

GRIEFING:
POLICING MASCULINITY IN ONLINE GAMES

by
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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Despite the rise in participation and economic importance of online games as a media phenomenon, ever-growing virtual worlds that seemingly exist as “third places” for social interaction and relationship formation, there is little research on the experiences of gamers with harassment, discrimination, and hate speech. Though changes in the industry serve as evidence of shifting attitudes about female, GLBTQ, and non-white gamers, harassment and use of hate speech based on sex and sexual orientation continue to flourish unchecked in online games. This study explores the prevalence of homophobia and sexism in online games as expressed through “griefing” behavior used to police competitive spaces traditionally dominated by white, heterosexual men. This thesis employs qualitative research methods to illuminate the persisting homophobia, sexism, and racism as experienced by gamers in online console and PC games.

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For my parents, who purchased my first computer, gifted me video games as a child, taught me to celebrate difference, and supported me in pursuit of my dreams through the best and worst of times.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In February of 2009, Teresa was harassed mercilessly on Xbox Live for identifying herself as a lesbian in her profile. Upon appealing to Microsoft for aid, Teresa was told players found her sexual orientation “offensive” and was banned from Xbox Live for violating their terms of use (Marco, 2009). As stated in the Xbox Live Terms of Use in early 2009:

A member may not create a gamertag or use text in other profile fields that include comments that look, sound like, stand for, hint at, abbreviate, or insinuate content of a potentially sexual nature. Profiles that do are asked to change the language and suspended until changes are made. In regards to sexual orientation, for gamertags or profiles we do not allow expression of any type of orientation, be that hetero or other. Players can, however, self identify in voice communication where context is more easily explained to all players involved (Marco 2009).

Xbox changed their policy in March 2010 and players may now openly express their sexual orientation, gender, race, and ethnicity in gamertags and profiles, evidence of shifting attitudes about these online identities. However, harassment and use of hate speech based on sex, race, and sexual orientation continues to flourish in online games. This study explores the prevalence of homophobia, racism, and sexism in online games as expressed through “griefing” behavior used to police competitive spaces traditionally dominated by white, heterosexual men. This thesis employs qualitative research methods to illuminate the persisting homophobia, sexism and racism that are experienced by gamers in online console and PC games.

Video games are a cultural phenomenon of increasing relevance, with millions of players in North American alone (Williams et al., 2009). They are no longer toys for children, as those of us who grew up with video games matured to adulthood, as digital games grow in complexity and sophistication, as the game development industry grows in economic importance, and as ever-increasing numbers adopt video games as an essential recreational and social activity. The majority of adults 18 and older (53%) play video games and 21% of gamers play daily or almost daily (Lenhart et al., 2008). Today's adults play more than previous generations, propelling the video game industry to \$7.4 billion in U.S. sales in 2006 (Williams et al., 2009). According to the Entertainment Software Association, by 2006 the percentage of frequent gamers that played online had risen to 44 percent, from 19 percent in 2000 (Castronova, 2007). Computer games as a pastime are now an acceptable mainstream activity. They are played in the privacy of homes on computers and game consoles, in public on cell phones and handhelds, on planes, at the office, in schools. Over the next generation, millions more will play.

Industry statistics indicate that the average age of video gamers is rising by about one year each year (Castronova, 2007), players average age in the thirties now, and older players log more hours than their younger counterparts (Williams et al., 2009). It seems that once people start playing, most don't stop, particularly as the games mature with them. We are potentially witnessing an exodus from "real life" (RL), a migration of economic, political, social and cultural activity. *World of Warcraft* became the world's most popular massively-multiplayer online game (MMO) in 2007, reporting as many players as the populations of Sweden or Bolivia (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008), and its

subscribers spend an average of twenty hours a week playing (Yee, 2006). Online technologies allow for a wide range of social activities, including research, chat rooms, file exchanges, correspondence, blogging, playing in virtual worlds, and others. Recent trends suggest all games will be going online within a very few years, and when they do, will likely acquire their own societal dimension and culture (Castronova, 2007).

There is now a significant body of research on violence in video games (Dill et al., 2005, Jenkins & Cassell, 1998; Frasca, 2010; Prensky, 2010; Squire, 2006) and depictions of gender representation (Ivory, 2009; Williams et al., 2009). Ethnographic and experimental investigations of player communities have explored the social dynamics in video games (Taylor, 2006). Online games have been recognized as containing virtual economic systems that bleed into real life (Castronova, 2005, 2007). Digital games are being explored as educational tools (Prensky, 2010; Squire, 2006), as well as tools for military training. Digital game research has resulted from a wide interdisciplinary collaboration. Our current understanding of games, players, and the social and cultural structures surrounding them stem from influences originating in the humanities, psychology, computer science, software engineering, social sciences, education, and economics, to name a few.

Online games are vibrant sites of culture, and digital gaming is not a fashion likely to fade soon. Video games are far too lucrative for that. Given their ever-growing popularity, it is important to recognize the multilayered nature of culture and social life in virtual worlds. With the advent of the internet in the mid-1990s, video game development companies have taken advantage of the advancements in networking technology to introduce a new breed of online games now available to a larger

demographic with high speed internet connections. According to the Entertainment Software Association, by 2006 the percentage of frequent gamers that played online had risen to 44 percent, from 19 percent in 2000 (Castronova, 2007). Recent trends suggest all games will be going online within a very few years (Castronova, 2007). Players do more than chat or simply talk to others in these digital environments. Much like RL, there exist rich layers in online communities; as a result we need to avoid oversimplifying or minimizing the depth of social life in virtual space (Taylor, 2006). Digital games go the mechanics of game play, and also include role-playing, community formation, official and unofficial social and political structures, and narrative immersion. Upon immersion in a virtual world, we are no longer interfacing with computer but with “culture encoded in digital form” (Manovich, 2001).

Video games are unique in offering real time interactivity and social life. Much like real life, in which cultural and social constructions of identity are imperfect and often marginalizing, these constructions carry into online culture. Given that the topic of this thesis involves social and game interactions among players, it’s important to briefly to address the concept of interactivity. In *New Media: The Key Concepts*, Nicholas Gane and David Beer (2008) describe this term:

Interactivity is one of the most frequently used concepts in new media theory. It is often invoked as a benchmark for differentiating ‘new’ digital media from ‘older’ analogue forms, and for this reason it is not unusual to find new media referred to as interactive media. But herein lies the problem: in spite of the almost ubiquitous presence of this concept in commentaries on new media it is not always clear

what makes media interactive or what is meant exactly by the term interactivity.

(p. 87)

Though interactivity is an important topic in new media studies, its definition and relevance remain topics of debate. Manovich (2001) omits the term “interactive” from his discussions of new media, referencing it as mythological. Interactivity in new media, according to Manovich, is impossible because the consumer’s actions are dictated by finite paths established by the producer. However, according to Henry Jenkins (2006) interactivity plays a large part in what he refers to as “convergence culture.”

Convergence culture references the intersections of new technologies, such as blogs and social networking, which allow for fluid role shifts between producers and consumers. In *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Jenkins (2006) describes convergence culture as a complex set of practices integrating the interests of both consumers/fans and media/big business. In new media a constant tension exists between producers and the audience, the roles often reversing, giving rise to fan-driven knowledge cultures. New media artifacts include both consumer and producer created objects and culture, which are both consumer and producer controlled.

In regard to online games, interactivity is undeniably important to understanding and exploring them. On the one hand, in the spirit of Manovich, they are worlds largely limited by the programming code defining them, which is produced and controlled by the gaming industry. Players are led down narrow paths and challenged with finite decisions with limited effects. On the other hand, consumers engage in tactics to circumvent the limitations of the game code, through mods and hacks, and also assume a critical role in

defining the unofficial ethics and practices prevalent in established online gaming communities.

Obviously, game developers want to capitalize on whatever interactivity gamers experience since they profit from creating virtual institutions consumers will find appealing. Virtual world development combines game design and community formation. Designers create social order and rules by which the society operates, essentially writing public policy (Castronova, 2007). The policies and procedures regulating virtual worlds have become standardized, evolving through trial and error. Company enforced and socially enforced virtual world policies have assumed semblance of ministries of constitutional affairs, education, war, economics, social affairs, employment, law, and justice. For the most part, these policies work. They have increasingly and successfully motivated citizens of real-world governments to opt for virtual worlds much of the time, where most everybody enjoys themselves (Castronova, 2007).

In examinations of online gaming communities and in-game interactivity, ethnographic and interview studies have reflected family-like dynamics and complex hierarchies among active gamer “guilds” (Taylor, 2006; Williams et al., 2006). MMOs have a culture, language and customs of their own (Corneliussen & Rettberg, 2008). Similar to other media, digital games offer stories, sounds, visual stimulation and movement. However, they also offer community, interactivity, challenge, tactile sensations, and experiences of fear, achievement and success. Online games contain social communities, most of which seemingly exist as “third places” for social interaction and relationship formation (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). MMOs are always accessible and the player’s characters, graphically represented by avatars, develop and

change as they participate in long-term social relationships with other players, making online games vibrant sites of community (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Persistent worlds or massively-multiplayer online games can accommodate thousands of players simultaneously. While they started decades ago with multi-user dungeons (MUDs) and text-based games, they've grown in complexity with the increasing sophistication of computer and networking technology. They evolved into graphically rich, immersing fantastical places where players can acquire virtual career, marry, and acquire property, form guilds and collectives.

Online games are highly interactive 3D graphical spaces accessible online through computer-application interfaces. Virtual worlds can be said to contain three characteristics: community, commerce, and collaboration. Assuming the form of an avatar, a digital representation of themselves, in either human or non-human form, they can wander virtual spaces, overcome challenges, build virtual wealth, engage in combat, and communicate with other graphically represented players. As of 2007 there were more than 100 virtual worlds online (Barnes, 2007), of different genres (ex. fantasy, science fiction, western, etc.) and dictated by different rules, encoded by the world design. Players in online games are often encouraged to work in teams and develop combat strategies as groups. Buying and selling in virtual currency is also very common and encouraged. Collaboration, community and currency serve as key elements supporting virtual societies in online games. However, despite the amazing experiences made possible by these computer encoded spaces, these worlds are made up of real life humans, who bring with them their own virtues and flaws.

The gendered nature of this digital citizenship has been highly specific. Until very recently, video games were understood to be created by and for male audiences (Fron et al., 2007; Ray, 2004; Cassell & Jenkins, 1999). However, video games have been increasingly marketed to demographics previously ignored by the gaming industry, including women, racially, and/or sexually diverse audiences. Despite the growing popularity of video games, research analyzing of diverse gamer experiences is limited. There is little research on resistance and conflict in online communities to a diversifying audience in what has traditionally been a very male heterosexual white-centered space. The video game market has been mainly defined by industry assumptions about gamers, and often offers stereotypes about their target audience, that they are homophobic, for example, as an excuse for not including more diverse content. A significant body of work has been done analyzing violence in video games (Dill et al., 2005, Jenkins & Cassell, 1998; Frasca, 2010; Prensky, 2010; Squire, 2006) and depictions of gender representation (Ivory, 2009; Williams et al., 2009). Ethnographic and experimental investigations of player communities have explored the social dynamics in video games (Taylor, 2006), but information about harassment and discrimination within virtual communities is scant.

Nevertheless, interactivity has negative aspects. “Punks,” “griefers,” and “spoil sports” continue to roam these spaces in mass, wrecking havoc and seeking to ruin the experience for other players. Game companies have largely struggled ineffectually to regulate the phenomenon of grief-play, the subject of this thesis. Online games have raised new ethical questions about the rights and responsibilities of members of these online communities, creating friction between the players roaming these spaces and the

gaming industry which that houses them. The challenges surrounding the creation of order in virtual society are similar to their real world equivalents. Given the popularity of online games, it's important to understand the mechanisms of these evolving isolated societies. Virtual worlds possess language variations, unique cultural values, symbols, policies, and economics, closely resembling these structures off-line. With a greater variety of tools at our disposal, brought on by advances in technology, people are now able to form, manipulate, conceive and express their realities in different ways. However, construction of identity offline is carried with us as we assume new identities online. This thesis specifically addresses the mechanisms of gender construction evident in online grieving.

Video games provide a new medium in which gender and sexuality can be studied. In this thesis I specifically address the phenomenon of grieving and how grieving reflects hegemonic masculinity. Grieferers are the anti-social troublemakers in virtual worlds, acting as violent team-killers, virtual rapists, ninja looters, and corpse campers. Although this thesis focuses on the negative aspects of grieving, grieferers can sometimes be activists, white knights, and heroes. Grieferers are not cheaters or aggressive players striving for game achievements, sometimes frustrating their opponents as a result. A grieferer deliberately irritates and harasses other players for the grieferer's own enjoyment, and not for ludic gain, such as to obtain experience, items and/or virtual currency. Griefing can manifest as hate speech, raids on peaceful gatherings, unprovoked violence, or theft of virtual currency or items. While not covered in detail in this thesis, grieferers are also protectors, activists, and punishers of other grieferers. Video games, as intersections of sports and technology where masculinity is constructed and reinforced,

are reproducing very limited notions of gender, reinforcing the sexual objectification of women. This thesis critically analyses how videogames can reinforce negative gender ideologies through practices of grieving.

At the time of writing this thesis, I am a 36-year-old lesbian woman, and inarguably part of the demographic affected by the policing masculinities in online games. I stand in a complex space with respect to my research. I was an early adopter of online games, journeying first into bulletin board systems (BBSs) and multi-user dungeons (MUDs) available to me via dial-modem in the 1980s. My father and older brother, both identifiable as “nerds” before the concept was fully framed in mainstream culture and media, introduced me to computers, video games, and virtual communities at a young age. I first began immersing myself in the world of online communities and computer games at the age of 10. This early exposure played a critical role in shaping the rest of my life.

From my early experience with BBSs and MUDs, being a woman in these first online communities was a rarity. Girl gamers and female participants in the first text-based communities on local BBSs were instant celebrities, if able to prove their real life gender through their associations with other members of these communities or at in-person get-togethers. We were immediately subject to significant attention, often in the form of flirtation and/or derision. Online culture was a world predominantly populated by educated young white men, many of whom struggled with their masculinity and relationships with women off-line. These struggles were often projected on the few of us women and girls who took to roaming these spaces.

However, these early experiences prepared me well for a near two-decade long career in technology. I started out working part-time in technical support while in high school, as it certainly paid better than retail and fast-food. I took positions designing and programming for the web after college, working myself up to management positions overseeing web development teams and online products in education and the media industry. Most of my co-workers, teammates and employees closely resembled the men I counted as friends and rivals in the online communities I had visited as a pre-teen and teenager. I struggled as a lesbian woman against the elitism, privilege, and misogyny I regularly encountered in the IT and web departments I served in over the years. I also proudly, if contradictorily, counted myself as one of that community.

Though I have since left my career in technology to pursue academia, I continue to play computer games, online and off-line. I've watched as online communities have increasingly grown diverse, as more woman, gaymers, and gamers of color have wandered into the virtual world. However, assumptions about these spaces as extensions of white male heterosexual masculinity persist, in many ways still subject to the rules unofficially set into place when online communities first began to form in the 1980s. It is my personal experience with these worlds, the online gaming world as well as the world of technology, as well as my personal experience with grieving and discrimination, that inspires this work.

Thesis Overview

The core of thesis is organized around defining grieving, discussing the construction and performance of hegemonic masculinity in sports, cultures of high technology, and video games, and finally the experiences of players with grief-play. In

Chapter II of this thesis I define the phenomenon of griefing in online games. This includes differentiating griefing from cheating, as the two are often equated in existing research on anti-social behavior in MMOs. Unlike cheating, griefing does not serve to advance griefers in the game. Griefing intentionally causes harm and upset to other players in the game with no ludic benefit. I will outline the types of griefing and a review of research into the motivations for griefing and antisocial behavior in online games.

In Chapter III, I discuss how video games are spaces where hegemonic masculinities are constructed and performed. In this chapter I locate video games in the context of sports and nerd culture, places traditionally dominated by masculine gender performance. I will review how sexist, racist, and homophobic ideologies are used in such masculinized spaces to reinforce mainstream gender constructions. Sports and video games teach men that violence is an acceptable resolution for conflict. In sports, cultures of technology, and video games, white heterosexual men can relate to one another in ways that reinforce hegemonic masculinity. The military also serves as a culture structured around traditional gender construction and has crossover with computer games. However, I don't pursue an analysis of military culture in this thesis. Men who excel in athletics and high tech fields of science and technology are able to demonstrate their male superiority. In the next chapter I argue that video games, like sports and cultures of science and technology, exist as spaces for performing and constructing masculinity. As an intersection of these cultures, video games exist as spaces of masculinity.

In Chapter IV of this thesis I outline my methodology for the ethnographic study of gamers' experiences with griefing. Video games have cultures unique to these spaces,

which overlap with real world ideologies, identities and perspectives. I pursued a multi-site ethnographic approach which involves ethnographic interviews while in-game, over chat, over email, in-person, as well as over the phone. In Chapter V I detail my findings, recounting the player's experiences with griefing and grief-play. And finally, Chapter VI discusses how griefing and gender construction intersect, as well as how conversations about griefing could be expanded through future research. While each chapter of my thesis addresses a different body of theoretical concerns, woven throughout is the core framework: defining griefing, gender construction in competitive spaces, and player experience with griefing.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bullets whiz past your head. Zombie corpses riddled with shotgun pellets lie in a trail behind you. You're well on your way to beating your own zombie kill record in Valve's *Left 4 Dead 2*. You're unstoppable. Then, suddenly, the color washes from your screen and you're staring into the gray sky above you, victim of a stealth kill by your own teammate. Furious, you wait to re-spawn as your traitorous teammate mocks and berates you over the chat channel. You've just been grieved. In this context, a griefer ("grief" in the sense of "giving someone grief") is a player who intentionally and repeatedly harasses other players in online games. Griefing can include nonstrategic violence against other players, sending insulting and obscene chat messages, raiding peaceful gatherings, and a long list of other anti-social, play-ruining tactics. There is no doubt that griefing has an impact. As many as twenty-five percent of game customer support calls deal specifically with griefing (Davies, 2006).

If you've played online multiplayer games at any length then you've likely your own stories and experiences with grief-play. Definitions of griefing vary widely and the term is often used synonymously with "trolling" and "cyber-bullying." According to Stephen Davis, CEO of IT Global Services:

Anytime people get together, there is going to be someone who abuses the environment... There's always the annoying guy at the party who saddles up to all the women, when you sit down to play a game of cards and someone cheats, its people playing political games in the office. That's all griefing. It's the dark side

of human interaction. It just becomes newsworthy in these cases because these online environments are still a novelty. (Girard, 2007)

The term griefing has been used to identify online pranks intended to cause distress, or inflict intentional harm, such as posting seizure-inducing images on epilepsy forums (Poulsen, 2008), bullying classmates on social networking sites (Ward, 2011), or posting offensive comments on online memorial pages (Cutler, 2011). Trolling, cyber-bullying, harassment and hate speech encountered throughout the web likely have much in common. The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature on, and definitions of, these forms of behavior in order to construct a definition of griefing as harassment in online games and computer/video game forums.

As described earlier in this thesis, griefing has long existed as a common occurrence in virtual worlds, an assumption supported by my ethnographic data. Debate continues over what constitutes and what motivates griefing. Griefing is often equated with cheating and mischief-making. As one interview participant described it, “Some people are more interested in fucking with other people than playing the game.” Griefing is used as an umbrella term for so many behaviors in game, it borders on being useless as a concept. Over the course of my research, I encountered descriptions of griefing equated with cheating tactics in-game, mods and hacks manipulating the game world, verbal and “physical” harassment, and random acts of violence. A griefer is not simply another player you dislike or disagree with. A griefer participates in specific behaviors for specific reasons. Working out this definition with the interview participants was vital to the project. I spent considerable time with the gamers distinguishing between griefers, cheaters, and generally disliked players:

L4D Player: I hate the term ‘griefing.’ One of my friends calls anyone he hates a ‘griever.’ If they play badly, they’re a griever. If someone is just a jerk, they’re a griever.

For this reason, I invest a portion of this thesis to defining and describing the phenomenon for the purpose of analysis. When players’ actions disrupt the play experience of others for personal enjoyment, with no in-game benefit, with the intention of causing distress and upset, this is “griefing.”

Griefers are generally characterized as anti-social deviants in virtual worlds, the online version of bullies or spoilsports. In its negative manifestation, a griever deliberately irritates and harasses other players for the griever’s own enjoyment, generally for no personal gain, such as to obtain experience, items and/or virtual currency. Griefing can manifest as spamming communication channels, game exploits disrupting play, strategically-impractical attacks on other players, hate speech, behavior intended to annoy and frustrate other players, or theft of virtual currency or items. Griefers are described as ninja looters, n00b baiters, corpse campers, and kill stealers (Dibbell, 2008). Griefers are a particular nuisance in online gaming communities, since their behavior often cannot be punished or deterred by the rules of the game or managed effectively by the game companies.

Except for the use of mod chips and the distribution of pirated software, the game industry has little concern for players cheating in off-line games. In fact, the game industry has financially benefited from the publication of walkthroughs and guides to help players succeed in the game (Consalvo, 2007). However, in online multiplayer

games cheating and griefing can result in both security and public relations issues. Cheating reveals code glitches, can negatively impact non-cheaters, and can potentially damage the popularity of a game, thus hurting sales. Game companies continue to struggle with combating cheating and griefing in online games. Strategies implemented to manage griefing and cheating by game administrators, development companies, and online communities are outlined later in this chapter.

To begin with the cheater needs to be distinguished from the griefer. The griefer may use cheats and cheating tactics ludically, but with the central goal of eliciting a reaction from other players. The cheater derives pleasure from using game cheats, but for the purpose of progressing further or gaining advantage in-game. Cheaters want to win and acquire status through the acquisition of power in the game world. According to Mia Consalvo (2007) most of the players she interviewed drew little distinction between griefing and cheating – both activities were considered unethical by most players, though what constituted cheating and griefing varied. Both cheating and griefing drew negative reactions from those players who abide by a code of conduct in online play. While there may exist conflict in gaming communities between the definitions of cheating and griefing, this study distinguishes between the two phenomena.

Foo and Koivisto (2004) define griefing in online games as “play styles that disrupt another player’s gaming experience, usually with specific intention. When the act is not specifically intended to disrupt and yet the actor is the sole beneficiary, it is greed play, a subtle form of grief play.” Greed play, however, is not always necessary grief-play. Many gamers would consider gold farming, the farming and selling of gold to players who are said not to “earn it,” a form of cheating, as these acts result in significant

ludic gain for the buyers of farmed gold. The motivation for exploiting the game world by purchasing gold is primarily to gain advantage and power within the game – not to cause grief or anguish to other players. Interestingly, game companies and legal systems have been quicker to respond to these ambiguous forms of cheating than they have to grief-play. In South Korea, where online gaming is immensely popular, virtual theft has been added to the country's criminal code. Hackers who steal game items or access to accounts to be sold on a black market are routinely prosecuted in court (Anderssen, 2009).

Many researchers and gamers equate griefing with cheating, violations of game rules or game world structures (Chesney et al., 2009). The rules of a video or computer game are contained within the game structure or game code. The engine which drives play determines what the players can and cannot do, such as where they can explore, how they can interact with other players, monsters, and non-player characters, what challenges they must overcome to advance. Play style and cheating tactics can differ significantly between game types and genres. The game itself embodies the rules and, for some players, the game world is defined according to the game code. These players want to experience the game as intended by the developers and play not permitted by the game structure is “out of bounds.”

However, some players define the game situation more broadly. These players employ hacks and mods, exploit game code glitches, con players, and engage in a wide range of activities outside the intended play structured by the game code. As Mia Consalvo's 2007 study puts it:

Cheating can be enjoyable and playful, both in the act of getting ahead as well as perhaps in the knowledge of besting other players in some way. Many such players see digital games as a space apart from ‘real life’ consequences, and so cheating is divorced from the fallout of what would happen if the person cheated in some way in daily life (p. 127).

These players considered cheating and griefing as contextual experiences. The rules dictating limitations in game-space are separate from those in real life.

Griefing Origins

With the advent of increasingly powerful personal computers being brought home, it was only of matter time before someone connected one to a telephone. In Chicago, during the Great Blizzard of 1978, Randy Suess and Ward Chistensen (who later developed the Xmodem file transfer protocol) began preliminary work on a their own computerized BBS, which was made public the following year. Cyberspace pioneers like them used microcomputers and some creative programming to build CBBS (Computer Bulletin Board System), turning home computers into communication devices. It didn’t take long for the idea to light a fire and spread through the personal computing community.

Once logged in, users had access to public bulletins, electronic messages, and file exchanges. Early BBSes only had one phone line, so users had to wait for people to log-off before they could access the board. Most local BBSes were operated by private hobbyists known as SysOp’s or System Operators. These systems were often located in homes or rental spaces, some with specialized hardware, multitasking software, or local area networks (LAN) for multiple phone lines allowing simultaneous log-ins and real-

time chat. Eventually, a number of special interest boards joined the ranks. Boards could be found for most every hobby and interest, including politics, religion, personals, music and alternative lifestyles. Many BBSes carried themes, reflected in their names and on their welcome screens. Common themes included castles, dungeons, space ships, pirate ships, sanatoriums and circuses. Some “elite” or “warez” boards exclusively offered pirated software and required membership in order to exclude law enforcement (“lamers”).

In the 1980s, door games, both single and multi-player, drew early online players. Bulletin Board System Doors allowed users to communicate with external programs, such as games, so games offered through BBSes were often referred to as “door games.” Many BBSes with multiple phone lines, for simultaneous logins, offered ASCII text-based games which allowed users to compete or interact with one other in virtual environments. A community and subculture of online gamers developed around text-based multi-user games, which were significantly influenced by pen-and-paper role-playing games (RPGS) such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. These virtual worlds were known as MUDs.

MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons, Multi-User Dimensions or Multi-User Domains), better known as the Essex MUD or MUD1 in later years, were entirely text-based. Players read descriptions of the environment, other players, NPCs (non-player characters), and events. MUDs were labyrinthine role-playing games in which characters assume the identity of avatars, much like massively multi-player online games today. They combined role-playing, interactive fiction, and online chat. Traditional MUDs were fantasy worlds populated by fictional races and creatures, many controlled by the players,

similar to *Dungeons & Dragons*. However, themes and rules varied significantly. The object of the MUDs were to explore the virtual world, complete quests, kill monsters, and advance player created characters. According to Bartle, “The game was originally little more than a series of interconnected locations where you could move and chat” (1990). The importance of Trubshaw and Bartle’s experiment is not just its contribution to gaming but its introduction to a new era in multi-user virtual worlds, which brought with it the phenomenon of online griefing. MUDs quickly became active social communities, where friendships formed and relationships blossomed. Most MUDs offered forum-like boards where the players discussed topics both related and unrelated to the virtual world. In the 1990s, the first graphical multi-user games were created, such as *Meridian 59* (1995), *Ultima Online* (1997), *Lineage* (1998) and *EverQuest* (1999).

The term “griefing” dates to the late 1990s when it was used to describe the “willfully antisocial behaviors” experienced and witnessed in games such as Electronic Arts *Ultima Online* and *Counter-Strike* (Dibbell, 2008). However, the behaviors associated with griefing can be traced to MUDs. It wasn’t long before many of these online multiplayer communities descended into anarchy, with players taunting n00bs, harassing other players, killing, stealing, and generally behaving badly. The infamous “rape” in the online community LambdaMOO, first discussed by Dibbell (1993), involved a player using the alias “Bungle,” who utilized subprograms to sexually assault two other characters in the online world. The cyber-rape shocked members of the online community and caused emotional harm to the victims. While one could argue that the victims experienced no real physical harm, Dibbell’s portrayal reflects significant distress

experienced by the players targeted by Bungle, as well as turmoil in the close-knit community.

Types of Griefing

There are a variety of forms of griefing in computer games. The practices can vary widely depending on the game structure and the game genre. A griefer may be a powerful player, a vandal, an activist, or even a game administrator. While many cheating and griefing methods can be used in both online and off-line games, such as game hacks, mods, and code glitch exploitations, online games include tactics which involve other players. For example, a griefer might dominate text and audio communication channels with taunts and hate speech. However, not all griefers are rude or antisocial. Griefers can also be tricksters gaming the rules of the environment, violating unwritten social standards. I will be discussing four types of grief-play: 1) Random acts of violence; 2) N00b hunting; 3) White-knighting and politically-motivated; 4) Harassment and hate speech. While there is overlap in the tactics used across these categories, in this section I describe these types of griefing as distinct categories as they each refer to specific forms of griefing with unique characteristics, distressing the victims in different ways.

1. Random acts of violence

An award nominated episode of the animated television program *South Park*, which featured the MMO *World of Warcraft* depicted griefing as excessive, random, non-strategic violence against other players (Gregson, 2007). Unnecessary and extreme exploitation of in-game parameters to commit violence against other players is a common form of grief-play. Often griefers understand the game well enough to exploit

ambiguities in the rules to the detriment of other players (Koster, 2005) and employ potent in-game characters with the capacity to wreak havoc on others. Luring batches of monsters, which are programmed to attack nearby players, into areas of the game populated by others (referred to as “training”) is also a common tactic for causing confusion and harm to others for no personal gain. This unproductive game violence often benefits from a power imbalance, with the griefer wielding more than the victims in the form of game knowledge or advantage. However, suicide attacks and friendly-fire are also common forms of violent griefing. While griefing differs from game to game, some common violent griefing tactics include: killing other players, with no in-game benefit; team-killing, friendly-fire or intentional actions interfering with own team’s success, such as “feeding” (helping the other team by purposively dying or exploiting team resources; “training” and “t-bagging” and other rituals of sexual humiliation.

2. N00b Hunting

New and less experienced players, often referred to as “n00bs” (an evolution of the term “newbies”), are common victims of griefers seeking to disrupt play experience. Versions of “n00b hunting” can manifest as calling n00bs out in global communication channels on their lack of skill; guiding them to dangerous areas of the game map, only to abandon them to certain death; and corpse camping, where griefers “camp” near the corpse of a player’s avatar, only to repeatedly kill them as they attempt to re-enter the game. The griefer receives only a small reward in experience, but the victim is prevented from continuing play (Warner & Raiter, 2005). Effectively griefing new players requires a significant power imbalance. Griefers who prey on n00bs are often highly experienced with the mechanics and narrative aspects of the game, and are often wielding avatars with

clout and advantages surpassing the beginners they target. Again, n00b hunting does not necessarily benefit the griefer with experience or in-game currency and, in fact, requires a time commitment on the part of the griefer. The goal of guiding inexperienced players to unsafe areas of the map or corpse camping is to ruin the play experience of another gamer. Existing research on cheating and griefing (Kendall, 2002; Consalvo, 2007) reveals that some griefers feel entitled to haze beginner players. Their experience and competency allots them elite status, and players unaware of popular griefing tactics or possessing limited in-game resources are deserving of harassment. Types of n00b baiting include, but are not limited to: spawn or corpse camping, interfering with a low-level character's re-entry to play; exploiting game mechanics to interfere with a character's ability to move or access in-game resources; and n00b baiting, such as conning new and inexperienced players, causing them harm or loss of virtual property.

3. White-Knighting and Politically-Motivated Griefing

There are instances of griefing-the-griefers, where gamers use the same tactics utilized by griefers to exact justice and impede players who are causing distress, which I refer to as "white-knighting." There are also examples of politically motivated griefing in online games. A group protesting US military action named Velvet Strike placed spray painted graphics containing anti-war messages in Valve's *Counter-Strike* and provided strategies for disrupting violent game play on their website (King, 2002). An artist named deLappe, opposed to U.S. government's involvement in Iraq, spammed the names of people who were killed in the war in the U.S. Army online game *America's Army* (deLappe, 2006). "I do not participate in the proscribed mayhem. Rather, I stand in position and type until I am killed. After death, I hover over my dead avatar's body and

continue to type. Upon being re-incarnated in the next round, I continue the cycle” (deLappe, 2006). Political griefing is intended to disrupt the play of others, generally as a distraction, for no personal in-game advantage. However, political griefing is often motivated by a political message or moral aim. Politically-motivated and white-knighting grief-play can include: spamming communications channels with political messages; engaging in multiple forms of grief-play against a griefer; and graphically “spray-painting” areas of the game with political messages.

4. Harassment and Hate Speech

The Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab released video of an art project in March, 2011 which documented hate speech based on race, gender, religion, and sexual orientation encountered in online game forums and during play of Bungie’s *Halo: Reach*. GAMBIT staff and students narrated transcripts of in-game reactions to players with gamertags assuming African American, Muslim, and gay identities, as well as a transcript of forum conversations about gender. As expressed on the GAMBIT Hate Speech Project website: “Some of the interactions we noted were outright hateful and confrontational, some were much more subtle and insidious, and some were positive. Our aim is not to demonize the individuals spouting examples of hate speech; none of the content reveals any personal information. Our goal is to show how commonplace it is” (Gambit, 2011).

According to Gordon Walton, head of online services for *Ultima Online*, “There are all kinds of virtual assaults where people are basically confronted in ways they didn’t think possible. Sexual stuff, racial stuff. You name it and it’s happened” (Pham, 2002). Walton wouldn’t even tell his wife about some of the grief-play he encountered in *Ultima*

Online, he found it so offensive (Pham, 2002). Griefing can be regarded as an extension of bullying, abuse, and harassment. Substantial research has found that victims of bullying, harassment and abuse experienced fear, frustration, anger, and stress (Chesney et al., 2009). In the case of online harassment, griefing can assume the form of bullying. This type of grief-play includes: use of racist, sexist and homophobic rhetoric; and insulting, taunting and berating other players.

Motivations for Griefing

Research on griefing is in its infancy. What research there is focuses primarily on motivations behind griefing. In this section I divide existing research into the motivations for grief-play broken into four categories: 1) anonymity, 2) mischief, 3) psychology, and 4) elitism.

1. Anonymity

Early cyberspace researchers pointed to anonymity and freedom from real life constraints as the cause for online antisocial behavior (Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Consalvo, 2007; Smith et al., 1998). Today, most research centers on the concept of anonymity as the cause for grief-play and online deviant behavior. Without traditional identity markers, it's difficult to ensure repercussions for griefing. Bowyer (1982) argues that anonymity both makes it more difficult to punish grievers and increases the likelihood of it occurring. So gamers, who may not engage in forms of antisocial behavior off-line, do so enthusiastically online. Without the cultural, legal and social restraints and deterrents found off-line, gamers are eager to push such boundaries in virtual environments. Consalvo's (2007) research on cheating in video games revealed that cheating players felt emboldened by the anonymity of online environments.

According to Patricia T. O’Conner, co-author of *You Send Me* (2002), the anonymity of online worlds encourages people to behave and communicate in ways they wouldn’t in real life. “Because of the anonymity that online writing affords, people get away with behaviors they couldn’t in the real world. What’s the worst that could happen?” (Pham, 2002).

Much work on negative behavior during computer mediated communication has focused on deindividuation. Deindividuation is a concept in social psychology regarding the loosening of social norms in groups. Theories of deindividuation propose that it is a psychological state of decreased self-evaluation causing anti-normative and uninhibited behavior (Diener et al., 1980). Deindividuation theory seeks to provide an explanation for a variety of anti-normative collective behavior, such as violent crowds and lynch mobs. Deindividualization theory proposes that players lacking identity, such as people immersed in a crowd, are more likely to reject moral behavior and social norms (Chesney et al., 2009). However, meta-analysis of deindividuation studies have concluded no support for increased anti-normative behavior due to anonymity or deindividuation in online environments. In fact, deindividuated individuals seem more likely to go along with group behavior, while identified individuals were more likely to engage in deviant behavior and irrational action (Chesney et al., 2009). Anonymity alone is not a sufficient explanation for griefing in online games.

2. Psychology

According to Yulan Liao, M.D., a psychiatrist at the Kaiser Permanente San Francisco Medical Center, there are possible psychological explanations for grief-play (Sid, 2007). She argues that some griefers may be suffering from serious psychological

disorders. These disorders include antisocial personality disorder, impulse control problems, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and psychotic disorders. Psychological conditions could impact players' ability to feel empathy, control their actions, or heighten their stress-level, all resulting in deviant online behavior. However, no research exploring how common such conditions are among the gamer population exists, so it's difficult to gauge the role psychological disorders play in motivating grief-play online.

3. Mischief

Often simple mischief is theorized as the root of griefing. Consalvo (2007) found that for some players cheating was the act of "...breaking the fundamental rules of the game, thereby ruining the enjoyment of others, or utterly destroying the challenge of the game" (p. 101). Griefing here is a ludic activity, a game played within a game. Grievers motivated by mischief derive enjoyment from challenging the social and structural rules governing virtual environments. The challenge goes far beyond the objects of the game itself, but rather rests in pushing the boundaries of what constitutes "play." Mischief motivated grievers thus reject the rules governing the behavior of other players, and measure success according to the volume and extent of disruption they can cause.

4. Elitism

For some players their prowess at gaming and their superiority over other players earns them the right to grief other players. In Yee's (2002) study of MMO player motivations, he found that grievers sought attention, elite status, and achievement through competition. In Consalvo's 2007 study on griefing in video games, some players pointed to their prowess in gaming, declaring that elite and superior players felt they had earned

the right to create their own rules. Similar to the motivation of mischief, elite gamers who grief have surpassed the built in challenges offered by the game and turn to gaming other players for enjoyment. Such players express disdain for lesser-skilled players (Consalvo, 2007). Much like hackers, these griefers often use game exploits and the logics of the code to demonstrate superiority over other players. For some this may be confrontational, such as berating other players on their lack of skill or targeting less experienced players over chat channels. Less confrontational tactics may include unethical acquisition of skills or items (Consalvo, 2007). According to Consalvo (2007), the majority of elitist players are male and relatively young, ranging in age from 19-32. Executives from firms recruited to combat cheating in multiplayer games confirm that most griefers who identify as elite gamers are young males (Consalvo, 2007).

Much grieving requires extensive experience playing and/or technical skill. As mentioned earlier, griefers often wield powerful in-game characters capable of wreaking havoc and dominating others. Gaming capital can be involved in the realm of online grieving, as griefers strive to impress other elite gamers by harassing other players or by using technical hacks. Players who are considered powerful and elite by other players are thought to possess large amounts of gaming capital (Consalvo, 2007). Such players may excel at certain types of games and contain significant knowledge about video games. Possessing gaming capital confers a certain degree of power and stature in gaming circles. "I get off on causing other people grief," said Robert L. Lee, a 16-year-old *Ultima Online* player in an interview with the *Los Angeles Times* (Pham, 2002). "It gives me a feeling that I am on a higher level than they are."

Elitist players exhibit behaviors closely associated with bullying. Definitions of bullying, harassment, and abuse are usually characterized by both aggressive and subtle behavior of imbalanced power, often including a victim in a weaker or subordinate position in an organizational hierarchy (Olweus, 1991; Smith & Thompson, 1991). In video games bullying behavior draws on social gaming capital. Griefing, bullying and harassment are about power dynamics in social interaction. In online games, power takes the form of superior technical skill and environmental power to control the experience of other players (Lin & Sun, 2005).

Conclusion

Griefers may be the anti-social troublemakers of virtual worlds, acting as violent team-killers, virtual rapists, ninja looters, and corpse campers. They may also be activists, white knights, and heroes. Griefers are not cheaters or aggressive players striving for game achievements, sometimes frustrating their opponents as a result. A griefer deliberately irritates and harasses other players for the griefer's own enjoyment, and not for ludic gain, such as to obtain experience, items and/or virtual currency. Griefing can manifest as hate speech, raids on peaceful gatherings, unprovoked violence, or theft of virtual currency or items. Griefers are a scourge in online games, since their behavior often cannot be deterred or managed effectively by the game companies.

There is a long list of tactics associated with both cheating and griefing. These methods can vary significantly depending on the game world and the game structure. Griefers are often powerful players, trolls, or even game company administrators. Griefing is a necessarily social activity, as one can only cause grief to other players when playing with and around other players. While many cheating and griefing methods can be

used in both online and off-line games, such as game hacks, mods, and code glitch exploitations, online games include tactics which involve others. While I couldn't hope to explain all the methods that griefers can utilize when engaging in grief-play, most griefing can be described as random acts of violence, n00b hunting, white-knighting and politically-motivated grief-play, or hate speech.

Current research on the motivations for grief-play in online games is largely limited to anonymity, psychological factors, harmless mischief, and hard-core gamer privilege. While anonymity certainly could contribute to the pervasiveness of griefing, simply the freedom from consequence is an insufficient explanation for why griefing often takes the form of hate speech and harassment based on race, gender, and sexual orientation. Furthermore, mischief and elitism assumed by power gamers are insufficient explanations for the phenomenon. In Chapter III, I turn to theories of masculinity to help us understand grief-play in online games as a strategy for reproducing hegemonic masculinity in online spaces, as video games exist as spaces, like sports and technology industries, where masculine gender is performed and constructed.

CHAPTER III

COMPETITIVE SPACES

Identity figures centrally in new media studies, particularly in video games. This is because embodiment can change conceptions of identity through text and graphic user interfaces. Players reinterpret themselves through their actions and representations in virtual environments. In theory, new media technologies often give opportunities for users to construct new identities, to experiment with their sense of self through video games, online communities, and social media. Jacob van Kokwijk (2007) refers to this concept of virtual identities: “A virtual identity is a persona that is implied when communicating online. It is a perceived view of who you are when you are online” (p. 56). Online play allows anonymity for the user. At the same time, virtual identities give users or players flexibility and a means to play with their sense of identity.

Online environments provide us with an opportunity to explore how gender functions in cyberspace. Researchers of gender in online environments are divided into two competing perspectives about the effect of the absence of a physical body on the performance of gender. One perspective believes that without the constraints of the body, gender online becomes fluid and flexible, allowing for the ability to transcend the binary views of gender (Haraway, 1991; Reid, 1994; Turkle, 1997). Rather than considering gender according to a male and female binary, there is the possibility of varied gender expression that transcends traditional categories. The other camp argues that because the occupants of virtual worlds have real life bodies and identities, they are unable to escape the limits of their understanding of gender and race, and thus use text to recreate the same

meanings in cyberspace (Burkhalter, 1998; Kendall, 1998; O'Brien, 1998). According to this perspective, gender and sexuality in online spaces become more rigid than in real life as members of online communities rely on stereotypical constructions to create order in a realm of uncertainty. Likely, as in real life, both experimentation with gender and increased rigidity are happening in online communities. This chapter focuses on occurrences of the latter and uses theories of masculinity borrowed from gender studies to analyze grief-play as strategies of masculine domination.

James Paul Gee (2003) suggests that video games construct three different kinds of player identity: 1) a virtual identity, 2) a real world identity, and 3) a “projective identity” that combines the other two. Gee (2003) argues that “projective identities” invoke a double meaning as players both project their real life identity onto the avatar and regard “the virtual character as one's own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become (within the limitations of her capacities, of course)” (p.55). This complicated relationship makes it difficult to disentangle where the player and the avatar begin and end. Projected identities can provide opportunities for players to play with gender, sexuality, and fantasy versions of self – this hegemonic masculinity acted out through virtual violence and grieving. Questions of gender, sexuality, and other social dimensions rooted in the body, are transformed by the nature of online communities. Interaction in cyberspace has been described as a mind-to-mind experience (Wellman & Gulia, 1998). Studies of this interaction reveal important truths about how we construct social realities.

Burrill (2008) delineates the video game format as inherently a non-feminine space which inescapably evokes themes of “digital boyhood.” Burrill (2008) uses the term “boyhood” (as opposed to manhood or masculinity), implying a state of perpetual childhood and a kind of forced immaturity within the reinforcement of these masculine norms. While there have been changes in to the game industry, for the most part video games are still created by and for men. According to Henry Jenkins (1999), video games are characterized by masculine play styles, and marked specifically by “boy culture.”

Independence, daring, dominance, hierarchical structures, and violence, are inherent design characteristics of many video games, aimed specifically to appeal to male audiences. Similarly, Burrill (2008) similarly argues that video games presume that “the player is always already male” (p. 138) and that games are a space in which boys and men engage in violent and aggressive play without the threat of consequence found in sports, war and other real-world activities and violence. Video games are a theater of conflict where an enactment of triumph of an anxious masculinity supported by the fast-changing nature of technology can be repeated at will.

Constructing Masculinity

The basic proposition of much recent feminist and feminist-inspired work on masculinity is that masculinity is socially constructed, not biologically given. Any discussion of grieving and its relationship to constructions of masculinity must first explore the complicated relationship between gender, body, and social constructions of masculinity. This topic has been discussed by many philosophers and scholars, who make the distinction between “sex,” which is biologically determined, and “gender,” which is based on social constructions. Eve Sedgwick (2005) explains that:

Gender, then, is the far more elaborated, more fully and rigidly dichotomized social production and reproduction of male and female identities and behaviors—of male and female persons—in a cultural system for which ‘male/female’ functions as a primary and perhaps model binarism affecting the structure and meaning of many, many other binarisms whose apparent connection to chromosomal sex will often be exiguous or non-existent. (p. 83)

According to Sedgwick (2005) and other gender studies scholars, gender is a construction falling on a continuum of masculine to feminine binaries of identity, as opposed to the male/female binary of sex. For the purpose of this analysis I will explore the socially and culturally constructed idea of gender. Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex*, proposed that in a world controlled and defined by men, women have been cast in the role of “other.” According to de Beauvoir (1989): “One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (p. 267). Likewise, men are not born but rather become men, and society contributes the means through which this construction occurs.

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler asserts that language plays a key role in gender construction. Butler argues that the use of pronouns and signifiers of gender, assigned to us at birth, begin to construct our gender ideology at an early age. Media and popular culture constantly reaffirm and produce further structuring of gender ideology. Butler uses the term “performativity” to explain how gender manifests. Essentially, we perform our genders, we are taught how to wear and express our masculinity and

femininity. West and Zimmerman (1987) similarly argue that gender is a situated construct, which results in part from our interactions with others. Gender construction does not occur in a vacuum but rather requires relationships, a positioning of self in the context of those around us, to materialize. Thus gender is something we do; we perform, in relation to members of our society. “Doing gender” involves a complex framework of socially guided activities and expression.

Connell (1992) states that “different masculinities are constituted in relation to other masculinities and to femininities through the structure of gender relations” (p. 732). Gender relations materialize inside structural constraints – masculinity and femininity as identities are defined according to a set of rules. Connell, utilizing Gramsci’s concept of class hegemony, incorporates power into an analysis of masculine hegemony. Connell (1990) describes hegemonic masculinity as idealized, assuming a particular dominance in localized sites, such as a soccer field or first-person shooter video game. Masculinity doesn’t always assume the same form, nor is it always dominant or uncontested (Swain, 2000). Rather, masculinity is quite fragile and insecure; it must be constantly maintained and defended. While it does not always involve violence, it is often secured by threat of violence. According to Swain (2000): “Masculinity is a relational construct occupying a place in gender relations, there are multiple masculinities, there is a hierarchy of masculinities, and masculinity is a precarious, life-long ongoing performance” (p. 96). Being a boy is the act of being constructed and constructing oneself according to the available meanings in a particular place, time, and context.

A valuable theoretical tool for understanding this social stratification of masculinities is Connell’s (1987, 1990, 1995) concept of hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity, from a social constructivist perspective, describes how men benefit from patriarchy (Connell, 1995). Connell outlines how intra-masculine hierarchy is created and legitimized. She contends that one model for hegemonic masculinity is distinguished above others, determining the “gold standard” for how boys and men should embody masculinity for the purpose of earning social capital. Some characteristics for hegemonic masculinity may include attributes such as athletic ability, technological competency, heterosexuality, and Whiteness. Connell argues that gay men and straight men who wear their masculinity in ways that differ significantly from masculine hegemony are at the bottom of this masculine hierarchy and are closely associated with the feminine end of the binary, which results in their marginalization (Connell, 1995). For these reasons homophobia has served as an effective tool for encouraging conformance to hegemonic models of heteromasculine dominance.

Studying what triggers homophobic expression reveals that homophobia has significance far beyond prejudice against homosexuality. Homophobia is deeply embedded in gender order, resulting from conceptions of contemporary masculinities and male identity. Homophobia is used to police the boundary between “successful manhood” and “failed manhood.” Since the 1970s, other frameworks for understanding homophobia began to emerge, tying it to misogyny, heterosexism, or religious bias (Haaga, 19991; Kimmel, 1994). Thought broadly associated with sexuality, homophobia is often triggered by nonsexual behaviors, such as the failure to conform to socially constructed standards of masculinity (Plummer, 2006).

Homophobic language is never deployed as random or meaningless insults, but carries very specific, powerful meanings. Specifically boys who appear effeminate,

babyish, are slow to develop physically, whose appearance differs from peer group expectations, who ally themselves with authority, and who avoid team sports are subject to homophobic name-calling (Plummer, 2006). Boys start using homophobic rhetoric at a young age and that these words become commonplace before puberty, before sexual identity is realized (Plummer, 2006). Research reveals that during crucial early periods of development, homophobic language is used against feminized targets, and that these meanings persist into adulthood alongside specific antigay connotations (Plummer, 2001). Both the nonsexual and sexual meanings for homophobic insults share the quality of targeting characteristic deemed inappropriate for developing men (Plummer, 2006).

Homophobia is rooted in gender dynamics and serves the unique role of marking the intra-gender divide between appropriate peer endorsed masculinity and a lack of masculinity. “Fag” is a repository of everything a boy should not be. By fearing crossing outside the boundaries of acceptable masculinity, of being associated with “Other,” homophobic rhetoric provides a mechanism for patrolling developing masculinity – to the extent that even dangerous and violent displays of masculinity are preferable to a feminized alternative (Plummer, 2006). Competitive spaces, such as sports, thus become proving grounds for violent masculinity, as well as mechanisms for outing boys/men who have failed at manhood (Griffin, 1995; Hughson, 2000; Hutchins & Mikosza, 1998, Plummer, 2006). From this perspective, the complex and problematic relationship between homophobia and competitive spaces becomes much clearer.

Evidence suggests that learning gender begins at a young age through cultural practices such as sports. A 2006 study conducted by the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles reported that 98% of American boys between 8 and 17 consume sports

media. Professional sports covered by sports media are dominated by men. Studies on gender and sports media reveal that sports commentary reinforces violent masculine performance (Krotoski, 2006). Sports commentators focus significantly on violence in professional sports, replaying footage and sensationalizing violent confrontations. By using language of war and conflict to narrate action, sports commentators promote violent aggression as rewarding behavior. A 1999 Children Now study points out that conflict between players of opposing teams is often used to promote continued conflicts (Krotoski, 2006). A focus on rivalry and aggressive competition bolsters cultural conceptions that violence is a normal expression of the masculine identity. The professionalization of this form of violent competition has now extended to video games.

While video games often celebrate the masculine athlete, video games serve as an interesting space in which men that don't dominate the top tier of the masculine scale, namely nerds, can thrive and dominate. Connell (1987, 1990, 1995) argues that jocks and action heroes serve as models of the highest order of masculinity, successfully assuming premium status and subordination from masculine identities in a lower position. As an example, multiple studies reveal that athletes assume powerful positions in high school spaces, distributing power as they see fit (Plummer, 1999).

I do not mean to suggest that there aren't examples of resistance to Connell's conception of masculinity, or that multiple, even contrasting, models of masculinity are unable to dominate the top position in the hierarchy. In fact, I explore two seemingly contradictory models of masculinity in this chapter: athletes and nerds. Technology and video games are a space in which computer prowess, high-tech equipment and skill with a controller/keyboard can dominate. In video games, nerds are able to live out the fantasy

of being physically and violently powerful men. For many male nerds, the title “nerd” is positioned in opposition to the physically powerful male athlete at the top tier of the masculine hierarchy. In the traditional high school male hierarchy, nerds are positioned at the lowest rung and jocks are allotted high status as alpha males. Nerds are beta males and weak, athletes are hyper-masculine. Therefore when a nerd proudly labels himself as thus, he largely considers himself to be acting in subversion against cultural definitions of masculinity. However, existing research demonstrates that nerds redefine masculine prowess according to scientific, mathematical, and technology achievements, and continue to contrast themselves with the feminine, which is perceived to be lacking in these skill areas.

Violence in video games is different from other types of media violence due to how users interact with the technology and each other. Gamers interact with the games physically, psychologically and emotionally. They assume the identity of the characters on the screen, meshing the storyline with their off-line ideology. Stories of violence are always told in conjunction with other stories about gender and sexuality. A common image in video game representations is hyper masculine male characters, linking male identity with expressions of violence. Aggressive masculinity in video games is very common in first person shooters, war games, action games, and e-sports. Often hate speech, taunts, and bullying go hand-in-hand with aggressive game content. In video games, as in sports, physical and verbal intimidation is acceptable expression of masculinity.

Violent video games help to normalize violence as an assumed part of the everyday fabric of life. Though men today are provided with more flexible interpretations

of masculinity, hegemonic models of the ideal remain very strong, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Popular culture continues to propagate images and stories that idealize males who embody traditional stereotypes of masculinity. Film, television and advertisements portray men who are aggressive, competitive, violent, unemotional, and detached. *The Grand Theft Auto* (GTA) franchise, for example, allows players to assume the role of an idealized male for a period of time. Niko Bellic, the protagonist in GTA IV, earns respect from other men, weapons, women, wealth, and status through a series of violent acts. GTA IV is one of many games that allow gamers to succeed in realizing idealized masculinity.

In Natasha Christensen's 2006 study of masculine expression by players in *Quake*, she found that bragging, trash talk, and violent griefing were pervasive. In *Quake*, the player always assumes the identity of a muscular male, whose goal is to exact violence and aggression, which is portrayed in pornographic detail. The character must navigate a maze while encountering threats from the game and other players. Rather than transcending cultural constructions of masculinity, *Quake*, like many games, reproduces the value of the hyper-masculine image. Aside from skill with the game, players can also use chat communication to enhance the game.

Winning and losing in *Quake* took on gendered overtones over the chat channels, as players exaggerated their wins and justified their losses. Christensen (2006) notes homophobic and sexually violent threats and acts against other players. The masculine domain in her playing of *Quake* defined success as aggressive domination. Players not only used acts within the game but communication channels to demonstrate superiority, by insulting other players and engaging in self-promotion. Players performed verbal

“victory dances” in order to underline their triumphs. Christensen (2006) observed that insults, threats, and arrogance are three common strategies for demonstrating masculine superiority. Both players with high and lower scores engaged in aggressive verbal techniques to validate their hegemonic manhood.

In Lori Kendall’s (2002) exploration of early MUD culture, *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub*, she noted that the men, specifically “nerds”, in these text-based virtual worlds performed masculinities online demonstrating a convergence and interaction of several important facets of identity, including class, gender, sexuality, race, age, and relationships to technology. Cultural expectations concerning technology usage converge with stereotypes of race, gender, class, and white nerds. The MUD participants Kendall encountered often poked fun at jocks and aspects of hegemonic masculinity. However, they also distanced themselves from women and femininity by engaging in interactions congruent with hegemonic masculinity. Both heterosexual and non-heterosexual men, Kendall found, depicted women as sexual objects (2002). Demonstrated competency with computers, combined with sexist banter, reinforced connections between technological expertise and masculinity (Kendall, 2002).

These nerds act as “gatekeepers,” whose authority is established through their expertise with science, technology and math. Ellen Ullman (1995) noted that people hiring computer expertise often look for signs of nerdiness as proof of intelligence and skills. Kendall (2007) argues that nerd identity is a manifestation of hegemonic masculinity, in which computer prowess is linked to masculine prowess. Male nerds argue for scientific, mathematical and technological achievements as the modern criteria for manhood. Therefore, proficiency in science, math and technology are inherently male

and should define maleness. Some male nerds argue that innate differences between male and female brains make excellence in math, science, and technology exclusive to men. By association, this also makes men superior at video games. For women to be equally capable in science, math, technology, and video games would rob nerds of their claims on male superiority and this would reaffirm their beta status at the bottom of the masculine hierarchy. Therefore some male nerds are heavily invested in distinguishing themselves from women in knowledge arenas largely dominated by men.

Indeed, feminist researchers found an inherently masculine undertone to science and technology. According to Wajcman (1991):

It is not simply a question of acquiring skills, because these skills are embedded in a culture of masculinity that is large coterminous with the culture of technology. Both at school and in the workplace this culture is incompatible with femininity. Therefore, to enter this world, to learn its language, women have to forsake their femininity (p. 19).

Studies of gender and technology often focus on how masculinity is embedded in technologies and technological practices, and how this allots men “expertise” as owners of technology. According to Judy Wajcman in *Feminism Confronts Technology* (1991), “A key issue here is whether the problem lies in men’s domination of technology, or whether the technology is in some sense inherently patriarchal” (p. 13). In the section that follows I detail how gender and sexual orientation are articulated in sports, technology, and video games and how female and GLBTQ players are perceived as threats to hegemonic masculinity.

Video games are a place where white, heterosexual, middle class men struggle against identity crises brought on by economic, social and political changes. In video games, men can fight their fears of social feminization, of a world in which success is no longer measured in terms of physical abilities. In the real world gender, sexual, and racial equality are being realized to some degree in technology. Video games provide an opportunity to study the construction and maintenance of gender performance in the midst of anxiety and change.

Omi and Winant (1994) point out that we take note of physical characteristics, like race and sex, upon encountering people, and based on our ideologies of sex and race, we make assumptions about those people. We expect differences in skin color and other racially coded identifiers to explain social differences (Omi & Winant, 1994). Despite the absence of visual cues, the signification and symbolization associated with human bodies continues in online relationships. While our physical bodies are not projected online, assumptions are made that we have physical bodies and true identities can be deduced through online interactions (Kendall, 2000). Likewise, the absence of women and people of color in early virtual environments plays into these assumptions. Although gender, race, and sexual orientation function in unstable relationship with each other, in face-to-face interactions, in the discursive domains of online games they often operate in a more hierarchical fashion.

Gender

The social movements that arose in the 1960s presented a threat to traditional masculinity that lingers today. The women's liberation movement, the civil rights movement, and most recently, the human rights movement for queer rights challenged

dominant white heterosexual social, political, economic, and culture power in the United States. Some men have not reacted well to these changes. Howard Stern, Rush Limbaugh, and Glen Beck rose to prominence and widespread popularity by tapping into anger toward strong, independent women (Katz & Earp, 1999). Today we can add Sarah Palin and Ann Coulter, political symbols of a nostalgic notion of womanhood, media icons who found an audience by explicitly trashing feminism.

One effect of women's liberation was the 1972 passage of Title IX in the United States which created athletic opportunities for school-age girls. Increased participation in sports by girls and women has been accompanied by changed attitudes as well. Improvements in female athletic performance have resulted from increased opportunities for female athletes, expanded youth programs, and new scholarships (Messner et al., 1993). Progress in female athleticism since Title IX challenges the assumed predisposition by men to dominate in physical arenas. Organized sports continue to be dominated by men at all levels and persist as spaces for constructing ideals of masculinity. Much of the continued regard for sport as a site for the construction and legitimization of masculine power lies with the mass media. Studies reveal that mass media depictions highly favor male athletes, and tend to frame female and male athletes as fundamentally different (Messner et al., 1993).

Just as the traditional male proving ground of sports has been unsettled, so has male dominance in the workplace. The number of female breadwinners has been growing since the 1960s. Women are outnumbering and outperforming men at universities across the West (Marklein, 2005; Essig, 2001). Though participation by women in critical fields, such as engineering and computer science has been decreasing and pay gaps

between men and women show stagnation or worsening, modern-day men are indeed in the grip of a crisis of masculinity which prioritizes wealth and fortune, rejects dependency, expresses fearless invulnerability, and rewards resistance to authority for personal gain (Essig, 2001).

This crisis in masculinity is played out in the video game industry which has historically been the provincial of white men. A study by the International Game Developers Association showed that only about 11% of the industry is made up of women (IGDA, 2005). The console and computer game target audience remains largely male and the ever-growing diversity of the MMO audience unrecognized. The images and representations that come out of video games are coming out of a culture controlled by predominantly male producers and designers. In Williams, Martins, Consalvo and Ivory's 2009 content analysis of video game characters, male characters were significantly more likely to appear than female characters and were more likely to play primary roles. Female characters are underrepresented in video game content and they are vastly more likely to be sexualized (Ivory, 2009). The female characters that do appear are often damsels in distress, highly sexualized objects of desire, or scantily-clad warriors, as is the case with Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* franchise.

In recent years an influx of casual games has been increasingly marketed to adult females and girls. The theme of girl marketed casual games is generally non-violent, orientated around food, fashion, or domestic spaces, or fitness. Research by the Ludica Group (Fron et al., 2007) shows how deeply marginalized female gamers are within the gaming industry, as well as how several layers of cultural influence (industry, games, media) help to support this system. Thus, it is not simply gamers, developers, or

magazines that are complicit in this schema of exclusionary masculinity, but a larger culture that ultimately defines video game play as inherently masculine.

Despite the persistence of stereotypes, existing research on game players seems to indicate that not all players are isolated teenage males (Williams et al., 2009). The existence of professional female gaming teams and the influx of women into the gaming audience demonstrate that men are not alone in playing with constructions of gender in online games. In a 2001 study by PC Data Online, women surpassed men in the population of online gamers (Taylor, 2006), at 50.4 percent. According to the Entertainment Software Association (2009), 40 percent of all video gamers are female and 25 percent are over 50 years old. Despite this, video game companies continue developing largely for their presumed male audience, at the same time marginalizing segments of their actual audience.

Sexual Orientation

Media attention to the video game *Bully* (Rockstar) in 2006, which allowed a male avatar to kiss both male and female characters (Lumpkin, 2007), demonstrated an increased attention to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) gamers and content in popular culture (Shaw, 2009). Heterocentrism in video games, as reflected through the media attention given to *Bully*, is an issue that requires attention (Shaw, 2009). Shaw, in her 2009 analysis, demonstrates how video game industry attitudes toward GLBT content and audience construction both contribute to how GLBT communities are represented in video games. Because of the lack of research on homophobia in video games, I look at homophobia in the analogous realm of offline sports and competition.

Feminist scholars have argued that the institution of sports has provided men with a sphere through which they can reinforce the ideology of male superiority. By excluding femininity and associating men with physical dexterity, strength, power, and violence, sports provide men with an institution through which they can reconstitute an otherwise challenged masculine hegemony (Messner et al., 1993). Messner, Duncan, and Jensen (1993) argue that homophobia in sport promotes violence. As Sabo (1994) explained:

In athletics, the lessons of homophobia are learned and acted out in various ways, of which teasing and ridiculing are probably the most common. Hazing and joking that goes on in most locker rooms communicate that homosexuals are inferior, silly, sick, or disgusting. The terms fag and faggot may be used to mock, insult, or aggravate a teammate. Lack of toughness, open displays of sympathy, or other behavior that is considered feminine might also provoke ridicule. (p. 103).

Messner, Duncan, and Jensen (1993) draw connections between sexism, heterosexism, homophobia and violence in sport. Athletics are sites of extreme heterosexism, where women do not belong and men must celebrate an ideal that rejects homosexuality.

In order to fully understand hegemonic masculinity, Anderson (2009a) uses the term “homohysteria” to describe a cultural back-lash against non-traditional expressions of gender and sexuality. Homohysteria is used to describe the fear of being homosexualized, and incorporates three variables: 1) cultural awareness that homosexuality exists as a sexual orientation; 2) high levels of homophobia within a culture, and 3) the conflation of feminine behaviors in men with same-sex desire. Varying combinations of these three traits determine unique outcomes for men’s gendered behaviors (Anderson, 2011). Homohysteria serves to explain how GLTBQ

invisibility diminishes aggressive homophobic rhetoric and behavior. As more out GLBTQ players venture into virtual spaces historically populated by heterosexual men, homophobic responses occur in the form of grieving.

Researchers largely agree that organized sports are highly masculine and homophobic institutions (Messner, 1992; Messner et al., 1993; Anderson, 2002; Connell, 1995). Many gay men are uncomfortable with team sports, where the exhibition of “gay” qualities is often denied value or acceptance (Anderson, 2002). Sports have been described as places where hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and defined, as athletes represent the ideal of manhood in contrast to femininity (Messner, 1992). As women have increasingly gained access to sports athletics have become contested terrain (Anderson, 2002).

In the absence of the ability to ban openly gay athletes, heterosexual athletes protest the intrusion of gay athletes through the creation of silence around gay identities. Anderson (2002) found that gay athletes were victimized by heterosexual hegemony and largely practiced self-silencing, some performing masculinity in dialogue to reinforce the illusion. In this regard, sports are not unlike the U.S. military, another highly masculinized institution, which banned openly gay and lesbian soldiers under the 1994 “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. Britton and Williams (1995) showed that the silencing of gays and lesbians in the U.S. armed services reflects institutional and cultural privileging of a heterosexual masculine ideal. Through the use of sanctions against resistant gender expressions, the U.S. military attempts to ensure the reproduction of soldiers as hegemonically masculine (Anderson (2002). Comparing the situation of

openly gay athletes to the U.S. military highlights that what cannot be discussed is just as powerful a weapon of heterosexual hegemony as what can be discussed.

Anti-gay discourse by athletes is geared to discredit homosexuality and discourage resistance to structured masculinity. Butler (1990) suggests that homophobic language is part of a larger heterosexist framework working to cripple the acceptance of alternative conceptions of gender. Homophobic speech encourages gay male athletes to remain silent about their sexuality and protect hegemonic masculinity. It sends the message that homosexuality is not welcome and has been almost as effective as an all-out ban on gay athletes from sports (Anderson 2002). Together the normalization of anti-gay discourse and a culture of silence make it difficult for untraditionally masculine gender to assume an accepted position in sports. Sexism and homophobia have served to successfully police men's gendered behaviors. Sexism and homophobia has kept Connell's model of hegemonic masculinity in operation.

Similar homophobic rhetoric and behavior found in sports is demonstrated in video games. In Christensen's (2006) *Quake* study, she noted that homophobic rhetoric in the interactions between the players was common. The male players expressed domination over the other players, whether men or women, with detailed descriptions of overpowering them sexually. Being superior was directly translated into penetration of their opponents. The basic challenge to masculinity was being accused of femininity, whether expressed in female gender or as a "bottom" in a same-sex scenario. This echoes real life ideas of hegemonic masculinity outlined earlier in this chapter.

Alternative expressions of same-sex love presented as storyline options in BioWare's *Dragon Age (DA)* franchise drew consternation from some gamers. Forum

and blog posts from critics state that they found homosexuality “to be disgusting” and were afraid to speak out “for fear of being called homophobic by what can only be called a mob” (BioWare, 2011). Below is a post from a straight male gamer named “Bastal” protesting the GLBTQ content in DAI:

I’m not here to debate the moralities of homosexuality, I personally find it to be disgusting but others will feel different, that isn’t the point of this thread... The whole point of the argument relies on the central point that straight male gamers make up an overwhelming majority of players. As I said before, I estimate that the number is around 80% (this includes straight male gamers who play a female). Now if my numbers are at all wrong (that in reality the split is 60-40-10 (male, female, and gay), then consider this post to be null and void, I’ve wasted your time (No doubt some of you already feel that way)... And if there is any doubt why such an opinion might be met with hostility, it has to do with privilege... The “privilege” always lies with the majority because if your goal is to make a game that will be liked by as many fans possible, then it makes sense to focus on that largest group. Why should one fan’s enjoyment be more important than five others? It’d more accurate to call “privilege” the idea that some minority group gets special preference for political points. If you really want to be all-inclusive, then I don’t see why homosexuals should get special preference while leaving other minority groups out... You’ll win praises and 10/10’s from gay activists and feminists for your great strides in promoting “equality” and eliminating “straight male privilege”, but you’ll have loss fans like me. (BioWare, 2011)

The above forum post represents persisting assumptions that video games are straight, male spaces. “Bastal” argues that most gamers are still men, that GLBTQ gamers assume a significant minority, and therefore do not deserve representation. “Bastal” demonstrates a market logic that game content should cater to the largest purchasing demographic. I would argue that “Bastal” feels that the same-sex content in DAII threatens his perception of video games are sites where hegemonic masculinity can be celebrated and performed. BioWare adopted a principled stance defending their decision to design games with same-sex storyline options, a stance that relationships are for everybody. David Gaider (BioWare, 2011):

The romances in the game are not for “the straight male gamer”. They’re for everyone. We have a lot of fans, many of whom are neither straight nor male, and they deserve no less attention... I would question anyone deciding they speak for “the straight male gamer” just as much as someone claiming they speak for “all RPG fans”, “all female fans” or even “all gay fans”... You can write it off as “political correctness” if you wish, but the truth is that privilege always lies with the majority. They’re so used to being catered to that they see the lack of catering as an imbalance... And the person who says that the only way to please them is to restrict options for others is, if you ask me, the one who deserves it least. And that’s my opinion, expressed as politely as possible. (BioWare, 2011)

The controversy over the same-sex storyline content options in DAII illuminate the conflict in the white, straight, male gaming community that these spaces are still largely dominated by white, heterosexual, men who reject alternative expressions of gender and sexuality that conflict with traditional hegemonic masculinity.

Conclusion

Video games provide a new medium in which gender and sexuality can be studied. It is an ideal environment for examining the performance of gender because interaction in video games occurs without the common visual references that are used for detecting sexuality and gender. Because gender cannot be interpreted through physical traits and mannerisms, denizens of online communities must rely on discourse in order to detect gender. In this way, sexuality and gender can be isolated as an activity independent of the physicality that is a characteristic in real life interactions.

Video games, as intersections of sports and technology where masculinity is constructed and reinforced, are advancing very limited notions of gender. They often reinforce the sexual objectification of women. They reproduce racial stereotypes. They're teaching young boys that violence is an appropriate response to conflict. Though online games allow for the possibility that gender can be transformed, white, heterosexual men online continue to relate to each other in ways which support male dominance and heterosexual male superiority. Men who play video games are able to demonstrate male superiority and male sexual superiority through the use of virtual bodies. In the bodiless realm of video games, it is interesting that "nerds" and men who participate in a technology culture, who are able to create an alternate world where masculinity is defined differently, do not take this opportunity. Instead, real life is mimicked not only by taking on the physical attributes of strength, but also by using rhetoric that emphasize aggression and sexual dominance.

Success in some online games is defined by aggression. Literally, the victor is the one who is able to destroy all the other players. While skill is essential in maintaining

success within the game environment, talk in the form of chat is used to both emphasize skill when winning and maintain masculinity while losing. Because success is defined as aggression, sexuality is used in a destructive manner to further the idea of violence. In the masculine realm of video games, as well as sports, being accused of being a woman or a homosexual is intended to belittle your opponents. Therefore, in the same way that sports and technology help to perpetuate the concept of male dominance through gendered superiority, online games also promote the idea of success through the positioning of masculinity as superior. Even though computer "nerds" are not directly competing with the use of physical strength, their skill is demonstrated through the use of avatars designed to represent traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity. Nerds are able to reaffirm their masculinity even outside the traditional masculine identity building institutions of sports and violence.

The Ludica Group have begun focusing on some of the cultural logic surrounding the gaming industry (Fron, et al, 2007a), and have discussed the hegemonies of masculine play (Fron, et al, 2007b). Their thoughts on the issues are worth noting:

The power elite of the game industry is a predominately white, and secondarily Asian, male-dominated corporate and creative elite that represents a select group of large, global publishing companies in conjunction with a handful of massive chain retail distributors. These hegemonic elite determine which technologies will be deployed, and which will not; which games will be made, and by which designers; which players are important to design for, and which play styles will be supported. The hegemony operates on both monetary and cultural levels. It works

in concert with game developers and self-selected hardcore “gamers,” who have systematically developed a rhetoric of play that is exclusionary, if not entirely alienating to “minority” players (who, in numerical terms, actually constitute a majority) such as most women and girls, males of many ages, and people of different racial and cultural backgrounds. It is aided and abetted by a publication and advertising infrastructure, characterized by game review magazines, television programming and advertising that valorizes certain types of games, while it marginalizes those that do not fit the “hardcore gamer” demographic.

Sports and video games have become a way for white middle class men to fight their fears of social feminization. Computer nerds who are especially vulnerable to the accusations of being less than manly are able both through the actions and discourse in online games to demonstrate the qualities required of hegemonic masculinity. Emphasis is placed on the strength of the masculine body while discourse sets the players apart from anything that is feminine.

CHAPTER IV

METHOD

Shortly before beginning this research project, I engaged in a round of EA's *Battlefield 2* online in a team with friends, all of whom are white men identifying as heterosexual. My gamertag, in-game moniker, clearly identified me as a female player. During play I was subject to continual sexist insults and sexual harassment from members of the opposing team. After play I mentioned the harassment to my teammates, who claimed to be entirely oblivious to the sexist remarks sent over global communication channels during play. While I in no way suggest that one must be female, non-white, or GLBTQ to be aware and opposed to grieving that takes the form of hate speech or sexual violence, this experience inspired me to pursue the perspectives of non-white, GLBTQ, and female players, who are specifically subject to grieving referencing gender and/or sexual orientation. For this reason, I chose to recruit participants from communities expressly catering to gay, lesbian and female gamers. Through ethnography, I wanted to understand how players potentially more sensitive to grief-play tactics, such as harassment and hate speech, experienced and were affected by grieving.

In order to examine the experiences of gamers with grieving, I decided to embark on an ethnographic study of players' experiences with and perceptions of grieving. I was well positioned to engage in conversations with gamers on the subject of grieving, being a long-time online gamer myself, and having personal experiences with grieving which failed to deter me immersing myself in online culture, much like the gamers I'd be interviewing. I could position myself as both an advocate of online games, a member of

the community which I was studying, and as well as a critical researcher of the phenomenon. Much video game research is either generally critical of the technology, content, and past-time as a whole, or exceptionally fan-based, testifying to the potential for video games to save our education system and/or positively transform our lives (McGonagal, 2011). My research lands squarely between these two extremes. The question about video games, as with all media, is not whether they're good or bad, forces of good or evil. The challenge is to apply critical analysis to how, as media, they potentially reinforce negative gender ideology found off-line. There is nothing inherent about video games that define them as a violent, sexist, homophobic, or racist medium. The technology is not the problem and nor are the virtual worlds. What needs to be questioning are the values we've privileged as we've designed, produced, sold, and played them. Pursuing this study from an ethnographic perspective enabled me to explore the rich and complex aspects of sociality and competitive play online.

Ethnographically studying a socio-technical phenomenon presented its own methodological challenges. Conducting the interviews outside of the game environment, in-person, over the phone, and/or via online chat, would rob me the experience of engaging in conversations with gamers on-site, in the virtual spaces in which grieving occurs. However, focusing on gathering data from the specific site of game environments would restrict me to a limited pool of interviewees who were familiar with the same games as I am. I didn't want the interviews to turn into play sessions for either me or the interview participant, distracting from the topic of grief-play. Rather than focus on one specific site, I developed a multi-site study which combined in-game, in-person, phone, email, and chat interviews.

I approached this project as an ethnographic study because ethnography enabled me to make sense of the unique customs and cultural practices common in online gaming communities. I agree with Danah Boyd (2002) who sees “ethnography as a descriptive account of cultural practices, grounded in data attained through ethnographic fieldwork and situated in conversations with broader theoretical frameworks.” While scholars from a variety of fields have adapted ethnography to integrate with a number of theoretical frameworks, as a method it has its roots in cultural anthropology (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1973; Marcus, 1998; Mead, 1928). Ethnographic fieldwork most often relies on participant observation, qualitative interviews, and analysis of cultural artifacts reflecting cultural practices. Ethnography does not limit itself to individual ideologies but to the complexity of interconnected practices. As a method, ethnography was ideal for this study, which involved an examination of worlds that exist apart, with their own languages and customs, but also populated with people with offline identities and ideologies formed in the real world. This study does not include participant observation or in-depth analysis of gaming cultural artifacts related to grieving. This study is limited to qualitative interviews with gamers about grieving. However, future work on grieving which includes participant observation would add significantly to conversations about the phenomenon.

Ethnography was used pre-internet to understand online gaming communities and practices. Some early examples include Lori Kendall (2002) and Bartle’s (1990, 1996) work on text-based MUDs and MOOs. Significant research has examined identity and embodiment in online games (Stone, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Consalvo, 2007; Smith et al., 1998; Taylor, 2006). Kendall (2002), Taylor (2006) and Consalvo (2007) documented

how people represent themselves in online spaces, including experimenting with freedom from, as well reinforcing offline ideologies online. Much of what early video game ethnographers, as well as early researchers of the Internet, struggled with concerned the boundaries between online and offline culture. Early into this work, ethnographers emphasized the importance of taking context into consideration.

Boellstorff (2008) distinguishes between “culture in virtual worlds” and “virtual culture.” The unique culture manifesting in virtual spaces is very real for the residents, and it crossover with real life. Though as researchers we are not always in the physical presence of our ethnographic collaborators when engaging in online observation, dialogue and interviewing, online ethnography is still a form of “face-to-face” interaction. Real life ethnographies contain elements of “virtuality.” We assume of the form of avatars in real life much as we do online. For this research project I chose ethnography, or “virtual anthropology” as Boellstorff prefers, in order to gain a deeper understanding of how griefing is experienced and how it impacts the experience of the players. Harassment affects us in deeply personal and complex ways. In order to gain this understanding, I felt it critical to hear gamers describe their experiences and their reactions in their own words. Understanding the context, the specific play experiences, during which griefing occurred is important. It enabled me to represent the nuanced experience of inhabiting online worlds, such as participating in online communities and relationships, and what it feels like to be grieved while roaming them.

Sociality in virtual worlds has evolved on its own terms, though it contains references to the actual world. Actual world sociality alone cannot provide the framework for understanding virtual world sociality (Boellstorff, 2008; Taylor, 2006; Nakamura,

2008; Hine, 2009). While aesthetics, landscapes, customs, themes, ideologies and behaviors are largely influenced by and closely resemble the off-line world, these ideas and issues are being experienced in virtual spaces. For this reason, virtual ethnography, as detailed by Boellstorff (2008), need not always incorporate meeting residents off-line for “context.” This assumes that virtual worlds are not themselves contexts, and ignores that sociality online between virtual world residents does not always extend off-line (Boellstorff, 2008; Kendall, 2002; Boyd, 2002, Taylor, 2006). Given the growing popularity of MMOs, housed on hundreds of servers and accessible through computer networks that extend across oceans and borders, it is no longer always possible to seek off-line relationships with online contacts.

Nonetheless, studying virtual spaces on their own terms does not include ignoring the ideologies, language, and customs overlapping across online and off-line spaces. “It means examining those interchanges as they manifest in the virtual world, for that is how residents experience them when they are in world” (Boellstorff, 2008). Emphasis on the permeability between virtual and actual worlds is certainly not new (Boellstorff, 2008; Taylor, 2006; Nakamura, 2008; Hine, 2009; Kendall, 2002; Boyd, 2002). Online and off-line worlds blend together into a complex narrative. Given that online spaces are created by actual people, their creators and those that explore them are limited by the understandings, imagination, and world views constructed in real life.

Recent game studies typically takes a critical view of identity online, not as existing in self-contained environments but with ties to real life values, culture, and sociality. However, online life is embedded in contained technological structures, which include their own dynamics and unique problems. This is not to suggest that identity

experimentation does not take place in virtual spaces, “but that how people make sense of and experience who they are online is not inherently separate from who they are and what they do offline” (Taylor, 2008). Griefing, in a sense, occupies both online and offline worlds, overlapping between spaces. What happens to us in virtual worlds is just as real, painful, wonderful, and meaningful to the participants as offline experiences. Our relationships online are just as intimate, attacks against us can be just as disruptive.

I pursued my ethnography of griefing in online games according to the virtual worlds’ “own terms,” as Boellstorff describes in *Coming of Age in Second Life* (2008). While online cultures are largely based on actual-world culture, language, and ideology, virtual ethnographies do not require face-to-face interactions with virtual world residents. Nor does the legitimacy of the ethnography require verification of real-world identities and demographics:

Since people find virtual worlds meaningful sites for social action, cultures in virtual worlds exist whether we like it or not; our task as ethnographers is to study them. To take virtual worlds in their own terms is not to claim, as some Artificial Life researchers have done, that their computational worlds are totally self-contained. (Boellstorff, 2008)

To instill upon virtual ethnographies criteria typical of real world ethnographies is to fail, as Boellstorff (2008) argues, to consider virtual worlds on their own terms, as spaces that mesh real life and virtual life, that contain cultural practices and sociality both unique to the virtual space and reflexive of the physical world. Boellstorff (2008), Taylor (2006) and Hine (2009) make a case for virtual ethnographies that take the unique

complexity of virtual spaces into account. During discussion of my findings, it's important to understand that online games are worlds apart with their own customs, language, and ritual. Any analysis of griefing should include consideration of the customs shared in these worlds. However, it is equally important to understand that an overlap exists between offline and online worlds, where identities and ideologies are carried over. The players exist in multiple-sites and communicate in multiple ways. For this reason, my ethnography includes in-person interviews, phone interviews, and interviews during play, over email and chat. I communicated with my interview participants in most of the varied ways they communicate with each other. Following what anthropologist George Marcus (1995) refers to as "mobile ethnography," I conversed with interview participants in various spaces, some of which were safe and closed (i.e., email, chat) and others vulnerable to griefing (i.e. in-game).

When I began this ethnography a year ago I was interested in learning more about gamers' experiences with griefing. Expressly important to this exploration was griefing that takes the form of hate speech, which is specifically gendered and racist. Hate speech as griefing has meaning that extends beyond mischief-making and exploitation of circumstances without personal consequence. For this reason, this ethnography explored griefing's gendered roots as expressions of hegemonic masculinity. Ethnography was a successful method for understanding the complexity of the gamer's experiences with online communities. I undertook the study with four central research questions in mind:

Q1: How pervasive is griefing experienced by online gamers?

Q2: How does griefing affect the play experience of online gamers?

Q3: Is grieving a tactic for reinforcing gender construction and hegemonic masculinity in online video game spaces?

The in-person interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The in-person, chat and phone interviews lasted an average of thirty minutes. Email interviews took place over a series of weeks with multiple replies and follow up questions. All gamers participated in semi-structured interviews (Appendix: Interview Guide), which asked about their background as gamers, motivations for playing, and their experiences with grieving. I then analyzed these interviews for answers to my central research questions. The mean age of 20 interview participants was 31 years old (ages ranging from 18 to 44). Minors were not permitted to participate in the online survey or the interviews. Fourteen of the interviewed gamers were female and 6 male. Half of the interview participants identified as heterosexual, 8 identified as GLBTQ, and two chose not to share their sexual orientation. Nearly all of the interview participants identified residents of the United States. However, one participant resided in Canada and one in the United Kingdom at the time of the interviews.

The in-game interviews took place in Valve's *Left 4 Dead* (versions 1 and 2). These interviews took many hours, due to the fact that we were playing while we discussed grieving. I averaged seven hours of play with the in-game participants, although not all this time was spent actively engaging in the semi-structured interviews. Much of this time was spent organizing and coordinating play. I used voice communication software which enabled me to record our conversations during play, which I then transcribed. I also took notes during play, particularly when the interview participant's movements and actions added to their responses.

Beginning in spring of 2010, twenty participants were interviewed. I asked the volunteers over email if they'd prefer speaking in-person, over the phone, over email, in-game, or over chat. Because a significant amount of research has focused on content analysis, violence, and presumed negative aspects of gaming, the community is often suspicious of researchers seeking to paint online gaming as a violent, anti-social, unhealthy pastime. After engaging the interview participants in conversations about games we've mutually played, establishing my long history with online games, participants were willing to speak more openly about their negative experiences online. The email and online interviews garnered more revealing information than the in-person interviews. Perhaps the anonymity the online interviews allotted the participants had a positive impact on their willingness to speak openly about harassment and hate speech online. In order to protect their anonymity, I omit any reference to the gamertags and in-game monikers used by the interview participants. However, I do indicate if these monikers are revealing of sex or sexual orientation in my analysis.

There are no true "natives" or "indigenous" residents of virtual worlds. No one is born in online games. However, there are levels of competency, experience, and status with online games, specific to a particular game and genre. I recruited interview participants from eight online gaming forums, some specifically tailored to women, players of color, and GLBTQ gamers, including lesbiangamers.com, girlgamer.com, Steam forums, World of Warcraft battle.net forums, and blackgamers.net. I selected these forums based on their popularity among MMO players, defined by their size and frequency of participation. As a result, most of the respondents were highly experienced players, self-identifying as "gamers," investing time outside of play to participate in

gaming community websites. I posted in the forums information about my research requesting participants and provided the URL for a website where they could submit their contact information.

It's important to note that the interview participants were hesitant to assume the roles of victims and were resistant to research that depicted video games in a negative way, because as gamers, they have an interest in not seeing gaming in stereotypically negative ways. There has been debate over violence in video games, continued discussion of their impact on children, and they continue to be criticized as an anti-social unproductive past-time. So it's no wonder that many of the gamers I interviewed were initially resistant to conversations about negative the aspects of online game play. One player asked me over instant message as we began our initial interview:

WoW Player: Why u hate computer games?

Me: Oh I don't! I love them. I've been playing for many years.

WoW Player: Why are u researching how they suck?

Me: I'm interested in how some players are driven to ruin the play experience for others. I don't criticize games at all. Actually, I advocate for them.

(Long Pause) Me: It's totally fine if you're not comfortable being interviewed.

Sincerely.

WoW Player: Googled you. We can talk. Just don't say wow melts my brain or some bullshit.

As evident in the conversation above, online players are protective of gaming culture and resistant to video games being portrayed in a negative way. The players I spoke with were uncomfortable with aspects of my research that may represent online games as pastimes harmfully affecting them. Even for the GLBTQ players who felt an affinity to me as a lesbian and female player who felt an affinity to me as a woman, distrust of research on video games, and of me as a researcher, was often an initial barrier to overcome. For this reason, the in-game interviews and interviews over game-platform supported chat, where my game statistics were visible to them on my profile, presented fewer barriers to establishing trust. “I’m not interested in teaching a n00b,” one player emailed after I offered to conduct the interview in-game. I assured the player that I could hold my own and we played together for nearly two full weekend afternoons.

Interestingly, many of the players were also quite protective of griefers. While, as discussed later in this chapter, there was universal complaint and acknowledgment of the phenomenon, many of these experiences were qualified and excused. As one player noted, “I hear hate speech all the time. They don’t mean anything by it. They can get away with it.” Like myself, many of the gamers, nearly all highly experienced players, had developed a tolerance for griefing. They had developed filters, defense, and coping mechanisms for the behavior. I believe these protective instincts are partially motivated by a desire to protect the culture of games. It was evident in the interviews that many of the players felt marginalized as gamers, inspiring a desire to protect all gamers, even those gamers whom they disliked, as a protective instinct:

31-year-old RPG and FPS Genre Female Bisexual Player: No one knows how many hours I play. It doesn't go over well on dates with girls but guys love it.

Me: Ha! I can relate. Sometimes I'm hesitant to tell people what I study.

Player: I'm not some big geek that never leaves my house but people find out I play games and they assume I'm a geek. I like my gamer friends more than my other friends. They don't care if I stay up all night playing *WoW*.

I made efforts to unpack these protective instincts and filters. I outline what was discovered from these efforts later in the next chapter. Most pre-existing research points to the anonymity allotted by online play as a motivation for griefing. This isn't surprising to me given the responses I often received during this ethnography, which often excused griefing as the product of an environment free of consequence for poor behavior. Nonetheless, I attempt to look beyond the players' instincts to protect the culture, including the griefers among them, as well as deindividuation as an excuse for poor behavior.

CHAPTER V

GAMERS

In line with the trend among the interview participants to protect both games and gamers in general, building community, even community beyond their primary guild or cohort, was a significant motivation for play. Sociality in-game was a significant factor for the enjoyment of play. The terms “friends,” “family,” “guild,” and “clan” were widely used by the participants, who spoke at length about their online teams and communities:

Me: Who do you mostly play with?

Player: I play for the friends I’ve made and kept over the years. We send each other birthday gifts; we’ve supported each other through some rough patches in life. I paid someone’s rent for two months and later, they repaid me with tickets to Prague. I send them games I want to play with them and they do the same with me.

Virtual worlds serve as spaces for building relationships and participating in a community of other players. All the MMO players were members of “guilds,” which are teams in some MMO genre games that allow players special communication functions, and features for consolidating in-game resources such as virtual currency and items. The action and first-person shooter genre players had friends they coordinated play with. The gamer below compared his online gaming to visiting his local pub. Although he considered online play healthier than hanging out at a bar, as well as cheaper:

Me: What do you enjoy about online games?

Player: I think it's about interacting with people, having a laugh. And then shooting them... I enjoy the interaction. It's more akin to a pub atmosphere, really, just online. We have in-jokes, talk about what we're up to, and so on.

Nearly all the players had close standing relationships with the people they played with, some extending off-line but most existing online only. The intimacy formed in online communities allows players to build close relationships online. These relationships validated them and griefing can hurt and undermine gamers' sense of connectedness.

Female players expressed unique factors related to their enjoyment of online play that were not evident in interviews with the male participants. Two female players spoke at length about freedom online from being judged for their physical appearance. One player, who expressed insecurities about her appearance, enjoyed body-less interactions where her beauty, or lack of beauty, was not a factor in her social encounters.

What I love most about playing online games is the ability of being social without feeling any awkwardness. I'm an introverted person and I can count on one hand how many friends I have. I feel more comfortable playing an MMO and talking with friends through a program like Ventrilo... They can't judge me if they can't see me. Therefore, I would say that these people like me for who I am, not what I look like.

Online games can be used as an avenue for play and socializing by players with limited flexibility in real life, particularly the female players. The player below is a single mother and lacks the income to afford child care. Online games allow her to virtually leave the home, make new friends, and participate in play, while keeping tabs on her children: "I'm

a single mother and well I don't get to go out a lot so hanging out socializing in home is great for me.“

Communities are also strategies for protecting players against griefing. Many of the interview participants mentioned they minimized their encounters with griefing by only playing with or against people they knew – people they knew off-line, people they knew from previous play experiences, or people who'd been vouched for by teammates they trusted:

Player: I hear less racism, sexism, hate speech than I used to when I first started playing.

Me: Why do you think that is? Is the culture changing or do you play different games or...?

Player: Um, no, that's not it. I mean I do play some new games. But that's not it. I guess I think I play with more people I know. More co-op¹, I guess... I know more than I used to.

The above player testified to experiencing less griefing as they grew more experienced with the game. As a by-product of his growing experience he was able to form a community that shielded him from anti-social behavior in-game. He also gained knowledge of the game, which made him less vulnerable as a target of random acts of violence and n00b hunting. Inexperienced players, particularly players lacking a social network in-game, are particularly vulnerable to acts of grief-play, which I discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

¹ Co-op, short for cooperative, is a form of play where you team with one or multiple players to pursue a common goal, mission, or outcome during play. This type of play contrasts with PvP, player-vs-player, which pits players against each other, and PVE, player-vs-environment, which is to play alone against the challenges of the game.

As I discussed in the introduction, ethnographic studies have revealed the experience of family-like dynamics and complex relationships in online games. Online games offer community, interactivity, and freedom from the constraints of RL. It was important to the interview participants that I address the positive aspects of online play. Online games contain social communities, existing as “third places” for social interaction and relationship formation like pubs and social clubs. They have evolved into immersive spaces where players can build real relationships in virtual settings. Players in online games are often encouraged to work in teams and play in groups. However, while online games contain rich social opportunities, they are still games. Depending on the genre, players are invited to compete against the game or with each other. Players who enjoyed PvP games and the competitive aspects of play encountered significant griefing and hate speech. Whether cooperative or PvP players, griefing was a phenomenon all the players could speak to at length. Below I outline the interview participants’ experiences with griefing and how griefing affected their play experiences.

Experiencing Griefing

It’s important to understand the context in which griefing occurs in online games. Video games, co-op or PvP, possess characteristics traditionally associated with sports. In cooperative play players assume different roles, like positions on a team, strategize and work together for successful play. Dialogue takes place between players to negotiate moves, offer praise or criticism, over text-based communication channels or voice microphones. In PvP settings, there are often communication channels that also allow dialogue between members of opposing teams. The act of fighting monsters with a team

or against human opponents is a significant source of pleasure in online games. The pleasure is in the mastery, as an individual or a team, and the acquisition of power through experience, stats, or virtual items and currency. The player below was primarily motivated by act of “winning” at online games:

Me: Who do you usually play with?

Player: I play with whoever makes a good teammate. Sometimes they're my friends that I know in person, sometimes they're randoms that I always win with. Occasionally, I'll play by myself, but that's when I have an objective and just want to get it done, no funny business... I play with my friends because I love them and enjoy talking to them, but sometimes, my competitive drive gets the best of me and I ditch them. Like I said earlier, I like people who I get along with and can win with.

The joy of combat is the product of competently embodying a virtual character, effectively beating opponents and/or working cooperatively with other players. We take pleasure in our skill, techniques, and successful control of our avatars and our environments. Violence in games can be extreme, causing concern for politicians and parents, but is also muted. While violence in video games can be graphically realistic, we experience violence in abstract. Combat is mostly missing the blood and gore characteristic of similar violence in real life. According to Taylor (2006), enjoyment of combat is more about the successful mastery of the timing and movements required, significantly less about virtual destruction. Not that aesthetic realism is unappreciated by gamers.

Experienced players, also referred to as power gamers and hard-core gamers, are fluent in the language, customs, and mechanics of the games they play. Skill level becomes a source of pride and membership to an elite status of gamers. Once achieving mastery, some gamers will go to extremes to keep the game entertaining, to push the boundaries of play, by tackling challenging difficulty-settings, entering into co-ops with similarly skilled players or going head-to-head with the most skilled players they can find. Boredom can result for some gamers, who are no longer entertained by the challenges of the game. This was true of the gamers I spoke with:

Me: You're good! Hope you're not bored. Sorry we're playing on easy.

Player: It's ok. I mean normally I'd be. Why play if I can do it with one arm tied behind my back? But I'm kewl chatting. I'm having fun.

Often acts of griefing are associated with boredom on part of some of the gamers, upon achieving a certain level of mastery, and, as discussed in the literature review, a sense of elite status, deeming the griefer the right to haze less skilled and less powerful players.

Competition is as much a source of pleasure for gamers as sociality, and for some, such as those who prefer PvP or playing solo, more so.

Me: You play a lot of games solo. Do you enjoy playing with people at all?

Player: I like playing against human opponents. AI can get annoyingly predictable and/or repetitive. I'm not really interested in 'meeting people,' if that's what you're getting at. I don't tend to chat during games.

This is true for many gamers regardless of gender and sexual orientation. When surveyed about what elements of game play were most important, women and men did not differ much in the elements of game play that were most important, which is competition and the ability to succeed at playing a game. The male, straight, female, and GLBTQ gamers all addressed competition and/or game mastery as a motivation for play.

Many elite players are not unfamiliar with the frustration and sense of empowerment often experienced through the progression and achievement of mastery. Griefing often takes place in the context of both frustration and elitism, as discussed in the literature review. This is likely why much research on griefing has referenced how competition and mastery lead to mischief-making and hazing. However, if the experience of eventual boredom and frustration are relatively common, this fails to describe why not all players respond to these common experiences through griefing, for not all players participate in griefing. In fact, griefers are largely recognized to be a small minority, though their impact significant:

Player: Most people are really fun! I love my guild. It's just a few jerks that try to ruin it for everyone else... Way more online than off.

Admittedly, there is a lack of research on the numbers of griefers roaming online games, as well as a lack of research on how many gamers have participated in griefing. Despite the potentially limited numbers of griefers, all the players I spoke with had numerous experiences with griefing in online games. In the next section I go into more detail about their experiences with griefing and how these experiences affected them. Only two of the

players I interviewed admitted to participating in griefing. Most players did not react with violence, hate speech or hazing when faced with feelings of boredom and/or frustration.

Random Acts of Violence

I crouched in my favorite position in the loft of the barn that marks the final stand-off at the end of the *LAD* “Blood Harvest” campaign. Momentarily we’d be faced with repeated waves of zombie hordes, which we’d need to survive until rescue. Once the military transports arrived, we would need to make it on-board, with zombies rushing in from all sides. Succeeding in doing this would trigger the end of the campaign.

Louis: Are you ready? This should go fast on “easy.”

Me: Yep. This would be a nightmare on “expert” with just the two of us.

Louis: Oh gawd, yes! Yesterday it took hours to make it to the end of “Dead Air” on “expert.” Some guy was playing. A friend of [Name Omitted]. It was taking *forever*... He just started shooting us and throwing [Molotov Cocktails] at us.

Giggling like he was tweaking. I finally just gave up.... My afternoon down the toilet.

Successfully finishing a campaign on “expert” in *LAD* can be extremely difficult, even for highly skilled and experienced players. This is partly due to that fact that friendly-fire can be fatal. Much like raids and difficult missions in *WoW*, which can require considerable team coordination and time commitment, these campaigns can take hours longer than campaigns on a lower difficulty setting. The griefer described above opted to sabotage

both his own and his team's success through random acts of violence against the other players. This resulted in the Louis quitting and sacrificing the time invested to reach the final challenge, which was understandably upsetting for Louis, who'd invested significant work in the form of hours played to reach the final stand-off.

As discussed in the introduction to this section, combat and violence are commonplace in video games. Competition against other players is a salient pleasure for many gamers. It can certainly feel like you're being grieved to be targeted and dominated by a better opponent. Being killed in PvP settings can be frustrating and interfere with the enjoyment of the play experience. However, these are built-in aspects of the game, permitted and intended by the mechanics of the game. If the experience of being bested is accompanied by verbal and text-based harassment and/or hate speech, it can qualify as grief-play. I will discuss harassment and hate speech in more detail later in this chapter. While potentially unpleasant, it is not grieving to be bested in a circumstance when you've willingly entered into head-to-head competition with another player or players.

Nonetheless, there are circumstances in which a player may unknowingly and unwillingly enter into a PvP circumstance, only to be pwned² by a more powerful or experienced player:

Player: My best friend was way into [WoW]. Talked about it constantly. I checked it out... I almost gave up when I started out.

Me: Why's that?

² Pwn is a 1337speak slang term derived from the verb *own*, as meaning to dominate or humiliate a rival.

Player: I got constantly killed cause I had my PvP on and didn't know what that was. I didn't understand why I was alive one second and suddenly dead. I was completely lost... Then I got walked through stuff.

Me: That sounds frustrating.

Player: Very. Then I got my account hacked.

In some online games that offer both PvP and co-op play options, such as *WoW*, you can activate a “tag” which makes you vulnerable to attack by another player. Turning off this tag protects you against attacks from other players. Unfamiliarity with the game mechanics, particularly for new players, can result in unknowingly entering into PvP combat, as was the case for this player. The player was then randomly killed, within seconds, by more powerful players. This would not have benefited the griefer in experience or item acquisition due to the low-level of the victim. This also qualifies as “n00b hunting,” which I discuss in the next section. This experience nearly caused the player to abandon online games, whose play experience was repeatedly sabotaged, resulting in stress and frustration. While entering into PvP mode, knowingly or unknowingly, and being killed is not technically griefing, specifically hunting down new players who would pose no challenge and produce no reward, or taking advantage of a new player unfamiliar with the game mechanics, is a form of grief-play and random violence.

Sexual violence is also a form of griefing violence. In most online games players assume control of avatars which anatomically resemble humans. Some griefers will manipulate their avatars to sexually violate or threaten other players.

Female Player: A few months ago, I was at the bowling alley [online] with a friend. If you don't know, the system has you sit still when it's not your turn. You can't get up or move around or anything. These two dirt bags saw me and came up and sat with their faces in my lap. I couldn't do anything about it if I wanted to keep bowling... and going on about mmmmm so tasty she's a peach bro, you want some and... I'm not gonna continue, it affects me just remembering it.

Me: This really upset you?

Female Player: Yes. I don't go back to that bowling alley anymore. People just shouldn't do that to each other... People have far fewer inhibitions [online]. Sometimes that can mean they're more likely to do fun, silly things, but usually it means they're freer to be jerks. The guys, anyway. It's gotten me to the point where I don't really want to interact with guys at all, as horrible as that sounds.

Me: You don't have to answer this question if you feel uncomfortable. But have you ever experienced something similar in real life?

Female Player: Yes but I don't want to talk about it.

Sexual violence in online games can be emotionally distressful for players, particularly men or women who've experienced sexual violence in real life. Often the players are

powerless to prevent it, which can activate feelings and sometimes traumatic memories of sexual violence, as the above player testifies. Sexual references and sexual violations are not uncommon in online games:

Me: Have you ever been T-Bagged?

Female Player: Yes! At raids [in WoW]. It's juvenile. Even when guys don't have penises they have to pretend they do.

“T-bagging” is the act of dancing or simulating a sexual violation over the body of a fallen opponent. The experience of sexual violence in online games can be annoying, or disturbing and emotionally traumatic.

Players recounted experiences where domination over other players, whether men or women, was acted out as virtual sexual domination. Being superior was directly translated into sexual command of their opponents. Masculinity is demonstrated through threats of rape and sexual domination. The use of heterosexuality as a tool for dominance prevails in the off-line world. This was also reflected in the interviews with the participants, who detailed rape and sexualized encounters with male players. Several of the female players described violent griefing as acts of rape. Other players used their avatars to simulate physical violation of their graphically-represented characters. The most frustrating aspect of this for the female players was their inability to stop it from happening.

For random acts of violence to qualify as griefing it must be just that: random in context, non-strategic, and completely unbeneficial for the griefer in terms of power-

acquisition. Grief-play in the form of random acts of violence must be in violation of spoken and unspoken customs in online games. For example, it's assumed that members of your own team in co-operative play will work with you to succeed. When players on your own team suddenly work against you this becomes as form of betrayal and often renders success by the rest of your team impossible. Destroying and humiliating less powerful characters, who are in no way interfering with your game play, is also a violation of game etiquette. Grief-play in the form of random acts of violence can also take the form of destructive suicide attacks, which significantly interfere with play for others, or "training" monsters into highly populated areas of the game. In online games you can agro³ non-player characters (NPC)⁴ by getting too close (if you're an appropriate level in some games). Agroing multiple monsters, or "chain agroing," can cause a train of them to follow you into other parts of the map, such as areas occupied by other players, whom they will then attack. All of these tactics result in play disruption for others and sometimes emotional distress, but no advancement for the griefer.

N00b Hunting

A "n00b," as defined earlier in this thesis, is l33t speak for "newbie" or "new player." Discovering the enjoyment of online play, the challenges presented by the environment, the pleasure of advancement and mastery, and an entire community of people you may never have encountered in real life are all part of what draws new players

³ To "agro" is to create hostility in others, causing them to attack you. This is frequently seen in MMO's where a player draws the attention of one or more hostile NPC's (non-player characters) and is attacked by them.

⁴ Non-Player Character (NPC) in a game is any fictional monster or character controlled by the game system, not controlled by a player.

into virtual worlds in mass each year. Being unfamiliar with the language and customs can also be disconcerting. N00bs specifically unfamiliar with online games in general are particularly vulnerability to manipulation.

Me: What are some negative experiences you've had in online games?

Player: More when I first started... I shall answer your question as a demonstration.

[The player's avatar turns and walks towards me, stopping in front of me.]

Player: "Hi there!"

Me: "Hello." [I play along.]

Player: "Are you new? Would you like some help?"

Me: "Sure."

Player: "I'll show you around! Follow me, my new friend!" [The player's avatar turns and runs away. I follow. We weave through cars until music plays indicating an approaching zombie horde. Zombies rush towards us.]

Me: "Have fun! Bye!" [The player's avatar turns and runs the other direction.] I would then log out on you but I won't. The fucker left me to die.

This player is describing a version of n00b baiting, where new players are lured into traps by more experienced players. N00b hunting (tracking new less-powerful players down and killing them), corpse camping (where a griefer waits to continually re-kill a less

powerful player whenever they resume play), or conning new players out of currency and items are all popular tactics for hazing new players. Griefing n00bs generally requires a significant power imbalance, in both game experience and clout. In Consalvo's 2007 study on cheating in video games, players referenced their mastery of gaming as justification for griefing. Elite and superior players felt they had earned the right to haze less experienced players. Elite gamers who grief have surpassed the built in challenges offered by the game and turn to gaming other players for enjoyment.

As described in the section on random acts of violence, many of the players I interviewed are familiar with the occurrence of being targeted and killed by more experienced players early into their play experiences.

Me: With practice I bet you'd be great at versus⁵.

Player: Thanks. It's just too obvious that I don't know what I'm doing. So I get killed in seconds. It's frustrating and I never have enough time to figure it out. I spend the whole time waiting to re-spawn⁶ while [the other players] make fun of me.

While defeating a weaker opponent who willingly enters into a head-to-head contest with you is not grief-play, the mockery and harassment accompanying that defeat is. As was the case with this player, n00b hunting can turn some players completely off PvP games

⁵ "Versus" is a player-vs-player mode in *Left 4 Dead* that pits a team of zombies controlled by players and survivors controlled by players against each other.

⁶ In most online games death is not permanent. The consequence for dying is to be temporarily removed from play and/or transported back to starting point. This is often referred to as "spawning" or "re-spawning." Monsters and NPCs can sometimes also re-spawn after being killed.

and modes. It's one thing to feel frustration learning the mechanics and specifics of a new game. It can result in an entirely new level of frustration to be repeatedly targeted and killed while seeking to climb that learning curve. For this reason, some of the players I interviewed largely preferred co-op play to PvP.

It's not uncommon for players with significant play experience to feel impatient with players with less skill, particularly for gamers driven by competition:

I most often play with people that I've known for awhile now, approximately a year... I play with them because we are in a guild together and more specifically, we are in a tight knit ten man raiding group so we talk all the time and it's more comfortable to talk to them even when we're not raiding. Also, some of us are officers in our guild... It is an amazing feeling when we accomplish goals as a guild.... Also, I tend to be annoyed with [people] who are too inept at figuring out how to play their character and who find it difficult to understand raid mechanics that it's just too much of a lost cause trying to assist them.

For players who've surpassed certain challenges in the game, thereby achieving a given level or status, playing against or with players who've yet to acquire similar mastery can feel dull or tedious. A majority of the players I interviewed, who all have years of experience playing online games, admitted to preferring teammates of similar skill and/or familiarity. It's important to understand that in some MMOs, such as *WoW*, challenges and areas of the map are designed for certain play levels. Some missions or sections would be impossible for lower-level players to succeed in. Higher-level players wouldn't be well rewarded for killing NPCs or engaging in missions intended for lower-level

players. The mechanics of the game encourage players with similar level characters to play with each other. However, many players have multiple characters of different levels.

Player: We can play *WoW* if you want.

Me: I don't have any high level *WoW* toons.

Player: I have some guppys I play with my n00b friends.

Me: You help out n00bs a lot?

Player: Not much anymore. Too boring. Same quests over and over. I have enough friends in the game now that I don't try to talk my other friends to play anymore.

While a certain sense of elitism or pride with mastery is ubiquitous, not all players demonstrate their superiority by hazing n00bs. Most of the players I interviewed opted to ignore or simply not play with less experienced players. Some of the players I interviewed enjoyed helping new players struggling with the mechanics, customs and culture of their new environment. One player ended our interview on a kind note, "Let me know if you'd like to play. Even if it's a game you don't play. I like helping [n00bs]. Good karma."

White-Knighting and Politically-Motivated Griefing

Along similar lines to using one's skill and mastery for good, and not evil, griefing can serve as an act of resistance against griefers with nefarious intentions.

“White-knighting” is the act of protecting harassed players or lashing out against griefers. Some players use griefing tactics to deter griefers or punish griefers for their behavior. As one player expressed, “I hear derogatory language all the time... I just mute them and kill them. I like killing punks.” While this thesis did not specifically focus on acts of resistance to masculine hegemony in online games, many players, specifically after having gained a certain mastery and skill-level, testified to coping and/or dealing with griefing by turning the tables.

It's much easier to drop them if they suck when you don't know the people. Might sound mean, but I don't play the game for people to insult me because they are making mistakes. So if it's not fun, I have no worries to leave them there to die.

LAD reference.

In *LAD* there's a window of opportunity to be saved by a teammate when your health has dropped to a point of causing incapacitation. If not revived within that window, you are temporarily removed from the game to wait to be re-spawned. Even after re-spawn you are dependent on your teammates, in co-op, to find you and return you to play. In response to harassment, this player would simply leave the griefer to die, refusing to allow them to resume play. This is similar to corpse camping in MMOs like *WoW*, which is a griefing tactic to prevent a player from resuming play after being killed. Griefers repeatedly kill the less powerful characters each time they attempt to resume play.

In the discussion chapter I address griefing as expression of hegemonic masculinity. Online gaming populations continue to grow in diversity and there are experienced players who refuse to accept hate speech, hazing, and grief-play as

acceptable behavior. Some game companies have turned to community policing of grief-play as a deterrent, depending on the gaming community itself to report and punish griefers. According to one player: “In my guild we protect each other. If a player has been hassled or killed, we get revenge. We send a message that no one messes with our guild.”

“White-knighting” in the form of help and protection is not always appreciated, however, and in certain ways reflects a different face of hegemonic masculinity. Progress in female athleticism and competitive video gaming challenge the assumed predisposition by men to dominate in these spaces. Research suggests that culturally some find ambivalence with positive portrayals of women’s skill in traditionally masculinized arenas. Many of the female players, particularly action and FPS genre players felt that they were coddled and underestimated because of their gender. They describe experiences where they were either specifically targeted or pandered to by male players drawing assumptions about their skill-level based on their sex:

All the time I hear slurs thrown about racial jokes, gay comments, etc. Not by people I play with but in region channels or zone-wide chats. I face discrimination all the time from people whom I don’t know but hear a female voice or learn I’m a female. Usually it’s assumed by them that a woman needs their hand held in games or can’t grasp the concept on how to fight. I see a lot of guys throwing themselves in harm’s way to try and "save" me. I hear "for a girl you’re pretty good" all the time. Even when I’m 20 levels above them, better equipped. They still have it in their minds that female gamers are somehow inherently worse or need to be coddled.

According to this player, being protected from griefers was an insult to her skill-level and ability to successfully defend herself. Being the recipient of “white-knighting” translated to sexist criticism.

While none of the players I interviewed engaged in politically-motivated griefing similar to deLappe’s (2006) spamming the names of people who were killed in the war in the U.S. Army online game *America’s Army*, aggressively resisting hate speech in-game by attacking and punishing the speakers is its own form of politically-motivated griefing.

Player: I've heard people say ‘fag’, ‘gay’, ‘nigger’ from times to times, but usually, these people suck both in game and out game.

Me: Does it bother you? How do you react?

Player: It used to bother me more but now I just make them suffer. I express my feelings with grenades. [Laugh]

Several players, particularly experienced female and GLBTQ players, expressed reduced sensitivity to hate speech and griefing through the cathartic empowerment of fighting back.

Harassment and Hate Speech

Griefing in the form of harassment and hate-speech was the most commonly experienced form of grief-play among the players I spoke with. In fact, all the interview participants related encounters with harassment and hate speech over communication channels on a regular basis. For one, all online games enable players to interact with each

other in some way. Players are often permitted in online games to communicate with members of their own team, with the opposing team/players, as well as globally with all players on their server or within their section of the game. As expressed by this player: “They do it because they can. Just trying to get a reaction... I ignore it or hide the window.” All players can use communication channels for the purpose of spamming, criticizing, harassing, and general anti-social behavior.

Second, harassment and hate speech do not require a power imbalance and/or game mastery on the part of the griever, as is often required for random acts of violence and n00b hunting. Both griefers in the state of losing and winning engaged in harassment and used hate speech. In fact, several players mentioned that they encountered hate speech more when the griever was losing. According to one player:

Usually when I kicking their butt they’ll start up... I do hear derogatory language. Just hearing stuff like Jew, Nigger, Cunt, Bitch, Faggot sometimes. Wanting to get people riled up and raging. ‘Trolling’ them. Not as many trolls in real life as on online, but there are still a lot of normal people online, not as much a difference as competing with people in any other sport or game.

For this player griefing in the form of harassment and hate speech was a by-product of the competitive aspects of play. She considered hate speech as either a psychological strategy to throw the opponent off balance, an expression of frustration while losing, or as posturing when winning:

Player: The more I hear “bitch” then I know I’m doing great or bad. I prefer to hear it when I’m winning. [Laughs]

Me: So it’s a good thing?

Player: Ummm. Well... Not good. But it does make me want to kill them more. So in a way.

This sentiment was shared by many of the players I spoke with. Hate speech and verbal/text-based harassment was associated with game-play tactics or emotional outbursts related to competition. For this player, hearing harassment and hate speech are motivating, aiding to help drive the player’s aggression. Highly skilled and experienced players were able to fight back, punish the griefer, and/or revel in defeating a player who behaved poorly by spouting hate speech.

It’s important to note that some women also engage in griefing tactics. While it was predominantly assumed by the gamers I spoke with that griefers are typically men, two of the younger female players admitted to participating in griefing themselves. They associated harassment with the competitive aspects of play:

Player: Some people would say that trash talkers and creepers are a negative experience, but I don't mind them so much. They're easy to avoid. If the slurs are ever towards me, there’s the mute button. A negative experience for me would definitely be losing repeatedly. I don't always mind it, but sometimes I just want to bash my monitor.

Me: So you hear trash talk?

Player: Oh yes. That's almost all you hear online. 'Make me a sandwich!' or 'You must be super fat since you're a girl playing videogames!' lame stuff. Easily ignored. And I have been in countless games where the words 'nigger' and 'faggot' are used excessively. I would say I witness it in 80% of the games I play... I'm sure I have used many derogatory terms and said inappropriate things, but it's all in good fun.

Trash talk is not necessarily grief-play. However, trash talk specifically sexist, racism, or homophobic qualifies as hate speech. One of the two women typically grieved by using sexist rhetoric targeting men:

Player: I make fun of the size of their dicks. They go crazy!

Me: This is in response to them saying sexist things?

Player: Definitely but not always.

Amongst the gamers I spoke with, women are also significantly more likely to "rage quit" as a result of harassment and grief-play than the male players. "Rage quitting" refers to suddenly dropping out of play as the result of emotional upset related to being harassed or beaten. Women are also more likely to end play entirely, as opposed to ending play with the griefer and moving on to a new game.

Sometimes it's just too much. Seriously. I get too worked up. I know when I "rage quit" they probably feel like they won but I really don't care. You know, I just need to take breaks and do something else to calm down.

This was not true of all the female players, some of whom took pride in their ability to tolerate harassment during play. However, none of the male players admitted to rage quitting or emotional upset as a result of hate speech and harassment.

For many of the women, players of color, and GLBTQ players, hate speech was not easily dismissed. Players of color and GLBTQ players were more likely to be aware of hate speech offline. Encounters with hate speech online triggered feelings of anger and vulnerability associated with offline racism and homophobia:

Me: Do you ever hear hate speech?

Player: I definitely hear the use of hate terms. I'm a bisexual Asian-American female whose oldest child is of black descent so when I see someone being hateful, I usually make sure I don't play with that person again... I don't see a racist coming into my neighborhood and starting some stuff, but since they are safe in their homes, they feel free to talk crap.

Players conscious of sexism and homophobia in their real life were less likely to tolerate hate speech in online games. As one GLBTQ player expressed, "It would upset me if I heard 'dyke' or 'fag' in my normal life. So yes, it upsets me online. It should not be allowed anywhere." The heterosexual players I interviewed were more likely to excuse

hate speech as a normal and tolerable aspect to online play. Experiences with hate speech were more emotionally disturbing for the GLBTQ players.

In July, 2010, I logged into the Valve's *Steam* late in the morning. *Steam* is a computer gaming platform similar to Xbox Live, which allows members to purchase games, create a profile, join gaming groups, and maintain a friends list. You can chat with members of your friends list, as well as see if they're online and, if so, in-game. I noticed one of my interview participants and her girlfriend were currently playing *L4D*. I loaded up the game and joined. My interview participant, who uses a moniker that clearly identifies her as a lesbian, was playing in a co-op with two people I wasn't familiar with.

Me: Where's your gf?

Player: Playing versus. I hate versus.

L4D has a selection of campaigns you can play. Most are co-op, where four players work together to survive a map or challenge. However, *L4D* also has a PvP mode called "versus" which pits a team of players assuming the role of zombies and a team of players assuming the role of survivors against each other.

Me: Why do you hate versus?

Player: People are assholes. It's hard to concentrate when I'm constantly seeing "dyke," "bitch," etc. And I suck. It's hard to get good when aholes are typing crap.

Me: It doesn't bother your gf?

Player: No she's femme. She just kills them if they start talking shit.

Me: Just killing them is a femme quality?

Player: No. She just doesn't hear stuff in real life. So it doesn't get to her.

While I've never met this interview participant in real life, her profile displays a photograph. Assuming this photograph is of her, she appears to resemble a stereotypical butch lesbian with short hair, dressed in masculine attire. The hate speech and harassment she's experienced while playing PvP tapped into associations with offline hate speech and harassment. Her girlfriend, however, according to the testimony of the player I interviewed, was able to pass as a heterosexual woman and had far fewer experiences with discrimination and anti-gay attacks. According to this interview participant, having fewer negative experiences in real life caused her girlfriend to be less vulnerable to emotional turmoil resulting from grieving in the form of hate speech. Players who feel personally affected by language which targets their gender or sexuality are more likely to feel marginalized and threatened offline.

The homophobic language used was not random or meaningless. Research reveals that homophobic language is used to feminize targets. Femininity, according to societal constructions of hegemonic masculinity, is an insult to prowess in competitive spaces. One player explained that the use of homophobic speech wasn't intended to belittle GLBTQ people but to belittle the skill of their opponent: "'Gay' seems like a synonym for 'of poor quality' rather than queer, but it's not meant in a hurtful way." For this player, who identified himself as a white, heterosexual, male, use of the terms "gay" and

“fag” did not qualify as hate speech. For this player the terms were used to insult the player’s skill-level.

Regardless of player demographics, hate speech and verbal harassment are the most ubiquitously experienced form of grief-play, and for some players, the most tolerable, and for others the most threatening, disturbing and personal. For many players, the use of verbal harassment and hate speech were directly tied to the competitive aspects of online games. The combination of anonymity, which protected the griefers from consequence, and competitive play, resulted in some players using hate speech and harassment as a strategic tool to rile opponents. However, for others, hate speech tapped into offline fears and vulnerabilities tied to gender and sexual orientation.

Conclusion

Ethnographic studies have reflected complex relationships and sociality in online games. Online games offer community, interactivity, and freedom from the constraints of RL. Online games contain social communities, existing as “third places” for social interaction and relationship formation like pubs and social clubs. They are immersive spaces where players can build real relationships during play. Players in online games are often encouraged to work in teams and play in groups. However, while online games contain rich social opportunities, they are still games. Depending on the genre, players are invited to compete against the game or with each other. For all the players who participated in this study, mastery, leveling, the acquisition of in-game power and competition were salient motivations for participating in online games.

The players I interviewed for this study experienced random acts of violence against their own teams or against everyone. Grief-play in the form of random acts of violence must be in violation of spoken and unspoken customs in online games. For example, it's assumed that members of your own team in co-operative play will work with you to succeed. When players on your own team suddenly work against you this interrupts the play of others. Killing and humiliating less powerful characters, who are in no way interfering with your game play, is also a violation of game etiquette and a common form of randomly violent grief-play. Grief-play in the form of random acts of violence can also take the form of destructive suicide attacks, manipulating the game to create violent encounters for others, such as through "training," as well as sexual violence. All of these tactics result in play disruption for other players and sometimes emotional distress, but no advancement for the griever.

Regardless of player demographics, hate speech and verbal harassment are the most universally experienced form of grief-play. How the players were affected by harassment and hate speech varied. For many players, the use of verbal harassment and hate speech were the natural consequence of competitive aspects of online games. The combination of anonymity, which protected the griefers from consequence, and competitive play, resulted in some players using hate speech and harassment as a strategic tool to rile opponents. However, for others hate speech tapped into offline fears and vulnerabilities tied to race, gender, and sexual orientation. Players of color and GLBTQ players were particularly sensitive to and disturbed by hate speech. In the next chapter I situate these experiences of grieving in relationship to hegemonic masculinity.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

Until recently, video games were understood to be created by and for male audiences. However, video games have been increasingly marketed to women, racially, and/or sexually diverse audiences. Despite the growing popularity of video games, research analyzing diverse gamer experiences is limited. There is little research on either resistance or conflict in online communities to a diversifying audience in what has traditionally been a very male heterosexual white-centered space. A significant body of work has been done analyzing violence in video games and depictions of gender representation; however few connections have been made between marketing, content, and griefing. The video game market has been mainly defined by industry assumptions about gamers, and often offers stereotypes about their target audience (that they are homophobic) for example, as an excuse for not including more diverse content. Ethnographic and experimental investigations of player communities have explored social dynamics in video games, but experiential information about harassment and hate speech within virtual communities is inadequate.

Griefers need to be distinguished from cheaters striving for game achievements and power. Griefers derive pleasure from causing havoc and distress, with little or no ludic gain and often at the expense of their own in-game characters. Griefing can manifest as hate speech, team-killing, virtual rape, unprovoked violence, or theft of virtual currency or items. Griefers are often powerful players, trolls, or even game

masters, and can terrorize online communities, as their tactics are difficult to deter and punish.

The video game industry continues to struggle with ethical questions about the rights and responsibilities of members of these online communities, creating friction between the players and the industry. The challenges surrounding the creation of order in virtual society resemble their real world equivalents. Given the popularity of online games, it's important to understand the mechanisms of this relationship between the industry and players, as well as between the players in-game. Online games are an opportunity to re-imagine identity and society. Early MUDs were originally envisioned as utopian spaces, where players could live out fantasies and perform their better selves. However, grief-play soon took form and continues to flourish in virtual communities decades later. As the gaming industry continues to struggle with strategies for combating griefing, players experiment with their own countering tactics. Player interviews revealed that forming tight-knit guilds, restricting play to friends and allies, and even fighting back against harassers and agents of hate speech.

As quickly as game companies execute strategies for combating griefing, the griefers find ways around them. Some game companies use filters to reject obscene and graphic gamertags and character names. They often rely on the audience to determine what is obscene and what isn't. Sony's customer service manager, Alan Crosby, estimated that each of his customer support staff members spend an average of one hour out of an eight-hour shift dealing with grief-related reports (Pham, 2002). Many of the policing strategies employed by game companies result from these reports. In this regard, industry anti-griefing strategies are generally defensive, rather than offensive.

Also, little consideration is given to the grieving strategies themselves, more consideration is given to the audience reaction to them.

Further research into how game companies discuss, seek to counter, and potentially tolerate grief-play would add significantly to this conversation about the phenomenon. Most game companies don't distinguish types of social grieving. Many game companies rely on the audience to identify griefers and grieving tactics. Companies controlling virtual worlds have to walk a precarious line between allowing freedom of expression and policing griefers. Game companies have done little to challenge harassment and hate speech in online games, perhaps largely due to the predominantly white, heterosexual, male demographic make-up of the game industry. More research into the video game industry and their perceptions of grieving behavior online is needed.

The habits of griefers have become an obsession for Sony Corp., Microsoft Corp., and Electronic Arts Inc. as the companies spend hundreds of millions of dollars building online games they hope will be successful on the global mass-market (Pham, 2002). There are over one million online game players in the U.S. and millions more overseas, particularly in South Korea and China (Pham, 2002). Game makers fear virtual saboteurs who jeopardize the rise of online games by deterring new adopters who pay monthly for access to virtual spaces, and have devoted significant resources to finding ways to stop the online mayhem (Pham, 2002). Griefers drive away business and it is common for developers to release server-side upgrades and patches to limit grieving methods that involve hacks and mods. Blizzard Entertainment, maker of *World of Warcraft*, has created software components and rules for its forums to combat grieving. "We're trying to take a whole new generation of players online who have never been there before," said

Cameron Ferroni, director of content services for Microsoft's Xbox. "We want to make sure everyone has a good experience" (Pham, 2002).

One of the biggest challenges faced by development companies has been how to deal with player-vs.-player (PvP). Many players enjoy the challenge of competing in violent contests against other players, while others would opt to avoid it altogether. Most games that allow PvP encounters offer separate servers or in-game functions to allow spaces where player-on-player attackers are restricted. *Ultima Online (UO)*, the first of its kind among 3D graphical online games, lost significant audience to player-killing. *UO* made everything PvP in the interest of promoting realism. However, limitless PvP opened the door for rampant violent griefing. *EverQuest*, which followed *UO*, took the opposite approach, allowing no PvP at all. This helped to reduce griefing but alienated the demographic who preferred the challenge of combating other players. Titles that followed generally offer both, giving players protections against attacks from others but only allowing PvP on specific servers. However, this does not deter social griefing tactics that do not include violence against other players.

Some gaming environments have introduced sparring and dueling options that are less violent than full-on PvP. Often these encounters take place in arenas and result in limited negative consequences for the loser. This allows players attracted to PvP combat to engage with other players without the risk of death and loss of virtual property. Controlled PvP has had limited success in the environments I've played. A brief survey of fellow gamers revealed that some players feel that the minimized consequences take away from PvP contests. Also, in systems that promote team play, one-on-one player duels can be extremely unfair. Some character classes are designed to serve more

supportive roles within team, such as healers and spell casters. These character classes often don't fare well in player duels with combat character classes, such as fighters. *Lord of the Rings Online* introduced another variation called "monster play." In monster play people can opt to play monsters against other player characters. This option is also available in Valve's *Left for Dead* series of games, which have game modes set aside for PvP competition. However, these variations do little to curb violence and social grieving. Despite these limitations, setting aside areas in game for PvP combat is the most popular compromise to date in online games seeking to promote social team play and PvP competition.

Online gaming companies often employ gamemasters who reprimand offenders. Others have opted for a crowd sourcing approach, relying on the gaming community to police and report offenders. The most malicious players are then red-flagged and dealt with at the gamemaster's discretion. "The most common 'griever counter-measure' is to put in place a strong community system," says Stephen Davis of IT GlobalSecure, a firm that specializes in developing security technologies for online games (Girard, 2007). "These community services provide clan features, friend's lists, reputation stats, and other features both to tie players more closely to the game and create an environment that reduces anonymity for misbehaving players." Nevertheless, this does little to stop grievers from returning to these environments with new identities, where they quickly return to their old ways. In the interview chapter of this project, I go into more detail about how players have sought safety among guilds and groups to shield themselves from grievers in role-playing genre online games.

Though online games are admittedly competitive spaces, increasing investment by the players and high stakes have encouraged gaming communities to continually examine ethics and permissible game tactics. "I expect we'll see more and more self-government," says Scott Jennings, game developer and author of *Massively Multiplayer Games for Dummies* (Davies, 2006):

The reason is fairly obvious if not particularly noble: it's less expensive for game companies to have their customers police themselves than hire people to do it.

The trick, and why you don't see it generally, is to construct self-policing schemes in such a way that they don't enable unscrupulous players to use them as tools of grief (Davies, 2006).

Many players are quite vocal in online gaming forums about acceptable online behavior. Blizzard banned over five-thousand players from *StarCraft 2* in September 2010 but this will ultimately not be a cost-effective way for game companies to respond to griefing, particularly since it's difficult, if not impossible, to prevent re-entry by the banned players assuming new identities (McElroy, 2010). According to Stephen Davis, "for a small game, these costs can be the difference between success and failure. For a large game, these costs are a continual drag on the bottom line" (Girard, 2007).

Community self-government has become essential in massively-multiplayer online role-playing games (MMO), such as *WoW*, for promoting continued play and protection from griefers. Complex persistent online worlds are particularly vulnerable to malicious behavior since they offer more nuanced opportunities for engaging in griefing-tactics than your average first-person shooter. In MMO's more is at stake for the players, who invest significant time and effort into leveling characters, developing communities,

exploring vast virtual landscapes. Also, MMO's contain vibrant online economies with currencies that sometimes translate to real-world dollars. Virtual items are regularly sold on eBay, against the explicit terms of the use of the game company. If digital property is stolen or lost, some players are effectively losing real money.

Developers have been experimenting with policing systems that rely on the larger community. In 2003, eGenesis released *A Tale in the Desert*, which offered players the ability to exact laws, ban players, and determine permissible behavior. This example inspired further experimentation with community self-governance. Xbox Live's Gamer Card system monitors gamers by allowing other players to score your behavior. A low enough reputation will impact whether other players will play with you. This has successfully allowed Microsoft to save on customer support. However, Microsoft also banned a lesbian player in 2009 who was targeted by other players exhibiting homophobic reactions to her sexuality, though they've since changed their policies. Gamers often use forums and in-game lists to limit their exposure to griefers. In *Second Life*, Linden Lab tries to keep up with complaints, reporting suspensions and issuing warnings in an online "police blotter." In *WoW*, the identity of unethical players spread quickly through forums and chat rooms. However, player rating systems, particularly in play environments significantly dominated by white heterosexual men, does not always protect minority players.

A MMO in May 2006, called *Seed*, invited players to elect one another to administrative positions, which could then decide on the direction of the game's online community. *Seed's* website explained: "Administrators control the foundation of the trade economy. Players can influence large-scale development of game-world society by

deploying or withholding resources for projects" (Davies, 2006). Players elected to administrative positions sometimes used their position to promote themselves and allies in-game. They were not always motivated to exercise power to promote fairness. The makings of a virtual political system were created, in which griefing becomes a means of Machiavellian self-advancement. "The evolution from game to virtual society is inevitable - you can believe that," said Richard Bartle. "What you can't believe is that these societies will necessarily be run along democratic lines. If a player gets the job of commissioner for public safety and decides to abuse the position by jailing all his rivals, so much for idealism." Bartle believes that the "guild" system that many game systems such as WoW support is a good example of this democratizing strategy. "Players are free to form groups with like-minded individuals, and organize however they please. Some guilds are democratic, some autocratic, and I dare say some are theocratic and everything else in between."

Companies controlling virtual worlds have to navigate precarious lines between maintaining community standards and policing overzealously. When Blizzard Entertainment ordered a player to stop recruiting openly gay, lesbian and transgendered players to a guild in 2006, fearing they would be harassed, there was backlash in the form of virtual protests and bad press (Consumerist, 2006). To counter negative publicity over a German child-porn case, Linden labs, maker of *Second Life*, introduced an age-verification system that required subscriber's driver's license numbers to access locations with adult content. The result was a heated debate over privacy rights (Reuters, 2007). "We are in competition with the real world," said Phillip Rosedale, the founder and chief

executive officer of Linden Labs, to the *London Telegraph*. “We are competing to create a better place for your mind to live” (Preston, 2007).

Griefers generally understand the game well enough to exploit the game structure to the detriment of other players. They often play powerful in-game characters with the capacity to cause significant violence and harm. Grief-play benefits from a power imbalance, with the griefer wielding more than the victims in the form of game knowledge or advantage. This is evident in randomly violent grief-play and n00b hunting, hazing weaker and inexperienced players. Research on cheating and griefing (Kendall, 2002; Consalvo, 2007) reveals that some griefers feel entitled to haze beginner players. Their experience and competency earns them elite status. Players unfamiliar with the game or popular griefing tactics are deserving of harassment. As discussed earlier in this thesis, perceptions of white, male, heterosexual privilege are evident in the hard-core gaming community.

Current research on the motivations for grief-play in online games includes anonymity, psychological factors, harmless mischief, and hard-core gamer privilege. Anonymity definitely contributes to the pervasiveness of griefing, making it difficult to deter and punish. Much of the griefing experienced by the interview participants was blamed on the anonymity of the environment. Common to existing research about griefing, the anonymity allotted online communities as an essential component for griefing online. The presumption by most of the players interviewed is that players free of consequence will behave badly.

However, this does not explain why some players opt not to grief as part of play. Nor does anonymity serve as a sufficient explanation for why grief-play often takes the

form of hate speech and harassment targeting gender, race, and/or sexual orientation. This project explored the motivations of grief-play in online games as an extension hegemonic masculinity in online spaces, as video games exist, like sports and technology industries, where masculine gender is performed and constructed.

For this study I primarily interviewed gamers who do not identify as griefers. Our understanding of griefing in online games would benefit significantly from ethnographic work with griefers. Much of the work previously done on griefing has looked at the uniqueness of the space, specifically the anonymity allotted, to explain anti-social and aggressive behavior online. However, I feel this explanation is insufficient, as outlined in this thesis, for why much of griefing takes the form of hate speech. Further work with griefers, approached from a feminist, is needed.

Video games provide a new medium in which gender construction can be studied. Interactions in video games occur without the common visual references that are used for detecting race and gender. Gender cannot be interpreted through physical traits and embodiment, so online communities must rely on discourse in order to detect gender. In this way, race and gender can be isolated as an activity independent of the body that is a characteristic in real life interactions. Among the gamers I interviewed, some women enjoyed the freedom of disembodiment, from gender constructions and stereotypes immediately applied to their sex.

Though online games allow for the possibility to resist traditional constructions of gender, some players continue to perform gender online in ways which support male dominance and heterosexual male superiority. Men who play video games can live out hegemonic masculine fantasies of violence and sexual domination. Some of the female

gamers interviewed detailed experiences of virtual rape and sexism. In the bodiless realm of video games, it is interesting that “nerds,” men who participate in a technology industry, who are able to create an alternate world where masculinity is defined differently, do not take this opportunity. Instead, real life is imitated through fantastical representations of strength and masculinity, by using hate speech that acting out aggression and sexual dominance.

This study lacked sufficient discussion of race in online games. Much of this is due to the lack of research on race and the gaming audience. The vast majority of research on race and video games has focused on representation and game content. Just as video games have grown significantly more diverse through the increasing participation of women, it follows that virtual worlds are significantly less white than they were at their inception. As argued in this paper, this growing diversity serves as a threat to white hegemonic masculinity. However, without studies reflecting on the growing racial diversity of gamers, this remains an assumption. More research on racial inequality in virtual cultures is sorely needed.

We need to better understand why racial and gender stereotypes are thriving in the gaming industry successful titles like *Grand Theft Auto*, *Extreme Volleyball*, and *Def Jam New York* (Leonard, 2006). Video games are a white-centered space, as over 50% of male player-controlled characters and 80% of female player-controlled characters are white (Leonard, 2006). Among the few characters of color, stereotypes are rampant, as demonstrated by Cuban drug dealers in *Vice City*, violent rappers in *Def Jam Vendetta*, Asian martial artists, black athletes and Arab terrorists in popular war games.

We need to consider the ways in which these stereotypes reflect and reintroduce offline power imbalances within virtual spaces. From a postcolonial perspective, Langer (2008) examines how races in *World of Warcraft* resemble framings of familiar versus other found in white Western culture. She demonstrates how representations of “evil” races resemble colonial images of African, Native American, and other peoples. Racially stereotyped representations could contribute to gamer ideas about race, affecting both offline and online relations. As Gaily (1993), Ito and Bittani (2008), and Leonard (2006) noted there have been little exploration of race in game studies, and even less that explores the intersection of race and gender with gaming. However, when female characters appear, most are white. Video games promote the idea that whiteness is to be celebrated, and while color is exotic, foreign, bizarre, and often evil.

Sports, video games, and fields of technology, where masculinity is constructed and reinforced, are advancing very limited notions of race, gender, and sexuality. Gender content has been shown to contribute to the sexual objectification of women and reproduce racial stereotypes. Video games teach violence as an appropriate response to conflict, and potentially reinforce negative gender ideology found off-line. There is nothing inherent about video games that define them as a violent, sexist, homophobic, or racist medium. Video games and virtual communities are not the problem. We need to examine the values we’ve privileged as we create and play them.

Derek A. Burrill’s (2008) book *Die Tryin’: Video Games, Masculinity, Culture* discusses ways that video games are playgrounds for the construction and performance of masculinity. He refers to this phenomenon as “digital boyhood” and explains:

Boyhood can be theorized as the regressive nature of first-world, capitalist masculinity, where the pressures of the external force the man back to a type of always-accessible boyhood. Videogames in the 21st century serve as the prime mode of regression, a technonostalgia machine allowing escape, fantasy, extension, and utopia, a space away from feminism, class imperatives, familial duties, as well as national and political responsibilities. It is a space and experience where the digital boy can “die tryin’,” tryin’ to win, tryin’ to beat the game, and tryin’ to prove his manhood (and therefore his place within the patriarchy, the world of capital, and the Law) (p. 2).

Discrepancies between virtual worlds, development communities, gamer populations and the US population have implications for self-identities and considerations of other groups (Williams et al., 2009). Similar to cultivation effects (Gerbner et al., 1994) and cognitive modeling of social identity formation (Mastro et al., 2007) associated with television, games may be influencing player’s impressions of themselves and social groups unlike their own (Williams et al., 2009). The existence, portrayal and absence of social groups have an impact on diverse society, potentially affecting power balance and identity formation. In an experiment of cultivation in a video game, Williams showed that specific symbols, rather than broader values, resulted in cultivation effects (2006). Harwood and Anderson (2002) posit that groups that are represented more in media are considered more important. The absence of representation can lead to feelings of relative unimportance and powerlessness (Mastro et al., 2007).

APPENDIX
INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interview Guide:

1. Rapport-Building: Trust building and gathering information about player.

A. Probes:

- (1) Please describe your level of experience with Massively multiplayer online games.
- (2) How long have you been playing?
- (3) What games do you play and have played?
- (4) What "genre" do you prefer?

2. Motivations for playing.

A. Probes:

- (1) What do you enjoy most about playing online games?
- (2) Who do you most often play with?
- (3) Why do you play with them, specifically?
- (4) To your knowledge, how often do you play with or against women, gamers of color, or GLBTQ gamers?
- (5) Can you describe some positive experiences playing online?

3. Negative experiences playing online.

A. Probes.

- (1) Are there people or types of people you avoid playing with? If so, why?
- (2) Can you describe some negative experiences playing online?
- (3) Have you personally experienced or witnessed harassment or discrimination against another player based on your or their gender, sexual orientation or race/ethnicity?

- (4) Do you hear derogatory language used?
- (5) If so, please describe these experiences.
- (6) In your personal opinion, what do you think the motivation was for the aggressor?
- (7) How would you compare your experiences with people online to offline?

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