're now labeled and you're 'outed' and everything you do will be scrutinized twice as hard, and every mistake you make, you'll get criticized for it even more, and it's just, there's no benefits to being honest about your gender". The fact that women are still not allowed to just be gamers keeps them from simply being able to play and only worry about their own success or failure. Because "female gamers" are separated from "gamers" in general, their individual preferences and choices end up reflecting on all female players.

Participants' experiences clearly show that "core" aspects of game culture are still a retrograde preserve for pre-feminist constructions of gender, where the inequality of men and women is largely taken for granted. Female players are consistently expected to be worse at games, to need help from male players, and to be gaming as a means for getting attention, rather than because they truly enjoy the hobby. To combat this, they often have to work harder than their male colleagues, as being among the best players is one of the few options they have for undermining negative stereotypes. This not only makes women's equality into a trophy to be

earned rather than an inherent right (Nakamura, 2107) but it also is a somewhat unsustainable strategy, and many female gamers end up changing their gaming habits or leaving gaming entirely when being the best takes too much time or energy.

Overall, interviews showed that concerns that games are a zero-sum industry and that the rise of casual games will undermine men's control over gaming culture are largely unfounded. Although games have been in their post-casual era for a decade, the discourses and ideologies that construct "core" as masculinized are still strongly in force. Games' masculinization of "core", and how it plays out in players' interactions with each other and with gaming culture, has allowed video games to serve as a bastion of misogyny largely untouched by the gains of feminism. In many elements of gaming, the inequality of men and women is protected and preserved.

This is likely due to a number of factors, including games' status as an entertainment medium and the resulting difficulty many journalists and players have in taking them seriously. It could also be a result of the fact that games have long been a marginalized medium; because mass media discourses and the gaming industry have historically constructed "gamers" as such a narrow, limited group of people, the impacts of gaming culture seemed similarly limited, likely to affect only people who actually play rather than society and culture more broadly. As games have become normalized and increasingly popular, however, the inequalities they support require further attention and analysis. Games may be improving, but they are currently still deeply problematic; both common sense ideologies about gender and pure force means for policing hegemony continue to prioritize men over women within this space.

Also important to this conversation is attention to how or why marginalized individuals still choose to play games and strive to identify as gamers given the many problems they have

outlined above. When one has to struggle to navigate the gap between gamer and gender identity, or when game content and other players clearly send a message that one is not welcome in gaming spaces because of gender, why would women still want to be gamers? And, more importantly, how can their choice to do so, to identify with this identity that is clearly marked as not for them, indicate means for undermining and changing the core/margins relationship in a masculinized space? Accepting that games are deeply exclusionary, women's choice to engage with them anyway is a seemingly paradoxical, self-damaging one. To address this, the subsequent two chapters will outline first what women get out of gaming and why they do so, as well as what strategies they use to manage their gaming experiences and protect themselves from the impacts of sexism. Through these two approaches, we can begin to break down the barriers of core and margins and centralize the experiences of women as important to gaming culture. More importantly, we can illuminate pathways along which damaging hegemonic power structures can be undermined and altered in masculinized media spaces.

Chapter Five: Women's Entry into Gaming

Participants recounted many factors that worked to bar them from gaming culture. However, they all opted to game regardless of these, in a seemingly paradoxical choice to enter an exclusionary space. The reason for this is because, despite all the indications that gaming was not for them, women were still able to find many pleasures in both games themselves and in the communities surrounding them. This is not surprising, as past research has outlined numerous factors, in both casual and core games, that make them fun for male and female players. Even early game studies work that relied on essentialized views of gender found elements like sociability that researchers expected to draw in girls and women.

What this chapter offers, therefore, is not necessarily a brand new view of why games are fun. Earlier work has already recognized many of the pleasures of gaming laid out here. What it does offer instead is, like the overt and implicit sexism chapters, an update on these pleasures for the post-casual era, where industrial changes have fundamentally altered the foundations of gaming and where women have had decades in which to adjust to the restrictions of gaming environments. For example, my participants' experiences indicated that many elements previous research had expected to be exclusionary to women, such as in-game violence, were not necessarily so. This chapter moves beyond the simple, easy-to-prove idea that women can enjoy gaming and demonstrates how they do so, providing a more nuanced picture of their strategies for prioritizing the elements of games they enjoy while dismissing those that are troublesome. It also indicates that women's enjoyment of gaming spaces can serve as a form of incipient feminism, in that they diversify conceptions of what women are and how they behave.

In addition, this chapter demonstrates how women are part of an interpretive community with the ability to read pleasure into games. More specifically, women adopt a proactive identity fluidity that allows them to prioritize their positions as women, gamers, and female gamers in varying ways dependent on the demands of the situation they are managing at the time. These flexible repertoires of meaning-making help them overcome the dominant discourses marking them as abnormal for gaming and also allow them to connect to elements of "core". Extensive histories in gaming, skill at playing, and affinity for games are some of the many factors women draw on to read pleasure into video game play.

Because of this, their interpretive strategies share many similarities with those male gamers likely employ. This allows women to envision themselves as part of an imagined community of gamers. They see themselves as connected to other gamers and part of game culture even as they battle against marginalization. This undermines the naturalized, "common sense" status of games' hegemony, showing how it can be changed.

Finally, the pleasures women find in games indicate that the way forward for gaming may not be to offer distinct female and male subject positions, or "men's games" and "women's games", but rather to provide a diversity of positions from which players can explore different ways of being and experience identities and stories that are not their own. The key role fluid identities and subject positions play in women's enjoyment of games indicates that a greater emphasis on this pleasure could open up gaming more broadly.

Relationship to Previously Exclusionary Factors

When interviewing participants, I opened each discussion with a brief overview of the research project, discussing some of the past questions researchers have asked about games and gender and indicating what my main areas of focus were. Following this overview, interviews

began with introductory questions, such as "What kind of games do you usually play?" and "Are there any types of games you dislike?[34]" I asked these questions both to provide participants an easy inauguration to the process of being interviewed and because past research has focused heavily on gender differences in what players like about games or dislike about them. I expected players to give responses reflective of the topics covered in many previous studies, such as emphasizing the challenges of games' frequent inclusion of violence or their hypersexualization of women.

What I found, however, was that these were not the first things women thought of when asked about games. Rather, women's responses were in many ways identical to those any gamer would likely give, even when they had already been told that the research project focused specifically on *women's* experiences playing games. Women's hypersexualization did emerge as a concern later, but only after further questions specifically asking about characters and character appearance. Participants' opinions on other aspects, like violence, were minimal, reflecting that these were not necessarily repellent in the way past research has assumed.

Furthermore, women listed a wide variety of game genres they enjoyed playing. These ranged from the heavily masculinized first-person shooter (FPS) genre, where players engage in firearms battles with opponents, to role-playing games (RPGs) like *World of Warcraft* or *Final Fantasy*, where players take on the role of an in-game character and guide them through a narrative storyline or a set of missions or quests. Even within a single genre, participants enjoyed a diverse array of games. For instance, within the RPG genre, players enjoyed both games that had set characters with established backstories and identities as well as games that allow players to create their own character. Puzzle games, action-adventure games, fighting games, and more

[34] For more details about interview construction see Cote and Raz 2015.

were all favorites of different interviewees.

The diversity of these preferences and the pleasures women expressed finding in games show that female gamers' play habits are deeply individual and contextual, reflective both of the gamer's play style and the reasons they were choosing to play a game in the first place. This undermines the essentialization of gender that games studies often struggle with, and also reveals how female gamers identify as *gamers*, or individuals invested in play and its pleasures, even given a gender-based context for discussing their experiences. For example, when looking at the rather revealing category of "things participants disliked", their preferences were not linked to the heavily gendered expectations previous research outlines.

Rather than bringing up problematic female characters or violence, almost every participant emphatically stated that they avoided games they were "bad at"— ones where they struggled to complete game goals and make progress through levels or missions. This was their biggest concern when asked simply about games they don't like and one of the biggest factors influencing how they chose what to play. As Adrianna stated, "if something is frustratingly hard for me to do, then I'm not going to have fun and… Why play a video game if I'm just going to be miserable the whole time about how much I don't get it?" Although there are some games that developers make so difficult that players must learn to take pleasure in even the smallest progress, like the masocore games described earlier, most gamers gravitate towards manageable challenges, games that may be difficult and require them to work through a challenge multiple times before they beat it successfully, but which they know they can master. The fact that players were first and foremost concerned with the types of games they were good at is not a surprise.

What does deserve more attention is *how* skill affected players' game choices, as this differed among individual participants, subverting the expectation that women all tend to play

casual games and avoid core ones. For some participants, fast-paced games which required constant attention were extremely difficult. They preferred games that allowed for a leisurely play style, where they could progress at their own pace, and they avoided games that lacked this option. For instance, Spinach did not play real-time games, which require the player to be reacting continually to changes in their situation and to actions taken by their opponent. She stated, “I just can’t think that fast, I can’t click that fast.” Instead, Spinach turned to choices like role-playing games (RPGs) where, although battle elements were likely to be fast-paced, she could progress through other parts of the game as quickly or as slowly as she liked, without feeling forced to maintain a certain speed.

Helix expressed similar sentiments, arguing, “[First-person shooters or versus-style combat games] require you to react quickly and don’t offer much downtime, as opposed to turn-based games where you can really think about your choices or platformers, where you can focus intensely to get through a difficult sequence and then relax— maybe even set the controller down for a minute”. In a turn-based game, players alternate who is in charge of the action. For instance, in the turn-based game *XCOM: Enemy Unknown*, the player is in charge of a military operation combatting an alien invasion. In a battle, the player will move all of their troops and give each commands, asking them to shoot aliens, heal their teammates, or save civilians. After this, the computer-controlled aliens will get a turn to move. While the player is taking their turn, the aliens cannot take any action, and vice versa. This means that the player can take as much time as they want during their turn without anything happening to interrupt their plans. For gamers like Helix, who gravitated towards turn-based games and platformers, fast-paced elements were acceptable, but the game also had to offer breaks in which the player could recover and prepare for the next section in order for these participants to find it manageable and

enjoyable.

Other players avoided different types of games. Rogue, like a few other participants, simply said, “I have no aim, I can’t play anything that involves a gun.” Because of this, she turned to RPGs or fantasy MMOs like World of Warcraft (WoW) while avoiding first- or third-person shooters. Others enjoyed puzzle games, but only ones that offered manageable challenges. If the puzzles were too hard, they would abandon the game. Some participants even avoided the types of games that are most frequently associated with female players— casual mobile games. “The only thing that I am horrible at are mobiles. I’ll try them, but I’m just not, I don’t enjoy playing a game that I suck at, so I don’t really play them that much. But that’s pretty much the only thing, the only kind of game that I’m not into” (DT). Individual tastes and skill ranged widely across genres and playstyles.

The second most common complaint about games had to do with their occasional shallowness— participants generally gravitated towards games with strong storylines, interesting or unique characters, and immersive environments. Participant Taylor Ryan summed up this perspective, stating, “I love interacting with [non-player characters or] NPCs[35] (they are doing such neat things with AI lately), becoming part of an intricate storyline, designing/crafting things in-game, affecting the game world in different ways, solving mysteries, figuring out puzzles… etc!” Interviewees wanted games that would deeply engage them. Of course, as with individual skill sets, the particular genres or games they found engaging differed by individual.

Many found first-person shooters (FPSs), especially multiplayer ones where their mission was simply to defeat another team, to be tedious. Marie said, “I find [first-person shooters] boring. I like to get engaged in the story and they don’t exactly have a story most of the time”.

[35] NPCs = Non-player characters, or avatars within a game that are controlled by the game itself. They act as allies or enemies, allow the player to buy or sell items, and reveal new parts of the storyline, among many other tasks.

Others some were willing to play first-person shooters in single-player mode, where missions are linked into an overarching plot.[36] This gave them their desired depth. Players frequently avoided simplistic mobile games too. As interviewee DT argued, "I can't play *Angry Birds*, I feel like it just doesn't grab my attention as much as sort of more developed games would." Although the uncomplicated mechanics of mobile games draw in many players, particularly those without an extensive background in gaming, more experienced players like DT can find them too basic to be appealing. Even MMORPGs, which tend to have larger female audiences than other genres, were not universally seen as immersive. Buttsvard was one of the participants who found them to be boring, describing them as "endless grinding", the slang term gamers use to describe repetitive actions a player can take within a game to build resources or experience[37]. Grinding can allow players to access harder levels or create better in-game items for their character, but it is also extremely boring and time-consuming, making it a very negative adjective when applied to the entirety of a game.

Finally, participants expressed concerns about elements like cost and accessibility, lamenting the decline of game rental locations like Blockbuster or the need to purchase multiple console, PC, or handheld systems in order to play every appealing game (as some are exclusive to specific platforms). These topics of discussion— skill, immersion, access, etc.— show that, despite being part of a study specifically focused on gender, female gamers often prioritize their self-identification as *gamers*. When simply asked about the types of games they prefer or avoid, female gamers are concerned with the individual experience of play, with meeting their personal

[36] Although players discussed their issues with first-person shooters' storylines separately from their issues with harassment, it is important to note that FPSs do tend to have toxic communities and high levels of trash-talk because of their competitive gameplay and masculinized, aggressive content. Some players opted to avoid multi-player FPS games for this reason rather than due to their storyline, demonstrating that both individual preferences for game characteristics and community aspects can matter to the games players' choose to engage with.

[37] Examples of grinding include circling a low-level area killing easy enemies to collect small amounts of experience points en masse or sitting at a lake fishing for a few hours specifically to raise one's "fishing" skill.

preferences, and with doing so at a reasonable personal expense in terms of time and money. They focused on the factors that make gaming more or less enjoyable to themselves as players.

While I had expected that female gamers would echo many of the concerns of past research— that they would find violent or hypersexualized content, for instance, to be off-putting or exclusionary— their primary discussion of games did not reflect this immediately. In fact, their opinions sometimes even ran completely contrary to past research. For example, participants brought up in-game violence as off-putting only three times within all thirty-seven interviews. Of these three instances, two spoke about violence negatively while one found it to be an amusing, cathartic pleasure, particularly if the violence was "gratuitous" and over the top (Bear). This seems to indicate that, at least among women who have managed to find space for themselves within gaming, violence is not necessarily a salient negative for female gamers.

Interviewee Fiber Freak talked about her deep aversion to graphic violence as something that was not really related to violence at all, but rather her distaste for blood and gore. She stated, "I choose not to play the really graphic, gory video games. I'm really sensitive to stuff like that and it's just not something I can do. My boyfriend was trying to get me more into first-person shooting so he was trying to show me all these video games, and there's just something about first-person shooters, holding guns, and all the graphic blood spatter, just… I can't tolerate that kind of stuff. I like the happier games. Which is funny though, because you know, Star Wars games, light sabers, I can do that. As long as it's not super graphic." In the first-person shooting games her boyfriend was introducing her to, it was not the actual acts of violence that disturbed Fiber Freak, but rather how they were portrayed. If games contained only limited blood and gore, she was fine with in-game violence, engaging in lightsaber battles with ease.

The other participant who mentioned violence, Emily, specifically stated a distaste for

violence against women, referencing *Grand Theft Auto* as a series she disliked because “it’s like beat up women with a shovel”. As a woman herself, games that encouraged gender-based violence were not enjoyable to Emily. The context of violence in many ways mattered more than the act itself— how games portrayed violence and who it was against affected how participants interpreted it, adding a new perspective to previous work.

Female gamers’ relation to factors previously perceived as exclusionary was not straightforward or consistent, but rather contextual and fluid. Furthermore, when discussing their concerns about games or elements they disliked, interviewees focused primarily on what would make their individual experiences playing more or less positive. This combats essentialized ideas about gender and games, demonstrating that many considerations female gamers apply to their gaming choices are likely similar to those male gamers employ. Rather than inherently and always prioritizing their gender identity, women are able to prioritize their gamer identity and use that to navigate content or community choices.

The Pleasures of Gaming and Game Preferences

Similar results occurred when discussing the games women enjoyed or the specific aspects of gaming itself that drew them in. Despite the many sexist aspects of gaming and game communities, female gamers were able to find extensive pleasure in gaming. In many cases, this was enough to motivate them to continue playing even as they encountered content and behavior that tried to drive them out of gaming spaces or culture. Furthermore, not only were players’ preferences as diverse as their concerns about gaming, but most were not specifically gendered. Players’ tastes were contextually dependent, with interviewees seeking out different types of games based on their desired outcome for play. Although the factors they enjoyed ranged from beautiful graphics to games that were critically acclaimed, participants expressed five main

pleasures they found in gaming: sociability, relaxation, identity play, character customization, and competition.

Past research explores all of these, but the way women talk about them matters deserved further analysis. Specifically, some feminine-gendered qualities like sociability were not actually related to women's gender identity, but rather their personal desires. Other qualities that are generally gendered masculine were ones that interviewees related heavily to the female gender identity. This provides evidence that quantitative research tallying the enjoyment players take in games does not tell the whole story; a deeper analysis of what women get out of them presents a multi-faceted view of femininity, masculinity, and possible combinations of the two.

Sociability

For example, many participants did appreciate the social aspects of gaming, as previous research would suggest. However, their specific approaches to sociability indicate that this preference is not a "natural" extension of gender, but rather a careful management of relationships and personal preferences. For some participants, games were useful at developing what social theorists refer to as "bridging ties" (Putnam, 2000, pp. 22-24), or broad-based connections across diverse social or geographic sectors. In other words, games helped interviewees meet new people who they would not have met in their day to day lives. This helped them manage social environments that they did not fit into or form new affinity groups along shared interests rather than geographical similarities, among other things.

When Elayne first moved to college, she felt very disconnected from her new environment and found online games to be a saving grace for her social life. In her own words, "I graduated early from high school to go to Texas Tech, which is… yeah, well I was only there for a semester, but long story short, I was suddenly cut off from all my friends, and I guess I kind of

found solace in WoW… like I wasn't even living on campus because my parents moved with me, and so I literally had no one in Lubbock". While some people might argue that turning to online games hindered her social life and her transition to college, Elayne's choice to leave Texas Tech after only one semester and her description of Lubbock, Texas as "the most horrible, isolating place in West Texas" reveals the depth of loneliness she was dealing with. In this situation, being able to meet and play with friends online helped her cope with her new situation.

Other participants related less extreme experiences but found games equally useful for meeting new people. Online games in particular were useful for developing bridging ties with others who shared their interest in video games. As Eva said, "In real life, I don't know anyone who plays video games. My friends, they're all girls and you know, they're very girly. Sort of like me, I'm very girly, but uh… they don't play video games. And guys, the guys that I know, they don't play video games either. For me to, you know, play with other people who share my interest in gaming, it was amazing. That's why I play co-op games or multiplayer games and everything like that now". Online, Eva could seek out people based on a game they both enjoyed or even a shared love of games in general, rather than hoping people she met in her day to day life would happen to like games as well.

Players even found games particularly useful for meeting others because, they argued, games could overcome geographic distance and even some divides based on gender, race, or class. Katie Tyler compared online games to attending a club around a common interest, but celebrated the fact that, "you meet people from all over the world: different countries, different states. And a lot of them are unique people who I don't feel that you'd meet otherwise because everyone is so different, and it creates a really fun environment. To the point where we actually become friends like Facebook or phone numbers and texting people". Her online interactions

translated into offline connections with people around the world, and she felt her interactions with them made her gaming experiences more fun and enriched her life overall.

Elizabeth elaborated further by pointing out how online games sometimes masked barriers to connection by making the game itself the main focus of early interactions. She argued, "When you talk to a gamer, like, a lot of times in *World of Warcraft*, you don't really know the gender of the person. Sometimes you can tell by the way they write, but sometimes it's pretty ambiguous and it's just like… nice to be able to connect on that level and not have it really matter what you look like or, you know, how much money you earn or anything. It's just, 'hey, you enjoy this game, hey I enjoy this game too', and you just get to bond and connect over that". Although research demonstrates that male and female players have a number of different approaches to play that can give away their gender, such as men's tendency to make their avatars move more frequently than women do (Martey et al., 2014),[38] many of these are subtle. Without obvious gender cues (or class or race cues), players like Elizabeth felt that they could connect to people who might not otherwise reach out to them.[39]

Other participants saw games as a way to improve their existing relationships, through greater bonding (Putnam, 2000, pp. 22-24). Many related their preference for playing with family members or existing friends in person, sharing the experience of gaming while in a room together. They even adapted single-player games into group experiences, having one person play

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[38] Martey et al. (2014) collected data within the game *World of Warcraft* in order to assess how players of different gender identities varied in terms of chat, movement, and appearance behaviors. The researchers found that men and women tended to behave very differently within in the game space. For instance, men were more likely to direct action verbally and to move their character around, even when there was no need for this. Women, on the other hand, used more emotional phrases, emoticons, and exclamation points. Interestingly, men who gender-switched, or opted to play a female avatar although they identify as male, generally showed a mix of these behavioral patterns (pp.293-294).

[39] At other times, of course, anonymity is a burden on players, as anonymous players can harass others with fewer consequences. However, Elizabeth's statements show that anonymity is not necessarily a bad thing, and that players have a complicated relationship with it.

while others looked out for hidden passageways or helped develop strategies for beating difficult sections. Katie Tyler related an anecdote about playing the *Legend of Zelda* series with a friend, where "one would read a guide if we got stuck and one would play, and then we would trade off playing so that way we both got to do it", while Jutte said that some of her best memories growing up came when her father played a game as she and her sister helped him find secret items or teased him when he missed them.

Chianna, who is a special education teacher, felt that party-style games, like those on the Wii, could contribute to important family bonding. "The family competition aspect that you got with board games and stuff, that can come out in some video games. So on that end, video games are awesome because they're encouraging family interaction that doesn't exist anymore". Although many families no doubt still play board games, Chianna saw digital versions of these as more updated ways to encourage family time, something she argued was essential to child development. Other players simply saw games as more fun when played with others, because they simultaneously got to enjoy the games they loved and spend time with people they cared about. Helix put it quite simply; "It's a much more fun way to spend time with friends or my husband than just watching TV- there's more interaction".

The ability to increase connections and social interaction was a key pleasure of gaming, one that past research has recognized and one that players consistently pointed out as a reason to game. After all, competing against a computer character is often different than playing against another individual. Computers frequently have patterns that players can figure out and combat, while another human is more likely to change their strategy regularly and present a different type of challenge. Furthermore, the ability to chat with others about the progress of the game, both in competitive and cooperative situations, is something a computer-controlled player cannot offer.

At the same time, it is clear that gender does not determine how players will react to games or what they will enjoy, in contrast to the expectations of very early game studies work. Newer research has of course moved away from this assumption, but gender-based stereotypes can still hold power, such as when players believe women are likely to seek out social games because they are "naturally" more talkative or desirous of interpersonal connection than men are. Greater attention to women's differences, and their frequent similarities to male players as well, can continue to undermine this naturalization.

Dependent on their individual needs and preferences, players were able to select games that met their desires for sociability, whether that was to connect to new people they might not have met otherwise or to deepen their existing connection with family and friends. Players who wanted to make new friends and connections largely played online, while players who wanted to bond more deeply with people they already knew could choose between single-player games, in-person multiplayer, and online multiplayer, as they could manipulate any of these forms into a social experience. Rather than simply seeking the ability to talk to others, or sociability for sociability's sake, they evaluated what they were looking for and how best to accomplish it.

It is true that sociability, especially in online circumstances, can default to trash talk and harassment, as researchers like Nakamura (2012) have pointed out. Despite this, female gamers often found more benefits than downsides to social play, especially as they became more practiced at choosing the right environments and games for them over time. For instance, playing with the right people counteracted some of the sexism inherent in gaming; players who entered gaming spaces with friends were sometimes able to dismiss harassment more effectively than those who played alone. Therefore, players were willing to participate in a balancing act, entering into sexist spaces if the pleasures also available there were worth pursuing, or if they

had a means to defend themselves against negativity set up in advance.

Relaxation and Control of Play Style and Pace

At other times, players sought out individual play and single-player games, as these elements allowed them to engage more deeply with a game or play at their own pace. In single-player moments, participants enjoyed the freedom to engage with a game in their own time or way. This increased their relaxation and gave them a feeling of control over their environment.

Emily recognized her preferred play style as a slower one. She said, "I like to go around and collect all the stuff and explore, and I know my brother sometimes is like, 'Who cares about that? You just have to get to the end of the game as quickly as possible. Then you can say you beat it and you won.' And I don't necessarily play [games] to win them as fast as possible but to kind of have fun playing them and hopefully beat it". At the same time, she felt she was less of a completionist than her fiancé and some of his friends, who would play through a game multiple times in order to master all of its elements. Emily wanted to explore and find some of the game's secrets and side quests, but she rarely went back to a game she had already beaten once. Single-player games allowed her to proceed how she wanted to, without pressure from her friends or family members who approached games in different ways.

This lack of pressure also meant that many interviewees turned to single-player games when they wanted to relax or detox after a day of work. Individual play allowed them to fit gaming in between their other responsibilities, like work or school, with less stress than if they needed to keep up with friends. For example, Alissa found that once she graduated from college with an art degree, she struggled to balance gaming with a hospitality job, her continued desire to pursue art, and a social life. Because of this, she moved away from games like *World of Warcraft*, where she had been part of a high-level raiding guild, due to the time these games

demanded. Instead, she switched to a more individual approach. At the time of her interview, Alissa was playing through *Diablo III*, an action role-playing game that had a multiplayer component. She proceeded through the game primarily on her own, with friends from *WoW* joining her occasionally. However, she made clear to them that she intended to play at her own pace and refused to let them hurry her through the game or demand more regular play than she could commit to. In this way, she used individual play to keep gaming in her life despite her changing circumstances. Many other players also related enjoying the personal challenge of playing puzzles, completing quests, or pursuing in-game goals according to their own schedule.

Like Radway's romance readers, individual play is a means for female gamers to mark out space for themselves or to manage outside demands on their time. Radway found that the act of reading a romance novel mattered to her participants because it allowed them a mental escape. Because the women she spoke with primarily worked in their homes, taking care of their families and prioritizing the needs of others, they sometimes found it difficult to rest or recharge. A book served as a temporary shield from the things they had to get done and allowed them to focus on themselves. Similarly, and despite video games' status as a masculinized medium, my participants were able to mobilize game play as a means for relaxation and escape. Given research such as Hochschild's (Hochschild and Machung, 1989; Schulte, 2014), which shows that women still face extensive challenges in balancing a career with the pressures of a second shift of housework, the ability to control one's entertainment and environment can provide a break from this. Solo game play, in particular, served as a form of self-care by letting female gamers face challenges at their own pace or explore a game setting in the way they found most relaxing; they set the conditions for their own enjoyment.

Recognizing the pleasures of solo game play is significant, as many past research studies

have focused primarily on online or multiplayer gaming. These approaches may miss players who prefer or who only play in single-player formats. This matters because there is evidence that women's game play is more private than men's; although large-scale surveys indicate that women make up a significant portion of the gaming audience or that they game regularly (e.g. Lenhart et al., 2008), research in public gaming spaces like LANs and e-sports competitions find that these spaces are dominated by men (Bryce and Rutter, 2002; 2003; Jansz and Martens, 2005; Taylor et al., 2009). Because these spaces are easier for researchers to access than individual game spaces, they have been studied more than private gaming has, which can hide women's presence and participation in gaming culture. This can then allow ideas of "core" as masculinized to perpetuate. Therefore, attention to the pleasures inherent in solo play can help address the gap between the masculinization of games' "core" and the deeply invested nature of female gamers. Despite the many sexist factors in gaming, women do find a great deal to enjoy in playing video games; these pleasures are just not always visible.

Transportation and Identity Play

Greater attention to individual play not only shows the enjoyment women get in using games to manage their environments and their relaxation, but it also reveals their pleasure in the ability to try out new identities through narrative exploration. Some players sought single-player games because they felt they possessed deeper storylines. For instance, when Misty chose RPGs over FPS games, her overall favorite genre, she did so because she was looking to explore a narrative, while choosing FPS games played to her need for competition. She said, "I like the story and depth of RPGs. People always talk about the immersive quality of them, which I guess is kind of what it is. I can suspend reality for a bit and get really involved with the characters". Story-driven games allowed players to experience other perspectives on the world as well.

Buttsvard described playing as "taking part in a fantasy. I can't always afford to go out and ride a horse around the desert. Or go out and kick someone's head off their neck. So it's fun to pretend." The specific types of storylines participants referenced varied heavily, from the futuristic space adventures of *Mass Effect* or the historical fiction of *Assassin's Creed* to the campaign section of *Halo* or *Call of Duty*, but the ability to put oneself in another's shoes for a time was widely appealing.

This suggests first that, in line with previous research, narrative exploration and identity play, or the ability to take on different characteristics and subject positions, were significant attractions for players (Taylor, 2003; Frasca, 2003; Bryant and Davies, 2006; Shapiro et al., 2006; Squire, 2006; Vorderer et al., 2006; Simons, 2007; Dubbelman, 2011; Gee, 2011). They enjoyed the ability to experience storylines and environments that would be impossible in the real world, due to their fantasy or science-fiction nature, as well as the ability to try to understand different characters, their motivations, and the choices they made within games.

Second, players' descriptions of enjoying narrative games because they are immersive and because they allow the player to try out different identities connects interviewees' experiences strongly to the concept of *transportation*, or "a distinct mental process, an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings" (Green et al., 2004, p. 312). Transportation is a theoretical construct used to describe both the process of a reader, viewer, or player getting immersed in a narrative media experience and the affective and cognitive impacts this immersion has on them. High levels of transportation can potentially increase one's enjoyment of a medium, can make the message a text is sending more persuasive, and can even alter the media users' opinions or beliefs by showing them different ways of considering an issue.

Most significantly to interviewees' experiences, transportation allows a media user to leave behind their self and instead see what it would be like to be someone else. This can help them escape from stress, self-doubt, and other negative emotional states, tying into players' use of games to relax and explore. Furthermore, transported players can experiment with different identities without facing the consequences or risks of trying to do so in their real life. As Green et al. (2004) argue, "A media viewer doesn't have to take the risk of changing jobs, spouses, or locales to experience another kind of life, but rather can vicariously experience such alternative life choices through the lives of the characters who inhabit the worlds to which he or she is transported" (p. 318).

Traditionally, transportation theory applies largely or solely to narrative media, such as books or serial TV shows. In the case of games, participants also tied their transportation and their exploration of different roles to narrative games. For example, multiple participants cited the 2010 game *Bayonetta* as a text they found transporting and where they could explore different identities. In *Bayonetta*, players take on the role of the titular character, a witch who can shapeshift, summon demons, and fight using both magical attacks and traditional firearms. The gamer guides Bayonetta through a storyline where she is pursuing a mystical object that is key to maintaining balance between light and dark magical forces, fighting off angels and other foes in order to proceed towards her goal.

Participants enjoyed the experience of being Bayonetta the character due to her combination of over-the-top sexiness and both magical and physical power. In her interview, Nina started addressing game characters by describing how female characters who are hypersexualized or damsels in distress do not "offend" her, because overall, she supported normative gender roles and characteristics. However, she then described how much she loved the

opportunity to play games as a character like Bayonetta, who combined a hyperfeminine appearance with hegemonically masculine aggression and power. Nina said, "I do like the way a lot of the stronger but very sexual characters are… portrayed, like, I really like Bayonetta, I love Lara Croft, you know. They might be hypersexualized, but I actually really like them, and I would totally wanna be like them." Although she supported traditional gender norms in her offline life, the ability to subvert these through sexy, powerful characters was deeply enjoyable. This shows that she used transportation to play out and experiment with an identity that would perhaps be uncomfortable for her otherwise.

Buttsvard analyzed this experience even further. She specifically pointed out that playing as Bayonetta allowed her to be powerful and sexy, but in a way that was meant for her pleasure as a woman, not to appeal to men. She said, "I tried to get some male friends to play it but they all said it was too girly for them. So, that just reinforced, to me, that the sexiness of that game was absolutely not for the benefit of men." Bayonetta was thin, conventionally attractive, and dressed in extremely tight clothing, but the way she expressed her power in the game marked this appearance as something for women to enjoy; they could take on more power than would be possible in real life, and they could look good doing it. Bayonetta let players subvert or overcome traditional gender expectations, instead embodying a more fluid identity without risking censure for doing so.

Participants also found and enjoyed opportunities for transportation and identity play in games that are not traditionally seen as narrative-based, such as MMORPGS. In these large-scale games, players work their way through a loose story that takes place in a carefully crafted fantasy or science fiction world, but they do not have to progress through the game in the same way. They could complete missions, explore, or even just spend their time fishing, learning to

cook, or collecting plants, minerals, or other materials. There is no one narrative experienced by all players. Despite this, many participants found the ability to create their own character, altering its appearance and role in the video game world, to be particularly helpful to their transportation experiences. They could choose who and what they wanted their avatar to be, and make decisions through the lens of their avatar's chosen personality and role. This allowed them to delve perhaps more deeply into a new persona than a pre-crafted character created by another person could. "By providing individuals with the option to place themselves (or, more specifically, a virtual representation of themselves) into a narrative context, [interactive media] allows them to transcend their typical role as audience members or consumers of media and, to varying degrees, shape and control the flow of events in the virtual world" (Green et al., 2004, p. 322).

When able to choose or create their characters, interviewees experimented heavily with personas that they were uncomfortable trying out offline or that simply did not fit into their lifestyle. For example, Angela specifically stated that she liked to play thief-style characters, "because it would be fun to be sneaky yet powerful in real life… I also am pretty straight laced in real life, so I like the thought of playing out the role of someone who is a little wilder and not afraid of breaking rules. I also seriously dislike being the center of attention, so playing a character who can win battles and then slip away quickly is appealing." Angela's attraction to thief-style characters was based on her own existing characteristics, such as disliking attention, as well as on characteristics she wished she could possess or wanted to try out. She liked to experiment with character appearance as well; when able to customize how her avatar looked, Angela tended towards "scars and tattoos and crazy haircuts" and towards characters that were tall and muscular, the opposite of her self-described "small and mousy" appearance. Some

aspects of this, like height, were elements she physically could not possess outside of games, while others, like the tattoos and crazy haircuts, were appearance elements she may not have been able to try out without social or economic repercussions, as she was in the process of job-hunting as an engineer. Games allowed her to mix what was possible and what was impossible in new ways to see how they fit together or felt.

Other interviewees also enjoyed the ability to try out new aspects of their personality or to take on characteristics that they normally lacked outside of video games. Bear, for instance, enjoyed playing destructive characters in games like *Team Fortress 2* because most of her spare time and her hobbies were devoted to building communities and relationships. She stated, "I work really hard to build community and mentor the people around me, and while it feels really valuable (and definitely is), there's a lot of responsibility. It's nice to just work off stress." Although she enjoyed being a mentor and helping others build relationships, such as through the e-sports club at her university, this role made many demands on her time and emotional energy. Playing a deliberately destructive and aggressive game character allowed her to ease this stress by taking on characteristics that would be contrary to her off-line goals. Many participants sought games as a chance to play as someone else for a while, taking pleasure in the opportunities different narratives afforded them.

This aligns with Shaw's (2014) findings that players did not need to identify with their characters based on shared identity categories, but rather that they were often drawn to play characters who appeared very different from them on the surface, but who were dealing with similar problems to those the player had faced in real life. Transportation theory builds on Shaw's work by providing further explanation as to how and why players engaged with narratives or characters who had little in common with them. Such experiences allowed them to

explore who they were, who they might want to be, and how they could respond to different social situations in a low-cost, risk-free way. As Green et al. (2004) describe it, “one reason transportation may lead to enjoyment [of media] is that it provides the opportunity for identity play. Transportation can open the doors to exploring and experimenting with other possible selves. Possible selves are those that individuals might become, wish to become, or fear becoming” (p. 318).

Another way in which participants took advantage of games’ opportunities for transportation, identity play, and narrative exploration was in how they combined traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine characteristics within their characters in order to subvert gender roles and norms. When able to create their own avatar and then use that character to play through a narrative, many participants opted to make their character conventionally attractive. Anna, for instance, said, “My Mass Effect Shepard looks like a really attractive version of me hahaha. My Skyrim characters range from pretty little blonde elves to big tall nords and grey-skinned, red-eyed, point-nosed dark elves. My Guild Wars 2s character are very pretty and young looking, hugely tall but also beautiful, and small and cute. I don't usually make very ugly characters.” Despite these similar appearances, she played the characters in different ways. In her words, “I used to play the good character, all the time. No stealing, no being mean, not killing people if I could avoid it. I recently made a pretty evil Skyrim character that's been a lot of fun, though I end up feeling bad about stealing from people or assassinating them for no reason sometimes”. Anna’s choice to embody conventionally attractive avatars but then take on different personalities allowed her to experience different levels of power and varying moralities without needing to sacrifice her gender identity; she could be both feminine and strong, good, or evil at once to see how that felt. Like the players who enjoyed being Bayonetta, combining the

traditionally masculine role of “hero” or “fighter” with a feminine appearance subverted “girl game” associations of femininity with domesticity, moved away from subject-positions where women were damsels in distress, and allowed players to be more flexible with their identifications.

Other interviewees found that, when they wanted to be aggressive, they tended to make male characters. This choice took advantage of hegemonic masculinity’s association with violence, letting women play out their aggressive tendencies without being told that these were deviant. If they tried to do the same in the offline world, their female gender identity could potentially provoke more of a backlash, as femininity and passivity are conventionally linked. This is, of course, not to mention the other problems with being aggressive in the real world, such as legal concerns. Games offered relatively safe outlets to try out different identities and characteristics.

This indicates that the relation of games and subject-positions was both a barrier and a potential pleasure for players. On the one hand, players often struggled with the fact that games required them to embody masculine subject-positions in order for the game content to make the fullest sense. They rebelled against characterizations that defined women as passive damsels in distress or that systematically linked their power to their sexuality. On the other hand, the ability to embody different subject-positions was also enjoyable, provided the player was *opting* for that position. Mixing together different characteristics, exploring unique personas or subjectivities, and subverting traditional gender norms were pleasurable experiences in video gaming. Players did not object to being feminine and domestic as a rule; they objected to being told they could *only* be feminine or domestic when they wanted to see what it was like to be so much more. This also connected directly to one of the two specifically gendered preferences interviewees

described— the benefits of character customization.

Specifically Gendered Preferences

In terms of preferred game elements, players only saw two of their frequently mentioned pleasures as significantly gendered female. The first was customization. Women argued that their enjoyment of character customization was potentially greater than that men would experience. This was because it could alter the types of transportation they could experience, but also because the option to play a character that matched their gender identity was less common than for male-identified players and because such a choice on the part of the developers seemed like an invitation for women to be gamers.

As Elayne stated, "I guess I feel kind of alienated or, uh, disregarded, dismissed, you know. So many, or so much of American culture, and media in general, especially media to be consumed, is just geared toward the white male as the default… It's just really refreshing to play a female character, even if I may be in like, some crazy skimpy outfit." Players were even more enthusiastic about choice when customizing their character or character gender did not force them to play a different storyline or dress differently. Many referenced the *Mass Effect* series as one of their favorites because it allowed them to be a female character and because that female character possessed the same skills and storyline as her male counterpart. Players did not feel like they were compromising by choosing "femShep", as the female main character is commonly known. DT said, "I don't mind playing as a guy or a girl but if I had the choice, like in *Mass Effect*, if I had the choice I'd play as a girl, because female Commander Shepard is badass". The ability to be a strong, capable space marine and also be a woman was a rare and enjoyable experience.

Speaking about games more broadly, Alissa felt that a choice of characters was an

indication that the gaming industry and community recognized women as potential audiences. “The fact that you can choose a girl character, that is the gaming world’s way of saying, ‘We want you to play too. We want you to play the same games and here’s how we want to show it to you. You can be a girl!” Interviewees often felt that games defaulted to men, or as Angela put it, “right now it’s mostly white and mostly male. It’s weird to have four or five character options and all but one of them are white men”. In such an environment, the ability to play as a female character stood out to players, and while it was not a requirement for enjoying a game, it was often a benefit. For men, who almost always have an option to play a character that matches their preferred gender identity, such a choice would likely be less significant.

The other pleasure women felt related to their gender was competition. Although gender-based research marks competition as something men are more likely to enjoy than women, that was not true amongst my participants, many of whom enjoyed testing their skills against other players. Specifically, a few relished defeating men and proving that women were capable gamers. Misty, for instance, found that shooting games appealed to her “competitive side. Especially when people get beat by a girl”. Tinsel shared this perspective, stating, “FPS I loved initially because I was beating ‘men’, lol”. Interestingly, both players followed these statements with a qualifier; Misty inserted a smiley face into her text-based interview, while Tinsel’s “lol”, or “laughing out loud” served a similar purpose. It is possible that these additions may have been a protective measure, allowing the speaker to argue that they were not being serious if the listener were to be offended by their specific targeting of male opponents. Because female players are numerically and culturally a minority in gaming spaces, such targeting could provoke a backlash. However, these statements and their modifiers also can be taken seriously as real expressions of enjoyment at in-game mastery and the players’ ability to succeed in a typically

male space and a typically male genre of games. As previous research has pointed out, beating men at their own game has been a pleasure for female players throughout game history (Jenkins, 1998; Beavis, 2005; Eklund, 2011).

Significance

The preferences and issues described above represent only some of the many reasons female players choose or avoid certain types of games or play styles. The goal of this section, therefore, is not to catalog all of the benefits women find in gaming, but to demonstrate that describing or understanding "female gamers" as a singular market or entity unfairly limits players to a specific, often stereotypically feminine identity rather than allowing them the fluid and multiple identities they preferred. In terms of game selection, for instance, although interviewees often shared preferences or disliked similar aspects of games, there were always exceptions. Some turned to violent games for enjoyable catharsis while others found graphic violence unsettling. Some played only multiplayer, while others avoided it entirely or switched between solo play and group play depending on their circumstances. Their choices were always personally situated, contextual, and mutable, with many participants arguing that the games they enjoyed changed over time or with different stages of life.

Women's disparate preferences for games and their pursuit of individual pleasures can also be seen as feminist, although players did not generally refer to them as such. This is first because the variety of women's preferences demonstrated how diverse they are, rather than categorizing them as a unit based on their gender identity. Drawing on the many reasons women gave for socializing in games, for instance, it is clear that they enjoyed this approach not because of a natural female tendency to talk, but rather because of individual benefits that players found in socializing. The same is true of players' enjoyment of both conventionally attractive female

avatars and avatars that sported mohawks or tattoos. Players used games to perform gender in a wide variety of ways, undermining essentialized stereotypes or expectations for what women should be or how they should act.

This was also evident in how women frequently took pleasure in elements of games that allowed them to display power, especially feminized power that involved dominating men in competition or combining conventionally attractive avatars with extreme physical or magical force. Through these elements, and like the game grrlz Jenkins (1998) and Kennedy (2005) studied, women undermined associations of femininity and passivity, instead linking femininity with strength, power, and competition. Their success in gaming and competition also subverts traditional expectations that men are better with technology than women by showing how women can also possess technical skill and mastery. Using skill to gain power in technological areas can have its downsides, as Nakamura (2027) indicates, but it can also allow women to take control of their environments and their femininity in new, powerful ways.

Finally, the deep knowledge about different games and genres women use to pursue experiences they will enjoy performs feminist action by showing how, despite the masculine connotations of "core", women often already possess these characteristics. They are committed gamers, capable of prioritizing this part of their identity and using it to achieve individual goals like the management of their time and environments or the dominance of their opponents. This illuminates the constructed nature of gaming's current power structures, the boundaries that police gaming's "core", and the gendered hierarchies that go along with them. This is a necessary step towards dismantling these inequalities.

The pleasures women find in games provide them with many individual benefits, such as stronger social ties, a feeling of accomplishment in competition, and practice identifying in

diverse and fluid ways. These also matter on a broader, community based scale, in that they show how female and male gamers share many interpretive strategies and a background in gaming that can tie them together. When looking at the same game, they have the potential to pull from it similar meanings. Many participants objectively recognized that games they did not like could qualify as *good* games— that is, ones with interesting gameplay options, narratives, or mechanics. Even if these games did not fit their personal tastes, players interpreted game quality along common lines. Only a small element of women's enjoyment of games was specifically gendered; the rest they felt was shared with men and with gaming communities more broadly.

In other words, they were part of the same interpretive community as many male gamers, employing the same strategies and backgrounds in gaming to read meaning into the texts and situations they encounter. This provides a possible pathway towards greater gender equality. Through an emphasis on their similarities, it may be possible for diverse gamers to build a network of affinity strong enough to help dismantle uneven hierarchies of power based on the perceived differences between male and female players. As Sandoval and other feminist scholars point out, viewing identity as performed and constructed means that groups of people take action not based on a natural connection, but rather "on the basis of conscious coalition" (Haraway, 2000, p. 296). Emphasizing the shared nature of men's and women's meaning-making strategies, and how these bind them into an interpretive community, may be one means for building this affinity.

Interpretive Communities and Gaming

Stanley Fish, who pioneered the concept of interpretive communities in 1976, defines them as "made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions. In

other words these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way around" (Fish, 1976, p. 483). Put more simply, members of interpretive communities share backgrounds and reading strategies that allow them to interact with a text and take from it the same meaning as other members of their interpretive community. Individuals who are not part of that interpretive community, or indeed who are members of other interpretive communities, will apply different strategies to the act of reading a text and will therefore take from it different meanings. Fish also argued that interpretive communities were not inherently stable, but rather that they changed over time, as the interpretive strategies and shared backgrounds they were based on also changed. "Interpretive communities are no more stable than texts because interpretive strategies are not natural or universal, but *learned*" (p. 484).

In applying this concept to video gaming and gamers, it is possible to see the female players who overcome sexism and misogyny in order to read pleasure into games as part of an interpretive community with a learned repertoire for "making sense, interpreting, performing perceptual closure, [and] deciding about what is intended" (Fish, 1976, p. 477) in a text. This recognition of the players' influence on a game's meaning helps move gaming research further from some of its early limitations in terms of understanding gender. As pointed out in this project's literature review, early work on gaming tended to essentialize gender, assuming that men and women would look for and appreciate completely different aspects in their games. It also often assumed that all players would interpret a game or situation in the same way based on their gender identity, giving that identity extensive power over their experiences. The theory of interpretive communities, however, recognizes the power of readers to interpret texts similarly to those who share their interpretive strategies and differently from those who do not.

In the case of games, players who have immersed themselves in gaming history and discourses around what games mean frequently possess similar interpretive strategies despite differences in gender, racial, or sexual identity, allowing them to read enjoyable meaning into texts and spaces that appear to outsiders to be entirely offensive or discriminatory. For instance, while it might be off-putting to many women to see only sexualized female portrayals in games, it is still possible for at least some women to read against these conventions and find their own enjoyment. This is clear in Jenkins (1998) interviews with game grrlz. Rather than seeing the prevalence of objectified female characters as a barrier to enjoying gaming, the game grrlz made this trend part of their fun, overemphasizing femininity in order to subvert stereotypes. They used sexualized avatars and hyper-feminine screennames to rub in their victories over male opponents, claiming power for women by demonstrating that they could succeed in a male space. Players read enjoyment into games through competition, aggression, and dominance, despite the fact that these are typically masculine traits. In other words, they flexibly prioritized their gamer identity and some aspects of their gender identity such as feminine appearances, to interpret texts and situations in a female/gamer way. At other times, players employ only their gender identity, or only their gamer identity, to interpret games in different ways and navigate gaming spaces.

Although games frequently offer only limited subject positions for players to engage with, women's interpretive repertoires include the ability to identify fluidly and multiply. This allows them to take on a mix of both feminine and masculine traits and navigate the divides between their gender identity, the gender assumptions that surround gaming, and the content of games and game spaces. They may have to negotiate these spaces carefully, and assumptions about who "gamers" are or what games should be can still affect them, but these were not enough to categorically exclude them.

Women's interpretive repertoires and their ability to find pleasure in gaming also illuminate the pathway by which hegemonic notions of gaming can be subverted and altered towards a more equitable power structure. Although "core" is used to police existing hierarchies in gaming, women's use of interpretive strategies similar to or even the same as those men use, connects these two groups. Once women overcome barriers to entering gaming culture and engaging with texts, they are more than capable of developing extensive knowledge about games, skill in playing them, and affinity towards games and gaming communities. This means that they are capable of embodying "core" characteristics, and they frequently do so. This indicated that the masculinized nature of "core", although powerful, is not absolute. Women's presence in gaming serves as a significant challenge to the discursive narrative that men naturally enjoy games more or are better at gaming than women.

This undermines the existing relationship of gaming's core and margins, indicating how these categories are naturalized by many exclusionary forces. At the same time, it provides a way forward towards greater equality, showing that even if "core" characteristics remain a priority though the current crisis of authority, "core" audiences are already more diverse than existing discourses expect. Because of this, broader audiences could be granted access to more power in gaming without change to existing notions of quality and centrality. Women are, in many ways, already part of gaming's center.

Imagined Communities and Being a Gamer

This is also evident in how many interviewees felt connected to the idea of an overall gaming community, whether they played in specific online spaces or not. As Benedict Anderson (1983; 1991; 2006) argues, given the scale and dispersed nature of modern society, a sense of nationhood or community is unlikely to be based solely on geographical proximity or

boundaries. Instead, he presents the idea of imagined communities, in which individuals do not know each other personally but connect through an internal feeling of affinity. This comes from imagining others as engaged in the same activities, at the same time, in which the individuals themselves are involved. Anderson used this concept to explain nationalism and national identities, arguing that even in the smallest countries, individuals are unable to meet more than a tiny fraction of their countrymen. However, because of the power of imagined communities, members of a nation feel connected to each other and the state. This is due to shared characteristics of the nation, such as language, as well as moments of national pride, such as when a nation's athletes compete in the Olympics.

Although Anderson focuses primarily on larger contexts, such as nationhood, the idea of an imagined community can also explain how individuals connect in smaller groups or feel an association with others they have not met based on shared interests. In the case of my interviewees, many saw themselves as part of an imagined gaming community, although they often envisioned it in different ways based on their personal experiences. Some players envisioned the "gaming community" very broadly, as a nebulous connection between people who played games. As Buttsvard stated, "To me, it's like asking if I consider myself part of the book reading community or movie viewing community. Yes, I am a human that takes part in media". Interviewees who took this stance saw themselves as somewhat connected to others via games and enjoyed knowing that others played the same games they did, but this connection did not necessarily impact their lives or self-identities in a specific way.

Others, however, took their connections to a gaming community further, and could outline both specific communities they felt they were part of and why they were connected to these areas. For instance, many players had individual games that they contributed to more

frequently than others. Bear was a fan of *Team Fortress 2* and helped manage some online forums and groups related to TF2. Because of this, she felt connected to people who played TF2 more than she did to a broader game community. Contributing to game-related forums, fandoms, and attending game-related events often helped players connect their personal experience to that of others and imagine themselves as related. Others linked "community" specifically to people they knew who also played games, both in-person and online. By engaging in gaming with others or by connecting to people specifically through games, they felt like they were a part of a larger experience. Arya, for example, felt linked to an overall gaming community because of her "friends who I have never met in real life. We catch up online and enjoy a game or two". She saw her social sphere as wider for having met people solely due to their shared love of a specific game.

Emotional affinity for games and experience playing them also kept many people connected to a broader imagined community. Interviewees like Harley, Alissa, and others felt that, "I just love gaming in general" (Harley), was more than enough of a reason to see themselves as part of a larger gaming community, and also frequently drew on their background in gaming to defend this connection. Harley, who was one of the oldest participants in the study, referenced the fact that she had played since the "Atari all the way to what it is now". Her experience with the evolution of gaming, to her, made her intrinsically a part of the gaming community due to her role as a witness to its development. Alissa simply stated, "I've been doing this so long, how could I not consider myself a gamer?", in this case using gamer as a stand in for "member of the gaming community".

Even more players referenced shared knowledge as a means for connecting to others. Chimera Soul enjoyed the fact that, when she found herself in one game talking to others about

different games they have encountered, she generally understood what they were discussing. As she said, "If I haven't actually played it, I've heard of it, I have friends who play it". Being able to recognize and understand what other players were talking about was essential to her, as she felt like she was keeping up with gaming news. The same was true of DT, who when asked if she felt like she was part of a larger gaming community, immediately responded, "Oh yeah, gaming is one of the huge hobbies of my life, it's probably the biggest. I'm checking gaming news every days, I'm trying to play games every day, I'm trying to squeeze in the time". Prioritizing the actual act of playing games as well as the process of learning about them and keeping up with new developments was an essential part of community for her. Overall, having a history that allowed one to identify as a gamer also frequently allowed interviewees to see themselves as part of something broader.

This is not to say that female gamers did not experience problems with their self-identification as both gamer and community member. At least a few participants said that they were hesitant to describe themselves as gamers, due to the long-standing ideological association of the term with straight, white men. For instance, Eva played games extensively, and considered them one of her main hobbies. However, her struggle with the expectations of who qualified as a "gamer" were so strong that she actively hid her game playing from offline friends, referring to herself as a "closeted gamer". She felt that games and gamers were so heavily masculinized in society that her friends and family would judge her choice to play them, saying, "my friends, they're mostly girls, they would make fun of me for it and be like, 'Oh, that's for guys'. My mom would tell me that too" (Eva).

Other players were not quite as firm about hiding their gaming habits, but many did feel a divide between society's perception of them and their own desire to talk about games, play

games, and have others consider them a gamer. As interviewee Alissa said, "Any girl who's a gamer is a strong female. You have to be, because as I said before, […] you're being told either right to your face or subconsciously that you're not good enough, that you shouldn't be doing this, get back in the kitchen and you know, make something or go sew something". Interviewees like Tinsel would discuss games heavily with other gamers and said "I'd identify gamer as my main hobby but might be reluctant to say so to norms, for example in a business/work setting or mother-in-law/older relative types. I think a lot of people see it as childish and a waste of time" (Tinsel). Women faced a variety of forces, both overt and implicit, that worked to disconnect them from the identity of gamer. This is reflective of Shaw's 2012 work, where she found that many marginalized game players avoided describing themselves as "gamers" due to the connotations of that term; as with her participants, some interviewees found that friends, family, and acquaintances bought into masculinized or anti-social stereotypes about gamers, leading players to struggle with a conflict between enjoying games but wanting to disassociate from these characteristics.

Finally, a small number of interviewees were not willing to consider themselves part of a gaming community. This was because they defined the concept narrowly, arguing that actual social interaction with other gamers while playing was a necessary component for a community, or because they felt that the gaming community excluded them. Jessica, for example, referred to herself as "a lone ranger" due to her affinity for solo play. She said that when she had previously played with friends or boyfriends, she felt connected to a gaming community, but as she shifted more towards solo play, this feeling diminished. Others felt like the gaming community did not allow women to define themselves as part of it. They frequently found that other players assume they were playing games as a way to get male attention, or they were marked out as "female

gamers" rather than just regular members. Although most interviewees were able to dismiss these reactions and still get enjoyment out of games and game spaces, a few interviewees found that the narrow definition of "gamer" was too exclusionary, disconnecting them from gaming communities regardless of what games they played and how often. These limitations, along with many other factors, placed a barrier between interviewees and the community their experience and knowledge should have encouraged them to connect to.

Associations with "Core"

This outlining of players' different interpretations of community is not an attempt to dictate how players should see the gaming community or what it should mean. Rather, it is a recognition of the ways in which, despite their unanimous pleasure in games and gaming, women's relationship to games is deeply complicated by the persistent hegemonic presentation of games as masculinized and as exclusive to men. The fact that a portion of interviewees were unable to see themselves as connected to a broader gaming community indicates how strongly "core" ideas bar marginalized players from gaming. Even players who rhapsodized about their enjoyment of games, and who demonstrated nuanced interpretive strategies for managing their gaming experience, were sometimes hesitant to identify as part of a broader gaming community, given the stereotypical characteristics attached to it. They also struggled with their treatment at the hands of male gamers, as it often demonstrated that others did not think of them as part of a gaming community. This undermined the internal feeling of affinity Anderson describes as essential to an imagined community.

Furthermore, like Radway's romance readers, players sometimes accepted the sociocultural definition of gaming as childish and a waste of time. This further complicated their ability to identify as gamers and as members of gaming communities. Some interviewees were

both deeply involved in gaming and resistant to this involvement, hesitant to have family members or friends connect them to the antisocial, male qualities associated with gaming. "Core" characteristics are strongly exclusionary, forcing even committed players into a paradoxical position where their enjoyment of games and their desire to be taken seriously as gamers conflicts with their desire to avoid being associated with "gamer" stereotypes.

At the same time, the fact that many interviewees did still feel a deep connection to gaming culture and communities more broadly and the fact that all participants were able to find pleasure in gaming cannot be overlooked. Not only do interviewees' perspectives on the pleasures of gaming and their ability to find enjoyment in a sexist medium reflect the result of some previous work, such as Taylor (2003), Hussain and Griffiths (2008), and Nardi (2010), but they also indicate how women can take on characteristics of "core", both in its industrial sense and in terms of centrality. Because of this, they break down some of the constructed barriers between gamer identity and a female gender identity, illuminating means through which the exclusionary nature of "core" can be altered.

Thinking again of "core" as a shortened version of "hardcore", and the characteristics attached to this in gaming discourse, women's clear preferences and ability to express them through their knowledge of games connects them to many "core" characteristics. "Core" comes with connotations of commitment to gaming as a regular hobby, extensive knowledge about games, highly-developed skills as a player, and the ability to play competitively. It also, as outlined earlier, aligns with expectations of hegemonic masculinity, such as aggression and dominance over others. While the interviewed players sometimes avoided these latter characteristics, even when they played competitively, their ability to navigate games and gaming spaces to find many pleasures in playing demonstrated their connections to "hardcore" play.

Each interviewee was able to point, without hesitation, to games that did or did not fit her own personal characteristics and play style. They had played widely enough and frequently enough to have clear preferences. They also knew how to fit different styles of games into their life dependent on what their needs were at the time. Players alternated social play with individual play, for instance, depending on whether they wanted to relax after work or connect with others. All of these characteristics are reflective of in-depth commitment to and knowledge of games, key elements of being "core". Women have invested time and effort into games and gaming, and developed extensive skill and familiarity with game tropes and offerings as a result.

Women's ability to take on these characteristics troubles the naturalization of "core" as a coherent concept. Because they adopt some aspects of core while rejecting others, such as its masculinization, they demonstrate the ways in which these characteristics are connected only by media coverage, industrial biases, longstanding discourses about who plays games and what games are, and players' resulting perceptions. Women also undermine the naturalized construction of core simply by identifying as female. Taking on other core characteristics without identifying as male subverts gendered constructions of men as "core" and women as "casual".

It is true that at some moments, gaming culture encourages women to take on or accept a masculinized subject position while gaming, such as when game content pushes them to objectify female characters or when they respond aggressively to potential competitions as a means of proving their skill. But interviewees also found that there were many times where they could happily inhabit both a female identity and a gamer identity; they just needed the ability to navigate game content and spaces in order to find the arenas that allowed for this. Women were not only willing to do the work needed to enter into an exclusionary space, but they also

demonstrated that they are highly capable of doing so. They can draw on their personal preferences and their experience with games in order to navigate offerings and prioritize a positive experience that will meet their individual, contextual needs. In turn, they then receive extensive pleasure from games, enjoying aspects such as sociability, meeting personal challenges, competing with others and with themselves, and more.

Players also were able to find places where, rather than having to embody a female/gamer position or a male/gamer position, they could embody an ungendered gamer position, escaping from the confines of "gamers'" masculine assumptions. This was evident in how clearly players expressed concerns about games that were not intimately linked to gender and in how they did not necessarily need to identify with the characters they played as in games. Interviewees expressed pleasure in different subject-positions that rose above concerns about whether the characters' gender matched their own. This indicates how game culture, although it frequently pushes inhabitants towards masculinized positions and characteristics, does not do so all the time, allowing for moments of fracture and expansion where different "core" identities can be imagined and made possible.

Finally, interviewees revealed that they were both able to embody fluid gender positions and that they enjoyed doing so, using elements like transportation to try out new combinations of traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine characteristics. Whether this meant physically dominating other characters or the game environment while presenting an attractive, conventionally feminine appearance or seeing how one would be treated as a male character, an evil character, or even just an ostentatious character, interviewees pursued a wide variety of flexible experiences. Rather than wanting to be always female and always gamers, they comfortably inhabited a range of identities and desired the ability to identify not in one, set "girl

gamer" way, but in different ways based on contexts.

Collectively, players used a proactive identity fluidity as an active strategy for navigating game spaces and texts. This allowed them first to manage the masculine subject positions games offered them and take on some characteristics while avoiding others. Furthermore, their drive for fluid identities and their ability to "construct a wide spectrum of negotiated positions" (Leblanc, 1999, p. 160) allows them to take on what Lauraine Leblanc (1999), in her study of punk women, termed "'trebled reflexivity': they challenge the norms of the dominant culture as well as the feminine norms of both culture and subculture" (p. 160). Women's embodying of masculine positions, their combination of masculine and feminine characteristics in their game characters, and their possession of "core" characteristics while being female all combined to help them undermine both the gender expectations of gaming and gender expectations of broader culture. Women acted against cultural expectations that define femininity as non-aggressive or non-competitive, while also indicating that women could and did enjoy games and game culture.

Overall, players' ability to take on a female/gamer position, or to find their own ungendered or negotiated position when offered only limited options, blurs the boundaries between gaming's central "core" and margins, moving core from an industrial term back to a conceptual model. Many aspects of gaming culture and in particular the construction of "hardcore" and "casual" rest on the assumption that masculinity helps mark out what is central to gaming and gamers. It is the assumption of masculinity that leads players to treat women with surprise when they are gaming, marking them as abnormal. The assumption of player masculinity also affects the type of content developers release and how they market it to an audience. Masculinity helps prioritize a limited "core" audience over gamers more generally, and has been key to the persistence of sexism in gaming culture.

As players indicate even here, where I was drawing on the pleasures they take in gaming and in connecting to a gaming community, the idea that women are not "core" deeply affects their experiences and their ability to develop the type of shared affinity one needs to be part of an imagined community. This likely also bars them from being part of other "gamers'" imagined communities, as players who imagine themselves as connected to others based on "core" characteristics will not see women as part of this due to the masculinization of that concept. Further study of male players would be necessary to support this completely, but the experiences of interviewees show that many of the people they encounter while gaming do not and cannot imagine them as gamers. This limits the power female players have when managing game communities, critiquing game content, and more.

At the same time, prioritizing women's experience shows that they are already part of gaming's "core" of invested players; they just have not been recognized as such due to an overemphasis on the significance of gender to what a "gamer" is. Therefore, a stronger recognition of how women already are central to gaming, and have been for a long time, can show that women are not just new, casual players drawn in by the post-casual era. In doing so, it can address some of the sexism and inequality present in gaming.

First, such an approach will reemphasize Shaw's (2014a) point that diverse representations in games can be a benefit rather than a weakness. As developers have argued, they craft their games to target their main audience, who they assume are young, white, men. However, not only do female players disprove this assumption, but the pleasure marginalized groups can take in characters that they do not identify with indicates that "gamers" can likely develop that same ability, learning to find pleasure in characters that are not straight, white, or male (Shaw, 2014a, p. 144). In fact, many of them might already seek out characters who differ

from them in terms of identity categories, looking for someone whose motivations or choices match theirs instead or someone who lets them try out different ways of being. The pleasures marginalized players find in gaming are likely very similar to those traditional game audiences also enjoy. Diversifying notions of "core", and who gamers are or can be, does not mean removing hegemonic "gamers'" ability to enjoy games, but rather decreasing other players' challenges.

Second, attention to women as "core" or part of the "core" can help improve the interactions marginalized players have in gaming communities by divesting commitment to gaming from masculinity. When other players do not automatically assume that female-identified gamers are unusual, or gaming to get attention from men, women will be able to focus more clearly on the pleasures of gaming and less on defending their position. They will also likely be able to connect more strongly to an imagined community of gamers, developing the internal feeling of affinity necessary for this association. Through this, they could develop greater access to power over what gaming communities should look like, undermining their existing sexism and misogyny.

Female gamers are extremely capable of managing their gaming experiences, as the pleasures they find in gaming and the strategies they employ to protect themselves show. However, given that the post-casual era is already working to redefine what gaming is and who gamers are, avoiding discourses that frame women as new or tangential to gaming and instead promoting ones that recognize their longstanding investment could be key to undermine gaming's sexism and instead developing a more equitable culture. Hegemony and the forces policing it are strong opponents, particularly when the dominant group gives up all pretense of common sense and employs pure force, like harassment, in order to maintain their privileged

position. However, women and other marginalized groups indicate that hegemony is not indomitable, by revealing its constructed nature and paths through which it can be subverted and changed.

Conclusion

Drawing on women's experiences with gaming in the modern era, it becomes clear that, as Shaw has previously discussed, "gamer identity was mutable, shifted over time, and wove together complex relationships between media representation, consumption, and identification" (2014a, 151). Interviewees were differently connected to gender identity or gamer identity based on context, history, and even personal preferences. However, it was also apparent that their ability to navigate these spaces and identities was not immune to outside influences. Specifically, existing structures of power and value affected when and how players could be understood as gamers.

Although industrial changes in gaming have undermined some existing expectations around games, such as the idea that men are the target audience for all games, new expectations have arisen to replace them, such as the idea that women are more likely to be casual gamers. Other exclusionary forces, such as stereotypes about gender roles and direct harassment, have also not disappeared, due to gaming's continued role as a masculinized medium. Overall, female gamers remain in a conflicted position.

Interviewees were, however, almost invariably hopeful for the future of video games. Despite the many issues they still faced, they largely believed that game culture was improving and would continue to do so. For example, many felt that game designers were starting to offer more female characters that had agency and a distinct role within their games, such as Ellie from *The Last of Us.* Furthermore, they saw some changes in the online environment. Some

companies, like *League of Legends* creators Riot Games, have started to take steps to change community behavior by adding reporting mechanisms to their game. These capabilities allow players to flag other individuals' bad behavior, resulting in in-game fines, temporary suspensions, or permanent removal. Although such a strategy could backfire if unwelcoming players flood the system with positive reports for negative behavior, when Riot started restricting chat abilities for *LoL* players who were being reported, they found that "bad language, as a whole, dropped 7 percent and that positive messaging actually went up" (Campbell 2014a). Players who improve are given back their full chat abilities, while those who do not face increasingly severe punishment, even if they are popular or professional players. For instance, two professional players were banned for a six month period in 2014 when they continued to abuse opponents even after their accounts were restricted (Farokhmanesh 2014). Encouraging the community to help manage itself through reports, applying punishments evenly across all groups of players, and having a clear reward for behavioral improvement can help make online spaces safer for diverse audiences, and also demonstrate that the developer takes all audiences, rather than just the traditional straight-white-male audience, seriously.

Because of this, future research should evaluate whether harassment patterns change over time and how coping strategies adjust accordingly, and well as how game content changes along gendered lines. It could also build off this work by exploring the experiences of other non-traditional player groups, to see if they face similar problems to women and if they handle them in the same ways. By exploring media choice and harassment coping strategies, it is possible to see how active audiences manage their media environment and carve out safe spaces, but it also reveals how cultural expectations continue to limit their power and how gaming moves forward according to its current hegemonic structure or through a new one.

Chapter Six: Finding Space and Exercising Active Audience Power

It is clear that female players find much to enjoy about games. The final question, then is *how*, specifically, women approach gaming to ensure that the positives outweigh the many potential negatives. To do this, female gamers have developed sophisticated strategies for both choosing content and for managing their interactions with the gaming community.

In terms of selecting what to play, women draw on four main resources to evaluate games and choose appropriate offerings. These are: their personal skill set, their knowledge of developer or genre conventions, previews of game content, and social network recommendations. Collectively, these pieces of information help women decide whether or not to invest in a game, allowing them to find games that meet their personal preferences while also weeding out games likely to be offensive or unenjoyable to them.

Once players have selected their game, they display five further strategies for managing their playing experience and their marginalized position in gaming spaces, particularly if the game they choose is played online in a multiplayer setting. These strategies are: leaving online gaming, avoiding playing with strangers, camouflaging their gender, deploying their skill and experience, or adopting an aggressive persona.[40] Players apply these different approaches contextually, responding to the situation they encounter or the strengths and weaknesses of their own personality. Through these strategies, they attempt to protect themselves from harassment or

[40] Although this work cannot draw quantitative conclusions or make claims that are representative of female gamers as a whole, due to the semi-structured nature of the interviews and the limited number of participants, these strategies are listed and discussed in order of popularity. More women practiced various avoidance strategies (e.g., not playing online) than directly combated harassment through skill or aggressive responses.

otherwise cope with the challenge of other gamers not seeing them as part of a “core” audience.

However, interview data also show that many of these strategies, both for game selection and for social environment management, have severe limitations. For example, some online environment management strategies, which are meant merely to prevent harassment on the basis of one’s gender, help further the construction of online spaces as “for men” by hiding women’s contributions to gaming. Other approaches are exhausting, requiring the player to manage every element of their online identity carefully to avoid harassment. Some strategies have the potential to backfire and result in greater persecution, or they can be limited in effectiveness by game mechanics that give the player less control over how they interact with other gamers.

Because of this, female players embody both the agency of an active audience and the limitations of group marginalized by the hegemonic order. Interview participants consistently showed they are capable of carefully managing their media choices to try to make them as positive as possible. However, their discussions also revealed that they were often unable to access or affect real power structures in gaming. When choosing games, for instance, they frequently felt that they were selecting from a group of texts that were not meant for them; although they were exercising their ability to choose, the pool from which they were choosing was highly limited in distinctly gendered ways. When playing online, they ran into the perception that online gaming, and gaming in general, were men’s spaces, with women thought to be interlopers into that space. Because of this, they often found that their best recourse to avoid harassment or negativity was to hide their gender or choose to play single-player games.

Active Audiences: Theory and Limitations

Communication research has been interested in the role of the audience, and has considered them active contributors to their media experience, since at least the 1970s, when

uses and gratifications research started to explore the factors individuals relied on to choose which media they wanted to engage with (Katz et al., 1973). Whereas very early communication theory posited that media were a “hypodermic needle” injecting their messages directly and completely into the minds of media consumers, uses and gratifications research started to add an element of audience choice to the field, arguing that people had specific needs, such as information gathering, and that they chose their media in order to fulfill those needs (Katz et al., 1973).

In the 1980s, the idea of audiences as active consumers expanded under the influence of cultural studies, such as Stuart Hall’s seminal works on encoding and decoding (1980). Hall focused on a reader’s consumption of a media text and introduced the idea that, although a dominant and culturally preferred meaning exists in a text, audiences also have the potential to engage in negotiated or even oppositional readings of texts. In these instances, they bring their own personal experiences and beliefs to bear on the media they consume. Although Hall was careful to emphasize that “connotative codes are not equal among themselves” (1980, p. 134) and that certain meanings are supported by media producer power, dominant ideologies, and the overall cultural hegemony of certain groups, the idea that audiences could resist these hegemonic powers and, through those small acts of resistance, possibly construct alternative meanings, was revolutionary.

Hall’s work led to a period in the 1980s in which theorists like John Fiske[41] focused on the “polysemic” text, which emphasized that texts were incoherent, contradictory, and thus subject to different audience interpretations. This celebration of audience power sometimes seemed to suggest that audiences were *always* active and *always* capable of applying their own

[41] E.g. Fiske 1986; 1987

meaning even to texts that were offensive, racist, or misogynistic. For these theorists, the activeness of the audience superseded Hall's careful restrictions regarding hegemony and dominant readings. As television researcher David Morley wrote, "Hall's (1981) original formulation of the encoding/decoding model contained, as one of its central features, the concept of the preferred reading (toward which the text attempts to direct its reader) while acknowledging the possibility of alternative, negotiated or oppositional readings. This model has subsequently been quite transformed, to the point where it is often maintained that the majority of audience members routinely modify or deflect any dominant ideology reflected in media content (cf. Fiske, 1987), and the concept of a preferred reading, or of a structured polysemy, drops entirely from view" (1993, p. 13).

Such a perspective quickly provoked a backlash from media researchers who found it to be an unrealistic perspective on cultural power structures. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, theorists began to return to Hall's original idea of audience power as circumscribed (Seaman, 1992; Morley, 1993). Although audiences had the power to read texts differently based on their personal experiences and beliefs, theory from the 1990s and beyond has recognized that they are always doing so in the face of hegemonic power structures that make certain meanings more powerful and therefore more likely to *dominate* a reader's interpretations.

Similar limitations appear even when interpreting readers and their meaning-making through other theoretical frameworks, such as interpretive community theory. Because interpretive communities are learned and multiple, it may at first appear that Fish's theory makes possible an infinite number of interpretive communities and therefore potential meanings in texts. However, because interpretive communities are learned, and because an individual requires them to understand the world and therefore can never completely be without an interpretive

repertoire, they are affected by cultural environments. For example, Fish points to St. Augustine's assertion that "everything in the Scriptures, and indeed in the world when it is properly read, points to (bears the meaning of) God's love for us and our answering responsibility to love our fellow creatures for His sake" (1976, p. 483). Fish indicates that this perspective has been supported by centuries of Christian literary analysis and therefore is an easy to employ interpretive strategy. In other words, an interpretive community based on this Christian value may be stronger or more widespread than an interpretive community that has not had equivalent socio-cultural support.

The fact that interpretations can be multiple, but are often constrained and directed towards a dominant meaning, comes through clearly in participant interviews. The dominant message of games does matter; it is extremely clear to players when "women are meant to be the hot side objects in games" (Emily), and they often cannot just choose to read this material in another way. Female gamers recognize when the industry designs a text for men, rather than women, and they feel the force of that exclusion. However, rather than avoid games entirely because of industrial exclusion, they exercise what power they have. Participants are intelligent media consumers, employing a wide variety of strategies to make the media they choose and the environment they play in as positive as possible, consistently trying to align their consumption with their beliefs. At the same time, the way they describe their choices often displays limitations, based on the fact that they are functioning within an environment in which hegemonic power marks them as outsiders.

Choosing a Game

The Role of Individual Preferences

Although the gaming industry often groups female players together, each interviewee displayed strong personal preferences regarding their video games. As stated earlier, almost all participants avoided games they felt they were bad at, instead focusing on the specific genres and styles that allowed them to progress through the game effectively. In addition, they often played games for different reasons, such as competition or relaxation, and they came to gaming with different console, PC, handheld, or mobile systems and from different class or financial backgrounds. Because of this, each woman was looking for unique characteristics in her games and carefully sought out games that met her needs.

Even if they share some preferences, women take nuanced approaches to game selection. For example, interviewee Misty played a lot of first-person shooters like the *Call of Duty* series, and said, “Shooters I always just played with friends through high school and college, and it appeals to my competitive side. Especially when people get beat by a girl”. Misty clearly looked for both social interaction and a competitive environment when playing multiplayer. On the other hand, interviewees like Jutte, who said she preferred “working with someone, rather than against someone”, avoided heavy player-vs-player games and instead chose games with cooperative elements. Social interaction was as important to Jutte as to Misty, if not more so, but competition was something she avoided rather than sought out. They both enjoyed multiplayer games, but looked for separate elements within those.

To choose games that meet their needs effectively, women must have detailed knowledge of their own preferences as well as the ability to sort through the offerings of the video game

industry to find those that will match with what they want to play. And interviewees displayed this ability, using their knowledge of genre conventions and developers, previews of games or reviews, and their social networks to find games that they would enjoy.[42]

Genre or Developer Conventions

Once participants expressed their preferences regarding games, they described how these connected to the types of games they played, relying on genre conventions to help choose appropriate texts. When players found a genre that worked, they often stayed with that type of text, just exploring the different options available within that category. "We would mostly stick to the types of games that had worked for us before. Like first-person shooters were a tried and true thing for my household, we didn't bring in a lot of RPGs or anything like that" (Jutte).

Frequently, players felt that different genres worked well for different play styles. For instance, game pace was a key consideration many players used to choose games. Players like Anna, who found it difficult to keep up with fast-paced action games, were more likely to tend towards RPGs or single-person story games. As she stated, "when I started playing games more a few years ago, I was awful with a controller, so fast-paced games like shooters were way too difficult… RPGs didn't punish you as much for being slower, so that made a huge difference". Her experience gaming was much more enjoyable when she could proceed at her own pace. On the other hand, Eva preferred shooting games or ones that had short missions and frequent save points, so that she could pick them up, play for an hour or so, and then put them down. Because

[42] It is likely that male gamers as well as female gamers use these different approaches to choosing games, as many are significant investments of both time and money. Newly released games can cost $50-60 each, or even more for special editions, and take at a minimum several hours to play. Gamers have a vested interested, therefore, in choosing games they will like. However, female gamers have to find games that are both enjoyable and inoffensive, and they may find their offerings more limited than men do because of this. This increases the significance of their game selection strategies.

of this, she avoided in-depth RPGs or MMOs, saying, “I like my games to be fast…MMOs, I hear they take a lot of time, and I’m not willing to dedicate that much time for a video game”. Other players who preferred fast-paced games avoided turn-based games like *Civilization*, as waiting for their opponent to play tried their patience and lost their attention (Laine).

Players also used a genre’s expected content to choose what to play and what to avoid. Fiber Freak, for instance, avoided shooters and preferred RPGs because the fantasy or sci-fi elements of many RPGs made them less graphic. She said, “I choose not to play the really graphic, gory video games. I’m really sensitive to stuff like that, and it’s just not something I can do.” Other players enjoyed the “catharsis” that came with playing “games for the totally gratuitous violence (and sometimes totally gratuitous porn)” (Bear). Bear chose games like *Team Fortress 2*, a shooting game with a strong element of comedy, to meet her needs in these areas, saying she deliberately chose games on the basis of their “humor, violence, [and] strategy”. She was willing to play RPGs like *Skyrim* occasionally but found they did not hold her interest as well as more violent multiplayer games. Because Bear and Fiber Freak displayed completely opposite content preferences, they tended towards different genres of games as well.

Finally, interviewees frequently considered genre mechanics. When asked what she looked for when choosing a game, Angela declared, “Loot! I loooove having a wide variety of items to equip and use in a game. Honestly, plot is probably secondary to that for me. I love character building, and what you can equip or use is a huge part of that.” Because of this preference, Angela and similar interviewees like Tinsel tended towards RPGs, which offer a lot of different forms of loot, or games known for offering extensive weapon and armor options, like the *Borderlands* series.

In addition to relying on genre conventions to help pick games they would enjoy, players

showed extensive knowledge regarding developers. As Anna said, “If I like a game from a particular developer or series, I’ll usually look at other games related to it”. For example, the game company Bethesda, which is responsible for the *Elder Scrolls* series, was extremely popular with RPG fans or participants who wanted a deep storyline. Bioware, which has created numerous acclaimed series like *Baldur’s Gate, Mass Effect, Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic,* and *Dragon Age* was also seen as a company that paid attention to narrative. On top of that, participants felt that Bioware games offered them positive female characters. Elayne said, “Bioware is, I guess, kind of unique in that they try to be pretty gender-neutral”. For example, participants often commented on the enjoyment they received from playing the female version of Commander Shepard in the *Mass Effect* series, arguing that it was a relief to play a female character who was strong, self-sufficient, and clothed in reasonable armor. Because of this, they were willing to try other Bioware offerings. Similarly, if a producer was known for creating games that a participant had not enjoyed in the past, they were less likely to explore their newer options.

Previews of Game Content

Participants also reported using a variety of paratexts, or material related to games but supplied by creators other than the developers, in order to choose the video games they played. In particular, they relied heavily on online reviews and previews of game content. These included Let’s Play videos, where another gamer films their progress through the game and provides commentary on their experience, official reviews from game magazines or websites, and community-based reviews on forums like Reddit or GameStop. For example, DT took many steps in choosing a game. She said, “I check out YouTube for reviews (more than one), I look at what the comments say and go on Reddit and ask people whether I should go out and buy this

game. Yeah, I do a lot of research before buying a game." By comparing multiple sources, she got a clear idea of what a game was like, whether it would fit her needs, and whether she should spend money on it. The source of the review also mattered. When looking at material from the game or reviews of it, participants were extremely discerning regarding what they took into account or ignored. Bubble argued, "If someone who only plays RTS hated a FPS, it doesn't mean much to me… So I'm pretty careful when reading reviews". She assessed a reviewer's past history, compared it to her own tastes, and then decided if that opinion was worthwhile or not.

Social Network Recommendations

In addition to their personal research, participants were willing to turn to their social networks and seek recommendations from friends. When Chimera Soul started playing *Team Fortress 2* regularly and joined a set clan of players, they directed her to many new games. In her own words, "When I would be in the main chat, they would talk about other games, and I'd be like, 'Oh, well… you know, I'll give that a try.' Like something like *Left 4 Dead,* on my own, I probably never would have tried… I had a gateway, starting with a clan." Because she and her clanmates shared a love of *Team Fortress 2*, Chimera Soul was willing to try other games they enjoyed even if they were out of her usual comfort zone. Numerous other participants, like Anna, Jasper, and Rogue, reported similar experiences, saying that they added things to their "list of video games to buy" (Rogue) when friends directed them to new material. This is because they expected that friends would know their taste and would avoid directing them to anything they would dislike or find offensive.

Significance and Limitations

Although none of these strategies are revolutionary, and are likely used by many other

groups of gamers or media consumers,[43] they do provide evidence that women are active media users even when engaging with a traditionally masculinized medium. They carefully choose what they want to play, displaying deep knowledge of game genres, developer histories, and gaming communities in order to do so. In addition, the care they put into choosing their video games combats the idea that women are a homogeneous block that only plays mobile or casual games, or the perception that they are not deeply invested in game culture. These participants embody many facets of "core" and use these to find the games they want to play, sorting through massive amounts of information and multiple review sources before spending their time and money on a game.

However, examining these strategies also shows that female gamers need to consider more potential angles of a game than that male colleagues may— they need to determine whether or not a game fits with their own personal identity values, given the fact that much of the industry's products are focused on a male audience. This caused frustration, guilt over game choices they felt were "stereotypical", and struggles in dealing with potentially offensive texts. Multiple interviewees were extremely disappointed in the offerings the industry defined as "for women", considering many of them simplistic or overly feminized. "I can't think of any game in particular I think is marketed toward adult women," Emily said. She continued, "When I think of girl games, I think of like that dog game and cooking games and things like that, like Barbie games. I think they are intended for little girls." Because of this, female gamers often cannot rely on industry marketing to help them choose games, as this will almost entirely direct them to

[43] For example, there are many similarities between the interviewees for this study and the romance readers Radway spoke with. Romance readers, like gamers, had clear preferences for what made a "good" or "bad" text. They generally avoided novels that included rape or multiple sexual relationships, preferring novels that had happy endings and a monogamous relationship between the heroine and the hero. These fit their expectations for love and their own life situations, where most were married, more clearly. Both Radway's readers and my participants worked to ensure that they engaged only with texts that fit their preferences, as they often had limited time or money to invest in their chosen medium.

casual offerings that may be infantilizing.

Furthermore, knowing how the industry views women and wanting to avoid playing into stereotypes made the gamers who did play more traditional “girl games” struggle with that choice. Feather, who had just gotten a Nintendo 3DS prior to her interview, had been buying and playing many of the games offered on that system. Although she was enjoying the games and appreciated that they were easy to fit into her busy schedule, she also felt guilty for enjoying them. She said, “I’m kind of… not ashamed of the games I have been buying, but I’m not happy with myself at the games I’ve been buying… I’ve played Harvest Moon a lot, it’s a very girly game. I’ve got Cooking Mama and Crafting… I’ve got a lot of Mama games because they are short little blurbs of stuff. I don’t know, I feel bad buying these as a woman because they are like little girl games to me, but they’re kind of fun.”

Feather deeply enjoyed playing video games, to the extent that she continued to work them into her schedule around her other time commitments. However, the types of games that were easiest to fit in, ones she could carry around on her 3DS and play in short bursts, were ones that she felt would make people more likely to stereotype her and, through her, other female gamers. She also personally disliked reinforcing prevailing industry stereotypes about female gamers. Because of this, her relationship with the games was an ambivalent mix of enjoyment and guilt. For some players, the potential guilt was enough to keep them away from certain games entirely. Laine avoided playing *The Sims*, for instance, both because it seemed a little simplistic compared to her regular game choices, but also because of the “stigma attached to it”, the expectation that it was a game only girls enjoyed.

Game culture put women into a conflicted position where they did not necessarily want to identify with a stereotypical feminine identity, but they also did not want to take on a masculine

identity or play masculinized game content all the time. Gamers like Feather and Emily, among others, found many pleasures in female-targeted games like the *Cooking Mama* series. What they struggled with was how other players interpreted their game choices. When they selected more domestic games, like *Harvest Moon*, they felt other players saw them as stereotypically feminine, even if that is not how they saw themselves. Female gamers also feared that others would assume they were casual players more interested in digital housekeeping than in gaming and that they only played "girly" games rather than gaming more diversely. Interviewees wanted to be able to enjoy multiple genres of games without having these choices reflect back on their personal identity; however, they felt that this was not completely possible and that they were always being judged based on their game choice. This made choosing the right game for the situation extremely important.

Finally, female players often had to choose how to deal with a game that was potentially exclusive or even offensive. For instance, they frequently found games that met their needs for storyline, pace, system compatibility, and price point, but then had to decide whether or not they wanted to invest in something that did not offer a female protagonist. As Elayne said, "I'm kind of turned off by games where I'm forced to play a male protagonist. It doesn't mean I won't play it, but it's just kind of a turn off". In general, this appeared to be a compromise women were willing to make, if only to avoid limiting their game choices too heavily. When given the option, almost all said that they would choose a female character over a male character, but if the choice wasn't available, they wouldn't automatically avoid that game. As long as the game had other characteristics that they felt they would enjoy, a lack of a female playable character was not a deal breaker for participants.

Offensive game themes or character representations were another story, and participants

often avoided these or found ways to see what happened in them without having to buy them. When a game contained potentially offensive themes, such as a high level of violence toward women, female interviewees generally did not play them. “There’s definitely some games I would play because… not because of a particular characters, but like, Grand Theft Auto I would never play because it’s like beat women with a shovel. I wouldn’t do that. So those kinds of games can bother me” (Emily). The same occurred if players were going to be forced to play as a character that was demeaning to women; they often would not choose to play that game at all. Anna put it simply: “I tend to avoid games that have incredibly problematic characters just because I know it’ll factor into how much I’m able to enjoy the game”.

One game players frequently said they avoided was *Lollipop Chainsaw*, a comedy horror hack-and-slash game released in 2012. In the game, players take on character of teenage cheerleader/zombie hunter Juliet Starling, who fights against hordes of zombies using a rainbow-spewing chainsaw. When discussing *Lollipop Chainsaw*, Feather said, “It’s this teenage cheerleader who wears next to nothing, who has a chainsaw, and she goes around and cuts up all these zombies… I watched the complete game on play-through and it’s just absolutely sexual innuendo and curse-words and pretty much just rampant sexualization of a minor. But it looked really fun. But I would never buy it because I would refuse to propagate that game play and that view of women but yet it looked fun. I watch my games that I don’t want to visually buy”. From the way she talked about the game, Feather’s feelings on the matter were obviously very split, as she balanced a desire for fun against the need for games to treat women more seriously. Feather recognized the comedy elements of the game and felt that its hack-and-slash game play would be enjoyable. However, because of its problematic themes, like the sexualization of minor (Juliet is just turning eighteen at the start of the game, which takes place on her birthday) and the

abundance of cursing, she refuses to contribute monetarily to the developer. Laine similarly avoided *Lollipop Chainsaw*, saying simply, “I hate the overly sexualized nature of females in video games. Will that make me stop playing them? No. Will the way a particular female is portrayed make me choose another games (such as the case of *Lollipop Chainsaw*)? Yes.” Again, she was balancing a love of games overall against specific cases that were, in her mind, demeaning.[44]

Because women in games are frequently marginalized or overly sexualized, female players find an extra challenge in choosing games, often having to select from among a number of potentially negative options. In some cases, this has led them to develop interesting rules for selecting texts or characters. For instance, Buttsvard stated, “Basically here's my formula for female characters and their breast design: Does the character have more bosom than agency? If no then awesome, if yes then is there a larger context? Explore why. If there is no reason, then the game is probably terrible.” She went on to support this statement with examples from some of her favorite games, contrasting Ashley, a *Resident Evil 4* character with “medium breasts, no agency” to Bonnie MacFarlane from *Red Dead Redemption*, a character she felt was “sweet and capable and tough”. Because MacFarlane had an actual role in the game, rescuing the protagonist when he is wounded, Buttsvard remembered her for her personality and assistance, rather than for her figure. Ashley, on the other hand, she remembered for being pretty but useless.

In terms of reading texts, most participants recognized the dominant message of a game, particularly when it was offensive or demeaning to women. Furthermore, they could not help but

[44] Although a number of interviewees spoke about *Lollipop Chainsaw* in negative terms, at least one (i.e. Nina) did express an interest in playing the game, treating it as a parody of how sexualized women are in games rather than as an offensive text. This again demonstrates that women cannot be treated as “just a homogenous block that react badly to sexualized images” (Buttsvard). Each makes individual decisions regarding how they will react to certain texts and why.

recognize that the industry focused primarily on games for men, treating women as a second thought. Because of this, they were always choosing games within an industrial and cultural system that significantly limited their options. At the same time, they carefully evaluated the extent to which potential texts fit into or were at odds with their values and belief systems and then, rather than choosing to read a text differently, as traditional active audience theory would expect, they instead chose whether or not to engage with the game at all. At times, they even try to make their feelings known to the industry by refusing to contribute monetarily to companies they find offensive, as Feather did when she chose to watch a play-through of *Lollipop Chainsaw* rather than purchase it. Women's strategies for choosing games show a balance between the constraints of a hegemonic culture that puts women on the margins and the ability of individual players to control their personal experiences.

Audience Management Strategies

In addition to exercising their knowledge of games to choose texts that they are more likely to enjoy, female players also demonstrate impressive capacities for managing social environments in order to make them more pleasant. The current video gaming environment is toxic in many ways. Although statistics clearly show that "gamers" now make up only a portion of overall video game players (ESA, 2013), cultural perceptions of who plays have been slow to change accordingly, and non-traditional game audiences are still perceived as "outsiders". Because of this, more established audiences still target ethnic minorities or LGBT players, for instance, for harassment. However, this treatment does not stop all individuals with these identities from enjoying games; many still play and have developed specific coping strategies they employ to avoid or respond to negativity.

As previewed earlier, female players revealed five main strategies they use to manage

their marginalized position in gaming spaces: leaving online gaming, avoiding playing with strangers, camouflaging their gender, deploying their skill and experience, or adopting an aggressive persona. A close examination of these strategies demonstrates how women regulate their media environment even though they are fighting an uphill battle against stereotypical ideas surrounding "gamers" and what gaming should look like. Women's outsider status may limit their power in the gaming environment, but they have developed creative approaches to help improve their situation, showing impressive capacity as active media managers.

Leaving Online Gaming

> "It's hard to make good alliances and to always have people to play with. So, multiplayer online games, they kind of force you to have friends and force you to play with other people, whereas when I play video games, I want to do it to have fun and enjoy myself and I don't always enjoy myself when I'm trying multiplayer." -Marie
>
> "I don't have a Live account. I used to play on my brother's account a bit, but then you get the nasty players. I used to play on my boyfriend's account, and then I got my own nasty players. So yeah, I don't really like the culture that's involved with multiplayer games." –Feather

The first potential strategy women employ to deal with online harassment and manage their gaming environment is playing primarily single player games. Because the current study specifically targeted women who game, none of the interviewees avoided games entirely. However, many of them avoided online play, due to past negative experiences or even the perception that they were more likely to be harassed online. They saw single player games or playing in-person with friends as a safer alternative, staving off problems before they could start. As one player stated, "I don't play a lot of online games, so I don't really get harassed"

(Buttsvard).

While it is positive that women are able to enjoy games even when the multiplayer experience is unwelcoming, the fact that some committed gamers are driven away from online gaming helps contribute to the perception that games are more for men than for women and normalizes gender harassment as a standard part of gaming spaces. Private gaming is naturally less visible than public, multiplayer gaming. Therefore, women who choose to play single-player or at-home multiplayer are often not counted among the ranks of gamers, even when they play frequently or have extensive experience. Because of this seeming absence, a great deal of previous research has tried to explain how game content may be driving women away from playing or how technology in general is oriented more towards men (e.g. Cassell and Jenkins, 1998; Kafai et al., 2008). However, newer research (Bryce and Rutter, 2002; 2003; Jansz and Martens, 2005; Jenson et al., 2007; Jenson and de Castell, 2011) and interviewee's own responses show that it is frequently the social environments of gaming, rather than games themselves, that women find off-putting. Therefore, they still game, but they do so in their own, private spaces, allowing the perception that gaming is a male pastime to continue unimpeded. This then results in higher levels of harassment directed at non-male players, who are seen as outsiders, and restarts the cycle, driving more female players into private gaming or away from playing entirely. Overall, this allows gaming to continue functioning as a misogynistic space.

Although it is important to recognize women whose gaming is private, much can be learned from those who do participate in multiplayer arenas. These women overcome the perception that gaming is not for them and find creative ways to deal with potential barriers to participation.

Avoiding Strangers

"I avoid them whenever possible. I don't like interacting with strangers at all." –Caddie

Among the women interviewed, not playing with strangers was one of the most common ways to avoid issues during multiplayer gaming. This strategy is popular because players assume that strangers are more likely to engage in harassment than friends are. For example, interviewees felt strangers reacted more poorly to mistakes committed while playing. As one said, "Strangers seem more likely to go off on you for not knowing something or playing in a way they don't like" (Angela). Friends, on the other hand, were more likely to handle problems calmly, restrategize, and try again.

It is of course true that all players, not just women, enjoy playing with friends. However, women also found an extra benefit, in that friends would not subject them to unwanted advances. Interviewees frequently mentioned times when male players would flirt with them or make overtly sexual comments, simply because of their gender. One interviewee, describing her experiences playing World of Warcraft (WoW) when she was in middle school, said that much older players frequently asked what color her underwear was (Katie Tyler). Another summed up male player's reactions to her gender with the phrase, "Let me see your tits" (Alissa). Female players saw these advances as both creepy and frustrating, as they took time and effort to fend off.

All interviewees recognized that there were always a few male gamers who were there just to play, and some had even become good friends. But many women spoke of how exhausting it was to wade through negativity in order to reach decent players. One said, "There are guys out there that I'm sure are fun and respectful and wonderful to play with, but I don't have the time or the energy to slog through it" (Feather). Therefore, they stuck to playing with

people they knew in real life or a handful of carefully vetted online friends.

From this strategy, it is clear that games which force players to engage with strangers are unlikely to be popular among female players or within other marginalized groups. More welcoming games give players the option to work with friends, even in cases where they cannot avoid strangers entirely. For instance, although League of Legends (LoL) players can choose an AI opponent, the most common game type randomly matches teams against other players of their skill level. Therefore, one's opponents are almost always strangers, and strangers are sometimes needed to make up a full team of players. The LoL community is "pretty toxic" (Anna), but research conducted by LoL's parent company Riot found that "a team comprised of a group of friends was the most harmonious, followed by a group of friends who had been joined by some strangers" (Campbell, 2014). Playing with friends can be enough to overcome online harassment by helping players dismiss its impacts. As Kay stated, "I have someone who's here in the real world, who can say, 'No, don't listen to them,' and that's much more tangible to me than whatever those people say across the Internet".

Camouflaging Gender

> "I don't ever give my gender just out of the blue. If something comes up, I might say, but if someone calls me 'he' in chat, I never correct it." -Chimera Soul
>
> "My username doesn't really give away that I'm a girl, and there are times when I don't use my mic when I'm playing, so people don't really know that I'm a girl." -Arya
>
> "I won't join anything where I don't know anyone and it's a voice video, meaning you have to communicate, because it's been that bad for me. I'm afraid to talk randomly to random people I don't know." –Eva

Another popular method for preventing harassment is gender camouflage: carefully managing avatar attributes and the use of voice chat technology so that other players do not recognize one's offline gender identity. Almost all players who discussed their gaming screennames, for instance, spoke of how important it was that other players would perceive them as gender-neutral or male. This was true even if they were playing as a female character; because a high proportion of men play female characters, avatar gender does not necessarily match offline gender (Stabile, 2014, p. 49). Avatar name, however, seems to matter. Interviewee Angela stated, "I remember once playing Team Fortress 2 with my ex with a Steam username that was feminine, and some random guy just started SCREAMING at me about being an attention whore. My ex thought it was hilarious, but I can't lie, I haven't used overtly feminine usernames since then." Despite the fact that her opponent did not know she was a girl, Angela's feminine username was enough to trigger a negative reaction.

Players also avoided using microphones and voice chat among groups they did not know, so that their voices would not reveal their gender. This not only headed off potential harassment, but also protected the player from dealing with repetitive reactions. Even players who described the online experience as positive expressed frustration at the fact that, when they spoke up online, the person they were speaking with often ignored the content of their statement in favor of surprise about their gender. One interviewee who led a WoW guild had to speak frequently to other players and said, "Of the hundreds of times I've used [voice chat] with people who didn't already know me well, perhaps two or three I felt like it was not a big deal and/or extremely interesting that I was a woman" (Helix).

This not only repeatedly excludes women from the general gaming community by treating them as anomalies, but it is also frustrating because it defeats the purpose of using a

microphone. The benefit of voice chat is that it is a faster means of communicating with team members and coordinating assistance, but for women, it does not always work that way. When they ask for help, their colleagues' surprise at hearing a girl sometimes delays assistance to the point where their character or their team can suffer a loss. Therefore, many women find it easier to avoid microphones entirely and sometimes even avoid game styles where being competitive requires voice chat. This allows them to "play as a gamer, instead of as a girl" (Bubble), while demonstrating how these are culturally viewed as incompatible concepts.

Because "gamer" and "girl" were seen as very different identities, a few participants did play games under screennames that others would see as female or chose to use voice chat, treating these choices as a form of activism. Helix, for instance, said that she deliberately maintained a LoL account with a gender-neutral name and one which used the title "Lady" to mark it as female. Helix used the gender-neutral name the majority of the time, when her main goal was to play for fun. The feminine character she deployed more strategically, saying, "I sign on occasionally when playing, when I am feeling up to dealing with that kind of trash- because I feel like if women don't do anything to show, 'Hey, we're here, we're legitimate players, too!' that the atmosphere won't change".

Women like Helix and Emily, who also played under a feminine name deliberately, are willing to provoke harassment if it means making clear to other gamers that women play video games and can be very good at them. At the same time, they needed to balance this activist role with self-care; Helix only used her feminine username sometimes, and Emily often did not play the kinds of online games that are associated with the worst levels of harassment, such as LoL or first-person shooters. Simply asking all players to start declaring their gender identity in online gaming, to help demonstrate that audiences are more diverse than is stereotypically expected,

would do great deal to change gaming, but would also require players to cope with higher levels of harassment and employ different strategies for dealing with it, many of which also have limitations.

Deploying Skill and Experience

> "I always wanna make sure that people are wanting to play with me because of my playing skills, not just because I'm a chick." -Elizabeth
>
> "I'm good at what I do, I taught myself I'm not gonna do it any differently and I'm not gonna try any less because you feel insecure, I'll go find other people who appreciate it." -Katie Tyler

When female gamers reveal that they are women, their strategies move from avoiding harassment to stopping it or finding ways to brush it off. For this purpose, many women rely on their skill and experience.

Some used skill aggressively; when players harassed them, they laughed it off as jealousy and pointed out how their history with games or their skill level surpassed that of the negative player. Alissa, for instance, defended herself against harassment in WoW by pointing out that she was the highest possible level in the game. She also stated that she "had been playing since vanilla", the slang term for the original iteration of WoW. Alissa's long history with the game is a sign of skill and commitment that few other players have. By emphasizing this, she delegitimized other players' insults.

Other interviewees quietly ignored harassing players and simply focused on the game. When the offending players found that the women and their allies were performing to a higher level, many of them stopped their negative behavior and apologized. Some even humbled themselves enough to ask for help. Helix stopped some extreme harassment from her guild

members because she “was reasonably good at playing the game and extremely good at the sort of theorizing/strategizing/management needed to lead”. Misty did the same with Call of Duty, stating that she “got good of it out of spite… to shut anyone down who was tossing [her] aside on the sole basis of [her] gender”.

Although emphasizing their skill or high level of experience with gaming was often enough to stave off harassment, this strategy did have its downsides. In addition to structuring equality and the right to avoid harassment as something to be earned rather than something inherent (Nakamura, 2017), relying on skill was difficult. Many women struggled to keep up the skill level they needed in order to prevent negativity successfully, both in competitive and cooperative games. Alissa, one of the most aggressive interviewees when it came to using her skill level strategically, explained that as soon as she could not be one of the best, she stopped playing WoW despite her long-time commitment to it. She said, “It definitely was tough being in a situation where I don’t want to have to compete, but I’m forced to and then forced to compete even farther just to make sure that I’m allowed to play”. If she was not one of the best, Alissa felt that she did not have a safe place in the game, and it stopped being fun. Other players spoke of feeling similarly pressured, like they had “to demonstrate [their] knowledge and prowess” (Jutte) in order to justify their status as a gamer. Unless they had tangible proof of their skill, such as a position in a high-level raiding guild or difficult-to-obtain gear, female players were always doubted.

Aggressive Responses

> “I never acted the way they thought I would act, so I didn’t cry and complain and be like, ‘OH MY GOD, YOU’RE SO MEAN!’ I was a dick back to them… a lot of guys are really surprised by that, but in a way, it’s kind of earned me a lot of

> respect because they know I'm not a pushover. I'm not just gonna let them treat me a certain way just because I'm a girl. I fight for respect." -Elizabeth

> "[Gaming] made me very sarcastic. It just gave me an edge over people cause I was either with them or it just went right over their heads and they were confused and just dropped it." -Katie Tyler

Deliberately adopting aggressive personality traits is the last coping method interviewees relied on frequently. Participants contended that showing men they could both take insults and dish them out earned them respect. When that occurred, insults stopped or changed from serious harassment to more joking banter (DT, Elizabeth). Deploying sarcasm had a similar result, garnering allies who found it funny while driving away harassers who did not get the joke. Interviewee Taylor Ryan said, "I'm a big girl. I have a sharp tongue. I can defend myself, and make them feel about two feet tall with a few sarcastic retorts."

Assuming more aggressive personalities to cope with harassment relies on making male players see that their female colleagues can stand up for themselves. For instance, when male players are overly chivalrous, treating women as if they need extra protection, gamers like Anna throw this behavior back into their face. As she stated, "In game, usually guys will take the hint to back off from babysitting me when I start doing it back to them!" Like deploying skill, taking on aggressive qualities and returning insults in kind demonstrates to male players that women can be skillful gamers and can engage in trash-talk just as well as men can.

However, responding to harassment aggressively can be a double-edged sword. Women who chose this strategy sometimes faced accusations that they were "acting like an emotional female" (Laine), with harassers drawing on the familiar trope of hysterical women to try to dismiss the player's response. As previous studies on online and game-related harassment have

shown, women cannot always use the same rhetorical strategies as men, at least not without provoking further harassment or accusations that they are being overly sensitive to something that was not meant to be taken seriously (Herring, 1999; Nakamura, 2012; Salter and Blodgett, 2012). Interviewees employing this strategy felt that with confidence and a reasonable approach, it could be useful in many situations, but they carefully prepared alternative responses in case it backfired.

This approach also had the potential to turn women against each other to a degree, when those who were comfortable being aggressive would get frustrated with those who were not. Elizabeth described an incident where a fellow female gamer had been harassed, and said, "you know, she was really upset… they were calling her like, "cunt", and all these words, and I was just thinking to myself like, I would have not put up with that for more than two seconds, I would have told that guy off and messed with him in the game… I wouldn't have sat there and, you know, cried like a little girl and been like, 'You're mean! Why are you saying that?!'". Because Elizabeth stood up for herself in similar situations and was able to brush off negative things other people said to her, she did not understand why the other player took harassment so poorly and did not deal with it directly. Rather, she felt that the other player ended up making women look like "little girls", potentially negatively affecting the overall perception of female gamers. In some cases, therefore, confronting harassers head-on may have both short-term and long-term consequences.

Unpopular Alternatives

In addition to their favored coping strategies, interviewees referenced three other strategies that were less popular and far more controversial.

They used the first of these, employing technical solutions like blocking harassers,

occasionally. Sophie, for instance, said, “I would either basically tell them to get lost or block them”. But for many games, blocking a negative player came with a high disadvantage, “because you can’t see what they type in-game, like if they sincerely tell you someone’s coming your way” (Kay). Not being able to see legitimate warnings or cries for help interfered with gamers’ ability to win in multiplayer games, and therefore was not a popular option. Technical solutions of this sort seemed to cause more problems than they solved for players, especially as many games make it easy for players to start a new character and resume harassment.

Relying on male assistance to drive off harassers was also an unpopular option. While some interviewees felt that playing with male friends or boyfriends may have decreased the harassment they faced, only one player, Elayne, specifically mentioned relying on her husband or male friends to help chase off people who were bothering her, and she only did so at in-person gaming events. Because her husband was physically present, this strategy worked; other players found that relying on men online did not always help. Helix, for instance, faced the majority of her harassment at the hands of her boyfriend’s friends in WoW, even after he asked them to stop. This option therefore was ineffective in many situations, and it also seemed unpopular due to the independence of the interviewees. Most preferred to rely on themselves in order to deal with harassment, rather than needing assistance.

No interviewees employed the final strategy for coping with harassment, the calculated use of flirtation to win over male players. In fact, they largely looked down on others who chose to do so, finding this strategy to be an uncomfortable one. For example, when Elayne jokingly revealed her gender to a player who was trash-talking her, he immediately apologized and went from rude to flirtatious so quickly that she found it unnerving, describing it as “pathetic and ick”.

Other players spoke of how girls who flirted to get ahead in games changed overall

expectations for female gamers. Vickie argued, “I feel that I should be represented as just a normal gamer too… You’ll hear some people talk about like… that was their impression of female gamers, that they always got something for free, or they did it to get help… I always tried to avoid having that connotation.” Players like Vickie and Feather, who described encountering similar perceptions of “girl gamers” felt flirting to get help encouraged harassment from men because it became the expected norm for female behavior. Men then saw women who flirted as behaving properly, which protected them from harassment, while those who did not flirt suffered. Helix agreed with this sentiment; although she was insulted on a regular basis while playing WoW, her female guild mates who flirted with everyone did not face harassment. Even though Helix was dating a fellow guild mate, other players still expected her to perform a particular, flirtatious role because of her gender. The fact that participants only brought up this strategy in negative terms indicates that flirtation, although it may be effective, was not an acceptable long term solution to harassment. Instead, it was part of the problem.

Significance and Limitations

From the strategies women employ and how they describe them, it is obvious that they are capable of managing harassment in order to find enjoyment in online games. But it is equally clear that coping strategies require work. Women must constantly be aware of how others will interpret their behavior, username, voice, or skill, and they must carefully manage these aspects to ensure a positive gaming experience. Just like offline society requires women to defend themselves against sexual harassment or assault by managing their dress and behavior, the onus of online harassment management is put on the victim.

Furthermore, many of the strategies in use come with potential complications. Taking on an aggressive personality to stop harassers, for instance, can result in a negative backlash, but

blocking harassers or hiding one's gender may further women's perceived absence in gaming and the association of games with men. In turn, this perpetuates the cycle of harassment. Gray (2014) points out, "Gamers can stay away from players they choose to avoid. However, this creates a problem in addressing meaningful solutions to verbal abuse within this space" (p. xxi).

Because of this, none of these strategies is a final solution; they are a "Band-Aid" on the problem rather than a cure (Emily). Many participants were aware of this, and some took deliberate steps to try to change gaming, even if it meant further harassment. These women recognized that public gaming is necessary to changing women's treatment in the online environment. As Emily said, "My gamer names have always proudly referenced that I'm a girl gamer. And I refuse to change that. I feel hiding my gender would make me complicit in victim blaming; i.e., I need to work harder not to 'attract' harassment rather than the bully needs to stop acting horribly." At the same time, it is unfair to ask women to shoulder the entire burden of changing audience stereotypes and behaviors. Simply increasing their visibility and asking them to face the resultant harassment cannot be the only solution.

Overall, problems with both game content and online environments can only be solved completely with a change to the hegemonic order of video games. Women can exercise their power to choose games and to manage harassment, but these strategies all have limitations. Removing these requires games designers and other players to see women as essential members of the audience, rather than as outsiders or anomalies. This will not only empower them to respond more strongly when they face harassers online, but it should also help contribute to a decline of gaming's overall culture of misogyny. When diverse groups are accepted as members of the gaming community, the kind of exclusionary language required for trash-talk is likely to fall out of use, and players would face fewer difficulties in finding games that avoid offensive

representations or offer female protagonists.

Conclusions

This project was originally motivated by the distinct divide between the narrative that casual games were diversifying game audiences and the backlash of sexism and misogyny that these diverse audiences faced when they entered into game spaces, particularly if they were at all critical of "core" games' overuse of violence, objectified female characters, and stoic, hegemonically masculine men. The dissertation attempts first to understand how these two contradictory trends can occur simultaneously and second to analyze how these affect female gamers and gendered power structures within gaming.

These questions are particularly significant because, although it is not the first time that players, academics, or journalists have challenged the longstanding perception that all gamers are men, the post-casual era is the first time in game history when this questioning has been industry-motivated and widely based. The proliferation of casual games and the deep change occurring in the industry, such as the rise of independent studios and the spread of new forms of funding and distribution, has decreased the power possessed by traditional AAA studios and started to disperse this more widely. This is not, or should not be, a surprise; the business model of AAA studios, where they focused primarily on straight, white, young male audiences, made sense when it arose in the early 1990s as a risk-management strategy following the game industry's collapse, but it artificially limited developers' market. If anything has become obvious in the post-casual era, it is that many different types of players exist. Because of this, it is highly unlikely that the games industry will revert back to its exclusionary focus on male gamers. To do so would sacrifice the extensive revenue to be gained from a broader consumer base.

In turn, this has motivated a crisis of authority, where previously hegemonic "gamers" find their dominant role in gaming is no longer taken for granted as just how things are. The growth of new audiences and new ways of conceiving of audiences in the post-casual era makes obvious the constructed nature of men's power in gaming. Because of this, the post-casual era is a threatening moment to hegemonic players and developers. They still possess extensive power, but new players and new marketing and development tactics question this power more heavily than at any point in the past.

This crisis of authority explains how gaming can simultaneously be broadening and experiencing increasing levels of sexism and misogyny; as hegemonic powers see their dominant role slipping away, they exert both common sense ideologies, such as "girl gamer" stereotypes, and pure force, such as direct harassment, in an attempt to police their space and preserve hegemony. From participants' experiences in interviews, it is clear that existing structures of power and value continued to affect when and how players could be understood as gamers. Although industrial changes in gaming have undermined some existing expectations around games, such as the idea that men are the target audience for all games, new expectations have arisen to replace them, such as the idea that women are more likely to be casual gamers. Other exclusionary forces, such as stereotypes about gender roles and direct harassment, have also not disappeared.

Hegemony is a pervasive force that can be difficult to undermine and change effectively, as interviewees' frequent conflicts and guilt about gaming displayed. In many ways, gaming's "core" remains a masculinized space, policed by exclusionary content trends, the direct harassment of female gamers and other "outsiders", surprise at diverse players' presence, and stereotypes about "girl gamers". This policing then encourages women and other marginalized

players to buy into limiting notions of who gamers are and who games are for, continuing to perceive "core" as not for them even as they undermine this idea through their own presence. Because of this, sexism and misogyny in gaming are legitimated and even at times celebrated. From here, these forces can extend more broadly to affect other cultural eras as well, becoming one factor building up and contributing to the larger anti-feminist culture the United States is currently experiencing.

At the same time, women and other marginalized players still choose to enter into gaming culture for many reasons. They find a wide variety of pleasures in both game texts and in the act of play, including social connections, the ability to explore different identities and ways of being, and more. Even some elements previous research found to be off-putting, such as competition, can be enjoyable, as female gamers use these to express their power and skill, dominating male gamers in their own space.

Furthermore, as Shaw has previously discussed, "gamer identity was mutable, shifted over time, and wove together complex relationships between media representation, consumption, and identification" (2014a, 151). Interviewees were differently connected to gender identity or gamer identity based on context, history, and even personal preferences. Women take on fluid identities, alternately prioritizing their gender identity, their gamer identity, or both dependent on what characteristics they need to use to navigate the spaces of gaming and the challenges they face within those spaces.

Because of this, it is obvious that women are capable media managers who exert some degree of control over their environments and experiences to make these positive. Furthermore, their presence in gaming, and the ability to read pleasure into games that they share with their male colleagues, works to undermine ideas of "core" and its use to police an exclusive masculine

sphere. By already embodying "core" in many ways, women mark themselves as similar to male gamers, showing how a stronger network of affinity could be developed between diverse types of players as a means for changing gaming's current patterns of sexism. As matters currently stand, women generally have to deal with gaming's misogyny on their own. They can use a wide variety of strategies to do so, such as avoiding online games, carefully screening the games they choose to play based on reviews, or even proving that they are the best as a means for avoiding harassment. However, each of these strategies requires work and may prove to be an unsustainable means of protection. Greater attempts to build a conscious coalition with male gamers based on shared characteristics could be a means for overcoming these limitations and improving gender relations.

The results of the project also indicate that marginalized individuals in other masculinized areas, such as sports or technology companies, have likely developed deep, meaningful strategies and interpretive repertoires that help them manage their marginalization. However, these strategies probably focus on individual protection rather than on changing the sexist underpinnings of their exclusion; as gamers show in this study, combatting sexism directly requires work and can provoke backlashes, harassment, or other consequences. One means for combatting this sexism could be through exploring these strategies and what they indicate about women's role in localized interpretive communities. Through similarities they then share with male colleagues, it could be possible to build a network of affinity and conscious coalition, where diverse members of a space strive for similar goals.

Recommendations

Interviewees were almost invariably hopeful for the future of video games. Despite the many issues they still faced, they largely believed that game culture was improving and would

continue to do so. However, there are some ways in which activists who want to take advantage of gaming's current instability could increase the likelihood of such improvements.

First, women's' experiences showed that they were generally dealing with harassment and exclusion on their own, and that this was difficult and stressful. This was the case even though many participants were recruited from online forums specifically for female gamers, showing that existing connections between them were not strong enough to solve the challenges of exclusion. Furthermore, as participants expressed, forces like the "girl gamer" stereotype worked to keep women from relying on one another in gaming spaces. Therefore, promoting further connections between female players could help ease their individual stress through collective action. As players' experiences indicated, being able to game with friends was a key means for dealing with online harassment. A wider network of women who can share and collectively dismiss harassment would make this strategy more effective.

Second, industry members and journalists need to be held more accountable for perpetuating discourses that make sexism both normal and acceptable in gaming spaces. Chief among these are discourses that treat female gamers as new or unusual, and which mark them as "other". Instead, recognizing that women have long been part of gaming culture, even in "core" areas, can help them build the connections they need to avoid feeling guilt about their hobby, to defend their choices to others, and to change perceptions of who gamers are. Increased attention to individual play in both journalistic and academic work could also help achieve this, as women's play if frequently more private than men's. This means that existing work often misses them, allowing masculinized views of gaming spaces to perpetuate.

Finally, as Shaw pointed out, developers should improve their focus on diversity in games, not because players need characters they can identify with, but because they deeply enjoy

experiencing different types of identification. When gaming, women took on a wide range of fluid identities. They also sought out games that allow them to explore different ways of being and embody varied identities. Although dominant male audiences may not be used to having to identify in different ways while gaming, the enjoyment women found in doing so indicates that men will likely also be able to find pleasure in experiencing different stories and characters. Telling diverse narratives can potentially increase all players' enjoyment of games while also signaling to marginalized players that they are important to developers and to culture more broadly.

Future Research

Although this project provides an in-depth view of women's experiences in the post-casual era, it does have a number of limitations that future research projects could and should address. First, the project's focus specifically on gender means that it can draw few conclusions about the experiences of other marginalized groups. The rise of casual games, which are heavily feminized, may be welcoming more women into gaming, but it is unclear what impact it might have on LGBT gamers or racial minorities. The post-casual era may provide more pathways into games for women than for other marginalized gamers, requiring further attention to their experiences, whether these are similar to women's, or whether they face a different set of problems. Greater attention to intersectionality could also be useful; although Eva recounted some experiences related to her intersectional identity as both female and Mexican, most of the participants for this study were white or spoke primarily about their experiences as women, rather than as intersectional, multiply identified individuals. Being a gaming minority in multiple ways likely poses a new set of challenges that should be addressed.

Second, future projects should aim to pursue a deeper understanding of men's fears about

industrial change. This dissertation posits some reasons why the post-casual era may appear threatening and provoke a backlash against female players, but it cannot support these with men's actual experiences, as all interviewees were female. Therefore, a project focusing on men could indicate what they find most significant about the post-casual era and why they react to its changes in sexist ways. It could also break down different types of male gamers, as not all players harass women and as men frequently have their own internal hierarchies of power and privilege. Interviews with male gamers could indicate what drives some gamers to harass others, why others avoid this, and how this affects individual players' experiences. In particular, comparing sexist gamers to those who do not take on aggressive personas or who serve as allies to marginalized players can indicate how these more diverse expressions of could be encouraged.

Finally, future research should move outside of a Western context. Although interviewees for this study were recruited online in an attempt to court diverse experiences, most of them were American and those who were not primarily came from other Western countries. This limits the scope of possible conclusions to this area. However, places like Japan have extensive game cultures that differ in many ways from Western game culture. For instance, Japanese games often contain more androgynous characters than Western games do, focusing less on heavily muscled, hypermasculine men. Because of this, they may have different gender relations among players that could provide guidelines for change or greater equality in the US context or could present unique challenges of their own. These should be explored in order to provide a higher-level view of power structures and gender hierarchies in gaming and technological cultures more broadly.

Final Thoughts

Although this dissertation focuses on a masculinized technology where other media researchers have analyzed feminized media, one large takeaway from the project can be

expressed in a minimally modified quote from Radway— “What is needed, I have come to feel, is a recognition that [female gamers] are themselves struggling with gender definitions and sexual politics on their own terms and that what they may need most from those of us struggling in other arenas is our support rather than our criticism or direction” (1991, p. 18). Women’s experiences in the post-casual era demonstrate that hegemonic structures of gaming, like in any other sphere, are pervasive and persistent, difficult to change quickly due to the forces that police them. At the same time, women and other marginalized gamers are using the flexibility and uncertainty of the post-casual era to push for greater power in an area where they have long been marginalized. What can ensure they succeed, instead of being overwhelmed by the forces and ideologies that try to return gaming to its masculinized roots, is greater recognition of their importance and help in expressing that more widely. A crisis of authority is an inherently uncertain moment. Change can occur, or the pure force the hegemonic class deploys can maintain their power. At the current moment, it is impossible to predict which direction the post-casual era will end up taking, although, like my participants, I see a number of encouraging trends occurring alongside problems with sexism and misogyny.

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