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## Keeping Quiet: Investigating the Maintenance and Policing of Male-dominated Gaming Space

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KEEPING QUIET: INVESTIGATING THE MAINTENANCE AND POLICING OF MALE-  
DOMINATED GAMING SPACE

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2014

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
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in the Department of Sociology  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Despite the near parity between the number of female and male gamers (Entertainment Software Association, 2014), studies on gender in videogames illustrate a culture that typically reflects hegemonic masculinity and excludes women on a multitude of levels. Because these interactions occur within real and virtual space (both online and within games), a holistic approach is warranted to analyze these mechanisms of oppression. This paper seeks to uncover the ways by which gaming culture is maintained and policed as a male-dominated space, through qualitative data collection. By using ethnographic, participant observation at a large, multi-genre convention the experiences of both male and female gamers were collected and analyzed. Their stories shed light on the means by which women are silenced, or “kept quiet,” by voice chat profiling, verbal abuse, and hostile Internet communities. They are subject to strict policing of gamer identity, relegation as casual gamers, and their calls for inclusiveness all too often fall on game developers’ deaf ears.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	v
LIST OF TABLES .....	vi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Rationale/Purpose.....	2
Theory .....	3
Methods.....	8
CHAPTER TWO: INTERACTIONS IN DIGITAL SPACE .....	13
Avatars and Gender-bending in Online Games.....	13
In-person Gaming and Masculine Space.....	16
Cyberfeminism and Gender Salience .....	17
Online Abuse.....	19
Online Voice Communication.....	20
Results: Silent Women .....	22
Conclusions .....	24
CHAPTER THREE: FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN GAMES .....	25
Stories for Men, by Men .....	25
Hypersexualization and the Idealization of Female Bodies .....	28
Alternative Perspectives in Content Analysis .....	29
Results: Mixed Responses.....	33
Results, Part 2: What To Do About Young Girls.....	35
Results Part 3: Cosplaying Virtual Women .....	37
Conclusions .....	38
CHAPTER FOUR: THE INDUSTRY .....	40
The Vicious Cycle.....	40
Advertising for Heterosexual Males .....	42
The Feminization of Labor.....	42
Results, Part 1: Where The Women Are('nt).....	43
Results, Part 2: Subverting and Reinforcing Hypersexuality In Artist Alley .....	45
Results, Part 3: Resistance through Voice Acting.....	49

Conclusions .....	50
CHAPTER FIVE: GAMES FOR WOMEN .....	52
Pink and Purple Games .....	52
Difference as Artifice .....	53
Male Ownership of Play.....	54
Results: Appetite for Destruction.....	55
Conclusions .....	56
CHAPTER SIX: HARDCORE GAMING AND E-SPORTS .....	57
Sports and Video Games as Masculine Spaces.....	57
The Presentation and Perception Of Professional Female Gamers.....	58
Results, pt. 1: Gender Essentialism.....	59
Results, pt. 2: Observing Male Gaming Space.....	60
Conclusions .....	62
CHAPTER SEVEN: WOMEN IN THE ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITY .....	63
Toxic Masculinity and Controlling the Discourse .....	63
In the Aftermath of Gamergate .....	65
Ethics in Hating Women .....	68
Results: Avoiding Identity Politics .....	69
Conclusions .....	71
CHAPTER EIGHT: LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS.....	72
Limitations .....	72
Conclusions .....	73
APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER .....	77
APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANTS.....	79
APPENDIX C: KEEPING QUIET DIAGRAM.....	81
LIST OF REFERENCES .....	83

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1 - Keeping Quiet .....	82
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**LIST OF TABLES**

Table 1 - Participants ..... 80

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In 2009, Mike Griffith, head of the video game company, Activision studios, gave a speech at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. He claimed that video games would soon “eclipse all other forms of entertainment in the year ahead” (Beaumont, 2009, para. 2). Americans bought 40% more games between 2003 and 2007, while during those years, movie ticket sales, TV usage, and music sales all had fallen (Beaumont, 2009). While Griffith’s prediction and statistics on the game industry may seem a bit self-serving, it is hard to deny the rise of videogames as a popular form of entertainment in the U.S. Part of the reason for this surge was a realization that video-game companies had in the mid ‘90s: Ninety-percent of American boys were already playing video games. If companies wanted to compete in this over-saturated market, they were going to have to expand their audiences. One of their targets was the female population (Jenkins, H., & Cassell, J., 2008).

While still stereotypically viewed as a male activity, the Entertainment Software Association reported that 48% of gamers now identify as female (Entertainment Software Association, 2014). However, women are underrepresented in the videogame industry, which consists mostly of males who make games that pander to heterosexual male interests (Near, 2009). As a result, gaming is, and has historically been, a gendered space; one where females are not as welcome, and those who do play are often seen as not “true gamers” or simply vying for male attention (Kafai, Et Al., 2008). Within online video games, women are profiled and made targets for verbal abuse (Kuznekoff, J., & Rose, L. 2013; Grey, 2012). Furthermore, female game developers and media critics who have bring attention to these inequalities have been harassed, subjected to death threats, and even driven out of their own homes (Chalk, 2012;



Teitell & Borchers, 2014; Steadman, 2014). If videogames are a somewhat volatile and exclusionary environment for women, then what experiences do women who play video games have in gamer culture? This study seeks to expose and gather insight on this topic. It will attempt to answer the following research question: What are the experiences of female gamers, both in games and around other gamers? How is gaming maintained and policed as a male-dominated space?

### Rationale/Purpose

Videogames have become more and more mainstream in recent years, and more ‘traditional’ enclaves of gamers are being forced to contend with wider audiences making demands for content that panders to them as well. The recent push for equality in gaming has brought forth an unparalleled backlash of vitriol from men who take the hobby rather seriously. Because of this, these fluctuations in the social geography of videogame culture warrant a more up-to-date investigation on the topic. Furthermore, there is a considerable lack of studies investigating the experiences of female gamers on a more holistic level. Studies are generally either limited to particular games, game types, or even just online interactions. Maintaining one’s identity as a gamer extends outside of the games being played, and the experiences of female gamers in those environments are also an untapped resource. I intend to capture a larger piece of the picture by not limiting the study to particular games or mediums of interaction.

· I will be to investigate the ways in which video game culture is dominated by masculine ideals, and how members of that community police and maintain it as a boy’s club.

The main approach of the research will come from immersion, participant observation, and analysis of detailed field notes taken periodically during the event.

## Theory

Because this study seeks to illuminate the experiences of women in gaming, feminist theory was the primary theoretical approach. As put in their 1998 work entitled *Contemporary Feminist Theories*, Stevi Jackson and Jackie Jones describe feminist theory as something “that seeks to analyze the conditions which shape women’s lives and to explore cultural understandings of what it means to be a woman” (p.1). A feminist approach entails first identifying the experiences of women within society, then questioning why that is—and lastly, finding how to address these inequalities so that society is a more just place for everyone (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2011). In this study, I follow this line of inquiry by using an ethnographic qualitative approach that provides a “thick description” of gamers’ experiences, evaluated through interviews at a major multi-genre convention. By utilizing the extensive amount of literature on gender and gaming, I am able to contextualize these personal experiences within the larger patterns of gaming culture and society. This process follows C Wright Mills’ concept of the sociological imagination—a tool that enables one to “grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (Mills, C. 1959, p. 6). Below, I discuss the theoretical approaches that this study will use in order to both understand and analyze the data collected.

In the words of Simone De Beauvoir, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1952: p.267). Feminism posits that inequalities between men and women are not biologically determined, and draws a line between sex—biologically determined characteristics, and gender—a product of social interaction. Because the identities of masculinity and femininity are negotiated through social interactions that permeate everyday life, these interactions are rife with gendered posturing and the constant honing of one’s identity via feedback from others

(Messerschmidt, 1993). By unpacking society's expectations and values associated with being a woman or a man—as well as the uncovering the way those norms are maintained (Blumer, 1969), one can gain insight into how inequality is reproduced. This theoretical approach is referred to as the feminist interactionist perspective. Using an interactionist theoretical framework, researchers view gender itself as a symbol, and how it is constructed and maintained through everyday interactions and by “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Because the identities of masculinity and femininity are negotiated through social interactions that permeate everyday life, these interactions are rife with gendered posturing and the constant honing of one's identity via feedback from others (Messerschmidt, 1993).

However, individuals are not free agents merely expressing their natural inclination towards manhood or womanhood. It is important to point out the social and historical restraints imposed upon individuals by the power of gender, particularly male gender power (Walters, 1999, 250). These configurations, that both restrict and enable the types of interactions individuals can have across negotiated gender lines, are where feminist theory and the interactionist perspective intersect. For instance, Connell's (2014) concept of emphasized femininity include submissiveness, sexual receptivity, empathy, and shunning technical competence in favor of sociability. By limiting women to this configuration of behavior, women are relegated within the social order.

Conflict theory holds that society's phenomena can be explained by identifying which groups have power and how they keep it or prevent other groups from obtaining it. In relation to conflict theory, Feminist theory primarily focuses on how men obtain and keep power over women in society, propagating a society that not only values men more, but restricts the opportunities of women (Lugones & Spelman, 1983). This system of active and routinized

oppression is known as patriarchy (Bunch, 1987; Chesler 1994; MacKinnon 1989;1993). In Chapter 2 and 7, I discuss how the toxic climate (particularly for women) of online gaming culture, encourages women to “keep quiet”. As a result, women remain unheard and unseen, perpetuating the idea that gaming is a male-dominated space. I further elaborate on this concept in Chapter 4, when I discuss inequalities within the male-dominated game industry.

In an effort to paint a more complete picture, a masculinities approach was also used to understand the motives and values of the men within gaming. Because of gaming’s male-dominated culture, the ways manhood is produced and maintained are part and parcel with the ways that women within it are marginalized (Grazian, 2007; Kimmel 1995; 2008; 2013). Manhood as a homosocial performance is a topic discussed at length among masculinities scholars (Grazian, 2007). Masculinity is subscribed to as a way to be a “man’s man,” to garnish favor and earn respect from other males. In fact, being well-liked by women is only important in the sense that they serve as legal tender or badges for males to command admiration from other males. Women are so undervalued by hegemonic male ideals that they really only act as an interim in what is essentially just a male-to-male negotiation of power (Kimmel, 2009:47). In Chapter 6, I cover the masculinization of hardcore and professional gaming and how the valorization of male power and hegemonic masculine ideals are much like those found in sports. Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant form of manhood within society, and it exists in relation to maintaining power over women (Connell, 2014). When discussing online tech culture, as well as the video game industry in Chapter 4, I also mention the concept of toxic masculinity. Kupers (2005) defines the term as “the need to aggressively compete and dominate others.” Toxic masculinity manifests in overt expressions of domination—such as the valorization of sexual conquest, violence of all kinds, and intense homophobia. In Chapter 7, I use Michael Kimmel’s

(2008) *Guyland* to explain the young male backlash against the push for inclusiveness in games. I also utilize the literature surrounding the attacks on female game developers/critics in the wake of Gamergate (Salter Blodgett 2012; Massanari, 2015; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Todd, 2015; Evans & Janish, 2015).

In Chapter 2, I discuss the interactions between gamers within the games they play. Due to the anonymous nature of videogames and text-based interactions, scholars have often investigated and theorized about the liberating effects of virtual space. Cyberfeminists in particular have heralded it as a world where gender can be suspended behind avatars and women can be outside the reach of patriarchal control (Haraway, 1987; Wajcman, 2000). Scholars have also pointed out the more disinhibitive elements of online interaction as well, citing anonymity as a catalyst for both creativity and brutal verbal abuse (Trammell, 2014; Van der Nagel & Frith, 2015; Suler & Phillips, 1998). Thus, by investigating the points at which gender passes through (or is pressed against) the membrane of anonymity within video games, this study can understand how it plays a role in interactions between gamers.

Chapter 3 covers the women *of* video games, including the types of roles they typically occupy, and the way they are depicted. Much like older feminist critiques of film and other media (Davies et al., 1987), contemporary feminist scholars have found that women in video games are outnumbered greatly by male characters (Beasley & Stanley, 2002; Miller & Summers, 2007). When they do appear, they usually occupy support roles in the narrative or gameplay, are subject to hypersexualization (Dill & Thill, 2007; Burgess et al., 2007; Downs, & Smith 2010; Cruea & Park, 2012). Components of sexualization, according to the American Psychological Association, include when “a person’s value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behavior, to the exclusion of other characteristics, and when a “person is held to a

standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy”. The idealization and exaggeration of the female form, as seen in video game characters, too often turns the female body into an object to be consumed by the presumed straight male player. This is problematic because it communicates to players that the most valuable asset one can have as a woman is a body that conforms to a very specific, thin, busty, and frankly, impossible beauty standard (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). Other qualifications such as skill, intelligence, and strength, all fall to wayside. Instead value begins and ends “at first sight”—effectively turning women into objects to be looked at. Furthermore, numerous studies detail the negative effects of exposure to idealized body types in the media, including body dissatisfaction and eating disorders (Turner et al., 1997; Nathanson & Botta, 2003; Grabe et al., 2008).

The discussion on excessive female sexuality in games would not be complete without mention of the male gaze. The term was first coined in 1975 by Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema*. In it, she discusses the way films present the world as if it was from a male perspective, thereby treating women as something to be gawked at. Mulvey assigns male pleasure as the chief motive for why this cinematic trend is so common, but a Foucauldian interpretation places this dynamic on a completely different level. Through this lens, men exercise both power *and* pleasure when they operate as voyeurs (Shen, 2007). As John Berger puts it in *Ways Of Seeing*, “Men 'act' and women 'appear.' Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” [p.47]. The one-way operation of the straight male gaze is very similar to Foucault’s concept of the panoptic gaze (Foucault, 1977). In *Discipline & Punish*, Foucault describes the panopticon: a prison where those incarcerated are situated among the outside walls, facing in. In the center stands a tower, from which a single guard can watch prisoners without being seen. Although this guard may not be able to watch everywhere at once,

the prisoner's awareness that the guard *could* be watching causes them to self-govern their own behavior. Similarly, the knowledge that the female body is subject to the male gaze causes women to internalize patriarchal rule and exercise this control over themselves (Duncan, 1994). Therefore, this predicament leads to power always flowing both through and from the approval of heterosexual males. This imparts to women that in order to use power, they must subscribe and conform to heterosexual male desire. In Chapter 3, I discuss the male gaze as it relates to female characters within videogames. Their appearance and role in the story often communicate to the player that women are to be displayed as ornamentation or eye candy for a heterosexual male audience.

### Methods

The data for this paper was obtained from a 4-day ethnography, conducted at a multi-genre convention in central Florida. Participant observation was the method of data collection, and a variety of field notes were taken from naturalistic observations and informal conversations with con-goers, artists, and vendors. Analyzation of discourse, proxemics, and cultural objects were also included (Seale, 2004). Artifacts collected included the event program, advertisements, business cards, and guidelines posted during the convention. Participant observation was chosen to go beyond merely reporting on a culture, and to understand the processes of social interaction and behavior that took place (Jones, 1996). While I would consider myself an insider in this culture, sliding between the status of an observer and a participant was necessary in order to record and analyze the emotions and experiences of myself and other participants at the convention (Walsh, 1998).

Events like Megacon are socially constructed spaces, and the way they are experienced is a product of the symbolic exchanges that occur within the discourse and audience that is present (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014; Blumer, 1969). Because of this, an understanding of how individuals negotiate identity within this space is vital. For instance, the way event participants communicated to one another their interests by the recognition and display of references either on their person, or in the surrounding environment, was vital. Signifiers, such as costume, merchandise, quotes, and internet memes were used by individuals to find others who shared common interests. There was a certain camaraderie that was developed between participants when someone recognized the other's cosplay of an obscure videogame or anime character. Because Megacon is a mecca for typically marginalized interests such as videogames, anime, and comics, it simultaneously serves as a safe space to celebrate them without fear of judgement.

Individuals who were spoken to hailed from a variety of locations in the U.S., a few examples being Georgia, Massachusetts, California, and Iowa. Having been to several cons before, including this one, I considered myself quite familiar with the environment. Furthermore, my familiarity with the culture from my own experiences as a gamer meant that I was privy to the medium, the lingo, and conceptual ideas that were discussed by participants.

I had in-depth conversations with forty con-goers, who I refer to with pseudonyms throughout this work. This does not include con-goers who I simply observed, such as those at the fringe gaming circles. The proportions of women and men I spoke with were nearly even, and most participants were white and young. More specific details on individuals can be found in Appendix B.

Choosing individuals to speak with was a combination of convenience and snowball sampling, with individuals often recommending other people they knew at the con for further



discussion. I tended to avoid con-goers who were on the move or en route somewhere, as they likely had somewhere to be. Instead, I often opted for groups who were idly resting at tables or by the side of the event. Long lines for the convention's events were also rife with opportunities to ask questions. Artists, workers in the game industry, and vendors were easy to approach and identify as gamers by looking at their booths. Although the event was quite busy, they seemed more than willing to talk shop about the topics related to this study. Many were also familiar with one another and recommended others within their network for the study.

There was no game room at the convention this year, so observations on individuals whilst gaming were limited to the all-day *Pokémon* tournament on Sunday as well as the unofficial circles of gamers who gathered at the fringes of the event in front of the consoles and TV's they brought from home.

As conversations were informal and took on a spontaneous nature, there was no strict checklist of questions that were addressed. In general, they started with talk of the convention and inquiries about the individual's relationship with gaming. After identifying their familiarity with it and what types of games they played, the discussions often went several different directions. Points of discussion coalesced around topics of interest to the study—including, but not limited to; the visibility and presence of women in gaming culture, gender-inclusiveness in modern games, female representation in the industry, female body representation in games, experiences getting into gaming, and their interactions with other players in games. Information about the research I was conducting was introduced to the conversations as naturally and gradually as possible. This was done, in effort, to keep discussants informed as they revealed personal information (Jaimangal-Jones, 2014). Every individual I spoke with was made aware

that they were participating in a study. For ethical reasons, personal identifiers of participants have been replaced with pseudonyms.

As per ethnographic record keeping procedures (Spradley, 1980; Lofland, 1971), field notes contained thorough accounts of feelings, interactions, the environment, emotions and observations. By doing this, I aimed for achieving the “pure” (Lofland, 1971:4) and “thick” (Geertz, 1973: 5-6, 9-10) description styles discussed in ethnographic literature. I attempted to obtain at least one or two quotations from each participant I spoke with, and while I sometimes I asked them to repeat themselves, the way they appear in the text here may not be exactly verbatim. Notes were taken via the notepad application on a phone. This note-taking method was chosen over a physical notepad to avoid standing out or making participants uncomfortable. Other than the direct quotations, I almost always waited until after a conversation was finished to begin recording my reactions and feelings. Field notes were taken during the combined 26 hours spent at the event and later analyzed via coding. Open and axial coding was used to categorize themes and trends in the observations, with an analysis of the ideas and quotes from each participant (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Open coding was used first, chunking the data into more comprehensible and more-easily conceptualized parts by going over notes, line-by-line. Axial coding followed, establishing connections between the themes uncovered in the process. The goal was to find intersections and points of orbit/centrality in the data and compare them to the research questions:

- 1) what are the experiences of female gamers, both in games and around other gamers?
- 2) How is gaming maintained and policed as a male-dominated space?

Chapters 2-7 detail the main themes I found within the data collected. Interactions within games, female characters and body representation, the video game industry, games ‘for’ men and

women, e-sports and hardcore vs. casual gaming, and the online community surrounding gaming. Each of these areas captures a piece of the larger picture of oppression experienced by the women I spoke with. As I discuss in Chapter 7, the way women are marginalized and silenced in these different arenas revealed a common theme of women being “kept quiet”.

## CHAPTER TWO: INTERACTIONS IN DIGITAL SPACE

*Carl: "I'd say the early 2010s was the time where just as many girls started getting into games as guys. "Before then it was 80-20 guys to girls. I play Destiny and it's more or less 50-50 on there now".*

*Researcher: [much later in the conversation] "How many women have you encountered on voice chat in the game?"*

*Carl: "Two."*

### Avatars and Gender-bending in Online Games

To begin this investigation in the current research on the experiences of female gamers, I will first focus on literature that examines the interactions they have while gaming. Gaming can be a social construct on a variety of levels. Obvious examples would be massively multiplayer online games (MMO's), in which thousands of players can interact, work together, or compete. In the majority of these games, players can communicate through in-game gestures, text speech, or even real-time voice chat.

The performance of gender exists within the constant interpersonal exchange of gender-normative behavior and social feedback from others (Messerschmidt, 1993). However, presentation (and therefore, expectations) can be manipulated by disguising or actively choosing to resist these classifications. This is particularly easy to do within virtual space, considering the incomplete canvas another player's avatar represents when it is being interacted with. In most cases, the avatar a player has chosen cannot/does not appear or sound like the actual person commanding it. If text-based chat is used, players have to "fill in the blanks" when interacting with one another if they are to create an image in their head of the person with whom they are

communicating. Because a player's in-person characteristics are not so obvious within a game; gamers have difficulty filling in these blanks. For instance, a study conducted on cross-gender avatars in *World of Warcraft* found that over 79% of all players had assumed an avatar of a different gender, and 30% did so on a regular basis. In their study, they found that men who assumed a cross-gender avatar were more likely to use exclamation points and emoticons than their same-gendered avatar brethren—a more common theme amongst female players. This captures a primary theme in gender research, particularly from the 70's and 80's, which holds that gender is not something someone *is*, but rather, something someone *does* (Connell, 2014; Hagemann-White, 1987; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Videogames are an excellent example of this theoretical perspective in action because the player's physical form is not present in the virtual world. Instead, they act through an avatar—essentially a blank slate for them to ascribe gendered actions, speech, mannerisms, and appearances. Thus, their avatar's gender is not just created, but maintained. This falls right in line with sociologist Erving Goffman's idea that gender expressions are performances (Goffman, 1976). He claims that gender portrayals are not essential or intrinsic to one's sex, but chosen and conscious expressions made by individuals that follow certain recognizable social conventions. As many of these scripts (such as appearance, voice tone, and manner of speech) can be further disguised online, freedom of gender expression is much more prevalent in these virtual worlds. However, in the *World of Warcraft* study some characteristics showed through, no matter the type of avatar chosen. For instance, men tended to stay further away from the group and backpedaled more often than female players. It should be mentioned though, that these trends are likely unconscious choices that could not be easily or reliably depended on when attempting to guess another player's gender based on their avatar. Another study on *World of Warcraft* found, that gendered language, such as pronouns, were used

in contradictory ways (Schmieder, 2009). Players often swapped back and forth when chatting between the gender of the avatar and the player behind it.

Perhaps the ultimate form of escaping gender would be within games that either neglect it entirely or split it into numerous categories. Made in 1990, the still-playable, online, multi-user dungeon named *LambdaMOO* held a gender scheme much more extensive than most games (Roberts, & Parks, 1999). Players can select from male, female, royal, second, plural, egotistical, splat, either, neuter, and spivak as their gender. Players are also able to create their own custom genders as well. Because of this, players are able to identify beyond the typically binary, dichotomous gender scheme. Other games, such as the *Armored Core* series, have the player assume a genderless avatar who is a pilot simply referred to as “Raven” throughout the game. *Agar.io* is an online game where players assume the form of colorful dots that attempt to grow in size and consume one another. While these dots do not possess a gendered dimension, both male and female gamers I know refer to the dots (and the players controlling them) as “he” and “him”. In Betsy Lucal’s *What it Means to be Gendered Me: Life on the Boundaries of a Dichotomous Gender System* (1999), she details her experiences of choosing to present outside of the dichotomous gender scheme within society. Despite the mixed set of signifiers she carries, other individuals often lump her into the ‘male’ category. She concludes that even if one opts not to do gender, others will do it ‘for you’. Much like in *Agar.io*, even if one is not presenting as either male or female, society’s still bears a tendency to assign binary gender dimensions to all ‘persons’ within a virtual or non-virtual space. This challenges utopian notions of a genderless virtual world.

### In-person Gaming and Masculine Space

Interactions between gamers in the real world have also been discussed by scholars. Many of these studies hail back to the days before online games, detailing the ways real-world gaming locations such as LAN (Local Area Network) parties and arcades were maintained as male-dominated spaces. In her 2012 autoethnographical examination of female-gamer space, Genesis Downey discusses the relationship that her and her daughter shared while regularly gaming together in a rather small room, that she calls, “The Femme Cave.” She mentions her experience of being marginalized as a woman in the primarily male-dominated culture that is gaming. She describes going to a LAN party when she was younger, a gathering where players bring their consoles or computers and play together on a local area network. She was the only female there, and she describes an environment as gendered gaming space. Flatulence, snacks, ribbing one another with lewd insults, shouting colorful strings of profanity; this was a male-gendered space. This theme seems to be recurrent throughout gaming’s history. During the 1970’s, arcade cabinets and other types of skill gaming, such as strength tests or darts, were primarily located in bars and other masculine locations (McDivitt, 2013). Early ads from Atari would depict both a woman and a man gathering over a game. However, the men were shown playing the game, and the women were shown standing to the side, watching. The literature reflects that this trend continues into modern day Internet cafés, with both women and men alike perceiving them as masculine gaming spaces (Yi-Chung & Lih-Jiun Chuang, 2008). In Downey’s 2012 account, the men’s significant others would not play with them in their “man cave” and congregated in the other room while collectively complaining that gaming was a source of separation from their partners. Downey described the practice of playing video games in the cave rather than joining the women upstairs as gender betrayal, and claims her daughter

participates in it as well by being such an avid gamer. However, Downey makes certain to illuminate the stark contrast between her and her daughter's perspective on gaming as a gendered phenomenon. Her 13-year-old daughter sees gaming as gender-neutral, and instead views it as age-related. For her, the virtual world is where she can escape the limitations of her age and have the freedom to do whatever she would like. This perspective focuses on a gender-neutral medium of gaming itself, as opposed to the masculine environment her mother described.

### Cyberfeminism and Gender Salience

In some studies, the argument has been made that role-playing video games are the ultimate form of breaking free from gender identities (Cross, 2012). While sexism and racism may extend into the virtual world, women can fight back by assuming the role of whatever gender or personality they would like. This can be empowering and can affirm the existence of their consciousness outside of a dichotomous gender scale, as shown in the previously mentioned *Lambda MOO* game. While games are not labeled with features such as “Supersede the pressures of gender roles!” or “Discover your transgender identity!” they can be a powerful tool through which one can explore and understand one's self.

Much like the women of the 19th century being able to use printing technologies to disguise themselves as male writers, the Internet has provided a space where women can discuss the issues they face, as well as suspend tools of oppression (Wajcman, 2000). Technofeminists challenged the cultural narrative that men were the creators and pioneers of technology throughout the ages, pointing out the relationships between woman and machine that are glossed over or ignored (Wajcman, 2013). Thus, technofeminism arose in the 1980's in direct opposition to ecofeminism, which placed technology in the realm of the masculine and, by association,



placed women in the domain of biology and the exploited Earth. However, as Gill & Grint (1995 p: 5) points out, this only reifies the patriarchal ‘women are slaves to their biology’ viewpoint that has existed within culture for centuries. In light of the paltry numbers of women in STEM professions (and by proxy, video games production), many scholars such as Cassell & Jenkins (2000) see this cultural alignment of masculinity with technology as one of the ways women are discouraged from these professions. Because of this, many feminists rejected the association between the natural world and women. As Donna Haraway (1987) famously writes, “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.” From a cyberfeminist viewpoint, the virtual world holds endless possibilities for women to achieve empowerment. As mentioned earlier, it is hard to deny the ways the Internet has facilitated feminist discussion and progress. However, cyber feminist visions of the Internet as a utopia have yet to be realized, as Claire Evans (2014) writes in her article about ‘90s cyberfeminism:

CyberFeminist thinkers and artists had the Internet pegged as a surefire playground for female thought and expression, but being a woman online in 2014 comes with the same caveats and anxieties that have always accompanied being female in meatspace. Fears of being silenced, threatened, or bullied are as real in the digital realm as IRL... . . . And anonymity! Anonymity, which CyberFeminists championed as a method for transcending gender, is now a primary enabler of violently misogynistic language all over the web—in YouTube comments, on forums, and in the email inboxes and Twitter @replies of women with public opinions about technology.

## Online Abuse

The problematic and empowering effects of anonymity in online space have been discussed at length by scholars, pointing out both its potentiality for creative expression as well as callous verbal abuse (Trammell, 2014; Van der Nagel & Frith, 2015; Suler & Phillips, 1998). Verbal abuse, also known as “flaming,” is quite prevalent in online space. Suler and Phillips (1998) argue in their study about online deviant behavior that the virtual environment promotes disinhibition when it comes to online inequality and harassment. One’s identity is hidden to a much greater extent in online space, and this anonymity allows a disassociation to be made between the player’s online persona and the person. This ultimately can lead to players in virtual space doing and saying things to people they would not normally do. The lack of a stake in conformity in a virtual world, as well as the nonexistent repercussions for verbal abuse, means that players are unlikely to stop their ill-willed behavior. For instance, the act of trolling is the online practice of manipulating another’s emotions in an attempt to get a reaction (usually anger) out of them. An example would be joining a messageboard for movie buffs, and then intentionally trying to enrage them by posting messages that deprecate classic films. While sometimes done in jest, what seem like good fun for a troll may be harmful to another person—especially when comments are to intentionally hurt someone’s feelings or threaten them. Trolling is generally seen as a nuisance in online communities and many have rules and regulations that attempt to prevent it.

Another problematic behavior online that is more specific to gaming would be griefing. These are virtual acts of cruelty, such as defacing or vandalizing another player’s creations, and are prevalent in games such as *Minecraft*. Considering the amount of time and attention to detail it takes to build some of the structures in that game, many players view griefing not only as a

ruining of someone else's fun, but an assault on their virtual expression of self. This notion of virtual violence blurs the line between reality and the game itself. For instance, in Julian Dibble's 1993 article on the cyber-rapist Mr. Bungle, a *Lambda MOO* community wrestled with the extent to which people truly empathize with and grieve through the virtual avatars they have created.

### Online Voice Communication

Anonymity and its control of presentation and interaction breaks down when voice-chat is added into the mix. In some cases, being able to communicate quickly through voice chat can grant a team a particular advantage. In others, it may even be required to overcome especially difficult challenges or to negotiate a trade of in-game currency/items. This incentive to interact with players around oneself is coupled by the added enjoyment players get out of sharing a collective gaming experience with others (Gray, 2012). In her examination of women of color in the Xbox Live community, Gray describes the sense of camaraderie that can be established between players when working together to perform complex tasks. However, she also detailed a darker side to this interactive environment. Gray regales an incident where players racially profiled her voice on Xbox live voice chat, and made disparaging remarks about her gender and race. This abuse continued until she left the chat. Her investigation into all female clans in these games revealed that in order avoid the racist and sexist speech female gamers had formed micro communities in the form of "clans" or "guilds." In a study on communication in multiplayer video games, female voices on chat received three times as many negative comments as male voices did (Kuznekoff, & Rose, 2013). This heightened risk of being on the receiving end of verbal abuse maintains the airwaves in videogames as an exclusionary environment—a place where it is unsafe to reveal your identity as anything but a young, white, male gamer.

Schwalbe et al. (2000) describes the concept of oppressive othering in their interactionist study on inequality between groups. Members of a group establishing superiority by defining another group as morally or intellectually inferior. Grey's (2012) accounts of being told "That's why you suck. You're a fucking girl!" and "Get back to your crack pipe with your crack babies." on voice chat are some of the most obvious examples of oppressive othering in action. This phenomena can occur through more subtle means, as well. When online culture (and online spaces within video games by proxy) jokingly states that "there are no women on the Internet," they are not only establishing that the female presence is invisible, but also that males are the norm in these spaces. Furthermore, even the way gameplay is narratively described by players carries with it markers of rape culture. Players will describe their conquests over obstacles in game (sentient or not) as either rape or another form of sexual violence (Salter & Blodgett, 2012). In Nick Yee's 2008 study on MMORPG players, he quoted numerous participants in his study that cited issues such as these as deterrents to gameplay. Men "talk about getting raped, without really thinking about it," refer to things that happen in-game as "gay," and do "crude things to player corpses in PvP" (Yee, 2008). This combined with idealized body depictions of female characters in game, (a point that will be discussed in the next chapter), was a constant reminder for one participant that "this game is made for 13 year old boys, or men who still think like them."

As videogames primarily serve a recreational role, it logically follows to investigate how men and women divide themselves across gender lines while at play. Barrie Thorne's 1993 book, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* discusses a process called "borderwork," where boys and girls maintain and negotiate gender boundaries while playing (pg. 64). She includes typical examples of this, such as boys chasing girls with snakes or one group claiming the other has

‘cooties.’ However, she points out that not all cootie-carriers are equal—with male groups being much more concerned with feminine ‘polluting’ of their masculine space.

### Results: Silent Women

Compared to the literature, several of the women at the convention had similar experiences with regards to online games and voice chat in particular. Tamika, an avid gamer, said she never feels excluded from the community until she steps into an online game. “Some people online just have to ruin the experience for everyone else.” Carly says she sticks to single player games because she isn’t too crazy about voice chat. “I get yelled at enough in real life for messing things up,” she explains. Pam, another female gamer, adds “The only time I really play online is in Skype voice calls with all of my friends”.

Perhaps the most vivid recount of experiences with voice chat came from Alex, a female *Pokémon* player I encountered during the tournament they held at the convention. “Oh yeah, I’ve had death threats, people threatening to hurt me—like, get off the game you dyke bitch. I even had one player threaten to poop in my mailbox. I just thought that one was funny.” While the slew of insults these women described beg the question as to why these men go to such great lengths and efforts to flame complete strangers. Alex explains, “Guys are afraid of that ego loss of losing to a girl.” Bridgett, another gamer I spoke with, adds “It’s always guys and it gets way worse when they’re in groups. I can’t handle them all ganging up on me. I’ve been kicked from games just because I’m a girl... ...I really feel like they’re just trying to prove their masculinity to each other by making fun of me.”

In games with high densities of players communicating all at once on networks like Xbox Live, it is easy to see how the more pernicious elements of masculine group dynamics come into

play. However, some of the women I spoke with detailed the way these interactions tend to change in one-on-one situations. Pam explains:

It's pretty bad but sometimes you get nice advantages for being a girl in a video game? Like, I play a lot of Rust. Like, a lot [laughing]... ..Anyways, when you run into someone in the game their first reaction is usually to just kill you. But I'll just come over voice chat in a slightly higher-pitched voice than usual and be like, "Heyyyyy" and the guy will either just run away or just start giving me free shit. My favorite is when they start trying to teach me how to play the game or give me tips like I've never played before. Because I'm a girl in a game, like some unicorn and must not know what I'm doing. My Steam profile is hidden so they have no idea I've spent like 500 hours playing the game or something. It's kind of annoying. But I've had people let me into their base. Their base! And I'll just kind of play along.

A few of the other women I spoke with also mentioned episodes where other male gamers would make the assumption they were new and then attempt to teach them how to play. This patronizing phenomenon is not unlike the neologism "Mansplaining" where unwarranted explanations (rooted in sexist assumptions) are given by men to women in a condescending manner. "I'll get guys in Mortal Kombat telling me how to block who have never even played against me before," says Bridgett. "I just wanna take them down and be like, Oh! How's that for blocking for ya? Do you need some lessons?"

I met Beverly in the Artist Alley section of the Megacon Showroom. She incorporates fanart of videogame characters into posters and other things such as keychains. "I literally get asked all the time if I've played any of the games that my drawings are from." She adds that she wouldn't be asked that question if she was a male: "There is a constant need to prove yourself as

a female gamer.” Alicia, another artist, faces similar interrogations when men peruse her fanart. Megan works for a subscription-based website where she cosplays as various characters from videogames and anime. She has had multiple men ask her if she has actually played the games she's depicting characters from and she often wants to respond with "no, I'm just pretending. I'm just dressing up for attention. You caught me".

### Conclusions

These experiences reveal a great deal about the assumptions and perceptions about women that these male gamers hold but they also raise a few questions. Are female gamers really mythical ‘unicorns’? Contrary to that perception, nearly every male I spoke with commented on how equal the guy-girl gaming ratio was ‘nowadays.’ “Gaming is for everyone. It’s what everyone knew but was afraid to admit... ..I get just as many girls as guys in here...” says Eric, one of the many videogame vendors at the con. Another vendor, Suho, describes games as “diverse and for everyone.” Furthermore, many men even cited the statistical parity between the number of men and women who game. It seemed as though they were well aware that a female gamer is not a novel concept by any means. However, the schism between what men know about women and what they *do* to women within gaming spaces suggests that men are policing these locations in order to maintain them as male-only. While in gaming space, women are expected to remain invisible and unheard. Furthermore, women who signify as gamers are subject to intense scrutiny.

## CHAPTER THREE: FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN GAMES

Maria: “When you play Fallout 4 you always play a girl.”

Paul: “Well, I do that more for the perks that only female characters get. One of them is Black Widow, which gives you seductive dialogue options when talking to men. I guess these post-apocalyptic guys never see women?”

### Stories for Men, by Men

Shifting from the social interactions that take place while gaming, we move on to examining gaming as a gendered experience in and of itself. In McDivitt’s aforementioned thesis on the masculinity of gaming, she argues that games themselves have gendered qualities (McDivitt, 2013). Early gaming, geared toward men, focused around sports and violence—traits that fall under the umbrella of hegemonic masculinity. In fact, even Mario from the *Super Mario Bros.* franchise (perhaps the most iconic of video game characters) has an origin story with similar, misogynistic roots. A designer named Shigeru Miyamoto was hired to design a *Popeye The Sailor* video game for the American audience (McLaughlin, 2010). Unfortunately, they could not obtain the rights to the series and had to improvise. Miyamoto created *Donkey Kong*, a game heavily inspired by the movie *King Kong*. Much like in the 1933 classic film, the main character must save a damsel in distress from an ape who has abducted her to a rather high and difficult to reach location. After the game’s success, it would eventually evolve into the *Super Mario Bros.* franchise. The protagonist who was formerly “Jump-man” would become Mario, the damsel would become Princess Peach, and Donkey Kong would go on to having his own series of games. However, the damsel’s kidnapping would remain a constant theme. Even today, 14 out of the 16 games in the main *Super Mario Bros.* franchise begin with Princess Peach being



kidnapped (Poitras, 2016). The *Mario* series is not alone, however. Countless video games rely on the damsel in distress trope as primary plot motivator, including *Star Fox Adventures*, *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*, multiple titles from the *Tales* and *Fire Emblem* series, *Prey*, *City of Heroes*, and *Double Dragon*, to name a few. Video games have often relied on the objectification of female characters as a plot point for male characters to advance the story or succeed in the face of adversity. The literature argues the reason for this is inextricably intertwined with the normalized, routine sexism in the world they exist in and the fact that video game developers are mostly men who cater to young male power fantasies with misogynist narratives (Royse et al., 2007; Leonard, 2003; Harviainen et al., 2016). Feminist criticism of games seeks to uncover the methods by which they reinforce the existing patriarchal power structures in society.

Some of these masculine ideals in games are not as obvious. Ewan Kirkland's 2009 article on the gendered undertones of the *Silent Hill* franchise describes a game where the player must fight and defeat "numerous creatures of monstrous femininity," eventually ending in a climactic scene where the player must press a button to finally end the life of the main character's horrific, mutated wife. This seemingly blatant misogyny is a psychological manifestation of the main character's guilt. In the game's story, he essentially kills his sick wife to put her out of her pain and misery. The nightmare of a world that he must survive is the representation of coping with and fighting that guilt. This disturbing narrative is essential to the game's trademark quality of instilling dread and fear in its players. These undertones are further complicated by the alternative nature of the main character's masculinity throughout the *Silent Hill* series. The main character's role as a survivor in a world of horror, rather than a predator, is a more gender-neutral role. Also, males in these games are nondescript, lacking overtly

masculine traits such as large muscles, gruff voices, or fearless demeanors. In the third game, (the only one to feature a female), the main character is a woman who is not overly sexualized and exhibits many masculine characteristics. According to Kirkland (2009), these complex gender constructions are not unique to *Silent Hill*, but games that contain them further disrupt the idea that video games exude exclusively hegemonic masculine or feminine ideals.

While this may be the case, the fact that the wife's death is the cornerstone element of the game's story sounds like it belongs on Gail Simone's *Women In Refrigerators* list (Gail, 1999). The list is a macabre collection of every female character who has died, lost their powers, or suffered a horrific injury as a plot device in order to further a comic book story. The title refers to a 1994 issue of *Green Lantern* (Volume 3) #54 where Green Lantern discovers his girlfriend has been killed by the villain Major Force and stuffed inside of a refrigerator. While that list exclusively features comics, there are several video games that employ similar themes (Tvtropes, n.d.). In the 2006 game *Prey*, the main character must mercy-kill his kidnapped girlfriend who has been effectively sewed to a cybernetic death-machine. The encounter is made even more disturbing by the fact that she begs you, the player, to do it.

Another example of disposable women in video games would be the infamous Lost In Battle quest from *World of Warcraft*. Players roaming the Barrens eventually encounter an Orc male, named Mankrik, who pleads with the players to help him find his unnamed wife. The quest gained a bit of memetic notoriety because the Barrens regional chatroom was constantly filled with players asking where Mankrik's wife was. The confusion surrounding the quest was not only due to the lack of direction Mankrik gave the players but, more importantly, because the players could easily walk right past her—a female orc body bearing no identifying markers other than the tooltip “Beaten Corpse”.

### Hypersexualization and the Idealization of Female Bodies

One of the most explored topics in video games is the representation of bodies in digital space. Much of the literature points to the virtual world of videogames as place where men vastly outnumber women (Beasley & Stanley, 2002). When women *are* present, they often exist as NPC's, or non-playable characters. For instance, other studies found that male characters in video games were more likely to have weapons, have multiple abilities, and hold the status as hero or main character (Miller & Summers, 2007). Women occupy a secondary status that is often tied to positions in the game's narrative that reinforce female gender roles, such as assistant, helper, healer, or—as mentioned earlier, someone to be rescued. All of these factors imply to the player that women are less important and less interesting than men. For example, the artificial intelligence program that helps Master Chief throughout the *Halo* series is a woman named Cortana who appears nearly nude. When asked why that was the case, franchise director Frank O'Connor explains that it is to “demand attention” and have the “upper hand during conversations” (Prell, 2015). Strange justifications aside, the theme of female personal assistant is firmly ingrained not just in video games, but culture as a whole. For instance, the voice-activated electronic personal assistants developed by Microsoft, Amazon, and Apple, all come stock-equipped with female voices (named, Cortana, Echo, and Siri). Kathleen Richardson, author of *An Anthropology of Robots and AI: Annihilation Anxiety and Machines*, says that these man-made electronic servants reveal a great deal about what men think of women (Lafrance, 2016).

When female characters did appear as heroines in games, their sexuality was often their dominant feature (Richard & Zaremba, 2005). Because of this, it is no surprise that much of the literature on women in video games shows that the bodies of the characters are almost

exclusively constructed and presented in a manner that conforms to heterosexual male desire. Beasley and Standley (2002) revealed that women were not only underrepresented as video game characters (15% of characters were female), but a staggering amount (70%) of those female characters in mature-rated games beared large amounts of cleavage. Another study found that female videogame characters in top-selling game magazines were sixty times more likely to be sexualized than male characters, and five times more likely to be scantily-clad (Dill & Thill, 2007).

There are also numerous studies regarding the negative psychological effects of idealized depictions of the female body in media. Unrealistic body images were shown to have a detrimental effect on self-esteem in adolescents (Clay et al., 2005) and increased body dissatisfaction/eating disorder symptoms in young women (Hawkins et al., 2004). This is not to say that body image issues are experienced solely by women. The idealization of the male body also has a negative impact on young males, with studies showing that such images can lead to skewed perceptions of one's own muscle mass and body image, leading to steroid use and eating disorders (Leit et al., 2002; Yang et al., 2005). However, the larger power dynamics that these gendered issues take place in create a different set of issues for women. For instance, when men appear shirtless or in the form of eye candy in video games, they often do so in ways that are empowering (Burgess et al., 2007).

### Alternative Perspectives in Content Analysis

Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* series is an example of a character that spawned numerous, opposing, feminist viewpoints in video game studies (Kennedy, 2002). No other video game character has had as much academic ink spilled about them—and with good reason: She is

one of the most iconic video game characters of all time, creating the most successful game-to-movie adaptation ever made, and appearing on over 1,100 magazine covers—a record that surpasses any female game character or real life model (GuinnessWorldRecords, 2015). However, Lara's contradictory nature of somehow simultaneously symbolizing all that is wrong and all that is right with female character design has brought forth an unbridled amount of discussion in academia (Kennedy, 2002; Schleiner, 2001; Mikula, 2003; Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Cassell & Jenkins, 2000).

After fruitlessly trying to find a character design that was not derivative of Indiana Jones, designers opted for a female character instead for the *Tomb Raider* videogame. While Eidos Interactive considered Lara's role as female lead in their new action game to be a cutting-edge prospect (most of the female characters of the time were helpless damsels), her design and marketing also held the potential for being a virtual sex symbol as well. Early in her design, lead artist Toby Gard accidentally shifted her breast size to 150%. The mistake was met with such overwhelming praise by development that the team decided to keep it that way (McLaughlin, 2008). After the first game's widespread success, Lara's identity as a sex symbol developed further, with magazines featured her in bikinis and pin-up style posters. When Sony released her 35-9-33 measurements, scientists even began calculating her body-mass index, questioning whether a figure like hers could even remain upright. (Croal & Hughes, 1998: p. 82). Much like Barbie, her dimensions represented the impossibility of western beauty ideals (Norton et al., 1996). In sequels, Eidos included numerous in-game costumes for her to wear, including a skin-tight wetsuit and a nightie as a 'reward' for those who manage to beat the game. In the groundbreaking *From Barbie To Mortal Kombat* (2000), Cassell and Jenkins cast Lara's success in a negative light, stating she has "done little to alter relations between girl gamers and the game

industry [p.30]”. All of these factors paint a damning portrait of the British aristocrat-turned-archaeologist, but many scholars offer alternate viewpoints.

As briefly mentioned earlier, her role and status within the game is far from compatible with traditional feminine ideals. Kennedy (2002) writes:

“(Lara Croft, among other female action stars) can also be considered as what Mary Russo describes as "stunting bodies" (1994): Female figures which, through their performance of extraordinary feats, undermine conventional understandings of the female body... .The transgressive stunting body of the action heroine is replicated in the figure of Lara. Her occupation of a traditionally masculine world, her rejection of particular patriarchal values and the norms of femininity and the physical spaces that she traverses are all in direct contradiction of the typical location of femininity within the private or domestic space. If women do appear within these masculine spaces their role is usually that of love interest (often in need of rescuing) or victim. Lara's presence within, and familiarity with, a particularly masculine space is in and of itself transgressive. By being there she disturbs the natural symbolism of masculine culture”, (Lara Croft as Action Heroine, para. 2.)

Other scholars have challenged the applicability of Mulvey’s gaze in video games. The fact that videogames are an interactive form of media separates this experience from the voyeurism in cinema that she describes (Sofia, 1999). From this perspective, male players do not passively ‘gaze’ upon Lara—instead, they *become* her. Kennedy (2002) even compares this to a digital form of transgendering, allowing male players to fuse with Lara and experience a greater range of emotions and being than they would playing a male character.

Scholars have also pointed out that analyses such as Mulvey's essay on the gaze are limited in the sense that they are heteronormative by design. As Sundén & Sveningsson (2012) put it: "... there is not necessarily anything wrong with the female body as object and visual spectacle. There are other pleasures to be had than those directed by the straight male gaze, but this understanding would need a different point of view—which could be termed queer" [p.6]. Here, it is notable to point out the lack of love interests in the *Tomb Raider* videogame series, leaving her sexuality effectively open to interpretation. Because of this, it could be argued that attributing her combination of masculine and feminine signifiers (long hair, guns, revealing outfit, boots, large breasts) to an exclusively heterosexual male context is basing the relationship between the subject and the viewer on shaky assumptions. Because of this, the degree to which one views Lara as her own independent entity has a great deal of bearing on the discussion of whether her form is free from the intentions of the developers who crafted her.

After all, it could be argued that characters from video games, or even media as whole, do not exist *talis qualis*—or in and of themselves. They are cultural artifacts, made and created by individuals such as game developers (Squire, 2002). These agents select and construct certain elements during the creative process that reinforce their own values and beliefs. These have been imparted to them through socialization—the process by which norms, ideals, and values are inherited from their environment (Clausen, 1968). This, combined with the perceived commercial appeal that must be considered, means that the way gender is represented in video games often follows and reinforces the dominant hegemonic discourse within society (Wolska, 2011). This means that when developers do attempt to include this female audience, they often do so in ways that still reinforce stereotypical gender roles.

For instance, in the previously mentioned MMORPG *World of Warcraft*, the expansion set *Mists of Pandaria* opens with a male character named Ji Firepaw greeting the player's freshly created character. If the player accepts a quest from him as a male character, he responds differently than if they approach him as a female character (Myers, 2012). While it was eventually removed in later versions due to complaints, the text from the game is provided below, respectively.

*“Hello, friend! You’ve got a strong look to you! I bet you’re all the rage with the ladies! Join me! You and I are going to be good friends!”*

*“Hello, friend! You’re some kind of gorgeous, aren’t you? I bet you can’t keep the men off of you! Join me!”*

Here, we can see that the game reinforces heteronormative and male stereotypes by pointing out the male character's strength and, accordingly, sexual capital. In contrast, the female character's fighting ability or aptitude related to the task at hand is nowhere to be found. Instead, a remark on her looks and the fact that she “can't keep men off of her” shows that the series of ‘compliments’ that the game offers are traits that hegemonic masculinity finds desirable in males and females. Notice how this character's description of the male's role in sexuality grants him a neutral role of being popular amongst women, while the female's role as described by this character places her in the traditional “passive” sexual role of being acted upon.

### Results: Mixed Responses

Almost everyone I spoke with agreed on some level that games were on a progressive track towards being more inclusive. Alan attributes this to more player-created options for avatars in video games. He points out several games, including *Sunset Overdrive*, where players



can choose from a variety of body types, skin colors, and voices. He argues that this is the ultimate form of inclusiveness because it allows for anyone who takes enough time tinkering around in the character creation screen to find an avatar that represents them. Alan and a few others I spoke with also mentioned *Mass Effect* as a series that successfully incorporated a female playable option, affectionately nicknamed “FemShep”. The game treats you the same, (save for the voice acting), whether you choose a female or male option for Commander Shepard. Furthermore, the armor options and character movements do not differ either (Payne, 2013). The collector’s edition of *Mass Effect 3* also included FemShep and Male Shepherd on each side of the cover insert. While this allowed an individual to swap which incarnation graced the cover, the game was shipped and distributed with the male version as the default.

Among the conversations at the convention, the topic that came up the most frequently was the way women are depicted in video games. This was no surprise, seeing as issues such as female representation in game design often come part and parcel with it. For instance, Ken believes that the imagery in hyper-competitive fighting games such as *Street Fighter* keeps women out of those games because it communicates that they are only for straight men. “The game just has a very TNA feel to it. You know, like pinup girls that very exposed and bulky giant guys. Alan also cited fighting games as likely culprits for portraying women in unfair ways and pandering more towards men. He said much of the humor in those games is at the woman’s expense, with jokes like upskirt shots. Much of their costumes serve no practical purpose and even the female characters who wear realistic clothing have alternate skins that put them in humiliating fetishistic costumes.

Beverly, a female video game design student, cites many recent examples in gaming as a sign that while things are getting better, they are not quite there yet. “I have mixed feelings about

a lot of these games. I like a lot of the things Blizzard has done with *Overwatch*. I heard there's actually women with different body types in there, like a really short, stocky girl and a large really butch chick." However, she quickly points out that many of the other female characters in the game seem to be built from the same body standard that women are expected to adhere to. She also notes *League of Legends* as a game that slowly became more and more typical in terms of female character design as it grew in popularity. Lastly, she expresses her ambivalence about the character Quiet from *Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*. She says she likes Quiet's unique facial design, but she was not fond of the way the creator of the series, Hideo Kojima, hopelessly defended her character design. To explain, Quiet is an assassin who aids the main character throughout the game. She wears little clothing, despite the rugged and dangerous environment she operates in. The game explains this design choice, in-game, by telling the player that she has a condition where she can only breathe through her skin. Beverly was not a fan of this in-story explanation for Quiet's appearance, and questions Kojima's true motives. She mentioned a tweet he sent regarding the new Quiet action figure, where Kojima was pleased to announce that the material in its breasts would be softer from the rest of the figure: "Quiet is coming soon. Yoji, a supervisor says some soft materials enables to be pushed & lifted. lol" (HIDEO\_KOJIMA, 2015).

### Results, Part 2: What To Do About Young Girls

Other people I spoke with had different perspectives on the topic. Megan does not believe sexualized images in video games are harmful by themselves. "You can have a sexual character without it being demeaning... ..It's dependent on how much agency the female character has in the story." Megan also wishes there were more games with characters she could relate to. For

instance, “ordinary men or women, not just big, muscley guys.” She believes gaming for women is getting better, although she would like to see more games where you can romance men.

Megan’s comments emphasize the importance of where female characters exist in relation to a game’s story. Her stance is not unlike those in the literature who argued Lara Croft’s position as an independent, smart, capable, and strong female lead elevated her from the status of just being eye candy for young males. Her comments about wanting more “ordinary” characters and more varied romances to pick from, reinforce perspectives in the literature that the default gamer is perceived as a heterosexual male. However, as I spoke with men on the issue, I found that the desire for more varied character types was not something that only women wanted. Matt, a video game journalist, professed his desire for better-written female characters that he can play as. For him, “it’s less about strong female characters in stories and more about well written ones.” Matt desires a level of humanity and depth in female characters that most developers have been neglecting. This is because, as he explains, they design them as sexy scenery first, and as actual personalities second.

Karen, a video game design instructor, says that she “loves” hypersexual female characters, although her male co-worker dislikes them strongly. In fact, the female character she most identifies with is Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* series. She admits that characters like those can be “harmful to young girls,” but she also says that “we are trying to make games that capture a larger audience than just that.” Karen’s position as someone who has worked in the industry for over a decade makes her perspective unique.

Craig also agrees that there is a potential for images in games to harm younger or less mature audiences with their unrealistic body depictions. However, he thinks that the U.S. is “too prude about that kinda stuff” but “okay” with high amounts of violence, unlike Japan. I asked

Craig where he thought the future of video games was heading and he said he did not believe that games with half-naked women were going to die out, “unless some psychos get in congress.” Instead, there will be a rise of female-oriented games that are less sexual “on the side.” Craig’s mention of the United States’ double-standard when it comes to sex and violence is not unheard of (Clark-Flory, 2011). However, it is interesting that he positioned less-sexual games on the periphery through his language.

Much like Karen and Craig, Carly took a similar, libertarian stance on the issue of body image in young women. She explains that seeing images like those in video games never made her question her own body. “I see how it could, though, if someone did not hear from their parents that's it's just fantasy.” Here, Carly puts responsibility on parents to communicate to their children that characters in games are not real.

### Results Part 3: Cosplaying Virtual Women

During a panel on diversity in cosplay, several panelists discussed the criticism they received for not matching the same body type, race, or gender of the character they were depicting. At some point during the Q&A session I asked the cosplayers what they thought about the body types that female characters had in video games. Scarlett told me she has always battled with weight and fat-shaming throughout her life. However, she does not let the body types of the characters stop her from playing them. Haley had the same empowering perspective about cosplay, and also added how video games were becoming similar to Barbie, in that they are starting to include different races and body types now.

## Conclusions

Overall, the opinions about female characters in video games varied widely, with many gamers having mixed feelings about the matter. In general, fighting games received the most flak for their depictions of women, while games like *Mass Effect* received praise for addressing equality in gaming with a measured hand. Games with hypersexualized (but competent) female leads like *Tomb Raider* and *Bayonetta* garnered mixed responses from both men and women, mimicking the diverse set of viewpoints that characters such as Lara Croft have engendered in academia. Ken's discussion of imagery creating barriers for women in competitive gaming embodied feminist perspectives of masculine space being policed. Beverly's criticism on developers such as Hideo Kojima resembles much of the literature surrounding issues of the male-dominated gaming industry discussed in the next chapter.

Others who were interviewed avoided placing the responsibility on developers and instead pushed for better discretion at the hands of consumers. What is fascinating is the way many who were interviewed discussed the harm that the objectification of women could cause. "Young girls" were brought up, time and time again, but there was no mention of boys, or even adults. This differed greatly from the research, which shows sexist depictions altering the performance and outlook of adult women and men (Adams et al., 2006; Zillmann & Bryant 1982, 1984; Davies et al., 2002). Furthermore, Craig and Carly felt that, because the characters being depicted were virtual, their idealized design could be explained away by parental guardians as just fantasy. However, this does not address the larger issue discussed in the literature about videogames just one of many objectifiers of feminine bodies in the media. In that case, the non-virtual women being displayed in magazines and television could not be answered for. As a

result, many participants in the study isolated videogames from their role in the culture of female objectification as a whole.

Lastly, cosplayers I spoke with detailed the humiliation they received for not quite matching the impossible sizes and shapes of characters in games and anime. However, their presentation was about letting the hate “roll off your shoulders,” so to speak, and realizing that cosplay is more about self-fulfillment than anything else. Instead, they argued that one can capture the essence of a character and celebrate them, despite not having the same shape, skin color, or gender.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE INDUSTRY

“The audience really determines what the industry makes. For instance, the new *Call Of Duty* they’re making has a lot of backlash and the developers are listening to that feedback”.

—Nick, a showroom vendor

### The Vicious Cycle

Female game developers face numerous challenges in the industry. For one, they receive significantly lower average salaries than male developers (Shirinian, 2012). Despite the amount of buzz that inequality in the industry has generated, statistics still show only 22% of those involved in the industry are women (IGDA, 2015). Other research shows that even when women are involved in these professions, they often occupy roles such as receptionist and marketing while men hold spots in the creation of the content (Deuze et al., 2007). Furthermore, only 33% of men in the industry found the lack of overall diversity in the industry to be an issue. In the same IGDA survey, 95% of respondents were aware of the overall negative ‘social perception of the game industry’, something the IGDA considered a “hard message coming from industry insiders and community members” (IGDA, 2015: 17). This overwhelming majority of men creates a cultural environment that is naturalized to the point where it no longer has to justify excluding femininity (Johnson, 2014). This “Brogrammer culture,” a neologism assigned to the legacy of sexism within startup tech companies and programming, represents a workplace rife with rape jokes, objectification of women, and overall lower pay for women in those professions (Hicks, 2013). Much of this is connected to the relatively infinitesimal numbers of women

involved in technology professions overall—a glaring example being that 3% of programmers are female (Burrows, 2013). It is worth mentioning the unrelenting onslaught of harassment and death threats female game designer Brianna Wu suffered after she mentioned that statistic via tweet during Gamergate—an incident where another female game designer, Zoe Quinn (among others), was also subject to threats and hateful messages (Teitell & Borchers, 2014). Both women were “doxxed” with malicious intent, a slang term for someone finding an individual’s personal information such as their phone number or home address and posting them online for everyone to see. As a result, both had to leave their homes. Jennifer Hepler, a writer for the video game company Bioware, received various hate messages and was forced to close her Twitter account after stating she preferred the story elements of games more than the gameplay (Chalk, 2012). In response to the incident, Bioware donated \$1000 to an anti-bullying charity in her name.

If death threats were not enough, research unsurprisingly shows that individuals tend to avoid occupations where their gender is not represented, creating a vicious cycle (Miller et al., 2004). To counter these imbalances, many scholars and activists have discussed what Fullerton et al. (2008) calls a “virtuous cycle,” whereby making game design a more inclusive environment will cause more females to participate in the industry and make games that appeal more to women. As a result, more women will make the transition from gamer to game designer. The push for diverse design teams in media content is an excellent strategy for avoiding the blunderous missteps that alienate female audiences—an issue that has reared its ugly head more than a few times for comic book companies as well (Strickland, 1980; Lavin, 1998).



### Advertising for Heterosexual Males

The idea of video games being made *by* white heterosexual males *for* other white heterosexual males is quite evident when one examines the advertising that is employed in print and online media. Dickerman, Christensen, & Kerl-McClain point out several vivid examples in their 2008 study on depictions of race and gender in video games. For instance, an advertisement for the PC game *Neverwinter Nights* in *Gamespy* magazine (*Gamespy*, 2003) depicts a nearly nude woman, barely covered in seashells, with the text “Have you seen this girl?” above it. Another game, *Civilization IV*, held an advertisement for an add-on for the game, which depicted a Statue of Liberty with dramatically increased breast size and the words CIV GOES BIG on the page as well (*Civ goes big*, 2007). What is interesting about these examples is that they both depart from the game’s actual content in an effort to attract heterosexual male attention with stereotypical female body images. The female character in the *Neverwinter Nights* ad does appear in the game, but fully clothed. Also, the tone of *Civilization IV*’s actual gameplay and imagery, lacking any sort of overt sexuality at all, makes their angle of advertising all the more blatant and inappropriate. Furthermore, Summers & Miller (2014) found that female depictions in video game magazines have exhibited more sexy and revealing characteristics as the years have gone by.

### The Feminization of Labor

Lastly, Huntemann (2013) argues that all of academia’s focus on representation and the interpretive power of consumers has blinded them to injustices being committed at a production and distribution level. For instance, scant wages are paid to the primarily female workers who create videogame hardware in deplorable conditions. Also, the use of “booth babes” by

companies to promote their gaming platforms worldwide is just another example of the feminization of labor (Barker & Feiner, 2010). Concepts such as the feminization of labor arose in the 1970's when Marxist discussions of production attracted feminist critique for neglecting gender in their analyses (Wajcman, 2000). What followed was an uncovering of the way female labor is exploited on the domestic and international level (Enloe, 2014).

### Results, Part 1: Where The Women Are('nt)

Acting as a buffer between the food court area and the colossal merchandise section of the Megacon showroom was a string of colorful booths, emblazoned with different trade schools' logos. Here, large video screens show dazzling examples of student-made animation while pulse-pounding and dramatic music plays. Young teenagers gaze wide-eyed, mouth agape—after all, making games is likely a dream job for many of them. Meanwhile, their parents drill the faculty on tuition costs, curriculum, and how viable one of their certificate programs really is. Lines form behind their virtual reality headsets, offering virtual tours of their campus; while arcade games made by the students themselves entice con-goers to take a break from the endless walking and stretch their digital legs. At scheduled times throughout the day the videos turn to powerpoint slide presentations, led by instructors from schools who offer some insight into the animation process with their years of experience in the industry. I happened to walk up during the Q&A segment of a presentation and took a seat amongst the crowd. James, the game designer/texture and animation artist currently presenting, appears to be in his early 30s. He seems to light up when I ask him about women in the industry. “That’s a very good question! [school name] has a *very* diverse student base. I believe we have a 45% female student body right now? Something like that.” When asked about the faculty, he replies “We admittedly only

have one female instructor.” As to why he thought that was, James speculated that the disparity could likely be explained by generational differences in gamers. “In my generation there just wasn’t very many chicks into gaming. It was a guy thing.” He says that “in time”, the generation of women who grew up with the Playstation era of gaming will eventually break in and level the field.

The very next day I was fortunate enough to get a chance to speak with Karen, the sole female instructor at the school. She described her early years of being in the field including regularly being one of the only three women in classrooms of 100 students. Design teams were only about 10% women, the rest men. She also explained that the reason she is the only female instructor at her school is likely because “it has taken a long time for women to wanna penetrate into that position.” Having spent over 10 years in the industry, she noticed a trend where certain areas of the industry were more inclusive of women than others. For instance, the design departments eagerly welcome a woman’s aesthetic touch, while programming and coding departments have an attitude she described as “Ew, cooties!”

Beverly goes to a different game design school in California, and hers also has only one female instructor. She recalled a number of stories from her classroom experiences, particularly in group projects. She often butts heads with her male classmates, especially over the sexualization of female characters in the projects they do. The instructors can be even worse. “For one assignment we had to animate some spiders, and the teacher was of course very much like ‘give the girl spider a pink bow’ and I’m like, they’re spiders! [laughing]”. She describes a video she saw from another group of students that was Star Wars themed. In it, the character Rey from *The Force Awakens* film was portrayed with a large-breasted hourglass figure. Beverly was confused, considering the character does not resemble that at all in the source material. Later she

found out it was the same instructor she had before that encouraged those students to modify the character's appearance. Furthermore, one of the requirements for her group assignment was that they further sexualize female characters because it was aimed at male gamers around the age of 20. However, according to Beverly, nothing about the actual gameplay or story would suggest that the game should be limited to that demographic. To go back to the Nick's quote at the start of the chapter, is it really the audience that is determining the content that developers are creating? Many of the female gamers I spoke with voiced concern that their desires, in terms of more inclusive game content, are largely neglected and ignored—especially from larger game companies.

#### Results, Part 2: Subverting and Reinforcing Hypersexuality In Artist Alley

“Why am I Sexy [character name]? Because it's fun, man... .. I see girls go out here all the time dressed sexy as characters from games and I wanted to do it too. Hell, one of the more famous cosplayers here put on a yellow bikini and called herself Pikachu.” -Antonio, cosplay celebrity.

Javier's display of prints at his artist booth was a veritable cornucopia of dragons, brazen warriors, and sorcerers bending the elements to their will. He had worked for a variety of companies and has had his artwork featured in trading card games, covers of fantasy novels, and a variety of digital media as well. “Video games need concept art,” he explains, and artists who are skilled at drawing pieces from relevant genres are often called in to set a precedent before a character, monster, or landscape is animated. Next to his booth is David, who has drawn fantasy art professionally for the past 20 years. When I asked him what his style was when drawing female characters, he explained: “I like to keep things very practical, very realistic... ..I also like

to look at historical imagery and draw from that. No chainmail bikinis [laughing]. Unless, of course, the client wants that.” The chainmail bikini that David refers to is an umbrella term for the revealing “armor” that fantasy artists depict on female warriors (MacCallum-Stewart, 2009; Sweedyk & de Laet, 2005). David claims this trend of female imagery in video games and other fantasy mediums came from old school fantasy artist Frank Frazetta. Perhaps most well known for his work on the covers of the *Conan The Barbarian* series, Frazetta depicted ludicrously muscle-bound men fighting to save nubile maidens from terrible monsters. His legacy left a lasting impact on the way men and women were depicted in videogames, comics, fantasy art, and even classic films such as *Star Wars* (Theodore, 2011). David pointed out that there are large groups of people online who strongly oppose women depicted in this manner. He told me he agrees with them that it is sexist and unrealistic but he believes there is room for both kinds of art.

Veronica, a well-known comic book author at the con, gave me her experiences with female representation. “There is definitely a ‘default’ body type for women in the art of comics, video games, and other media,” she says. Often she will receive art for the comic from illustrators and have to send it back, telling them to “cover up her butt” or “show less skin,” She does not blame the artists, though. “They’ve been trained to draw women that way... It’s an industry standard.” Another artist, Lee, says he sticks to primarily drawing men and monsters for clients. His female figures come off as too “masculine,” and while some people or clients may like that, the "standard" or "default" female build is much like a bikini model.

With rows and rows of talent like these in Megacon’s Artist Alley, one can imagine it would be difficult to stand out. However, one booth in particular seemed to elicit a great deal of laughter attention from passersby. Enter Yazmin: She makes dakimakura, a japanese type of

body pillow, adorned with somewhat to-scale images of fictional characters in sexual and alluring poses on a bed. While dakimakura traditionally depict female characters from anime, Yazmin's art takes a departure from Otaku culture and depicts male characters from video games instead. This subversion is fascinating because it is not simply just an inversion of gender. The characters she has chosen, like almost every male character in video games, are not sexualized to the extent that female characters are in their original media. Yazmin explains that characters in video games are depicted in ways heterosexual males find attractive, and game companies are missing out on a whole other audience: "Big companies don't do this stuff. Meanwhile, if you look at the fandoms online there is a whole market clamoring for it". She adds that it is inevitable that these companies will see how much money the indie artists and developers are making from these products and eventually adopt it into their game. However, it will not happen anytime soon because they perceive a large risk in taking a chance with characters like that. "I don't think the companies are inherently "against" characters that are male and sexualized. They're just afraid to take risks." Yazmin was not the only person at the convention who saw the AAA video game companies as last to change. I later found another artist at the con doing dakimakuras in this style as well, named Travis. He expressed similar sentiments, saying that there is indeed a disparity in the sexuality apparent in female characters versus male characters. There is a market for sexualized male characters that is not being satisfied by games and his art taps into that void. Travis explains that this is because for a long time games were made primarily by white cisgendered males. On the third day of the convention I had found out from one of the other artists that some of the Megacon staff had asked Travis to take down some of his artwork and make his display shorter in height. According to the staff, his display was 12 feet tall, much higher than the 8-foot height limit. Having seen Travis' display prior to this complaint I could

attest for the fact that it was nowhere near 12 feet. Furthermore, several other booths around him were still much higher. When Travis asked if he knew which manager issued the complaint the staff member replied that they were not “required to tell him that information.” He told me “I feel like they don’t want my stand so big because it has a lot of gay stuff on it.” He tweeted about the incident and in response the event staff promised an email giving him more details about their rationale. By late Sunday (the end of the con), Travis had still not heard back from anyone regarding the reasoning for why his display was singled out.

Another person in Artist Alley who subverted sexuality in video game characters was Antonio, a self-proclaimed “mildly famous” cosplayer who had his own booth. His persona was what he called a ‘sexy’ version of a popular male character from gaming. The booth sold memorabilia featuring him in suggestive poses beneath sexual innuendoes. Much of the humor surrounding Antonio’s cosplay act was the absurdity of hypersexualizing a male videogame character who was not regarded as sexy by the gaming community on any level.

Lindsay’s art was also subversive of typical video game tropes in the sense that it featured almost exclusively female game characters with messages of empowerment such as “fight like a girl” next to them. When I began talking to her and her partner at the booth, I first asked a few questions about their art. They seemed quite wary of me, and unlike the rest of the individuals whom I had interviewed, kept their answers terse and to the point. However, as the conversation shifted towards gender and videogames, they opened up. I later found out from a friend of theirs that they were initially suspicious of my inquiries regarding their art because of the numerous put-downs other artists and guests had made towards the legitimacy of their work.

### Results, Part 3: Resistance through Voice Acting

Megacon was home to a number of panels that took place at scheduled times throughout the day. Lines of fans would shuffle into the large conference rooms and take a seat amongst the rows of chairs. Presentations ranged from famous voice actors telling their stories to podcasters just talking about the latest hot topics in anime, video games, or comics. I was fortunate enough to speak with the three women heading the *Women In Anime And Videogames* panel and ask them about their experiences as voice actors for video games. Pearl tells me it was a challenge starting out because she often had to play submissive female characters. These frail depictions of femininity were often contrasted with stoic, smart, and muscle-bound male heroes. Another voice actor, Emma, expresses her burning hatred for any role in which she has to play a woman who makes a man a cake (a common trope in anime or Japanese videogames). The third one, Mary, describes the complications that mixing gender roles from different cultures can lead to: “The Japanese have a saying: ‘deru kui wa utareru’, which means, ‘if a nail sticks out, hammer it down.’” She goes on to explain how Japan’s gender roles are even stronger than in the U.S. Thus, this proverb usually applies to women in the Japanese anime and games that she voice acts. There may be a great deal of pressure to stick to the source material and play that character as submissive or invisible. However, she also tells me that, as an actor, it is her job to adopt those gender roles to ones more congruent with American society. Thus, she often takes female characters who were previously coy and brings them out a little bit—or in some cases, a lot, to tell a story with female characters the American audience can more easily relate to.



## Conclusions

Despite the alienation of female gamers, the general opinion among those in the industry that I spoke with was that more and more women were becoming part of video game production. In light of this, it appears the video game industry is in a process of growing pains—slowly, but steadily making room to finally include workers and ideas that are not male. Old practices and traditions still exist, (as evident from Beverly’s experiences as a student and the industry’s need to appeal to the straight, white, male demographic.) but the consensus seemed to be that those will eventually age out, à la the “virtuous cycle.”

While I never got a chance to uncover the reasoning behind the unfair treatment Travis and Lindsay were subjected to, the subversive nature of their videogame fan art could have played a part in why they were singled out by the event staff, guests, and other artists. Antonio’s cosplay act also sexually subverted a character that was not considered attractive by the heterosexual, male-dominated, community but he managed to garner a great deal of positive favor from guests and staff—including a feature in the event program. However, much of Antonio’s memorabilia and imagery featured penis jokes and innuendo that resembled the same types of pickup lines that are typical within masculine culture. By contrast, Lindsay’s artwork was emblazoned with messages of female empowerment and Travis’ work portrayed men with vulnerable and intimate posturing. Because of this, these images did not conform to the hegemonic masculine discourse in the gaming community that was discussed in the literature.

In addition, the conversations I had at the voice acting panel provided some valuable insight – especially considering the lack of discussion in the literature on that facet of videogame production. Taking creative liberties as well as vocalizing discontent with the way female characters are portrayed in games and anime are both forms of resistance employed by voice

actors. By acting as an affront to two-dimensional depictions of femininity, Pearl, Emma, and Mary are able to challenge the dominant trends in those mediums.

## CHAPTER FIVE: GAMES FOR WOMEN

“It depends on the genre as to whether the game is more aimed towards men or women. Console and PC games are more skewed towards men, you know, like fighters or shooters. Mobile games and rhythm and puzzle games are more towards the females.

—Craig, an artist in Megacon’s showroom

### Pink and Purple Games

There exists several branches of thought in the literature about games “for girls” and “for guys.” The first focuses primarily on gendered preferences of mechanics and content within games, attempting to identify where female and male interests lie. For instance, several scholars explain how game designers can better cater to female audiences (Ray, 2004; Kerr, 2003). Some focus on market data, highlighting statistical differences in the types of games women and men report playing (Carr, 2006; Greenberg et al., 2010). Others break down less overt masculinized traits in video games, like Fullerton et al.’s (2007) published work on digital space. They posit that the way space is “treated” within those games is masculine in and of itself. For example, strategy games allow players to take the helm as they battle over and conquer the space within the game while shooters place players in maze-like environments that they must shoot their way out of by gunning down any opposition that also occupies it. The 1999 book *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* calls to attention the tragic lack of interest in video games and technology among young girls as a whole. Rushing to capture this untapped market, companies began making “pink” games—games about dressing up, shopping, or other stereotypical interests of young girls (Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012). It would be some time before the industry realized that young

girls' interests were not the same as women's. What followed was a wave of "purple" games that instead attracted female interest through focusing on mature themes that affect women, such as relationships (Kafai et al. 2008). In concordance with these efforts arose academic "guides," who write manuals for companies to use in order to better accommodate the 'natural' inclinations of women that are not being catered to. For example, Graner Ray's 2004 book *Gender Inclusive Game Design* attributes gendered game preference to biological traits, such as the feminine need to "elicit an emotional response" from videogames (p.60). However, as scholars are quick to point out, assuming a difference in male and female preference from the get-go only reinforces stereotypes about gender that individuals must already contend with on a regular basis (Sundén & Sveningsson, 2012; Taylor et al., 2009).

#### Difference as Artifice

By contrast, there exists strands of research on the mutability (or even the existence) of those purported gender differences in game preference. For instance, observations at an all-girl boarding school's game club showed that while female players initially expressed interest only in traditionally "girl" games, they played all kinds once given access to titles such as *Dead or Alive* or *Grand Theft Auto*—traditionally "boy" games, for a longer period of time (Carr, 2005). Carr concludes that tying game preference to gender essentialism is misguided, given that it developed from exposure, access, and peer culture. Jenson et al.'s (2011) ethnography of an after-school gaming club frames their research as a direct challenge to the "facts" established by various studies about female preferences in games, claiming that conflating gaming skill with gender is a fundamental mistake. Their study found more similarities than differences boys and girls who were the same skill level. These works indicate an academic push to unpack and

deconstruct the social dynamics, marketing, and mechanisms of access surrounding these games in order to find understanding beyond what market research shows. Yee (2008)'s study on MMORPG's is an example of a study that conducts analysis in this vein. Yee argues that MMORPG's are an excellent example of games that manage to appeal to female and male audiences. Because there is a lack of social access points available for women who wish to game, MMORPG's provide easier access—either through in-game communities or, through the male partners of those women, who already play. However, claiming this proclivity for MMORPG's is because “women like to talk” is grossly incorrect, as it neglects the rich variety of gameplay and social features that games like these offer (Taylor, 2006 p:95).

#### Male Ownership of Play

There has also been numerous studies into the male ownership of play in the digital world (Kennedy, 2002; Fron, et al., 2007; Chess, 2009). Feminine anxieties about child-rearing, housekeeping, and performance of domestic duties are part of a gendernormative landscape in which boys are free to play with their toys all the way into adulthood, while women engage in a much more agonizing balancing act as their free time shrivels away. Chess' extensive 2009 dissertation succinctly states: “Thus, even now with the passing of the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, 57 where women are guaranteed a right to equal pay, they are still not necessarily guaranteed a right to equal play” (p. 205). She juxtaposes Arlie Russell Hothschild's landmark 1989 book, *The Second Shift*, with the themes present in games aimed towards female consumers. In the *Second Shift*, women in the modern day have embraced the classic 40-hour work week but must also contend with a second shift of unpaid household work and child rearing when they get home. Chess argues that even when women engage in free time, the video games

that are marketed towards them are based around “virtual productive play”, a game style where play and work are one and the same—a *third* shift. For instance, in *Diner Dash*, the player takes the role of Flo, a woman who must anticipate the needs of restaurant goers in order to better serve them. Thus, games with productive play give women, what she calls, a “permission slip” to placate their intrapsychic overseers.

### Results: Appetite for Destruction

While the gendered qualities of a game are still felt, they are not always followed. In a study that investigated the experiences of female gamers in Sweden, some of the participants expressed a disdain for feminine themes in games, one even claiming that men just wanted women to play games where they take care of houses or build communities, instead of fighting monsters or engaging in heart-racing combat (Sveningsson, 2012). At the convention, most of the women I had conversations with shared similar views. For instance, Carly says she “likes blowing things up.” She thinks games that contain lots of violence could discourage women from playing games but that's more of a “societal” thing than a video game thing. This distinction she makes seems to echo the literature previously discussed on the variety of societal factors that play into gaming preference.

In my conversation with Beverly, she too confirms that her and her girls like “playing GTA 5 and fucking some shit up” as much as the next guy. She adds that things like “hyper violence” in video games are enjoyed by women as well. She also expressed her strong dislike of the term ‘girl gamer,’ instead preferring to just be considered a gamer like everyone else.

## Conclusions

It is interesting to note that during these conversations, men almost always were the ones who made a distinction between games that women played and games that men played. Men often mentioned titles such as *Harvest Moon*, *The Sims*, and the *Katamari* franchise when discussing the broad concept of “games that women enjoy”. These games were notably nonviolent, and many exhibit traits of the productive play discussed in the literature. Craig, quoted at the top of this chapter, seemed to hold assumptions about gender-based preference in videogames. Max, the hardcore gamer discussed in Chapter 6, put a spin on this viewpoint, instead claiming that more difficult or time-consuming games were not as enjoyable for female gamers. In contrast, while female players were aware of this division as a stereotype, they did not find it particularly relevant or applicable. In conclusion, the arbitrary boundaries between “male” and “female” games appeared to be maintained and policed by men—an observation worth investigating further in future studies.

## CHAPTER SIX: HARDCORE GAMING AND E-SPORTS

Male 1: “Dude, some girl came in here yesterday and started bodying everyone.”

Male 2: [laughing] “Yeah, well she beat him.” [Pointing to male 3]

Male 3 “Hey, she came in here as Bowser and just didn’t care about anything!”

—conversation overheard between men playing *Super Smash Bros.* at the convention

McDivitt mentions in her 2013 thesis that the rise of female gamers was brought about, in part, by the wildly popular *Pac-man* franchise. The inception of “cute” or “cutesy” games, like *Ms. Pac-man* and *Centipede*, attracted a female audience that was a previously untapped source of revenue. These games were vibrantly colorful and had named characters that would interact during intermissions. This was relatively new to mainstream gaming and led to increased female participation in games and game development. McDivitt also describes a backlash from male gamers, who felt females were encroaching on their previously masculine space. They claimed these games were too simple and popular with women because they were easy to play. The male pushback that female gamers experienced when *Pac-man* was popular, embodies a conflict theory perspective—where men delegitimize female accomplishments and prowess in order to maintain hardcore gaming as a male-exclusive hobby.

### Sports and Video Games as Masculine Spaces

This power struggle is also evident in sports, an area that competitive video gaming (or e-sports) has been attempting to break into for quite some time now (Taylor, 2012). Taylor et al.’s 2009 ethnography of several video game tournaments showed a disturbing trend in the way e-sports had adopted the sexist “terrain” of the medium it desperately is trying to emulate. Women



at the events served as forms of ornamentation, sex appeal in advertising, and cheerleaders. Here, hegemonic traits such as dominance and the capacity to humiliate others are valorized, reinforcing the perception amongst gamers that women lack the ability or drive to compete in video game competitions. Perhaps the most fascinating part of this work was their analysis of female pro gamer Fatal Fantasy. Often heralded by the community as one of the “good gamer girls” (Taylor, 2009: 254), Fatal Fantasy was known for taunting her competition, motivating her allies through threats, and making aggressive strategy calls. Taylor et al. concludes that Fatal Fantasy’s ability to adopt the “misogynistic (and homophobic)” elements that are intertwined with competitive sports has allowed her to maintain her status, despite the threat her presence as a female hardcore gamer may pose to a community who see it as a male space.

#### The Presentation and Perception Of Professional Female Gamers

Also present in sports is what scholars call the “symbolic annihilation” of women (Tuchman, 1979; Hardin & Shane, 2005; Klein & Shiffman, 2009). Coverage of female events and female players are either nonexistent or trivialized in comparison to the big-budget productions that are male major league competitions. The way female e-sports is publicized can further divide these competitions along gender lines. For instance, the Asian Cyber Games banner for their annual DotA 2 competition issues a “call for the beauties” (Lok, 2013). ImbaTV, a Chinese streaming site, attracted an unprecedented number of viewers for a female *Hearthstone* tournament that took place in a peculiar setting. Competitors sat across from each other in a purple room, adorned with sheer drapes, with white silk tablecloths, and wearing matching white dresses (Tassi, 2015). During Microsoft’s developer’s conference in spring of 2016, the company paid for a party in which scantily clad women danced on tables for developers (Day, 2016). After

receiving numerous complaints, the company publically apologized. These events show that even in the past couple years, women are still either treated as invisible or glorified in ways that reinforce heteronormative gender roles. Furthermore, sports are far from an even playing ground and the hegemonic structures within them reinforce existing gender norms (Shell & Rodriguez, 2000). This male hegemony places men as the rational ones, worthy of a culture's celebration—while women are slaves to their biology and the household (Artz & Murphy, 2000). This is also reflected in the way that sports fandoms are also primarily male-dominated groups as well (Toffoletti, 2014; Haddad, 1991). In the movie *Sideline*, a group of Iranian female sports fans are confronted by a male who says they are acting like men. Shouting, jumping up and down, and exuding intense emotions over a sport are gendered actions, and the role of spectator in a sport is traditionally that of a male. This association is twofold, as the role of the player is stereotypically that of a male as well. Because of this, there is a distinct parallel between men vicariously living out hyper-masculine power fantasies through both video game character and sports athlete alike.

### Results, pt. 1: Gender Essentialism

I spoke with Max, a hardcore gamer who does marathon gaming events for charity. He said he personally knew more female gamers than male gamers and that the medium had gone a long way in terms of male-female player ratios. When asked what exactly brought about that change, he replied, “Mainly the difficulty. Games today are much easier than they were before. Now you get games that play themselves for you. You know, like *The Order*.” He later gushed about the *Dark Souls* series, games which “don’t hold your hand” and “are exceptionally punishing.” Max’s implications about games that are appealing to women (read: easier) reveals a long running perception about women in gaming that has existed since its earlier days.

“Hardcore” and “casual” games have been divided across gender lines.

Ken, an artist at the convention, explained at depth the great deal of barriers for women in the competitive scene of video games. On Twitch, a website where gamers can watch other players stream, he says there are few female pros. The ones that are there are not watched or valued for their skill. Furthermore, there is a great deal of resistance against allowing female pro players to get sponsored by companies. Many players feel sponsorships should be only given out on merit, rather than to female pros. This myth of a neutral meritocracy has historically been utilized by male gatekeepers and journalists in sports to simultaneously put down women while maintaining a position of “fairness” (Knoppers & Elling, 2004).

Lastly, the idea of gender essentialism rears its head in the community regarding transgender players as well. Ken tells the story of a transgender female Street Fighter player named Ortiz who faced several obstacles in her experiences as a professional player, including outrage from players who did not think she should be allowed to play in female-only tournaments. He later sums up: “Men don’t mind if women play games, they just want them to know that they’re superior.” CJ, another male gamer I spoke to, has a female friend who is very competitive about fighting games online. “I watched her for 3 hours straight one time and she crushed nearly every person she played against. And all the guys in the chat were like ‘show us your hands. We don’t believe it’s you playing.’”

### Results, pt. 2: Observing Male Gaming Space

Unlike previous years, there was no gameroom scheduled for the con, so attendees that wanted to play had to bring their own consoles and TV’s. They set up in the lounge recesses on the second floor, somewhat near the fringes of the event. The groups rarely exceeded 10-12 but

people came and left quite frequently. *Super Smash Bros. For Wii U* was the game of choice at every one of the locations I observed. Known for being the quintessential party game, the *Smash* series was known for being easy to pick up and play, but hard to master. Up to 8 players could play, crowding around the screen, squinting to find their character among the colorful carnage and keep themselves alive.

During the hours I spent observing these groups, I did not see any women play. The two that were present sat off to the side of the area, on their phones. Both men and women would approach the space, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of a match, but most just kept walking on. Only the men walked up and asked if they could join.

Gameplay was mostly silent, save for the relentlessly clicking of the controllers and the occasional laughter or expletive shouted when someone's character died. On a couple of occasions, one gamer would become indignant towards another for some perceived injustice, such as choosing a character that was "too good" or "annoying." One player in particular was quite vocal. He issued constant challenges to other players and accented every one of his character's strikes with an accompanying "Ohh!" and "Now what?!" A few of the players seemed irritated by his boisterous play style but no one said anything about it.

The fact that these pickup groups were all-male and stayed all-male as long as I observed them said a lot about the approachability of this homosocial group. Of course, it is entirely possible that onlookers were judging the 'level' of play the gamers were at, gauging whether they stood a chance. When they stopped to watch I would sometimes ask the group if they were going to play. While the groups were mixed by gender, only the men answered my inquiries. Some said they were only good at the prequels in the series, while others said they had panels they needed to be at.

## Conclusions

A recurring theme I found throughout these observations was the alignment of femininity with casual gaming and masculinity with hardcore or professional gaming. There was a perspective among male gamers was that buckling down and taking the time to really get good at a game was not something female gamers were interested in. Furthermore, extremely time consuming and difficult games such as *Dark Souls* constituted a challenge that was best enjoyed by male players.

This division of casual and hardcore gaming is important because hardcore and professional gaming carries with it a certain level of decorum, and more importantly, masculinity among gamers. Because of this, it was no surprise that male gamers I observed in gaming circles used a skilled female player as a way to rib on one another's masculinity. By doing this, they simultaneously devalued her playing ability as well as challenged the masculinity of the player who lost to her.

As Ken described, the barriers put in place by the e-sports and the gaming community create a feedback loop that maintains professional gaming as male-dominated space. Female players receive little encouragement to enter the professional sphere, and the ones who are there are either not covered by e-sports media or celebrated on merit of their appearance, rather than playing ability.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: WOMEN IN THE ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITY

“I truly believe people should fight inequality wherever they may find it in society, even in gaming... . . . Some people may talk about stuff going on in Africa and say that what you’re fighting for doesn’t really matter, but those are the kind of people who don’t do anything for any cause.”

—Todd, a video game journalist

### Toxic Masculinity and Controlling the Discourse

It would be difficult to talk about gender and videogames without mentioning the swirl of online conflict surrounding it. Discussion of representation and sexism in videogames have spiked to unprecedented levels in recent years (Todd, 2015). Hubs of what Massanari (2015) calls “toxic technocultures” fester within online real estate dedicated to geek interests and STEM. This tech-oriented masculinity creates an environment that simultaneously objectifies women while treating their presence within that space with suspicion and derision (Varma, 2007). Massanari (2015) argues that the actual mechanics of online communities (such as moderating styles, downvoting, etc.), combined with an overemphasis on individual choice, means that conversations that challenge elements of geek culture are branded as threats to free speech. As touched on earlier in Chapter 2, there is also numerous factors that lead to disinhibited and problematic behavior in online spaces (Suler & Phillips, 1998). Because of this, it is no surprise that online discourse has been compared to a “wild west” (Miller & Slater, 2000), where unabashedly venomous rhetoric is the norm (Trammell, 2014).

An example of where this and toxic masculinity collide would be the Dickwolves incident that took place on Pennyarcade.com in 2010, as well as the events that followed.

Anastasia Salter & Bridget Blodgett chronicle this incident and provide a gendered framework for it in their 2012 study *Hypermasculinity & Dickwolves: The Contentious Role of Women in the New Gaming Public*. Pennyarcade is an extremely popular website about gaming with a large amount of influence in that community. In 2010, they published a comic where a villager describes that his people are raped each night by creatures known as “dickwolves” (Krahulik & Jerry, 2010a). In response, several people took issue with the comic, stating that it was extremely offensive to rape survivors. Pennyarcade responded with another comic strip, ‘apologizing’ for any rapists they may have created from their comic, and posing those who found the comic strip offensive as irrational (Krahulik & Jerry, 2010b). As the argument grew in size and viciousness, Pennyarcade created a line of T-shirts emblazoned with a sports-team style Dickwolves logo. Years later, the site would apologize for the incident, admitting it was a terrible mistake. In this incident it is clear to see how a powerful force in the gaming community (one with several yearly conventions all over the U.S., with attendance numbering in the tens of thousands) defended their usage of rape-laden gamer rhetoric by framing smaller groups as irrational, emotional, or too easily offended (Gabe, 2010). Emotion management is another method by which dominant groups subjugate others on an interactive level by ensuring all groups handle events emotionally in the same fashion. One of the ways this is done is by regulating discourse (Schwalbe et al., 2000). This is essentially where the dominant group polices the way things are discussed—in essences, the language, thought process, and lines of reasoning used when a topic is brought up. Another method is by controlling the emotional subjectivity of groups. By enforcing the way groups are allowed to react or feel towards events, the dominant group holds dominion over the experiences of the subjugated group. When the dominant group states that the oppressed do not

have the rational ability to describe their own experiences, they are able to maintain control of discourse by gaslighting potential resistance.

### In the Aftermath of Gamergate

Originally brought about by scandals in video game journalism, the online phenomenon Gamergate quickly morphed into a discussion about gender equality in gaming as a whole. While the buzz surrounding Gamergate consisted of many different people with a multitude of different opinions on the matter, the discourse seemed to always polarize around two opposing factions: The Gamergaters— ‘real’ gamers who find the corruption in video game journalism deplorable and are against the recent push for inclusiveness in videogames. They wage a cultural war against, what they call, SJW’s (short for ‘Social Justice Warrior’—pejorative slang for someone who advocates social justice online) who they see as ‘whiners’ that do not play games. Their perspective is that the SJW’s crusade for equality is simply for attention or because it is a fad. Neither group is an actual organized entity but they each represent clusters of like-minded ideals that have coalesced into loose, diametrically opposed positions. The degree to which conflict has ingratiated itself into online discourse has made it more of a question of *when* rather than *if* discussions on equality in videogaming will erupt into a vicious flamewar. As a result, many scholars have attempted to unpack this conflict to further understand the motives and thought processes behind the GG movement (Massanari, 2015; Chess & Shaw, 2015; Todd, 2015; Evans & Janish, 2015).

Much like the resurgence of white power and mens’ rights movements in the past ten years (Kimmel, 2013), the backlash against PC, or politically correct, culture is inextricably entwined within the Gamergate movement (Chess & Shaw, 2015). Because of this, in order to



understand why parts of the gaming community so fiercely reject diversification in gaming, one must delve into the culture of masculinity that pervades it.

Michael Kimmel's 2008 book, *Guyland*, discusses the fervor with which young males defend one of the only bastions of self-worth they possess—their leisure time:

Why are these guys so angry and defensive? In part because they feel a little guilty that they are spending so much time doing something they know is so purposeless. And all their macho blustering about being proudly not PC is belied by the fact that most of them wouldn't dream of expressing such blatantly racist and sexist opinions in the company of women, for example, or in the presence of a person of color, or in front of their parents or teachers. They know these attitudes are wrong and indefensible: that, in part, is what makes them so attractive. Adolescents have been "proving" their independence with rebellion against their parents' values for generations. But it goes deeper than that. Guys' defensiveness also has to do with the rage that's both covert and overt in much of what passes as entertainment in *Guyland*. Because as it turns out, the fantasy world of media is both an escape from reality and an escape to reality—the "reality" that many of these guys secretly would like to inhabit. Video games, in particular, provide a way for guys to feel empowered. In their daily lives guys often feel that they don't quite measure up to the standards of the Guy Code—always be in control, never show weakness, neediness, vulnerability—and so they create ideal versions of themselves in fantasy. The thinking is simple: If somebody messes with your avatar, you blow him away. It's a fantasy world of Manichean good and evil, a world in which violence is restorative, and actions have no consequences whatsoever. (pg.151)

As Kimmel reiterates throughout his works (1995, 2008, 2013), the white male's position as the dominant social group is one fraught with paranoia and frustration. Impossible standards set by hegemonic masculine ideals leave them reeling from overwhelming waves of aggrieved entitlement. When reality fails to grant them what they believe they are due, they exercise their disillusionment by blaming the rising tide of equality all around them. Social policies such as affirmative action and welfare are just cogs in a grand conspiracy that actually place white males at the bottom (2013, p:17). Meanwhile, tyrannical 'feminazis' strip all that is good about manhood until there is no longer any place left to just be "one of the guys" (2013: p101). Much like the "Angry White Men" Kimmel discusses in his book (2013), the Gamergate movement sees feminism as a cabal of shrieking harpies, eager to swoop down and take their icons of manhood away. Chess & Shaw (2015) show that this paranoia in Gamergaters extends even so far as to constructing convoluted conspiracy theories about feminist academia and the beginning of Gamergate as a whole. Much like Kimmel, Chess & Shaw frame this issue within the anxieties of tribalism and a cultural persecution complex:

It is less useful to consider the validity of a conspiracy in terms of actual persecution, and is more potent if we look at it in terms of a combination of perceived persecution and an examination of the anxieties that the conspiracy is articulating. From this perspective, we can look at gaming culture as a somewhat marginalized group: For years those who have participated in gaming culture have defended their interests in spite of claims by popular media and (some) academics blaming it for violence, racism, and sexism. A perceived threat opens a venue for those who feel their culture has been misunderstood—regardless of whether they are the oppressors or the ones being oppressed. It is easy to

negate and mark the claims of this group as inconsequential, but it is more powerful to consider the cultural realities that underline those claims. (Chess & Shaw, 2015: 217)

### Ethics in Hating Women

Further complicating this issue is the insistence at the hands of its supporters that GG is really about ethics in gaming journalism. While there are undoubtedly individuals who truly are aligned with that perspective, the scores of online users who cyberbullied female game developers and feminist critics under the #Gamergate banner transformed it into a movement rooted in misogyny (Wofford, 2014).

Media critic Anita Sarkeesian remains a prominent figure in the push for equality in gaming. Before she created the web series *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, she used the fundraising site Kickstarter.com to raise money for it. The funding project was wildly successful, but the publicity drew in a substantial amount of vitriol from the gaming community. What followed was a series of rape threats, racial slurs, and other colorful insults from “true gamers” who saw her as a liar, a whiner, and “not a real gamer” (Steadman, 2014). She received threats against her and her family via email, messageboard, phone, and even paper mail. As a result, she left her home and stayed with friends to avoid any possible realizations of the threats she received. Her Wikipedia page was vandalized numerous times, and there was even an online flash game where players can beat up an image of her face (Ryan, 2014). On October 14th, 2014, Sarkeesian cancelled her upcoming speaking engagement at Utah State University because of an anonymous email she received. In the email the writer threatens to massacre everyone in attendance because “feminists have ruined my life” and that “misandrist harpies” have punished men for merely “fantasizing about being men” (Starr, 2014). After the threat, Sarkeesian asked

for the school to heighten their security. However, because they would not deny the carrying of guns from those with the proper permits, Sarkeesian cancelled the event. This was not the first time this has happened to her. On March 19th, 2014, several members of the staff at the upcoming Game Developers Choice Awards ceremony received an email threatening to bomb the event if they gave Anita Sarkeesian the Ambassador's Award for her video series (Totilo, 2014). The event holders contacted authorities, who swept the premises with bomb-detecting equipment and heightened the security of the event. No bombs were found and the ceremony occurred without incident, with the very nervous Anita receiving her award. These threats and the extensive online smear campaign made against her only seems to reinforce her point that the gaming community is male-dominated and that many male gamers would prefer to keep it that way.

#### Results: Avoiding Identity Politics

In light of the findings, gamers interviewed during this study represented a spectrum of different viewpoints on gaming and gender. However, once conversations about gaming began to drift towards issues such as diversity, it was hard not to notice the palpable tension in the air. After all, as gamers, many respondents were eager to share how deeply they identified with gaming and were understandably defensive about it. There seemed to be an awareness—a universal acknowledgement of the lines and lines of digital ink being spilled about the topics we discussed at that very moment. Many people would mention vague collections of people online, either aligning themselves against or alongside them. For instance, the artist, David, mentioned a “group of people online” who felt chainmail bikinis were sexist and impractical. Alan also referenced several groups of men online who refused to play games simply because they had

female leads in them. Alex, describes herself as a feminist by definition but actively avoids using the term. For her, groups online have made what was supposed to be a movement about equality into a movement about hate (She air-quotes the phrase “Die, cisgendered scum!” as an example). However, almost every person I spoke with grounded their perspective as a personal viewpoint, rather than identifying *with* a group. Some, like Alex, even took great lengths to avoid being stuck with an unwanted or politicized label. Because of this, much of the online identity politics surrounding Gamergate remained, well, online. Only two individuals, both male, even mentioned Gamergate. However, the way they did also separated them from the two polarized viewpoints discussed in the literature.

Matt, an online video game journalist, talks about the gamergate issue as polarizing, with both sides using violent rhetoric and screaming at each other. He says he stays out of it for the most part, because it doesn't affect him as a white straight male. However, he is willing to help friends that are victimized by it. "Society is at a crossroads right now," he explains, "A lot of the harassment has always been there but now it's coming out and people are trying to do something about it." He thinks some of the fear against the equality movement is that some men believe that their “big boobed anime girls” and “grand theft auto” are going to be taken away from them, even though that is never going to happen. Or, that “a certain anime character’s pelvic bone won't be shown”. Matt laughs, and adds, “Dudes who care about that stuff are weird.”

Todd writes for a website that talks a great deal about Gamergate. However, he was quick to disavow allegiance with any of the movement’s pernicious deeds. “Doxxing people isn’t cool”. He also hates how GG essentially became about “4chan coming out of its hole”, rather than ethics in game journalism, which is what he writes about. Todd believes that game designers should have full creative freedom, and should not receive such a negative reaction for

“not including a strong female character.” However, while this stance may be congruent with many GG’ers, Todd’s feelings on inequality were quite strong, as evident in the quote at the start of this chapter.

### Conclusions

Based off of their professions, it would not be much of a stretch to say Todd and Matt are quite familiar with online discourse concerning video games. However, the fact that they distanced themselves from GG speaks volumes about the negative press the movement has received. This, combined with their condemnation of cyberbullying and the harassment directed at women, reinforces the literature’s emphasis that the Gamergate movement is a vocal, but *small* minority of gamers. Of course, this is further complicated by the schism between how those associated with Gamergate see their own movement versus how the online public views them. Furthermore, individuals who write online hate-pieces and make threats against women online are, of course, not keen on revealing their identities in the offline world. Because of this, future research that studies these perspectives would have to be done online.

Lastly, the gamers I interviewed in general were quick to distance themselves from groups online, and held their ideas as their own. Alex’s acceptance of feminism’s ideals but rejection of its label is similar to the “I’m not a feminist, but...” orientation detailed in many studies on identity and collective action (Williams & Wittig, 1997; Acosta-Alzuru, 2003). She appeared to be aware of the large amount of hate and negative attention that feminism had attracted in the online sphere, as well.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

### Limitations

My status as an insider within white male gaming culture carried with it some advantages while researching, but also many limitations as well. For instance, it likely could have diminished my ability to notice familiar and routinized socio-cultural phenomena. Furthermore, it would be pertinent to remind readers that the gender, ethnicity, age, and experiences of the people who take part in these conversations have a major impact on fieldwork, and my status as a white male researcher will affect these relations, information gathered, and my ethnography as a whole (Kloos, 1969: 511; Cernea 1982:131-35). Discussions with women about equality and incidents of harassment and victimization may have been inhibited by the fact that I, the researcher, was a male. Furthermore, awareness on the part of the participant that I am performing a study may have lead them to answer a certain way, a la the Hawthorne effect.

Another drawback to this type of research is the reality of the mere-exposure effect. While the gamers I have spoken with are extremely familiar with gaming, they may also be less than inclined to discuss its negative aspects. For some, it may be easy to love something as while also criticizing it. For others, discussing the problematic aspects of gaming may be an affront to their identity.

The fact that this study only gathered data from a single convention is a shortcoming as well. Many of the people I spoke with hailed from places all over the country, but there are drawbacks to only using one type of convention. Obviously, a “pure” gaming convention like Otronicon or PAX East/West would have reduced a lot of the “noise” that came from the other

interests being celebrated at Megacon, such as anime and comics. Also, the fact that Megacon is held in Orlando means a disproportionately high number of individuals likely came from the southern regions of the United States. Regional differences on a variety of social issues, especially equality, may have played a role in shaping individuals' responses.

### Conclusions

The results from this study both subverted and reinforced much of the theoretical framework surrounding gender studies in gaming. For instance, the women I spoke with who avoided online gaming/voice chat revealed mechanisms of oppression described in the literature, such as verbal abuse (Grey, 2012; Yee, 2008; Suler & Philips, 1998). This embodies the conflict perspective I described earlier, where men within these spaces are actively engaging in these practices to maintain them as male-only spaces.

It would also be pertinent to mention the contrast between the male and female perspectives on equality in gaming. While a handful of men were well-versed when describing female oppression, most of them were under the impression that games had become 'equal' in the last few years. Women agreed it had gotten better, but disputed how close the gaming community really was towards equality. Also, they were more likely to speak of 'action' or 'changes' that needed to be made, such as more inclusive content within games. This gave their perspective a greater sense of urgency than most males I spoke with.

On the other hand, many women and men alike had mixed perspectives on the negative effects of female objectification and idealized body images. Many felt hypersexualized characters alienated female players, while others did not mind them so much. Videogames created avenues of empowerment and enjoyment for players like Karen and Megan that



superseded traditional understandings of gender dynamics. Much like in Kennedy's (2002) dissection of the literature surrounding Lara Croft, the purview of textual and content analysis can be epistemologically challenged. As Harvey (2011) puts it: "...emphasis on the textual displays a tendency to fall into a problematic media effects analysis which does not account for the culturally, historically, and materially situated context of game development, production, marketing, and play, and in turn re-essentializes feminine preferences and masculine proclivities." For instance, Karen, Megan, and many other women's enjoyment of playing as female characters that the literature deems hypersexualized disrupts the idea that characters like these exist only for the straight male gaze. This raises the question of how present the intentions and prejudices of game developers are in the characters they create. Furthermore, clinging to dualist notions of masculine and feminine content in videogames may do more harm than good, as brought about by the pink/purple games movement and the misguidedness of Graner Ray (2004) discussed in Chapter 7. Because of this, materialist approaches to understanding women and video games may prove more effective in uncovering the mechanisms by which gaming remains a male-dominated hobby. To borrow feminist theorist Karen Barad's notion of *intra-action*, viewing the relationship between player and game as an entangled object unto itself may be a good start (Barad, 2001; Taylor et al., 2006).

Many participants painted a bright future for gaming. While everyone agreed that gaming's origin was almost exclusively the domain of males, the question of how far it had come was a point of contention. For many (males in particular), they believed the age of equality had arrived in the past decade or so. They cited statistical parity of women and men in gaming and pointed out the figurative olive branches that were extended in the name of diversity, such as Call of Duty's and Rust's recent inclusion of female avatars. Others felt that much work still

needed to be done, especially when it came to offering romantic elements and depictions of sexuality that appealed to more than just heterosexual desire. Either way, it appeared gamers believed in the inevitability of gaming's redemption in the eyes of the public. It seemed the hobby had made great strides into the realm of mainstream entertainment and now the community must contend with the fact that it is no longer a fringe hobby. As Eric put it, "Gaming is for everyone. It's what everyone knew but was afraid to admit."

Another takeaway from this ethnography was how interlocked the issues such as game content, the industry, and in-game interactions were. Conversations bounced back and forth through these different arenas constantly. Because of this, I got the impression that inequality in gaming as experienced on multiple levels and, therefore, was not an issue that could easily be solved. However, the vectors of progress and areas of potential improvement that interviewees described may provide insight into finding a way to make gaming a more inclusive environment. For instance, many female gamers expressed a desire to be heard by the gaming industry. They wanted for female characters that were more diverse and had more important roles in the game's narrative. Others wanted more romance options to choose from in role-playing games, instead of the standard fare of male-seeking-female relations. Much like the virtuous cycle described in Chapter 6, incorporating more female developers in the industry goes hand in hand with creating games that appeal to wider audiences. Furthermore, the community's tolerance of harassment and abuse can no longer be tolerated.

The only aspect of modern gaming culture that remained unmentioned, for the most part, was Gamergate and the online politics surrounding it. While the debate still rages online, the relatively short shelf-life of online drama may have caused the topic to become old-hat in gaming circles. The fact that I did not encounter a single self-identifying "Gamergater" in my

search for different experiences in gaming seems to support the claim that the online movement is a tiny minority (my own relatively small net cast into the gaming community notwithstanding). Instead, there appeared to be a disconnect between the divisive online culture war and the sense of fellowship among gamers that permeated Megacon.

Amongst all the swirls of data and conversations I had, one theme kept bubbling to the top: Women who play games are not being heard. In voice chat and online games they are kept quiet, due to the fear of being profiled and harassed. Their calls for more diverse content and representative characters have fallen on deaf ears, with game developers only beginning to address them. And finally, women who speak out and bring attention to these issues risk incurring a daily deluge of hateful messages and violent threats. Unfortunately, the silencing and marginalization of women is anything but a new occurrence in society (Houston & Kramarae 1991; Lorber, 1994; Miller et al, 1998; McGill, 2013), and gaming seems to be just one more arena that reflects this (see Appendix C for diagram). However, the recent amount of attention drawn to these issues (in academia and the public alike) could mark the beginning of a forward step on the path to equality. This is certainly a step worth taking, considering gaming's ability to relax, thrill, educate, and even creatively fulfill players are just a few of the things this unique medium has to offer. It is my hope that this work plays some part, however small, in illuminating the experiences and struggles of women in gaming.

## **APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER**



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901, 407-882-2012 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

From : **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**  
To : **Christopher Charles**  
Date : **May 13, 2016**

Dear Researcher:

On 05/13/2016 the IRB determined that the following proposed activity is not human research as defined by DHHS regulations at 45 CFR 46 or FDA regulations at 21 CFR 50/56:

Type of Review: Not Human Research Determination  
Project Title: Control At The Con: An Observation Of The Maintenance  
and Policing of Male-dominated Gaming Space  
Investigator: Christopher Charles  
IRB ID: SBE-16-12235  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

University of Central Florida IRB review and approval is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are to be made and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human subjects, please contact the IRB office to discuss the proposed changes.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewska, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kanille Chap" with a horizontal line extending to the right.

IRB Coordinator

## **APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANTS**

Table 1 - Participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Suho	Gaming Apparel Vendor	Young	Asian	Male
Eric	Game Vendor	Young	White	Male
Lee	Comic Artist	Young	Asian	Male
David	Fantasy Artist	Middle-aged	White	Male
Milo	Fantasy Artist	Middle-aged	White	Male
Travis	Dakimakura Artist	Young	Hispanic	Male
Yazmin	Dakimakura Artist	Middle-aged	Black	Female
Antonio	"Mildly famous" cosplayer	Middle-aged	White	Male
Veronika	Comic Artist	Middle-aged	Asian	Female
Lina	Artist Vendor	Middle-aged	White	Female
Javier	Artist	Young	Black	Male
Beverly	Video Game Design Student	Young	White	Female
James	Game Designer	Middle-aged	White	Male
Carl	Gamer	Young	Hispanic	Male
Megan	Online Cosplayer	Young	White	Female
Ken	Artist	Young	White	Male
Floyd	Celebrity Voice Actor	Middle-aged	White	Male
Tamika	Online Cosplayer	Young	Black	Female
Pearl	Voice Actor	Young	White	Female
Emma	Voice Actor	Young	White	Female
Mary	Voice Actor	Young	Asian	Female
Pam	Video Game Design Student	Young	White	Female
Alan	Artist	Young	Black	Male
Matt	Video Game Journalist	Young	White	Male
Karen	Video Game Design Instructor	Middle-aged	White	Female
Craig	Artist	Young	Asian	Male
Nick	Artist	Young	Asian	Male
Paul	Artist	Middle-aged	White	Male
Nina	Artist	Young	White	Female
Max	Gamer	Young	White	Male
Carly	Gamer	Young	White	Female
Scarlett	Celebrity Cosplayer	Young	Hispanic	Female
Haley	Cosplayer	Young	Hispanic	Female
Alex	Gamer	Young	White	Female
Bridgett	Gamer	Young	White	Female
Todd	Game Tester	Middle-aged	White	Male
CJ	Gamer	Young	White	Male
Erin	Cosplayer	Young	White	Female
Amy	Cosplayer	Young	Asian	Female

## **APPENDIX C: KEEPING QUIET DIAGRAM**



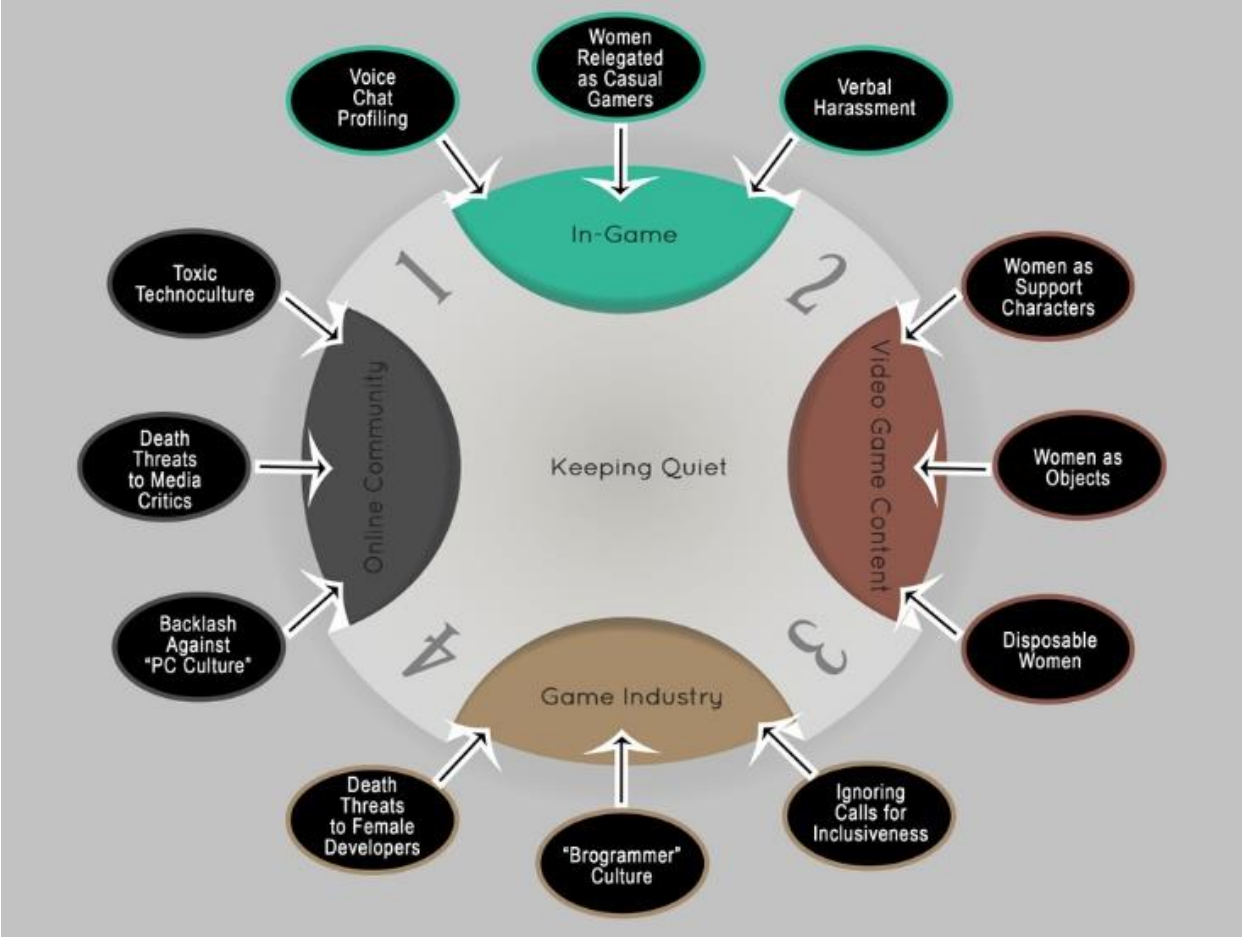


Figure 1 - Keeping Quiet

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