FROM GIRLFRIEND TO GAMER: NEGOTIATING PLACE IN THE HARDCORE/CASUAL DIVIDE OF ONLINE VIDEO GAME COMMUNITIES

Erica Kubik

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2010

Committee:

Radhika Gajjala, Advisor
Amy Robinson
Graduate Faculty Representative
Kristine Blair
Donald McQuarie
The stereotypical video gamer has traditionally been seen as a young, white, male; even though female gamers have also always been part of video game cultures. Recent changes in the landscape of video games, especially game marketers’ increasing interest in expanding the market, have made the subject of women in gaming more noticeable than ever. This dissertation asked how gender, especially females as a troubling demographic marking difference, shaped video game cultures in the recent past. This dissertation focused primarily on cultures found on the Internet as they related to video game consoles as they took shape during the beginning of the seventh generation of consoles, between 2005 and 2009. Using discourse analysis, this dissertation analyzed the ways gendered speech was used by cultural members to define not only the limits and values of a generalizable video game culture, but also to define the idealized gamer. This dissertation found that video game cultures exhibited the same biases against women that many other cyber/digital cultures employed, as evidenced by feminist scholars of technology. Specifically, female gamers were often perceived as less authoritative of technology than male gamers. This was especially true when the concept “hardcore” was employed to describe the ideals of gaming culture. It was harder for female gamers to claim the identity of hardcore gamer because this ideal referenced masculine attributes that women were perceived as lacking. Rather, female gamers were lumped into the category of the “casual” consumer of video games, not valued in the community and sometimes also seen as problematic. Biases against perceived feminine gaming styles were also discovered in formal structures of video game cultures, as evidenced by analyses of video game reviews. This data suggests that female
gamers had a harder time fitting into video game cultures than male gamers because of gendered biases within the cultures. This dissertation advocated for the dismantling of hidden male privileges underpinning these biases so that a more equitable gaming culture could be achieved.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank the members of my dissertation committee for all of their strong support and guidance: Radhika Gajjala, Chair; Kristine Blair, Reader; Donald McQuarie, Reader; and Amy Robinson, Graduate Faculty Representative. I would also like to thank members of my dissertation writing group, Nathan Crook and Rob Prince; my writing partner, Melissa Altman; and my graduate cohort as a whole for all of the help they gave me in shaping my ideas. For both emotional and intellectual support in their friendship, I would acknowledge the following people: Tim Balen, Mark Bernard, Molly Brost, Michelle Crook, Mike and Lori DuBose, William Emerson, Sandra Falero, Andrew Famigletti, Molly Frendo, Jeremy Hill, Brande Jackson, Cassandra Jones, Jen Metcalf, Aisha McGriff, Marnie Pratt, Pamela Steinle, Jamie Stuart, Isaac Vayo, Kelly Watson, and Jason Zeh. Special acknowledgment must be made to Stefan Hall, who suggested this topic idea in the first place. And, of course this dissertation would not have been complete without the spiritual, emotional, and financial support of my family, especially my parents James and Kathy Kubik, and my brother Bob who played video games with me when I was growing up. I’d also like to thank the Shepards, especially the two gaming girls Lauren and Megan. Finally, I would acknowledge Neil Shepard, my biggest supporter and greatest critic.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION. VELOCITYGIRL GETS GAME</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 1. THE SEVENTH GENERATION CONSOLE WARS: CONSUMPTION, BRAND APPEAL, AND IDENTITY</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 2. THE WII IS FOR SOCCER MOMS AND GRANDPARENTS: DEFINING AND THEORIZING THE HARDCORE/CASUAL DICHOTOMY IN VIDEO GAME CULTURE</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 3. MASTERS OF TECHNOLOGY: GENDERED ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGICAL LEGITIMACY IN VIDEO GAME CULTURES</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER 4. REVIEWING THE GAME REVIEW: AUTHORITY IN VIDEO GAME CULTURES</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION. WHAT’S THE PROBLEM WITH WOMEN GAMERS?</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION.
VELOCITYGIRL GETS GAME

At the 2005 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), hardware developers unveiled their new plans for the next generation\(^1\) of console videogames during their respective press releases (since released as the Xbox 360 during the 2005 Christmas season and the Nintendo Wii and PlayStation 3 during the 2006 Christmas season). All three of these developers attempted to define through their words and actions what “next generation gaming” means and how their console fit that pattern so that gamers could understand why it was important to upgrade their technology. Both Microsoft and Sony, with their Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3, respectively, opted for more power, hardware, and graphics capabilities in their next generation consoles. These systems could run incredibly realistic looking games as well as become the locus for viewing media like movies in better quality formats.\(^2\) Nintendo, however, downplayed the power of their machine, emphasizing instead new technologies like motion sensitivity in their controller. With this new technology, they hoped to create a different and unique gaming experience.

This emphasis on quirky technology rather than power created some trash-talking, where at the 2007 Game Developers Conference, Chris Hecker, game developer for Maxis/Electronic Arts, called the Nintendo Wii, “two Gamecubes [the previous system]

---

\(^1\) A term used to define the life cycle of a gaming console. Historians of video games list the present cycle as the seventh generation.

\(^2\) Microsoft pushed high definition DVD formats, while Sony’s PS3 came equipped with Blu-Ray players at a significant price discount to others on the market at the time of launch. As we know now, the Blu-Ray player is the format that came to dominate the market.
duct-taped together,”3 indicating by his comment that the system was inferior, power-wise to both the 360 and PS3. This statement was the tip of the iceberg in terms of online debate about the relative merits of each system, where system specs were assessed and performance of the machines was debated. I see the driving force behind these debates is a need to define one’s masculinity through the performance and sophistication of one’s machines, or the typical “boys with their toys” syndrome. Technology acts as the locus for performing masculinity in an era of economic instability and job and career displacement. The technology one possesses helps to maintain identity along the axes of gender and class. The ability to have the perceived best and most powerful technological innovation is a masculine endeavor. Of course, this sets the stage for how both men and women can relate to technology. If power is so important to determining value in gaming culture, it was curious that Nintendo did not define itself by its machines processing capabilities.

While E3 2005 was important because it unveiled the plans for the “next generation” from the big 3 (Nintendo, Microsoft, and Sony), it also marked a crossroads for the gaming industry. The culture of video games is in many ways a subculture, but one that is becoming increasingly more mainstream. One need only look at the money to understand this: Halo 2 for the Xbox outgrossed many mainstream movies in its first weekend of sale.4 There is even talk of making this franchise into a movie, as the film

---


4 In the first 24 hours of availability, Halo 2 sold 2.4 million copies and earned $125 million. See Chris Morris, “‘Halo 2’ Sales Top ‘Grand Theft Auto;’” available from
industry wants to cash in on this phenomenon. The rise of online gaming as well as console sales from last generation indicate that there are more people playing games than ever before.

Yet, while the video game industry is a multibillion dollar industry, the cost of game development has risen considerably as better technology has emerged to create better graphics that, in turn, cost more money to make. This means that in order to make a profit on a game and the console the games sell on, developers have to get more people to buy each respective title.

What is the solution to this problem? Developers must create consoles that will expand the market and appeal to new gamers, especially females—the girlfriends, moms, and sisters of the men who already play video games. Since the rise and fall of arcade games, home computer systems that played games, and the emergence of the console industry, the video game market has typically been seen as the province of a young male market. Women have always played video games; they were just not seen as the traditional gamer.

Yet, during E3 2005, many game developers turned their attention to female gamers for the first time. During the press release for Microsoft’s Xbox 360, whose predecessor, the Xbox was seen to cater to a specific “hardcore,” macho gamer, J. Allard, then Corporate Vice President for Microsoft, outlined his plans to industry professionals for appealing to new, code “female,” gamers. Stating first that the hardcore gamer, who he nicknamed “Striker” would not be left out in the cold, he went on to detail that new

content for the Xbox 360 would appeal to the casual gamer, whom he nicknamed “VelocityGirl.” Here is what Allard had to say about VelocityGirl:

But maybe most exciting, the Marketplace is going to be a way to get VelocityGirl reengaged with our market and reengaged with games. Because on the Marketplace, she's going to be an active member of the community, the community of people that play games like Tony Hawk. Now, she might never pick up a controller, never take a run in the halfpipe but she'll be able to design and sell stickers, shirts, boards, sound tracks and even design her own skate park for those hardcore gamers like Striker.5

This quote suggests that some game developers, while marketing to females, still did not (do not) see women as real gamers. They could also have a very simplistic view of what appeals to females playing games that obscures the real range of tastes and sensibilities of female gamers. There are women who play typically “macho games” like Halo 2 or Counter Strike, on Xbox Live no less (Wednesday night is officially “ladies night” on Xbox Live), just as there are women who enjoy puzzle games (Tetris, perhaps), role playing games (narrative and story oriented games like Final Fantasy) and simulation games (like the Sims). Furthermore, not all men who play video games are just picking up the most bloody or violent game to play; they too have a range of tastes. The truth is that many males and females play many different genres of games for many different reasons. While console and game developers must create marketing strategies that

---

depend on generalizing game populations to make money, it often seems that the real habits and tastes of women (and sometimes men) who game are stereotyped, generalized, or ignored.

While not seeing female gamers as mere girlfriends and cheerleaders of the “real” male gamers, Nintendo was also actively trying to market to female gamers in new and unusual ways with their Nintendo Wii. When describing the new gaming system, President of Nintendo of America, Reggie Fils-Aime stated, “We’re making games for girls and moms, grandmas and grandpas.” Nintendo has stated on numerous occasions that the industry runs a risk of entropy if new gamers are not encouraged to play. So, for this cycle of consoles, Nintendo has conscientiously created a system that was easy to use and family friendly. In this way, they hoped to expand the market by getting the family members of existing gamers to play as well as bringing their consoles to non-gaming families for the first time. This new system raised the question of whether or not gaming culture will be more inclusive to women gamers or if this is just business as usual.

Though I started with the business end of gaming, it is not my only focus in this study. I am interested in understanding how gender, especially females as a troubling demographic marking difference, shapes video game cultures. As a part of digital culture, video games, like the internet, are/were created predominantly by men, so it is not surprising that divisions along the lines of gender occur in gaming space. While this new celebration of female (different) gamers by game publishers and developers has the possibility of changing the features of the gaming landscape, the reality is that most gaming culture is still fraught with gendered tension. I set out to explore the ways that

---

tension gets expressed in gaming culture. What I found was that the culture used ideas like “hardcore” and “casual” to typify players and that by hierarchizing these two types, the space of the culture was delineated. Further, in the process of creating these distinctions, gamers relied on gendered narratives, representations, and stereotypes to give meaning and shape to their ideas. These ideas have direct bearing on gamers looking for community online because the very structure of the culture welcomes some (males) at the expense of others (females). Often, the atmosphere of video game culture was hostile or indifferent to female participation.

What do I mean by video games and video game culture? A video game is an electronic game that uses feedback, the visual or “video” component and control, the bodily manipulation by the user usually in the form of a joystick, or keypad, etc. Through the interface, players make something happen on the screen, in the world of the game. In this way, games are interactive and video games are often called interactive games or software. Games are understood as comprising different genres like action/adventure, puzzles, or simulations for example. They can be shallow or complex and they come on a variety of platforms—accessed through cell phone, PCs, or dedicated gaming machines. The first video games appeared in the 40s and 50s with the advent of the television and early computers but it was not until *Computer Space* (an offshoot of one of the first “modern” video games, *Spacewar!*, created at MIT) in 1971 that games became commercially available. Since then, the game industry has generated billions of dollars a year.7

---

Video game culture, then, is tied to video games. Certainly video games and video gaming are part of mainstream global culture and many people play video games yet would not consider themselves members of a gaming culture. However, I would suggest that video game culture is distinct within mainstream culture and that it is organized around video games (seen here as a community sharing common interests). This is what Henry Jenkins or other scholars of fandom would refer to as a fan culture. The members of that culture include: the manufacturers of games, the players of games, and journalists spreading information from one group to the other; or put another way, the producers, consumers, and mediators of the two. Of course, as is the case in many fan cultures, these distinctions can be blurred. This culture is both virtual and visceral in the sense that gamers experience the culture in a variety of ways: accessing internet sites, playing games, chatting with friends, attending conventions, etc. Literally any interaction with technology or people that focuses on or is derived from video games constitutes the culture.

Besides the variance in expression of that culture, the different sites if you will, there is a wide variety of specialization/fragmentation in the culture. Gamers may delimit their involvement solely on a game, genre, or brand product (for example Final Fantasy gamers, fans of RPGs, PS3 owners respectively). This is especially true of MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games), which by their very size create worlds all their own (and which have been some of the most frequently studied). Indeed, whether one plays mostly through PCs or dedicated consoles in some ways determines who/how/where one participates in culture. Given the introduction, it is obvious that I am more interested in consoles than PCs. This mostly stems from the gendered
marketing of the big 3 (Nintendo, Microsoft, and Sony) at E3 2005 that initially sparked
my interest in studying gaming and gender. However, I also game mostly from a home
console, so I have more familiarity with the spaces that are important to that subset.

My model of culture, while taking clues from fandom studies, also stems from
Clifford Geertz’s belief “that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he
himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not
an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”8
For me, understanding how significance/meaning is understood by members in culture is
key. Indeed, culture is constructed by the interactions of members trying to create
significance. This suggests to me that culture is not a stable structure that people
passively live in. Rather, people are active shapers of culture, causing culture to be
dynamic and contested.

But how do people in a culture create webs of significance, especially in relation
to issues of representation and identity? In answering this question, I find Judith Butler’s
idea of performativity the most useful. She shows that identity formation is a process
constructed from habitual daily performances and communication. The sheer repetition
of these performances makes these performances intelligible. In “Performative Acts and
Gender Constitution,” Butler examines the ways that gender norms and behaviors are
shaped by language. There are several key ideas that are reiterated throughout Butler’s
larger works. First, speech is always deployed in social space. There is no such thing as
a distinction between reality and language. Therefore, language constitutes reality.

Speech is an act.

---

Furthermore, when one speaks, it must be recognized by others to create reality. Through the process of recognition, speech becomes performative. Butler writes that, “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity constituted through a *stylized repetition of acts.*”9 The stylized repetition of acts continuously refers back to historical enactments (what she means by citationality) of gender (or race, etc.) to constitute itself. In this way, gender is a historical ideal rather than a natural category. The body becomes a cultural sign and one compels the body to perform the historical idea.

Because gender is always performed rather than existing as a natural state of being, it is unstable. This is why not performing one’s gender (or race, class, etc.) has “clearly punitive consequences.”10 Because it is so unstable, it must be vigorously policed to maintain the semblance of naturalness. Though one may be punished for not performing one’s gender correctly, in parody Butler sees the possible subversive quality of gender performance and an ability to change gender ideals. She writes:

> Gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is

---


10 Ibid., 273.
mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand
the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various
kinds.\textsuperscript{11}

While one plays video games, one is still performing one’s gender, or race, sexuality, or
class for that matter. Video games are not divorced from everyday life. Rather, as a site
of play, identity construction becomes a heightened activity, because it represents a
moment of disconnect from everyday life. This disconnect can allow the play to both
reinforce and disrupt traditional performances of gender, because one might play through
or against the grain of traditional notions of gender behavior.\textsuperscript{12}

To understand how gamers constituted culture through their performative
interactions, especially when they employed gendered understanding as a framework for
interaction, I employed discourse analysis. James Paul Gee in \textit{An introduction to
discourse analysis} argues that language helps construct reality by creating significance.
This is similar to Geertz’s webs of significance and Butler’s gendered performativity.
He writes, “We use language to make things significant (to give them meaning or value)

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 283.

\textsuperscript{12} Many feminist game scholars have written specifically about Lara Croft, one of the
first early female game characters who was also extremely sexy. What these scholars
found was that gender identity of gamers became much more complicated because
players could inhabit the gender other than their own in games, a form of virtual cross-
dressing. While a male gamer playing as a female character may not necessarily then
understand what it is like to be a female subjected to gendered domination, this play does
allow for heightened consciousness. See Anne-Marie Schleiner, “Female Bobs Arrive at
Dusk,” in \textit{cyberfeminism. next protocols}, eds. Claudia Reiche and Verena Kuni (New
York: Autonomedia, 2004), 119-132 and Mary Flanagan, “Hyperbodies,
Hyperknowledge: Women in Games, Women in Cyberpunk, and Strategies of
Resistance,” in \textit{reload: rethinking women + cyberculture}, eds. Mary Flanagan and Austin
in certain ways, to build significance.”¹³ Discourse analysis then, asks, “How is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways?”¹⁴ Drawing on this framework, I focused on the way ideas about gender were used to create significance for cultural members. This discourse was used both to set the limits of cultural membership (who belongs and who does not) and member identity (I belong because…). Gendered discourse also created a framework for understanding value within the culture (this game is cool because it is violent).

I analyzed discussions gamers had on blogs and message boards, and more formal communications like press releases, games reviews, and articles. I also examined the structure or context of these communications, for example, looking at hit rates of web sites. I was not interested in the individual attitudes expressed by cultural members, but rather how their expressions constituted a culture that consistently devalued “feminine” attributes and female members.

Some of the key theoretical ideas I explored are the concepts of privilege, authority, and authenticity, especially as it related to women’s relationship to technology in general, and gaming culture specifically. As evidenced in the following literature review, the work of cyberfeminists was especially helpful in shaping my ideas.

I could not cover the entire gaming culture (as if such a whole, stable community existed). In this sense, my work was exploratory and partial, functioning like an ethnography or case study, mapping out some of the key concerns of this culture as they relate to gender relations. So, this dissertation can be understood as a pilot study, setting


¹⁴ Ibid.
the stage for future work. Here, I would like to talk more fully about the limitations of my research and the reasons for those limitations. First, while gender was not the only marker of difference that maintained culture (race, etc.), I focused almost exclusively on gender because it was such a visible and rich topic. As I mention briefly throughout this study, issues of race, sexuality, class, etc. are all relevant to understanding how power and differences are used to construct gaming cultures. Future research should explore these topics more fully, especially in a global context.

While I became interested in the construction of video game culture as a fan and member of the community first, and in fact the 2005 E3 represented my first stirring of interest in researching the community, I actively collected data from October 2006 to August 2008 (and as a fan, I still keep tabs on what is happening). During data collection, I explored online websites and blogs related to video games. Originally, I had planned to focus on two mainstream blogs, Joystiq and Kotaku as well as explore less well-known gaming sites with atmospheres more female friendly like Girls Don’t Game, etc. Indeed, much of my data comes from these sites. However, I also signed up for a Google Alerts service at the beginning of my research with the text words “gender” and “video games.” This allowed me to widely sample gaming culture. While it would be impossible to include all of the data I received and reviewed, I did sample more gaming web sites and blogs because of this. Throughout, I focused primarily on cultural concerns about gaming consoles, rather than PC gaming or large, social games like MMORPGs and my data reflects that.

Besides data found online, I also examined print magazines, televised press releases (usually transcripted by others and found on the web), video game content and
packaging, and even game advertisements. However, these were used only in support of online material, which I considered my focus. The reason I focused on the internet is that it seemed the most far-reaching of cultural apparatus available to me and which had the greatest impact on the culture. The data I extracted ranged from sales data of games and fan reaction to that data, transcripts of game conferences or press releases and fan reaction, articles by journalists and comments from gamers, and fan websites/blogs. These all tell me different things about the users generating discourse. Of note, I tried to be aware that the authors of these texts had different relationships to the production of games and assumedly power in the culture (producers making the games have the most power over the content of games for example), and that these relationships to power were going to change the formality of the text and the level of investment in the culture.

One key piece of data that needs to be explored more fully in future research are the attitudes and feelings of women gamers in relation to the power hierarchies within gaming cultures explored here. While the voices of women gamers are sprinkled throughout this study by their presence in the culture, their voices are not made central. Considering the marginality they face in gaming culture, giving voice to their thoughts is a way to positively intervene in gaming cultures. However, as a female gamer myself, I came to this study with a certain relationship to the community already in place. In some ways, this allows me perspective on what women gamers might have said if given the opportunity and it certainly influenced me in the choices I made on what to study and how to think about gaming.

What the above suggests is that this is not a study grounded in traditional understandings of knowledge production or research. Traditional understandings would
see this work as flawed for two reasons: it does not claim completeness and as a researcher I am not sufficiently objective. However, what research can ever claim to be complete? Indeed, a field as rich and varied as video game cultures would be difficult to cover completely except in the most cursory way. But, as Donna Haraway suggests in her groundbreaking work on feminist epistemologies “Situated Knowledge,” claims to completeness serve to establish the primacy of Western epistemologies when she writes, “But of course that view of infinite vision is an illusion, a god-trick.”\(^{15}\) Research that claims to see everything and cover everything represents itself as authority, an idea that I return to in relation to video game cultures. Understood here, a researcher using Western epistemologies gains authority by positioning his or her work as objective and impartial.

As mentioned above, I can not claim impartiality as a researcher because I am also a gamer—I am too close to my subject. But, rather than a weakness, this can be a strength. Haraway writes, “Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object.”\(^{16}\) Feminists use their experience, seen as embodied knowledge, as the basis for authority. We can acknowledge that research may be partial or fragmentary because it does not weaken our claim to authority which comes from embedded research practices.

Finally, I would like to review the existing scholarship relevant to my dissertation. Two strands of scholarship useful to me were video games studies, which examines the artifacts and their cultural significance of video games, and cyberfeminist research, which examines digital technology and its implication on feminist concerns. Though helpful in


\(^{16}\) Ibid., 190.
some ways, much of the scholarship exploring video games was not especially relevant to my research, which I explain below.

A large part of early video game scholarship often focused on the affects of video games and violence on childhood development. I see this work as only tangentially relevant to what I am studying, as I focused mostly on adult gamers. While some of this work does examine gender formation of children in relation to video games, it is often used in relation to models of developmental psychology which, while relevant, was not my area of focus. This literature is highly oriented towards public policy and debates on video game consumption and behavior. Scholars like James Paul Gee have adequately advocated that playing video games can be positive, and I am not arguing that video games will “rot someone’s brains” or make them sociopathic.\(^\text{17}\) One critical text, however, in this area of focus is *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*, edited by Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins.\(^\text{18}\) This explores how access to video game technology is biased through gender (in schools boys are allowed more time to play with computers than girls), how video games become embedded with negative and positive associations based on gendered stereotypes (“girly” games are not cool), the problems girls face playing video games (games do not often appeal to a “girl’s” interest, or if they do they are ghettoized), and new models in game design that would create a more female-friendly gaming culture (games as storytelling, perhaps).

Another area of literature in the field examines the technology and development


of the field of video games from a historical context, usually directed at the fanbase rather than a purely scholarly audience. Often, this literature imagined video games as technological objects divorced from the cultural context in which they emerged and/or the products of lone geniuses. As Jennifer Daryl Slack and J. Macgregor Wise explain in *Culture and Technology: A Primer*, technology, including video games is often seen as separate from culture, rather than embedded within it.\(^{19}\) This creates problems because technology is then seen as out of control. This technologically deterministic way of viewing video games does not tell us how gamers draw meaning or create community around this technology. Just as important, this literature often creates a narrative of technological development that obscures the contributions of women and people of color.\(^{20}\) As I explore later in my dissertation, women’s relationship to technology is often one of marginality and/or illegitimacy. While historians of video games are important in mapping out the field, we must be critical of what they obscure. One key exception to this literature is J.C. Herz’s *Joystick nation*.\(^{21}\) She explicitly connects the history of video games to the military industry, which funded initial computer research in the first place. That connection to the military (and the cultural values embedded within

---

\(^{19}\) Jennifer Daryl Slack and J. Macgregor Wise, *Culture and Technology: A Primer* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005).


\(^{21}\) J.C. Herz, *Joystick nation: how videogames ate our quarters, won our hearts, and rewired our minds* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1997).
it) is still in place as evidenced by commercial video games produced by the US Army.22

Another major element in the field of gaming literature is scholarship attempting to theorize new ways to study play. *The Video Game Theory Reader*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron and *The Medium of the Game*, edited by Wolf alone23 are anthologies that focus on video games as artifacts. Much like one area of film studies, the formal aspects of the game are studied, the medium of the message so to speak. Clearly this new medium has implications for user’s understanding of time/space, etc. within and outside the game. Jesper Juul’s *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*24 uses theoretical tools from disparate fields such as literary theory to psychology to examine the tension between the real world and the game world and the tension between the rules of the game and the fantasy and fiction within the game. Juul contends, like Huizinga and Callois before him,25 that playing games is the very essence of human behavior and that computer and video games help to shape human identity. Embedding videogames in the culture they were created in, Alexander Galloway’s *Gaming* explores the ways that the logics of the computer game follow the logics of

---

22 *America’s Army* is a free online game produced and distributed by the US Army. Available from [http://www.americasarmy.com/](http://www.americasarmy.com/); Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.


informatics in a global, highly digital world. These new ways of organizing information shape the way we play, think, and become subjects in a global economy. Galloway draws on Haraway’s informatics of domination, which I explore below. Finally, *First Person*, a collection of essays, also critically explores new alternatives and new theories for studying video games. The authors’ concern in this anthology is that as an interactive medium, old methods of textual analysis have to reworked. While useful, these texts focus on the game as text that individuals interact with. I did not study games as objects or artifacts. Rather, when I did focus on games, I explored how they were referenced in the culture to create meaning.

However, through ethnography, several scholars have explored the culture surrounding the play of video games and what gamers are doing and saying. Several ethnographies revolve around the MMORPG *EverQuest*. Edward Castranova’s work on the economics of *EverQuest* has become a classic. Focusing on the blurring of distinctions between the real world and the virtual worlds of MMORPGs, he suggests that these "synthetic" worlds are as economically important as many real world economies. And just as surprisingly, just as real as real world economies. Building off Castranova’s work, Julian Dibbell’s *Play Money* shows the ways that these play economies operate when he attempts to make as much money playing the game as he

---


could as a writer. Finally, T.L. Taylor once again examines MMORPGS in *Play Between Worlds*. She sets out to refute common sense wisdom that suggests that playing video games is isolating and lonely. Rather, by examining the culture of these worlds, Taylor shows that gaming is a social activity.

Because I did not study culture in a “game world,” or study games as cultural artifacts, but rather the community that surrounds gaming culture, fandom studies and cyberfeminists who have explored internet culture were ultimately more relevant to my study. Henry Jenkins is at the forefront of fan studies, the area of research devoted to examining the ways in which fans of mass media products interact and immerse themselves in their world of interest. Jenkins’ work has great bearing on the world of game studies, because gamers are excessively invested fans. In *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers*, Jenkins has suggested that fans are not just lonely isolated geeks, nor are they passively ingesting the culture they enjoy. Rather, through their fandom, they create a community of like-minded individuals that creates an atmosphere of sociality and belonging as well as actively engaging and creating new mediums in the fandom they pursue.

Related to this idea is the exploration of the connection between virtual worlds and “real” worlds. Sherry Turkle examines the connection between virtual communities

---


What she discovers is that identity in the real world is shaped by play in the virtual world. Cyberspace does not exist as a separate space with no consequences to identity. By playing with gender on MUDs, users' real life understanding of gender is formed. Play is intimately connected to meaning making. The way we shape cyberspace is always connected to real world hierarchies already in place. This was most notably represented by Julian Dibbell’s account of a rape in cyberspace, which described the sexual harassment and victimization of several members of a virtual community by another member of that community. Using a program to take over the avatars of other people and have them engage in sexual acts against their will, the violator illustrated that even though “real” bodies were not being victimized in the virtual stage, an act of violation still occurred. In every sense, the virtual world is part of the real world because users create meaning and identity through their interaction with this world, including other people they may socialize with. Thus, I see the gendered dynamics of online gaming cultures as constituting gendered practices in real life. An online culture that is dismissive of female participants will be dismissive of female contributions outside the culture.

The other strand of scholarship that had bearing on my work was cyberfeminism. A discussion of cyberfeminism in some ways must start with Donna Haraway’s “A Cyborg Manifesto.” In this article, by meditating on the figure of the cyborg—a figure created in our consciousness as machine/human/animal (human as animal)—she seeks to


destabilize hierarchies of man/animal, man/machine, and animal/machine. These
hierarchies are dependent on the conceptualization of things as whole in and of
themselves (like a self) or united in binary systems used to create a clear understanding of
an ordered world (nature vs. culture). The cyborg is a fragmented and contradictory
figure that destroys stability. She writes, “The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived
experience that changes what counts as women’s experienced in the late twentieth
century.”34 The purpose of the cyborg in relation to women is to denaturalize the
category of “woman” which in the past had been aligned more closely to nature, the body,
and intuitiveness in a scientific, rational, and humanistic conceptualization of the
man/woman split. Men, of course, were given the supposedly superior space in that
dualism, being aligned with the mind, knowledge, and rationality. The cyborg disrupts
all that. She writes, “The cyborg is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy,
and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence.”35

The cyborg figure is relevant to a feminist agenda in the sense that it idealized an
“identity” that was “contradictory, partial, and strategic”36 much like Anzaldua’s
mestizaje woman or Sadie Plant’s idea that women were the quintessential posthuman-
typified by behaviors like fluidity, multi-tasking, and networks.37 While later

34 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 149.

35 Ibid., 151.

36 Ibid., 155.

37 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt
Technoculture* (New York: Doubleday, 1997).
cyberfeminists have suggested that this conceptualization is utopian or essentialist—these ideas were meant to destabilize the idea of woman as “natural.”

Another key concern for Haraway is the question of coalition building. Realizing that feminisms of the past were often exclusionary to a non-white, non-liberal tradition, she sees the cyborg feminist as someone capable of building activism through affinity rather than identity. Similar to the oppositional consciousness of Chela Sandoval,38 or feminists who work through the concept of community through Derrida’s notion of hospitality,39 it suggests that political activism be achieved through common goals rather than common identity. A politics of identity must exclude because it relies on sameness to create community. A politics of affinity can embrace difference and otherness because the politics is rooted in the immediate and the situated and recognizes that different points of view and different experiences are acceptable because the body, consciousness and identity can be complicated and contradictory.

Haraway also explores the embedded ways in which women live in a technically mediated world, a world she calls the informatics of domination. She writes, “…we are living through a movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system—from all work to all play, a deadly game.”40 That informatics of domination uses language differently. For example, rather than using the term representation, we move to simulation, from small group to subsystem, etc. That change

38 Chela Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).


40 Haraway, 161.
in language, where we see the world not as a natural world that we observe, but as a
system of information we process makes us aware of the constructedness of everything,
including self and identity, especially in relation to markers of gender, race, class,
sexuality. She writes, “It’s not just that ‘god’ is dead; so is the ‘goddess’…Ideologies of
sexual reproduction can no longer reasonably call on notions of sex and sex role as
organic aspects in natural objects like organisms and families.” Like Butler, “woman” is
a constructed category, rather than a natural fact.

Women are both integrated and exploited in the new world. She writes,
“Communication technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our
bodies. These tools embody and enforce new social relations for women worldwide.”
Exploitation is easy to see. Certainly the material lives of many women, especially chip
workers in Asia building the computers the world uses are experiencing the domination
of technology through particularly gendered ways. We also see the ways in which the
new economy feminizes the new working class. She writes:

To be feminized means to be made extremely vulnerable; able to be

  disassembled, reassembled, exploited as a reserve labour force; seen less
  as workers than as servers; subjected to time arrangements on and off the
  paid job that make a mockery of a limited work day; leading to an

41 Ibid., 162.
42 Ibid., 164.

43 See Karen J. Hossfield, “‘Their Logic against Them”: Contradictions in Sex, Race, and
Class in Silicon Valley,” Technicolor: Race, Technology, and Everyday Life, eds.
existence that always borders on being obscene, out of place, and reducible to sex.\textsuperscript{44}

The integration comes from the ways in which various aspects of the life, like home, work, and the market become more deeply integrated and inseparable in the lives of women. Further, women become more deeply embedded in a post-capitalist economic system, and therefore more fully able to be exploited. However, women also face the exciting possibilities of both experiencing pleasure and injecting feminist aims into the new world order, integrating as it were, feminist political goals into technically mediated space.

Haraway is influential in several ways to cyberfeminism, most notably in the advocacy of the body as a site for multiplicitous identities. But just as importantly, Haraway is influential in her insistence that political activism not be exclusive. This seems clear in almost all definitional ideas about what cyberfeminism is because there is a hesitancy to define the term at the exclusion of others. For example, Anne-Marie Schleiner, illustrating cyberfeminist tactics, writes, “Like Donna Haraway’s mythical cyborg, I allow myself ironic contradictions, strategic associations and genderless positions. We don’t like our identities to become cemented to our isms.”\textsuperscript{45} Claudia Reiche in \textit{cyberfeminism. next protocols} expresses the idea thusly, “It is everybody’s

\textsuperscript{44} Haraway, 166.

right to coin the notion of what ‘cyberfeminism’ is.”46 For many cyberfeminists
definitions are a type of domination.

While Faith Wilding explicitly addresses this hesitancy to define in her important
work, “Where is Feminism in Cyberfeminism?” and some of the reasons why, more
important is her idea that by defining actions as cyberfeminist, we are engaged in
political action. She writes:

Definition can be fluid, and need not mean limits; rather, it can be a
declaration of desires, strategies, actions, and goals. It can create crucial
solidarity in the house of difference—solidarity, rather than unity or
consensus—solidarity which is a basis for effective political action.47

For her, the two parts of cyberfeminism modify the other. Feminism evokes the
historical and contemporary movement in which people work for freedom and justice for
women on the local and global scale. It advocates for bettering the “material, political,
emotional, sexual, and psychic conditions” arising from differential gendered hierarchy.
The cyber part, literally meaning to steer, govern, and control suggests a movement that
allows women to be at the helm of technological space, governing and shaping action.

She continues, “Cyberfeminists have the chance to create new formulations of
feminist theory and practice which address the complex new social conditions created by
global technologies.”48 So, clearly cyberfeminism advocates action and activism.

46 Reiche, cyberfeminism, 9.

47 Faith Wilding, “Where is Feminism in Cyberfeminism?,” available from
http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith_def.html; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.

48 Ibid.
In *reload*, an edited collection of cyberfiction and criticism, the editors define cyberfeminism in its relation to theory and practice. They write: “Grounded in both practice and theory, cyberfeminism can be thought of as a new wave of feminist theory and practice that is united in challenging the “coding” of technology and in investigating the complex relationship between gender and digital culture.” Inherent to this idea is the fact that there is an oppressive, dominant culture that must be recoded.

For Mary-Anne Breeze, cyberfeminism comes to represent oppositional practices against dominant modes of culture. She writes: “Cyberfeminist practices offers a way of constructing a space within the dominant confines of computer culture – one that celebrates organic creation and non-narrative, often non-linear writing and art practices.” So, though cyberfeminism resists definition, I argue that it celebrates feminist activism against dominant and dominating narratives by producing and interrogating new technologies available in the digital new economy. This activism can take many forms. Whether developing new art or technology that is more inclusive/safe than old masculinist forms, critiquing those masculinist forms that still proliferate in/through digital space, or teaching new technologies so that new members can participate in the new economy, cyberfeminism is far-reaching and diverse.

There are three questions that cyberfeminists are asking that I see reflected in my dissertation. First, is the question of the body, self, and identity in relation to technology. With the evocation of the fragmented cyborg, Haraway made the body central to

49 Flanagan and Booth, *reload*, 11

discussions of technology. Furthermore, in her article “Situated Knowledge,” she clarifies that knowledge of the world can only be achieved through experience, positioning the body as the prime mode in which people are capable of knowing.51 This is in opposition to the idea that the mind is disconnected from the body, and through that disconnection, rationality is achieved. Many cyberfeminists have explored this idea by examining how the body comes to know the world differently through interaction with technology.

Early conceptions of the internet were utopian, optimistic that it would be a place where people would cast off all of their oppressions and everyone could be rid of the body. Or, put another way, the work and play one did on the internet had no relevance to real world identity and meaning making. This idea of the freed, abstract mind escaping the meat of the body was probably most famously represented by William Gibson’s Neuromancer, but has been a theme in much mainstream cyberpunk fiction since then. That escape from the body and privileging of the mind is invested in the Cartesian dualism that Haraway explores in “Situated Knowledge.”

But scholars studying gender and race showed that categories of difference in the real world translated into the virtual world in complicated ways. Furthermore, new ways of organizing relationships based on digital sociality reordered and recategorized gender and race.

Gender is not the only way in which identity impacts the relationship to technology. In Race in Cyberspace, we see that race is as powerful as gender in shaping

people’s relationship with technology and people mediated through that technology.\textsuperscript{52} Throughout this collection of essays, the authors explore the ways in which cyberspace reenacts racial hierarchies from the "real world." They suggest that language plays a large role in the construction of racialized online identities, that offline representations of race bleed into the world of cyberspace (refuting the fact that anyone can be anything on the Web), and that access and education play a key role in maintaining racial inequalities on the web.

Lisa Nakamura, a key scholar in studies of race and cyberspace, argues that rather than being the space where identity becomes liberated and free from hierarchies in the real world, cyberspace is a place where "race happens."\textsuperscript{53} The hierarchies of race in the real world get enacted in the virtual world in a number of ways, one of which is by creating cybertypes, an idea I explore more fully in chapter two.\textsuperscript{54}

As argued by the scholars discussed above, rather than seeing the internet as without bodies or borders, they found that the body was intimately embedded in technology and that technology was reorganizing borders, not removing them. The question becomes how the virtual is connected to the real, especially in relation to hierarchies of race and gender.

\footnotesize


What does this mean in relation to my scholarship? For me, discourses utilizing concepts like masculinity limit who can easily belong to gaming culture. A key concern for many cyberfeminists as well is the relationship between the body and a consumer economy mediated through technology?55

In the first chapter, I confront issues of the consuming body by examining fan reactions online to the market success of their gaming brands. I find self identity is constituted through the consumption of media and technology, in this case gaming consoles. Therefore, gamers invest value and power in the products they supported. At the same time, gamers come to know something about themselves. Further, that branded consumption relied on gendered tropes to constitute meaning.

Looking more closely at those gendered tropes, in the second chapter, I examine how male and female bodies are divided into a hierarchy of “hardcore” and “casual” bodies in the gaming world, terms used by the culture to cultivate ideas about belonging and value.

A second question central to cyberfeminism that my dissertation also addresses is the question of women’s relationship to technology. As noted by several cyberfeminists and as I map out more fully in my third chapter, women are positioned in relation to technology as low-tech workers or consumers, but rarely as the makers or masters of

technology. Furthermore, narratives about technology often highlight women’s disassociation with technology by emphasizing men’s more supposedly “natural” relationship with technology or ignoring the contributions of women to the creation of high technology altogether. And while women have often been positioned unfairly in relation to technology, it is important to note that markers of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and sexuality have also been contributing factors in placing others as non-masters in relation to technology. Finally, women’s relationship to technology can also be one of subject to technology, as seen in technologies in the biomedical field that seek to control women’s bodies.56

In my third chapter, I move beyond discussions of hardcore and casual, examining net communication which debates the “problem” of women in the gaming community. I analyze some specific ways in which women are still not considered legitimate producers and in many cases consumers of video games. Their relationship to technology in the gaming community is almost always seen as problematic because of deep-seated assumptions about gendered technology practices.

Expanding on these issues is the question of who has authority over technology and whether women can access that authority. Authority is tied to who has authored that technology, especially in relation to code. Furthermore, the code, the authored work, may

itself exert authority over those not allowed to participate in its making. In my fourth chapter I use this understanding to examine the phenomenon of game reviews, which like code, set the parameters of taste in the video game community, usually at the disadvantage of “feminine” taste.

The final question I address in this dissertation is the question of advocacy and activism. As noted above, cyberfeminism is implicated in activism. My final chapter examines the challenges of a politicized gaming culture and possible ways my dissertation might intervene in the debate over the “problem” of women gamers.

---

57 Claudia Herbst, “Masters of the House: Literacy and the Claiming of Space on the Internet,” in Blair, Gajjala, Tulley, Webbing Cyberfeminist Practice, 135-152.
CHAPTER 1.
THE SEVENTH GENERATION CONSOLE WARS:
CONSUMPTION, BRAND APPEAL, AND IDENTITY

It started with a war. Like many other wars, the shape of this war remained ambiguous and full of nuance, until one began to examine the many individual battles that helped to control the ebb and flow of conflict. Unlike many other wars, this was a war fought mostly with words and fought on both the real and virtual stages. I am talking of course about the seventh generation console war, when console manufacturers competed for gamers’ dollars and a larger piece of the market share. Console wars usually last for the first few months or years of a console’s gaming life when industry trends have yet to be set. The seventh generation console war ran roughly from the release of the 360 in 2005 to when the Wii won majority market share in 2007.
Interestingly, though it is no surprise that console manufacturers, industry analysts, and journalists have invested this period of time with high stakes, gamers have as well. We might ask what investment for gamers is being nurtured through their involvement with the console wars. In this chapter, I map out the current landscape of the home console videogame industry by describing the console war to show how the hardcore/casual dichotomy came to such prominence in the last few years and how technology, branding, and identity are connected.

As usual, the seventh generation of video game consoles was anticipated by many fans on the internet. Questions were asked about how this next generation would be different from previous iterations, but also who of the three console manufacturers would be the definitive winner this generation. Previously, the Sony PlayStation 2 had astounded the video game industry by selling over 100 million consoles, and fans and
analysts alike wondered who would reign supreme this round.\textsuperscript{58} I begin this study with a brief history of that console war.

With few exceptions, the console war for the seventh generation of video game consoles kicked off at the 2005 E3, when all three major console manufacturers gave industry officials, press, and fans a first look at their new systems. While Nintendo had mentioned their new system at the previous E3 and Microsoft had offered a glimpse of their system on MTV earlier that month, the E3 conference gave hardware developers a real chance to show what the future of gaming would be. The console unveilings started rampant internet discussion among fans of the pros and cons of each system. These discussions would catch fire like brush skirmishes throughout the entire period before market launch and beyond.

Of the three console manufacturers, only Microsoft offered much to show conference goers, the Xbox 360. Microsoft had entered the gaming business in 2001, with their Xbox. The Xbox 360 was the successor of this machine and represented the company’s second foray into videogame hardware manufacturing. Microsoft became interested in the gaming business after collaborating with Sega by porting Windows CE to their last console, the Dreamcast of the previous generation.\textsuperscript{59} Additionally, Microsoft, largely known for their PC products, saw the video game market as a threat to the PC market. This was a way to diversify and expand the Microsoft brand.

\textsuperscript{58} Indeed, even though the PS3 has been on the market for over three years, the PS2 still sells well. Of course, this has many factors, including price and the large library of games available.

\textsuperscript{59} Sega is a previous console manufacturer that now only produces software. Its slogan, “Sega does what Nintendon’t” was very popular and shows the intense competition that can occur between console manufacturers.
As stated, the Xbox was released in 2001 to compete alongside the Nintendo Gamecube and PlayStation 2—consoles I will address shortly. While the system sold well and was well received by the gaming community, Microsoft lost 4 billion dollars in this venture.\(^{60}\) The launch of the 360 was meant to turn their gaming division around by building on the positives established by the Xbox brand and downplaying the negatives.

Looking at the Xbox brand, it is easy to see that this console came from a company with vast experience in the PC industry. For example, the hardware featured technical sophistication that allowed unprecedented modding and customization, although this was probably not the intention of Microsoft. The Xbox was also the first successful console to use an internal hard disk drive, which allowed the console to store media and play and store much larger and more complicated games. And finally, building and sustaining an online gaming community, which by 2005, had over 2 million subscribers, Microsoft used the techniques and savvy taken from the PC/Internet world to establish their brand and in the process set the gold standard for online gaming on consoles with their Live services.

\(^{60}\) This was not seen as a failure by Microsoft. They knew it would be difficult breaking into the gaming business with two well-established brands already competing. The Xbox to them was a Trojan horse, a way to promote brand recognition for not only their gaming division, but Microsoft as a whole (as if Microsoft needs any more). It is common practice for game console manufacturers to sell their consoles at a loss or with very little profit under the assumption that the company will make up the profits in revenue from games. This follows the strategy of buying expensive razor blades for cheap razors, so called the razor strategy. Of the three manufacturers, only Nintendo, a fiscally conservative company, was able to sell its seventh generation console for a profit right from launch. Microsoft and Sony both initially sold their machines at a loss, but with the costs of manufacturing decreasing, they are finally making a profit on their consoles. See Roger Ehrenberg, “Gaming and Razors: A Hopelessly Broken Metaphor,” available from http://www.informationarbitrage.com/2007/05/gaming_and_razo.html; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.
Because of its planned launch in six months, the 360 was much further along than the other two consoles. I have mentioned Microsoft’s press conference previously, but it is worth reiterating that it seemed clear from the conference that Microsoft envisioned its brand as cool, elite, and masculine, as seemed evidenced from the rock-star like presentation. For example, industry suits wore hoodies under their blazers and sat on the stage during the press release—downplaying the corporate atmosphere in favor of one emphasizing youthful cool. From the press conference it was also clear that Microsoft would continue in the direction of the old Xbox, though with an appearance less bulky and bricklike, and consciously imitating the white of their PC competitors, Apple. Despite new appearances, games still seemed to stereotypically target a masculine playing audience.

Though not nearly so far along in development as Microsoft’s 360, Sony’s press conference about the PlayStation 3 at E3 2005 had a lot of buzz surrounding it, not only because it was the previous generation’s hands down winner, but because the gameplay footage that was shown during the conference looked so beautiful and so photo-realistic that the gaming community could not help but be impressed. However, it would later come to light that much of the screenplay footage shown was from in-game cut-scenes, rather than actual gameplay footage, which would look better. That aside, it seemed the PlayStation 3 would continue the success of previous Sony offerings.

The PlayStation 3 has had two successors in the PlayStation and PlayStation 2. Sony, an entertainment company, first got into the console manufacturing business because of a deal gone sour. In the late 80s, Sony partnered with Nintendo to attempt to develop a disk technology for game storage (previous consoles relied on cartridges).
Nintendo had approached Sony to develop a CD-ROM technology for their SNES which would ultimately be released in 1991. However, after reviewing the contract, Nintendo, always concerned with maintaining strict control over their products, grew concerned about the seeming control Sony would have over games developed on the disk format. Nintendo secretly negotiated a deal with rival Phillips to help develop the SNES, but one that gave them complete control, and ultimately, did not utilize disk technology.

Sony was left to pick up the pieces. Rather than halting research, Sony decided to make their own console. By 1994, after years of research and prototypes, the PlayStation was released to the general public in Japan. The next year, 1995, saw the release of the PlayStation worldwide. The PlayStation was a hit. Going against the Nintendo 64, the follow-up to the Nintendo SNES Sony had initially been part of making, Sony saw sweet revenge. Following a successful launch, PlayStation went on to sell over 100 million consoles in its 11 year run, a feat only topped by its successor the PlayStation 2.

The PlayStation 2, which was fully backwards compatible because it embedded the parts of the PS into it, was released in 2000 to compete with the Nintendo Gamecube, and later Microsoft’s Xbox. Since its release, it has been the most successful console to date, with almost 140 million units sold. However, this accomplishment was tarnished by the fact that many consoles had quality control issues seen in disk read errors that contributed to a class action lawsuit against Sony, the conclusion of which saw Sony reimbursing or replacing any faulty consoles.

---

The PlayStation 3, then, had some really big shoes to fill and also some pitfalls to avoid. One thing that made the PlayStation such a recognizable name in gaming was the rise of disk-based games which allowed for more sophisticated games to be made. But that disk compatibility also saw the beginning of merging gaming machines with other media-playing devices. While former gaming systems had had limited media playback, the PS2 allowed users to play DVDs on their machine. This created more value to the console and, one could argue, helped to establish the rise of DVD purchases as a whole. This, in turn, helped the parent company, which had interests in the entertainment industry. The PlayStation brand also boasted a massive gaming library, which, by being backward compatible, also made the console appealing to many fans. While Nintendo may be recognized as a gaming brand because of its longevity, Sony’s PlayStation really made gaming mainstream by creating a product that was accessible to all. It seems weird then that they would turn their back on the mainstream appeal established by their brand by creating a system that was not affordable or mainstream, as became evident in the months to come.

Another console that would take months to get a fuller picture of what it had to offer was Nintendo’s new console. Probably the most disappointing for industry officials and fans alike was the Nintendo conference at the 2005 E3. The unveiling of the Nintendo console, codenamed “Revolution” was brief and shallow. About the only thing learned of this mystery console was that it was “unique.”

But the feeling of frustration towards Nintendo’s secrecy would have a bit of a payoff in September 2005, when Nintendo unveiled what they perceived as the revolution in their Nintendo Revolution: motion sensing controllers. At the Tokyo Game Show,
Nintendo introduced the Wii Remote to the general public. This remote would look and feel like a television remote with the added functionality of a point and click style laser pointer as well as a near (up for debate by fans) 1:1 motion capture using optical sensors and accelerometers.\(^{62}\) The internet became rampant with speculation and debate over whether this would be a good thing for Nintendo, or its death knell, signaling the last of the old guard’s decline into obscurity like Atari and Sega and the rise of the more recent game developers of Microsoft and Sony.

The “Revolution,” later called the Nintendo Wii was the fifth home console released by the company, evidence of the long history Nintendo has had with gaming. In fact, it is the longest running company that has continuously manufactured videogame consoles. Nintendo, which was founded in 1889, was originally a playing card manufacturer (as well as investor in love hotels, taxi companies, and other ventures). Only in the late 70s did the company move into the gaming industry by manufacturing arcade games. The success of *Donkey Kong* in 1981 cemented Nintendo’s place in the gaming industry. Then, when the arcade industry was about collapse, Nintendo diversified. Previously, in 1980, the company had manufactured one of the first handheld gaming systems with the *Game and Watch* series—another successful venture in the gaming industry.\(^{63}\) Then, in 1983, Nintendo released its first home console, the Family

---

\(^{62}\) By 1:1 motion capture, I suggest that the motion one makes in real time holding the Wii Remote translates exactly to the game screen. This is much easier said than done, however, and games that rely on movement for the Wii sometimes suffer because of this. In the summer of 2009, Nintendo introduced Wii MotionPlus, an accessory players can attach to their Remote to make it more precise.

\(^{63}\) Indeed, Nintendo’s success at handheld gaming devices is as great as or greater than their success in the console gaming market. The release of the Game Boy in 1989 has made Nintendo the hands-down champion of handhelds until very recently. Through
Computer or Famicom in Japan. The Famicom, titled the Nintendo Entertainment System or NES for a worldwide market, was a different type of home console from that offered by giant Atari and others. The competition was not very innovative, not moving very far from the first Pong game and often had quality assurance issues. Nintendo marketed itself by bringing in new innovative games never seen before and assuring consumers that their brand equaled quality.

After the release of the NES, Nintendo continued to find support in the gaming community with their Superfamicom or SNES, released in 1991; the Nintendo 64, released in 1996; and the Nintendo Gamecube, released in 2001. And while Nintendo continued and continues to have a loyal fan base, its dominance in the gaming market was at an all time low before the release of the Wii because of the success of Sony and the new cache of the Microsoft brand.

The Wii was in some ways a radical departure from the brand, though it retained key elements that have kept the company in the running for so long. Nintendo has always prided itself on being family friendly. When Mortal Kombat was released on both the Sega Genesis and SNES, Nintendo censored parts of the game to make it less violent at the expense of game sales. This commitment to family values can be seen in the parental controls which can be utilized on the Wii, the only console of this generation to list this as a major feature. Nintendo also prided itself on value. The Wii included a

many iterations, the Game Boy had little competition until the release of the Nintendo DS in 2004, a sister system that seems to have finally killed this long-running technology. The only real competition to Nintendo’s dominance in the handheld gaming industry has been the new emergence of the PlayStation Portable by Sony, which still has only roughly one third of the market.

64 Kent, The Ultimate History of Video Games.
pack-in title so that consumers could enjoy the console right out of the box—another feature that has been around for every Nintendo console. And while the franchise loyalty Nintendo displayed towards the games it has created over the years, from Mario, Zelda, and Donkey Kong, shows that it was willing to stick with tradition, Nintendo had also prided itself on innovation throughout their gaming history, being responsible for gaming innovations like touch screens and analog sticks which have been hugely influential to the entire industry. They have also had stinkers like the Power Glove and Virtual Boy, though too, so people were not sure what the Wii Remote would be—a success like the Nintendo DS, or a failure like the Virtual Boy.

While that success had yet to be determined, a new campaign of the war soon drew near; the release of the Xbox 360. On November 22, 2005, the 360 launched almost simultaneously worldwide retailing at around $300 and selling around 350,000 units in its initial launch window. Fans generally embraced the new machine, creating a shortage of the console that would continue well into April 2006.

That initial success can be traced to several features of the console worth noting. First, the 360 was and continues to be a powerful as well as graphically sophisticated machine, able to play content in hi definition. Microsoft also heavily emphasized that this machine could be a media hub, able to play several audio and video media formats as well as download content from the Xbox Live Marketplace (later including a deal with Netflix to offer video streaming). Some content could then be saved on a large hard drive for future viewing. This made it advantageous for users to pick the size of drives dependent on their storage needs, so Microsoft gave players the choice of customization and a sliding price scale. Also, the gaming was seen as a huge feature, with many games
promised in the coming months, some initial limited backward compatibility, or the ability to play games from the previous Xbox system (now fully backwards compatible). Finally, probably the largest part of Xbox’s success was an easy and fun online gaming hub with established gaming franchises.

However, some problems plagued and continue to plague the 360’s successes and that was hardware reliability. While there has never been an official statement regarding failure rate, fan discussion on the internet has caused the “Red Ring of Death” phenomenon or RRoD, to become a catchphrase for the 360’s failure. The RRoD is a symptom of hardware failure that emits a red ring of light instead of the usual green around the power button. That this is something not just made up by fans can be evidenced by Microsoft’s leverage of 1 billion dollars to extend the warranties of 360 users three years to commit to a higher level of customer service.\(^{65}\) Still, despite this wrinkle, the 360 was and continues to be a gaming success.

With one console already launched, Nintendo and Sony had some catching up to do, and needed to seriously impress the community if they were going to make a dent in Microsoft’s sizeable lead. On April 27, 2006, Nintendo revealed the name of its new console, the previously mentioned Wii. While the internet exploded with this revelation, not all of this buzz was positive. In fact, in some gamers’ opinions, the name of the console cemented the impression that this console was gimmicky and faddish. These worries in the community had been building with the controller reveal, which for many fans, seemed odd and unlikely to be much fun. However, at the 2006 E3, when industry

\(^{65}\) Tor Thorsen, “Microsoft extending 360 warranty to three years;” available from http://www.gamespot.com/news/6173633.html; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.
analysts were able to play games using the Wii Remote and hear the pitch by Nintendo executives, fans could see some merit with the system.

The PS3 did not compare so favorably at E3 2006. While graphics still continued to impress and some games looked promising for the system, the gaming community was suspicious of how the games would look on the actual system considering the previous year’s rendering fiasco. Also coming as a shock was the price point of the PS3, at over $499, and what some considered the arrogance of Sony officials.66 However, brand recognition as well as real high-end features, like a built in Blue Ray disc player, kept the gaming community optimistic for the launch.

Launching within two days of each other, fans speculated on who would win this mini-war, Nintendo or Sony? With one successful console on the market and a simultaneous launch with last generation’s clear winner, would the Wii and its quirky motion sensitivity be a big success? While the Wii had a lot of curiosity toward it and a dedicated fan base, many thought it would be eclipsed by the PS3 before Christmas.

The Sony PlayStation 3 launched in Japan on November 11, 2006, North America on November 17, 2006, and Europe and the rest of the world on March 23, 2007. During that initial November release date, the PS3 sold close to 400,000 units, even at a price point so high. It is difficult to determine what the actual market for PS3s was however, because supply was initially constrained. On the other hand, demand for the system quickly dropped off, so one wonders if people bought the system before the holidays

66 Ken Kutaragi, chairman and CEO of Sony Computer Entertainment states in response to the high price of the PS3: "...for consumers to think to themselves 'I will work more hours to buy one'. We want people to feel that they want it, irrespective of anything else." See James Ransom-Wiley, “Sony Wants You to Earn That PS3!” available from http://www.joystiq.com/2005/07/06/sony-wants-you-to-earn-that-playstation-3/; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.
because it was hyped to be a big seller. Also, flipping hard to find consoles has become big business online, so there is no telling how this practice inflated initial demand.

Much like the 360, the PS3 emphasized game sophistication and graphical power. Considered by many to be the most powerful of the generation’s consoles, the PS3’s extra computing capacity was even put to good use by helping compute for Folding@Home when not being used for gaming or other media consumption. And, as seen by the screen shots from previous gaming conferences, the PS3 featured high definition. Also like Microsoft, Sony marketed the system as capable of other multimedia tasks by packaging in a Blu-Ray player and giving users the choice to play other audio and visual media. Added to this was the PS3’s ability to connect with its little brother, the handheld gaming system, PlayStation Portable (PSP). Sony also offered users the ability to choose between a basic and premium model which featured different sized hard drives. And finally, also echoing the successes of Microsoft, Sony planned to launch PlayStation network, an online space that would serve as a unified place for online gaming, shopping, community, etc.

Buyers of the PS3 gushed at the power and graphics of the machine, both when playing games and watching movies through the Blu-Ray player. But, concerns over the machine were numerous. The price was just too high, especially when a gaming console

---

67 Folding@Home is a distributed computing system that performs immense simulations of protein folding. See “Folding@Home PS3 FAQ;” available from http://folding.stanford.edu/English/FAQ-PS3; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009. Of course, critics of the console mocked purchasers of PS3 who Folded@Home by saying that if there were any good games to play, they would be doing that instead of contributing unused computing power.

68 Part of the reason both Microsoft and Sony took this route is because the PS2 really found its phenomenal success, especially in Japan, because it was also an inexpensive DVD player.
comparable in specs and features could be had in the 360, and for a lower price. Plus, because the 360 had been out longer, there were more games to play on it. And that was the seconded largest problem with the PS3 launch, there just were not that many games. While some of the launch games were impressive, they seemed few and far between, and it seemed like the pipeline for good games was slow. Part of this had to do with the power of the machine. Because the configuration of the PS3 was more complicated, it made making games for the system more time consuming than other systems.

Unlike the Sony PS3 launch, which because of demand had instances of violence,⁶⁹ it seemed to be a Nintendo love-fest in lines across the country, where people brought their portable Nintendo systems, the DS, to play games with friends while they waited. Nintendo released the Wii world-wide on November 19th, 2006, selling almost 530,000, at $250, in the initial launch window.⁷⁰ And surprising to some and vindication of the brand for others, the Wii had robust sales like the PS3 and quickly became hard to find and stayed hard to find until recently. The Wii quickly became the must-have item for the 2006 (and the 2007 and 2008) holiday season.

The features of the Wii were diametrically opposed to the giants of Sony and Microsoft. Rather than committing to an arms-race type effort to be the most powerful and most graphically enhanced machine, Nintendo opted for a small and quiet system that

---


⁷⁰ These numbers and others throughout my dissertation come from VGchartz (unless noted), a website that tracks the numbers of video games sold worldwide on a weekly and monthly basis. Tracking comes from NPD numbers and data directly from retailers. “Hardware Sales from Launch;” available from http://vgchartz.com/hwlaunch.php; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.
meant to change the way users perceived gaming. That new direction was the motion controller that was meant to be easy to use and intuitive to play. Everything around the machine conformed to getting new people to play. Like all other Nintendo machines, the console came with a pack-in title, *Wii Sports*, which while simple, was addictively fun. The interface of the machine was also intuitive because a user could choose to play a game, shop for Nintendo merchandise, create an avatar (the Mii), upload photos, check the weather or news, all from distinct channels.**71** Those channels seemed to conscientiously echo a user interface that new gamers would be familiar with, the television, thereby giving new players an easier time adjusting to the technology. Plus, it went with the theme of the Wii Remote, or “Wiimote,” which echoed the style of a television remote. And, for those long-time fans, the Wii offered the most expansive backwards compatibility of all other systems by allowing the previous generation’s game discs to be played in the Wii, and offering a Virtual Console that showcased games from the NES to the 64 era.**72** The biggest “feature” fans seemed to love was how much fun the system was. People talked about playing *Wii Sports* with their family over Christmas,

**71** Since launch, the channels in the US have expanded to include an Internet channel using the Opera browser; a Nintendo channel featuring interactive content on Nintendo games; the Everybody Votes Channel, giving users a chance to participate in worldwide polls; and the Check Mii Out Channel giving users a chance to participate in popularity contests centering on their Mii.

**72** Users also have access to old Sega games, TurboGrafx games, and NeoGeo games. Users can also download new channels and small, “indie” games by selecting WiiWare.
making video game playing a communal affair. Indeed, news stories featured “Wii parties,” bringing attention to the Wii in mainstream culture.73

However, while there were some good games launched with the system, the following months provided an endless stream of low-quality titles. Part of this came from the unique challenges brought about by designing games utilizing the new motion sensing features of the console. Part of this was also an attempt to cash in on the unanticipated success of the console. Users also complained about the power and performance in comparison to the other two consoles. The Wii just did not look as good and could not do the same things that the 360 or PS3 could. But, as the cheapest of all of the consoles, these shortcomings were outweighed.

It was not until after the Christmas season, though, that the gaming community could see how much the Wii was selling. The after-holiday season is typically met with little demand for video games or systems. Yet, the Wii demand continued and in some cases continues to outpace supply. Meanwhile, rumors surfaced of PS3 units continuing to stagnate on store shelves, with little public interest after the initial surge.74


74 VGchartz gives fans an opportunity to make predictions of sell-through for particular games and brands. While one can see the potential fun in this pursuit, we might wonder why gaming fans care so much about the number of systems sold or the games made, because they don’t receive a share of the company profits unless they own stock. But, this illustrates how success of a console can be a source of pride to a gamer that identifies with that brand. Also, more tangibly, game consoles that are more successful usually publish more games, so the gamer benefits in that way.
Furthermore, rumors surfaced of Microsoft flooding stores with product (channel stuffing) in order to meet sales projections.\(^75\)

Many have suggested that the Nintendo Wii was the winner of the console wars. Even if fans are unwilling to give the clear victory to Nintendo, the doom and gloom predicted earlier in the console war, in which one hardware manufacturer would go under, clearly has not happened. Though the PS3 has not had the record-breaking numbers of its successor the PS2, it, along with the Xbox 360, and the enormous success of the Wii, are clearly successful enough to keep the video game industry strong even in a cycle of economic uncertainty. So, while it may seem clichéd, the real winners of the console war are the gamers themselves.

However, looking at the relative success and failure of these systems tells us something about the changing or emerging landscape of gaming. Why was there such a surprising success of the Wii and equally surprising “failure” of the PS3 during the launch window? I posit the Wii appealed and continues to appeal to a casual audience more than the PS3, through marketing as well as price.\(^76\)

Looking back on the console wars, it is clear that something new and important in the gaming industry was developing. Nintendo clearly hoped to expand its gaming market by appealing to new gamers, mostly women and older folks—or what has been


\(^76\) Bleeding edge technology is much more risky than technology in line with today’s standards, because early adopters are the only ones willing to pay the price of that technology, especially if it should fail, like HDDVD players implemented in the Xbox 360. While we might see motion sensing controls as technologically innovative, it is also not as expensive to implement.
touted in this generation as the casual crowd. It seems to have worked and the apparent success of Nintendo’s strategy has caused both Microsoft and Sony to follow suit in whatever ways they can while still emphasizing their bleeding edge technology. Meanwhile, old video game users have felt left out and have voiced their concerns over games that do not appeal to them. This has led Nintendo to promise not to forget the base, the fans, or the hardcore gamers. What this has done is split the gaming community into two types of gamer: the hardcore and the casual. While I will spend the next chapter explaining exactly what these definitions mean and what they say about gender in the gaming community, I would like to stress a few points now.

Fans’ reaction and participation in the seventh generation console war shows that technology is a tool for meaning making and identity formation for gamers. While it is clear looking at the internet community during the initial launch of these consoles that gaming fans cared enormously about the successes and failures of their consoles of choice, what isn’t clear is why. Here I want to explore fans participation in the console wars and what this tells us about consumption and identity.

Throughout the console wars and beyond gamers again and again passionately defended their console of choice. Some of the best evidence of that passion came when NPD numbers came in for each respective console each month after launch. The NPD group is a well-respected consumer-marketing research group that tracks consumer buying trends and attitudes in North America in a variety of industries, including video games. For gamers keeping track of sales numbers on the web, it is the most trusted

source on gaming numbers that comes out every month.  

After the release of all three consoles, comments on articles about NPD numbers on Joystiq (and other gaming websites) exploded. While there were moments of calm in these hotly debated forums, the majority of comments were written to establish credibility for the console the gamer preferred while at the same time trashing other consoles (whether in agreement or contrast to the numbers tracked by NPD). For example, in replying to Noshino, who claimed that Microsoft’s product was not selling in Japan because Japanese consumers did not buy American products (a problem for worldwide domination of the 360), Name123 writes:

iPods, Starbucks, foreign sports cars are all popular in Japan.

The Xbox 360 isn't popular in Japan because the Japanese are smart enough to spot a bad product, like the Xbox 360, when they see it. The Console X 360 is nothing but a generic, me-too console. Even the name "Xbox" is just a bad copy of the PlayStation name. Microsoft is a mediocre company. Most American geeks are just too dumb to realize it.

Here Name used sales numbers to bash the console he or she dislikes. But, not everyone bought Name’s logic. Vegeta (aka Ska Oreo) replies:

ummm what? I'm sorry but I can't believe you just said that with a straight face. Look I know your a sony fanboy and all, but that doesn't mean you have to be a complete tool about it. Seriously regardless of what you think

---

78 I use both Joystiq posts on monthly NPD numbers as well as the website VGchartz to comment on the sales of the three consoles. I prefer VGchartz to NPD numbers because users can compare between weeks or months, etc.

about Microsoft, the xbox and 360 has had a huge impact on gaming culture.\textsuperscript{80}

What interests me here is that Vegeta passionately insisted on the relevance of Microsoft to gaming culture. Why is that important to this gamer? Summing up posters’ zeal best is Marty who writes, ”This entire article is just an invitation for a fanboy showdown. Or a fanboy cagematch. That'd be better.”\textsuperscript{81}

Marty references the fanboy, an insult used in many discussion boards about gaming and other nerdy cultures. But what is a fanboy? Going to the Urban Dictionary, several definitions surface. Dr. Know writes, “(n) Technocratic zealots; evangelicals of geekery. Characterized by irrational advocacy of a particular OS, console, company, or franchise. Most commonly used to delegitimize contrary opinions in gaming forums.” \textsuperscript{82}

So, the fanboy (or girl) is so narrowly focused on the particular brand they like that they are unable to see the good in products different from their brand. Sega Slayer reinforces how the label of fanboy is used as a weapon when he writes, “A pathetic insult often used by fanboys themselves to try and put down people who don't like whatever it is they like.” \textsuperscript{83} Obviously, then being a fanboy is shameful because being one shows bias, as if the gamer (or similar nerd) is not rational. Finally, that bias is taken to extremes as seen

\textsuperscript{80}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{81}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
by the definition that Arran writes about the fanboys, “They take the 'console war' very seriously, as if it's a real war.”

There were clear cases of rampant fanboyism throughout the seventh generation console war. While of course there were many gamers who bought multiple consoles each generation (in fact, some gamers say that is the only way to be a “true” gamer, whatever that means), a lot of defending of consumer choice still remained on the internet. Probably the most defensive of all gamers were those that adopted the PS3 early in the console life. Because of the lack of games early in the console’s life and the exorbitant price, non-PS3 owners accused PS3 owners of being robots blindly following the brand. Not only that, but their console was losing the console wars, if only strictly looking at numbers. That caused a lot of fans to turn fanboy. For example, Matt B defended buying the PS3, even though it is so expensive when he writes, “The PS3 is not an impulse buy like the other consoles and handhels. [sic] It takes contemplation [sic] and the faith to know that you are in the possession of the most power media hub. Flame away, you can’t change my opinion.” Expecting a flame war as a result, Matt B still hoped to convince others that the purchase he made was not a waste of money. The defense of a video game console reached new heights with the establishment of the defense forces. All three consoles have one, the Sony Defense Force (SDF), the Nintendo Defense Force (NDF), and the Microsoft Defense Force (MDF). The purpose of these defense forces

84 Ibid.

was to defend the brand from console bashers. This statement is from the Sony Defense
Force website:

The original Defense Force! Created on September 11, 2006 the Sony
Defense Force (SDF) is back with a new look and a new site. It’s original
intention was, and still is, to give honest news about all things PlayStation.
Since the launch of PS3 there has been a lot of F.U.D. (Fear, Uncertainty,
Doubt) spread around the internet thanks to viral marketing campaigns
from competitors. A SDF is here to cut through the mess and give straight
answers about the PlayStation Platform.  

While the Defense Force claimed to be unbiased, a perusal of the content of the website
suggested otherwise. Defending one’s console of choice through the defense forces
bordered on zealotry. This uber-fanboyism did not go unnoticed by the gaming
community. Lord Chako replied in response to people referencing the Sony Defense
Force in the comments section of a Joystiq post:

Maybe I’m too old (24), but I really don’t get all this ‘NDF, MDF, SD’
shit. Why would you rigorously defend a corporation, whose only
purpose is to take your money? I’m not saying you can’t have a
preference, but you shouldn’t devote yourself to only one company.  

86 “About SDF;” available from http://www.sonydefenseforce.com/?page_id=2; Internet;
last accessed 01 October, 2009.

87 Alexander Sliwinski, “Financial Times declares console war Wii-ner;” available from
Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.
Lord Chako brought up the question why gamers care so much about the products they buy and the consoles they play. He is right to question why multi-billion dollar industries need a defense team consisting of internet nerds.

One way of understanding what is going on here is to look at Dick Hebdige’s work on subculture. Looking at musical subcultures in the 1970s, Hebdige saw that the formation of subcultures and an individual’s sense of self in that subculture were contingent on a sense of style which helped to signify meaning. Building off Phil Cohen’s analysis of class in the UK, Hebdige writes, “He showed it [class anxiety] working out in practice as a material force, dressed up, as it were, in experience and exhibited in style.”88 I understand this as meaning, especially identity, is understood through the body; experiences the body feels and style the body expresses to others.

Hebdige outlines the importance of style as a way to solidify group cohesion by writing meaning on and through the body. I see that in action in the flame wars outlined above. Style is not only contingent on a personal style, like a slacker, Doritos eating, t-shirt wearing stereotype of video game fan. Style could also hang on a gaming style. So, that instead of using fashion to show belonging, fans bought the product like the 360 or PS3 to highlight their gaming style, then made sure everyone knows what and why these brands are important to them.

Stated another way, identity through embodied meaning-making is intimately tied to global consumption. You are what you buy. Cyberfeminist Susanna Paasonen explores the relationship of women and girls to consumptive practices in digital spaces. After examining web sites tied to dolls aimed at young girls like Barbie and Bratz, she

---

argues that these websites help to construct lifestyle through interaction with consumer goods. She writes, “Their sites are exemplary of what Anne Cronin (2000) called the compulsory individualism of consumer culture-the necessity to produce and manifest one’s individuality through consumer choices.”\textsuperscript{89} Through one’s choices, one’s individuality is maintained. Participating in a flame war by defending their console allowed gamers to delimit who they were in relation to the subculture and the values inherent in that subculture.\textsuperscript{90}

This argument suggests that those involved in the process of meaning making are more than just passive consumers. Henry Jenkins, through his work with many different types of fan communities sees fans as social groups sharing intellectual resources to create a loose consensus of meaning through identity. While obviously there is disagreement sometimes in the group, as seen by the fan reactions illustrated above, more often than not, people have a fairly clear understanding of what constitutes acceptable community standards.

This idea that fan culture is in some ways an interpretive community is only possible by imagining fans as active participants in meaning making. Rather than understanding gamers as a passive audience like earlier scholars might have, Jenkins sees audiences as creating meaning through textual poaching. Textual poaching shows us that fans take components from the cultural texts they are fans of to make something new, with the purpose of creating community and exploring self-expression. Rather than

\textsuperscript{89} Paasonen, in \textit{Webbing Cyberfeminist Practices}, 29.

\textsuperscript{90} And we also see the fragmentation of the culture by having such disparate brands to choose from.
simply interpreting a text, fans are creating new texts imbedded with new meanings. This is what Jenkins terms moving from meaning producers to cultural producers.\textsuperscript{91}

In gaming, textual poaching can mean modding a game to make it more personally relevant, writing fan fiction about games, making memorabilia, cosplaying, etc. In fact, the very act of playing a video game which has multiple ways to play suggests a new level of customization available to the player. It also suggests that the relationship between consumer and producer is much more integrated than ever in popular culture. This is what Jenkins calls convergence culture. Convergence culture is the knowledge of producers that consumers are taking their products and using them to create something new that is personally meaningful and relevant and conversely, consumers’ insistence that they be heard and known by producers.\textsuperscript{92} This idea of convergence culture is relevant to the console wars outlined above because it was expected by producers that fans would have an opinion about the consoles as information was being unveiled and make their opinions known on the web. Conversely, fans expect gaming companies to keep them informed of new developments.

But, while there may be a convergence between producer and consumer in gaming culture, it certainly seemed that the fandom itself was splitting up based on brand. Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft, by establishing different products that are fairly different from one another, create brand recognition and brand appeal. This branding translated to

\footnotesize

\textsuperscript{92} I immediately think of all of the YouTube videos out there showcasing player’s gameplay, which would then be commented on by other fans. Especially cool to me was a \textit{Resident Evil 4} knife run by a person named Kai Wii. Hey, Kai Wii, when are you going to finish your run?
gamers, who become Sony gamers, or Nintendo gamers, or 360 gamers, as seen by the Defense Forces. The way the technology is branded bleeds onto the gamer who buys the product, so that stereotypes of each gamer manifest. The Wii owner might be a Nintendo zealot, going to gaming conventions dressed up as their favorite obscure gaming character from the past; or a kid; or the kid’s mom, or a girly girl who only likes silly games. The 360 owner definitely likes macho games and first person shooters, playing online with his or her friends. And the PS3 owner is rich and likes to play racing and sports games and have the best technology.

This is not to suggest that gamers only stick to one console or that the consoles they choose are for these stereotypical reasons. Rather, I’m illustrating that the products gamers’ buy reflect the gamer they are seen as in the community. These stereotypes of gamers and systems are often used to draw boundaries within the gaming community, and further legitimize or delegitimize certain gamers. For example, while the Nintendo Wii has had incredible success selling, many gamers feel that the Wii is not a good console and is being bought by people who do not know what quality gaming is. Often cited as a reason why Nintendo’s success does not matter is the fact that the software attach rate (the amount of games bought for the respective console) is much lower than in other consoles, which suggests that the people buying Wiis are not true gamers, just people buying into the hype. Severian00, defends the 360 after the Wii reached a majority share of the market in October 2007, citing Microsoft’s usually high attach rate when he writes, “As for the Wii hardware to software attach, I’ve always said it was bad
for Nintendo [sic] that their main customer is now soccer moms and grandparents. They are buying the Wii for Wii sports and that’s it.”

Severian suggested that the people buying Wii games are not true gamers in other words because they are not buying enough (and they are also old and women). But, these gamers are also not true gamers because they are not buying the right games. Slaziman echoed statements about Wii and Wii owners on a post about Nintendo’s impact on the gaming industry when he writes, “...The people buying the Wii are not going to buy hardcore epic games unless they contain a known Nintendo franchise. Why would developers put out Resident Evil 4’s when they can put retarded minigames and sell more while having lower development costs?” The now ubiquitous term hardcore was being used to set the boundaries of gaming, and Wii games and Wii owner were falling on the wrong side of that line. The next chapter will interrogate what hardcore means and how that affects gamers, especially female gamers. For now, these exchanges illustrate the importance of brand evaluation for consumer identity.

---


CHAPTER 2.
THE WII IS FOR SOCCER MOMS AND GRANDPARENTS:
DEFINING AND THEORIZING THE HARDCORE/CASUAL DICHOTOMY IN
VIDEO GAME CULTURE

Considering the topic of this study, it is obvious I like to play video games. I get
excited when new games come out. I read online reviews, interact on message boards,
buy games the day they are released, even sniff around game stores days before a release
date to see if they set product out early. I often ignore people I like when I am into a
game, sometimes playing for 8-14 hour stretches in a day when I first get them. Yet,
when talking about the release of *Halo 3* with my class after its release in 2007, a student
asked if I had played it and I responded that I did not play First Person Shooters. After
that he looked like he doubted that I knew anything about games at all. At that moment, I
felt that my legitimacy as a gamer was called into question. How do certain games, as
well as certain behaviors and patterns of consumption come to define who is a gamer?
Key to answering this question is the idea of “hardcore.”

If you are a fan of video games, you have probably come across the term hardcore,
especially during this generation of console games. It is used to describe everything,
from games, to players, to demographics. Players use the term hardcore, as do journalists,
developers and game publishers. But what is hardcore, hardcore gaming, or hardcore
gamers? That is a bit trickier to pin down. There is no set definition of what hardcore
means in the gaming world. In fact, part of the fun of hardcore is arguing over its
definition.

Using online debate over what is hardcore and casual gaming and who are
hardcore and casual gamers, I define the gaming modifier “hardcore,” and its antithesis,
“casual.” I argue that these definitions constitute gaming identity by asserting value for some at the expense of others. This is done by referencing gendered stereotypes about video gamers, games, behaviors, etc. The end result is a normative value to the masculine hardcore gamer, and devaluation for the feminine casual gamer.

Understanding gamers relies heavily on references to hardcore within the gaming world. While the definition of who is a hardcore player is often nuanced and can be debated or flamed, many key characteristics start to emerge once I started analyzing definitions. On the MegaGames: The Hardcore Gaming Experience website, they write:

A hardcore gamer is usually a male, between 14-34 years of age who has gaming in their top priority list, for example, someone who would prefer to play a game instead of sleeping at night or watching TV. Basically a game addict. With a very high technical knowledge on computer, console hardware and the whole computer industry in general, they keep up-to date with the latest technological advancements…One of their main characteristics is that they usually play a large number of games per year that could very well be over a 100 games…As the trendsetters in the gaming industry, these elite gamers are so focused on gaming that some end up being game developers themselves.95

The qualities of this person stated above are addictive, technically proficient, and highly committed to gaming. These qualities make them leaders in the gaming world. This is a common trope of hardcore gamers: that they are the elite of gamers and that industry

leaders look to them to be the litmus test of quality when it comes to games. But why are these gamers the elite? Is it because of the money they are investing in the gaming industry, spending more money than the average gamer? Or, more plugged into the gaming world, are they more vocal and therefore taken more seriously than the average gamer? One thing this definition made clear, they are more important than the average gamer, at least according to this website.

This website focused on how hardcore gamers are the elite of the gaming community because their behavior tied them more closely to the development and production of games. Other typical behavior cited as hardcore might be prowess at a game. Someone would be considered hardcore if they are so good at a game that he or she represents the elite of gaming. A good example is the person who posted a video of his or her run through Super Mario Bros. in five minutes.96 Or, someone could prove their hardcoreness through longevity, claiming to have played since the Atari or NES era, proving they are not upstarts. Or they prove hardcoreness by knowing the lore, exhibiting proficiency in gaming history. This could be exemplified by gaming trivia quizzes in the back of Game Informer magazines that score you on your ability to know the minutiae of a game and rank you accordingly. All of these are acceptable qualities of a hardcore gamer. Of interest here is that in the first definition, behavior was being equated to a certain demographic: young males with disposable income and time. What of the above behavior makes this a specifically young male characteristic? Already, we have an

elision of gaming behavior and gendered patterns of behavior and consumption which I will return to shortly.

Another way to mark hardcore, through genre, is in some ways easier to see. This was better summed up by another website addressing hardcore gamers, Hardcore Gamers.net, which is “A site for gamers who want to read about and discuss the quality games, not every hyped up flashy game that’s out there.” They state:

Hardcore gamers, let me ask you something…do you really want to hear the latest news about games like Dead or Alive: Extreme Beach Volleyball, Army Men, or whatever WWF game? If you said yes, then you are not a hardcore gamer and this site is not for you.

Here the website was appealing to the gamer’s discriminating tastes, suggesting once again that gaming identity is tied to branded consumption. Of note again, several things are happening at once here. First, the gamer’s identity is being equated with the games he or she plays. Second, the gamer is evaluated as a gamer by the quality of the games he or she plays. So that arguing about the merits of a game is also reinforcing ideas about the self. Put simply, if you play hardcore games, you are a hardcore gamer.

But what are hardcore games? For most, the definition of what is a hardcore game relies on the genre, tone, or style of game. Of course, not all games are considered hardcore. For example, is the Nintendo title, Animal Crossing, a hardcore game? This

---


98 Ibid.
game is most definitely not considered hardcore.\textsuperscript{99} No, hardcore games exhibit certain features of which the above game does not possess. Some elements of hardcore games might include: mature content, hyper-realism or superior visual effects, extremely violent content that may be really bloody, and definitely “macho” sensibilities. While I would not consider \textit{Halo 3} hyper-realistic because you’re fighting against a hypothetical alien race, it is a graphically sophisticated FPS and the goal of the game is to kill others with efficiency and panache and that labels it a hardcore game,\textsuperscript{100} so the gamer playing it is hardcore. Which, to go back to my opening story, also serves to suggest why I am not a hardcore player since I do not generally play this type of game.

So, genre also sometimes relies on implicit and heavily gendered stereotypes. As noted above, many would not classify \textit{Animal Crossing} as a hardcore game, even if the gameplay one exhibited towards the game was hardcore. It is not just the quality of the game that is at issue here, because both of these games are regarded as “good games” in some way\textsuperscript{101} Rather, the trappings of the game, the look, the gameplay, the ideals and objectives, do not fit the established patterns of hardcore. And part of the reasons why

\textsuperscript{99} This can be evidenced by the fact that when Nintendo suggested it was a hardcore game for the fans at its 2008 E3 press conference, most fans weren’t buying it. See Luke Plunkett, “Iwata So Very Very Sorry for Nintendo’s E3 Presser;” available from \url{http://kotaku.com/5027984/iwata-so-very-very-sorry-for-nintendos-e3-presser}; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.

\textsuperscript{100} Some hardcore gamers think the game is too popular, and argue the mechanics of the game have been dumbed down to make it more accessible. So, to those gamers, \textit{Halo 3} is not hardcore but mainstream, which still illustrates the point of this paper that hardcore is a term meant to differentiate between common and elite.

\textsuperscript{101} And the question of determining what is quality and how these markers of excellence might in themselves be biased is explored in chapter 4.
these games do not conform is because these games do not have the trappings of masculinity, the style.

To elaborate further, we might make a comparison between two games on opposite ends of the hardcore spectrum: Animal Crossing, already mentioned above; and Grand Theft Auto, a highly successful franchise that many in the gaming world would consider hardcore.

Animal Crossing, originally developed and published in Japan by Nintendo in 2001, has had remarkable success in the United States. Since its first appearance, the franchise has expanded to include a DS game and a second console game for the Wii. The game starts by giving players the ability to play as a boy or a girl who is moving to a new town inhabited by talking animals. Once there, the player buys a house and pays for it by getting a job with the local retailer Tom Nook, a raccoon with an eye for business. Players can also do jobs around the town for their neighbors or collect fruit, fish, insects, fossils and other things to sell to earn bells, the local unit of monetary value. Players also spend their time in game buying things to decorate their house with; designing clothing to wear or give as gifts; interacting with neighbors by writing letters and giving them presents; and participating in town activities like trick-or-treating during Halloween (the game takes place in real time and gameplay changes with the seasons).

In comparison, the Grand Theft Auto franchise, developed and published by Rockstar Games starting in 1997 has expanded to ten stand-alone games. It has a different feel than Animal Crossing. In general, players are invited to play as a lowly criminal moving up the ranks of organized crime. In one of the franchise’s more successful games, GTA: Vice City, that meant playing as Tommy Vercetti in a world
modeled after Miami in *Scarface.* To succeed in the criminal underworld, Vercetti must complete objectives that help to establish him as ruler of a cocaine empire, usually along the lines of killing rivals with various melee weapons and guns all while evading capture by the police. Players also have the ability to interact with the world of Vice City outside the main storyline in a variety of ways: stealing cars and motorcycles to make jumps or tricks or just drive around the city; collecting packages to unlock secrets weapons or vehicles; or mowing down innocent bystanders within the city just to create a sense of mayhem and chaos within the world.

From a design standpoint, these games are very similar to one another, *GTA* is considered a sandbox game, meaning that while there are concrete objectives in the game, players are free to ignore those objectives and interact with the landscapes in the game to an unprecedented degree. The worlds are open-ended and interactive, and one could suggest that an “ending” to the game is up to the player. *Animal Crossing* has been called a “communication game” by Nintendo. Much like *GTA,* the game has objectives that a player must reach, but the player is free to choose when and how to achieve those objectives. The real key to the game is interacting with the characters and environments in the game. So, like *GTA,* *Animal Crossing* thrives because of its open-ended gameplay.

But, as illustrated above, the style, and therefore the status of each game as hardcore are very different. The overarching words one might use to describe *Animal Crossing* would be “cute,” “cartoon-like,” or “playful.” The animals in the game are unrealistic and adorable, using a gibberish language that further reinforces the idea that this world is one of make-believe. *GTA,* on the other hand, strives for graphic realism,
ultra-violence, and sexual suggestiveness. The characters in the game engage in violent behavior, foul language, and criminal activities. But, these are the very characteristics which make it hardcore.

The difference in how these games are perceived would all be fine if value was not being placed on certain games for their hardcore appeal, and by extension, the players who play the games. Using gaming taste as a marker of whether one is a “true gamer” showcases how hardcore gaming and games are props for gatekeeping activity. There is a clear understanding that some people are true gamers, the hardcore, and some are not, those who like games that are not hardcore, “bad” games apparently. We can see a few problems with this however. First, who decides what a good game is and what is not? And do these designations help to maintain a gendered hierarchy within the gaming world? While none of the “bad” games listed on Hardcore Gamer.net above seem to specifically target women, in fact, all those games cater to a stereotypically masculine audience, it would be easy to see other games that do target a female audience as not good or not serious enough, such as Bratz: Rock Angelz. These games are often cited as “girl” games that are terrible, but are they much worse than games targeted at a young male demographic such as Dragon Ball Z? While it might be easy to see the problems from a design standpoint with this game, it does seem suspicious how easily dismissed these games are. And, if you are an adult female gamer, will you be unfairly targeted

---


103 Released in 2005 for the Nintendo Gamecube, Sony PS2, and PC, the game garnered mixed reviews and is derided or ignored by the gaming community.
because you do not fit the patterns of consumption considered appropriate by the cadre of fans, assumed to be male and hardcore?

Both gaming sites that these definitions appeared on are trying to entice gamers to their website, so this stuff has to be intelligible to the gamer looking for community. Of course there is money involved in this, because of the ad space revenue that a site can generate so it is important to see how and why these sites are creating community the way they are. We might ask what is appealing about the idea of the hardcore gamer as the elite in the gaming community. For me, this taps into feelings that everyone likes to feel special and singled out. If you can count yourself as one of the elite, highly technically skilled gamer who has fabulous taste in games, then you know you belong. However, in order to belong, there have to be people who do not belong; the casual, regular, or average gamer who are misfits. What is worrisome is how easily dismissed casual gamers are, especially since most casual gamers demographically are women.104 Further, even women gamers who do play “macho” games have a harder time “proving” their hardcore status.

The complicated nature of the hardcore/casual dichotomy is demonstrated by a third website. On the G4 website, poster John Manatang started a discussion on the meaning of hardcore after playing *Wii Sports* at a gaming party.105 This article and list of


105 His suggestion that definitions of hardcore may not be relevant anymore is something that has echoed a lot since the release of the Nintendo Wii but, because of space, can not be adequately addressed here. John Manatang, “The Definition of Hardcore Gaming;,” available from
posts it generated demonstrate that the definition of hardcore is almost always personal. It seems that people almost always defined hardcore in relation to themselves. For what purpose? In describing hardcore, Manatang proved his own hardcoreness to create a sense of legitimacy. He listed trying to perfect a certain combo in a game, beating certain titles, calling in sick to a job to play a game, and lying to significant others about time spent playing a game all as behavior related to hardcore and then he writes, “…does that sound hardcore enough?106” And what did I do when I first tried to explain the definition of hardcore; I started with an example of my gaming habits. It seems here it is about proving to ourselves and to others in the community that we belong. An abstract definition is not enough. It is the relationship between definition and gamers that allows them to define themselves in relation to the community. It is not just about bragging rights, it is about constituting identity.

I myself have often wondered if I am hardcore or hardcore enough. When it comes to games, I have enjoyed them all of my life, sometimes it seems a bit too much so. But what can I reference as hardcore? I have certainly invested time into certain games, for example I think my record was 16 hours in a single day playing Animal Crossing during a particularly sad moment in my life. But, as noted above, this is not a hardcore game. Or more recently, I replayed Fire Emblem: Path of Radiance over 15 times to get the bonus player of Ashnard for my game, investing hundreds of hours into the game in the process. Is that hardcore, or just dorky?

http://www.g4tv.com/thefeed/blog/post/688753/The_Definition_Of_Hardcore_Gaming.html; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.

106 Ibid.
I also believe that I have some skills with certain games, although I generally tend to like easier games. But I think I am pretty good at certain genres. As for out of the ordinary, I have completed a no-death run on *Pikmin 2*, which involves finishing the game without losing a single life, taking considerable time and skill. But, I could not go head to head with online players in any game, though I have tried with *Dr. Mario Rx* and *Super Smash Brothers Brawl*.\(^{107}\) I also participate in out-of-game community participation, like surfing the internet looking for gaming news, reading and participating in online forums, and most time consuming, writing dissertations on gaming.

Yet, I still feel uncomfortable with labeling myself a hardcore player, because the stereotypical definition of a hardcore player, that 18-34 white male who plays bloody First Person Shooters, is decidedly not me. In ways that may not be totally conscious, the gaming community makes it very difficult for some players to belong in the community in spite of or despite the games they are playing. What makes this even more difficult is that my gender stereotypically relegates me to the antithesis of the hardcore gamer—the casual gamer.

I am not trying to suggest some essentialist notion that boys/men act one way and that girls/women act another way, because clearly men and women exhibit a range of behavior. Rather, I am suggesting that gendered expectations embedded in the culture shape the way we perceive appropriate behavior in both men and women. And in the world of video game culture, the very definition of hardcore, the valued gamer, the elite that the industry looks to for trends, relies on stereotypical masculine behavior and

\(^{107}\) And if none of these references to games mean anything to you, then you are definitely not hardcore.
tropes. As for female gamers, it may be easier to assume that they are not serious gamers, the casual gamer in other words.

Previously, the largest home of casual games was the PC, where users could engage in a quick game of Solitaire or Minesweeper as desktop applications or go online to casual gaming portals like Pogo and play flash games or other easily downloadable applications from the Internet. Consoles, as far as the industry defined it, did not really figure into the casual gaming demographic. The current generation of consoles, however, is eager to tap into the revenue generated by the larger market of casual gamers. One could argue that, beginning with Guitar Hero for the Sony PS2 from last generation, game developers have had casual gamers set in their sights. As a rhythm game with a guitar-like controller and an intuitive feel, Guitar Hero represented one push towards catering to a casual market. The Nintendo Wii, an entire console arguably organized around the casual market, represented another great push. Even the 360 and PS3, considered bleeding edge technology marketed towards the hardcore crowd, gestured to this audience with their online marketplaces which carry affordable and easy to learn games for the casual crowd. Clearly then, casual games and gamers are seen as increasingly important to the industry, but the definitions of who constitutes the casual gamer remains murky.

Complicating this is that a casual gamer and casual games do not just equate. Is a casual gamer just someone who plays casual games? Or is casual gaming a state of mind? A casual game could be defined as any game that is easy to learn and does not require

---

108 However, the reality is that the game does have a learning curve and not everyone finds the controls so easy. Also, the Expert levels are insanely difficult, making it appealing to someone wishing to achieve. So, you can take this casual game to hardcore levels.
much investment in time or money by the gamer. While I am maybe not a hardcore
gamer according to some in the culture, I am definitely more than a casual gamer.
However, I play games labeled as casual and I’m sure there are many hardcore players
who do as well. And someone who only plays games labeled as casual may play those
games obsessively, to a point where the behavior becomes hardcore. For example, if
FPSs are considered hardcore, one of the reasons they are called so is because they
represent twitch gameplay, or games that heavily rely on precision and reaction time,
increasing the game difficulty. If a player achieves a certain prowess in a game so
difficult, their skills can be used as bragging rights. However, puzzle games like Tetris,
which are targeted towards the casual market and are pick-up and play type games, also
can showcase twitch gameplay at later levels, when blocks fall quite fast, and the adept
player needs great reaction time and coordination to succeed. Is that casual player
obsessed with Tetris now hardcore?

I would suggest casual gamers employ a different relationship to games than
hardcore gamers, which makes them casual players. Some characteristics we might
consider casual would be a more tenuous relationship to the community of gamers on the
Internet or local. They might also have a different relationship to more formal channels
in the game industry: for example, not surfing websites or subscribing to print magazines
about gaming, or not keeping up with industry news. They might also pick up games
based on their own opinions or the opinions of friends, rather than from gaming reviews,
which causes some hardcore gamers to rant about the uninformed minds of casual gamers.

Of critical importance is that, just like the definition of hardcore, definitions of
casual gamers are relational to those being described and those doing the describing. I
have mentioned that one way to classify casual games is to imagine them on PCs, small flash games that can be added on to a computer with little time or effort. To the gamer playing on a dedicated home console, those PC gamers are casual. But, for someone who spends thousands of dollars crafting, customizing, and upgrading a PC to make a game perform at the very highest graphic capabilities with no lag time, then playing on a home gaming console is seen as casual. What matters is that the casual gamer is less than the hardcore gamer—less dedicated to spending time or money, or less skillful than the hardcore gamer, or “true gamer. The casual gamer also plays certain games that are seen as less worthy than hardcore games, such as pick up and play sports or racing games or cooking simulations. But, like the definition of hardcore gamer, the definition of casual gamer is in the eye of the beholder. For example, The Urban Dictionary has several definitions of what constitutes the casual gamer. Definition 1.5 of “casual gamer” states:

Hardcore gamers have a generally negative, and often derogatory view of casual gamers, looked upon as the plague of the video game industry. While hardcore gamers are in the minority of gamers they provide an invaluable resource to developers on both the hardware and software end. Without the hardcore gamers passion and dedication to the art, we would not have the quality games that are available today. Since the purchase power of the casual gamer determines what becomes a best seller, it is understandable why the hardcore gamer has such contempt for the group.109

This definition employs a relational definition of casual gamers, putting them in a clearly inferior category in relation to the hardcore gamer, of which the writer of the definitions assumes him or herself to be. This enables those who can claim a hardcore status access to power and privilege within the gaming community.

But though we might suggest casual gamers spend less money or time on video games than the hardcore gamer, this does not account for the aggression shown towards casual gamers in the above definition. The author of this definition seems to feel that because of their mass numbers, casual gamers get more games made and marketed for them. Perhaps this is the reason why there is so much antipathy towards casual gamers from hardcore gamers? They feel casual gaming is going to bring down the industry as they know it and they are mad about it. Another contributor to the definition on Urban Dictionary demonstrates this point with his/her definition of a casual gamer:

“Gamers” that will eventually bring the downfall to the gaming industry if us true gamers don’t do something about it. I hope casual gamers aren’t let into Heaven, for their ignorance and obliviousness will be the downfall of my afterlife as well!110

While that last cited definition may seem exaggerated, it does echo a lot of the sentiment found on the internet about casual gaming. Bringing up *Wii Play* for the Nintendo Wii on gaming message boards for example almost guarantees a flame war. Looking at these definitions, one thing does seem clear. It does not really matter what constitutes the casual gamer. The casual gamer functions as a type of straw man, used to shore up the

110 Ibid.
identity of the hardcore gamer by elucidating what he is not. In the process, a lot of ill will is generated toward the casual gamer.

A further troubling aspect of these definitions of the casual gamer can be seen when we go back to the discussion of the relationship between hardcore/casual gamers and gender. What we see above is that the casual gamer, now othered by the hardcore gamer, has less credibility or legitimacy as a gamer than the hardcore, or “true” gamer. What ties this back to gender is this: a discourse of legitimacy is explicitly connected to masculine gamers because the game players most valued in the culture are the hardcore players who are defined by and through references to a stereotyped masculinity. In contrast, tropes of femininity are devalued in the game world as when games seen as more “girly” are called bad or less serious. But, also because the demographics of casual gamers are a majority of women over 30, when hardcore gamers abuse casual gamers by saying they will bring the industry down, they are in fact referring to real female bodies, even if their intention is not to degrade anyone personally. While game developers want casual gamers around, they are about the only ones, it seems. As mentioned above, the enormous outcry from the “true” gamers out there is that these casual gamers, these women, are bringing down the industry. So, not only are they illegitimate, but they are dangerous!

If we look at literature surrounding masculinity on the internet, we see that men’s relationship to technology is often seen as more natural, and hence more legitimate. Lori Kendall’s work studying the BlueSky MUD focuses mainly on the performance and maintenance of masculinity in MUDs. She understands her subjects to be mostly white, heterosexual, middle-class males, or subjected to those ideals. She gives a great
ethnographic account of the ways that one’s gender, race, ethnicity, class, and other markers of identity are performed in online encounters, helping to create a sense of community and legitimacy among the group members. However, that legitimacy came at the exclusion of members who could not or did not fit in.\textsuperscript{111}

Key to her understanding of online user participation in these MUDs is her awareness that gendered norms of behavior shape and maintain social interactions of the BlueSky group. These norms center around the idea of hegemonic masculinity, or "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women."\textsuperscript{112} Kendall suggests that while few men actually embody the ideal of the man in positions of domination, all men benefit from the maintenance of the "patriarchal divide." Negotiating their relationship to these ideals and maintaining those ideals is how the concept of masculinity is used in discourse.

Of particular importance for this discussion is her awareness that in cyberspace one way of showing patriarchal dominance and therefore showing an ideal of hegemonic masculinity is through the use of dominance over technology. This particular style of masculinity requires "aggressive displays of technical self-confidence and hands-on ability for success, defining professional competence in hegemonically masculine terms and devaluing the gender characteristics of women."\textsuperscript{113} So, certain displays of self have

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{111} Kendall, \textit{Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub.}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 72.
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 73.
\end{flushleft}
to be valued at the denial or exclusion of other displays. For Kendall, one of the ways masculinity is maintained is through asserting dominance over women, which upholds a heterosexual ideal; or dominance over technology, which by showing marketable skills upholds certain class ideals in online conversations. We see this same process in action in video game culture through the elevation of masculinity through a performance of hardcore identity and the devaluation of femininity through the abuse of casual gamers or casual games.

If female gamers are constituted as casual gamers even if they play more than casual games, who are not legitimate, can they ever be seen as legitimate gamers by other members of the culture? Yes and no. Everyone can participate in this hardcore image, as long as they do not upset the balance too much, as long as they pass so to speak.

Returning to Kendall, she suggests that women, men of color, or other non-normative groups can possibly participate in the masculine culture of the internet. Because there are not visible reminders of difference, "members of subordinated groups may more easily join interactions with the dominant group as long as they conform to its norms. Thus online forums have the potential to be nominally more inclusive but in terms that still effectively limit participation."\textsuperscript{114} What this suggests is that cultural codes of conduct are organized around patterns of identity, which while possibly inclusive are also very rigid in definition. Those from subordinate groups have a doubly hard time fitting in because they must maintain an identity that doesn't represent them. Further, that identity seeks to legitimize itself by claiming the identity of the other as abhorrent.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 108.
To explain the process of legitimization through normativity more fully, I return to Lisa Nakamura’s theory of cybertypes to explore how some identity possibilities become more normative than others in the gaming world. I suggest that the figure of the hardcore gamer functions as a sort of cybertype. What is a cybertype? Nakamura writes:

I coined the term cybertype to describe the distinctive ways that the Internet propagates, disseminates, and commodifies images of race and racism…cybertyping is the process by which computer/human interfaces, the dynamics and economics of access, and the means by which users are able to express themselves online interacts with the “cultural layer” or ideologies regarding race that they bring with them into cyberspace.  

I take Nakamura to mean that the process of cybertyping occurs when people take the elements of identity they are familiar with from “reality” and retransmit, refigure, or reimagine those identities through the medium of technology. Our identities become retyped or recoded through our relationship with technology, not where we are totally free to configure whatever we want, but where we recreate old patterns of dominance and subordination.

For example, in Nakamura’s examination of the cybertype, we imagine most bodies on the internet to be white, because cybertyping normalizes the Internet as a white space. However, when bodies of color do appear (such as pictures of people on a web page), they exhibit characteristics or mannerisms that mark them as culturally other. Someone of indigenous origin, then, would perhaps be marked with stereotypical conventions of the “native” without any reference to a “real” body living in the present.

---

115 Nakamura, Cybertypes, 3.
tense with real life concerns. This is how difference is celebrated on the Internet, a sort of imperialist nostalgia, in the words of Renato Rosaldo.116 The virtual figure of the native or similar marked other is stripped of all history or contextual relevance to become a signifier representing inclusion/harmony, or simply to add background window dressing in the virtual fantasy/tourism of the white internet user. If the concerns of or other reference to a real body are made, that body is accused of not playing by the rules, being a whiner, or otherwise made to feel excluded or ignored. This is because these real bodies shatter the illusion of harmony that this culture tries to inculcate and gives lie to the fact that difference is not a problem in cyberspace.

While Nakamura explores how race gets remastered in cyberspace, my project is a little different. First, while the space of my study is the Internet, the users coming to a video game culture have a much more specific goal than those more generally using the Internet, and that is to participate in gaming culture. Therefore, much of the meaning making going on in this culture is more narrowly focused than Nakamura might suggest of other Internet users.

Another way in which my project differs from Nakamura is that she is mainly concerned with how race happens on the Internet, even as she realizes that race, gender, class, sexuality, and other markers of difference operate together to form a matrix of domination and oppression. For my project, while race, class, sexuality, and age (as evidenced by the title of this chapter) are all tied up in notions of the hardcore/casual, I am most closely interested in how domination and subordination in video game culture run along a gendered axis through the hardcore/casual spectrum.

This is not to suggest that race, sexuality, or class, etc. is not important to study in video game culture. However, the hardcore/casual dichotomy, drawing so heavily as it does on a reference to real gendered bodies illustrated in gamer demographics and the widespread use of gendered stereotypes in gaming culture, makes gender my primary focus.

Like Nakamura who shows that racialized bodies help to maintain the normative, white, center which usually remains unmarked, the casual/hardcore divide is about delimiting who belongs and who does not without any named reference to identity markers in the discourse. The identity of hardcore gamer is about defining the center in idealized form, using markers of masculinity while rarely naming gender as a feature of normativity. Meanwhile, the casual gamer also helps to establish what is normative, by showing what it is not. We could not understand so clearly what hardcore means unless we know what it is not, the casual gamer.

I suggest that the power and privilege attendant with inhabiting a masculine gaming identity remains elusive and unmarked for most gamers. What I mean by this is that normative cybertypes like the hardcore and casual gamers obscure the devaluation of female gamers in game culture because gender as a marker of difference does not have to

---

117 For example, recent debate among fans over Resident Evil 5 showed that race mattered on the Internet. There was some concern that the game, which had a white protagonist in Africa killing black, zombie, monster bodies, helped to perpetuate negative images of bodies of color as well as a real-life relationship of mastery by whites over bodies of color. Much as Nakamura illustrates in Cybertypes, those who brought up these issues in online debates were decried as reading too much into it, or making too big of a deal. See, especially comment postings, Brian Ashcroft, “Resident Evil 5: Clearly No One Black Worked on This Game;” available from http://kotaku.com/378535/clearly-no-one-black-worked-on-this-game; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.
be evoked. Meanwhile, male gamers have access to discourse that reinforces their legitimacy as gamers.

What do I mean by legitimacy and gaming? Here is an example. G4 is a tech and gaming brand that hosts a cable station and website. It has several programs designed to serve the gaming community. One of its shows, *XPlay*, has a co-host, Morgan Webb, who is constantly asked if she actually plays game. Her fellow co-host, Adam Sessler, to my mind has never been asked this question. Because Webb does not fit the normative ideal of the gamer, she constantly has to avow and reaffirm her status as a gamer. This occurs because, while cybertyping creates legitimacy for some gamers, the hardcore gamers, Webb does not fit that cybertype. Because of this, she is not and never will be normative. Since there are set definitions of what constitutes a “true” gamer, the hardcore player; and because these definitions are inherently set up to exclude women and non-normative men; Webb as female co-host of a gaming show constantly has to reaffirm her status as a “true” gamer. This is done in interesting ways, for example, whenever a sports game or other game typically catering to a male audience is reviewed on the show, Webb is the one to give the review, helping to unconsciously support the idea that she plays games just like the men.

For Webb, we can clearly see how a gender-reinforced pattern of gamer identity can and does have negative consequences for her livelihood. Performing in certain ways in order to maintain credibility for herself and the corporate entity she represents, it is easy to see how restricted her choices may become. Of course, this is not especially different from other areas of society. We are all daily asked to perform in certain ways that restricts the totally free expression of self. But, what is troubling in gaming culture is
how easy it is to see how legitimacy, and therefore power, are restricted to certain segments of the gaming population unless they overachieve to prove their credentials. That these categories of hardcore/casual are so sharply demarcated by gendered tropes again seems suspiciously like a reinforcement of traditional modes of domination through difference. That this is a culture meant for the entertainment of its members should not mean that the inequality within the culture should not matter or that it is not important. On the contrary, as seen by how strongly argued and defended definitions of hardcore and casual gamers are by members of the community, we need to realize how serious this business of fun really is.
CHAPTER 3.
MASTERS OF TECHNOLOGY:
GENDERED ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGICAL LEGITIMACY IN VIDEO GAME CULTURES

As noted in the last chapter, women’s relationship to power within the gaming community is fraught with tension. While depictions of games and the gamers who play them as either hardcore or casual shape the ways in which women gamers can assert legitimacy in video game cultures, I want to open up the discussion by examining women’s relationship to technology in general, which informs this highly technically oriented culture. As I noted in the introduction, women’s relationship to technology has been problematic, and here I will flesh that idea out in more detail by drawing on the work of several feminist scholars. Then, I will tie in the discussion of the problematic female technology user/maker to the topic of female gamers by focusing on the way in which the gaming community embraces these logics in communication with and about women gamers outside the topic of hardcore/casual.

I focus on two specific avenues of net communication. First, I examine the structure of that communication, or the space of the community shaped by gendered communication; I do this by talking generally about the ways in which gendered communication styles broadly affect the way gender becomes expressed in gaming culture, as seen through a discussion of flaming and flame wars. Second, I examine the content of communication, or the place of females in that community as seen from conversations about females, female gamers, and the politics of gender equality in the world of video games. By looking at the specifics of these discussions gamers have had on the web about “girl gamers,” these supposed new upstarts in the gaming community
that may tear it apart by its very fabric, I see that conceptions of female gamers as
dangerous to the community are just another way in which women are made to feel like
unnatural or fraudulent users/producers of technology.

The history of technology, as has been noticed by many feminist scholars, is one
populated by white, middle-class men. They are the makers of technology, and thus
important to focus on, while women and people of color remain largely absent. Yet, this
history is largely a myth. Michelle Wright illustrates the ways that histories of
technology follow assumptions laid out by Western epistemologies. They follow a
progress narrative in which white, European males are the privileged inheritors of
cultural superiority. She writes, “Technology is deployed as the latest chapter of
evidence for Western superiority. Yet, it is a specific representation of technology as
white, male and Western that is championed and accompanied by a truncated history that
grossly distorts the facts.”\textsuperscript{118} To keep this narrative intact, much of the work done by
females and people of color has to be ignored or erased from history. For examples,
while African Americans have been responsible for several innovations in technology
and industry, one of the few inventors to be acknowledged in histories of technology is
George Washington Carver, his token presence meant to suggest a real lack of
advancement by other people of color. Further, when critics attempt to reacknowledge
the work of people of color or women in these narratives of progress, the backlash is
often great. This should not be surprising considering the amount of power and
legitimacy that is leveraged for one group at the expense of others by maintaining
narratives of technological haves and have-nots (or dos and do-nots). However, by

\textsuperscript{118} Wright, in \textit{Domain Errors!}, 49.
keeping these narratives intact, women and people of color are still seen as illegitimate producers of technology. Only by acknowledging the constructed nature of narratives of technology can we begin to take a step forward. Wright writes, “The information and communications revolution was not invented in a garage by two teenage boys, it came out of long and arduous advancements in metallurgy, mass production, an overwhelming accumulation of capital and, of course, slave labor.”\textsuperscript{119} Rather than the work of some lone, white, male genius, the history of computing technology is deeply embedded in questions of power and access to resources.

Counter-narratives of women as technology producers have become more frequent with the advent of feminist studies of technology. Yet, analyses of women and technology have also revealed stories of women working through and with technology in ways that were not empowering. Austin Booth and Mary Flanagan write:

Any discussion of women and technology needs to be placed in the context of women’s access to technology within the international labor economy…Women enter most frequently into technology networks as workers rather than as users or creative producers of high-end technology.\textsuperscript{120}

Women may be relegated to positions of technology maintainers, like the chip worker who operates in the underbelly of technology production. While she is vital, she is not inheriting a particularly powerful position in a global capitalist culture.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 57.

\textsuperscript{120} Flanagan and Booth, \textit{reload}, 13
Following that theme, much feminist scholarship has been written describing how technology has been used to constrain female lives. Here we see accounts of women as the slaves or victims of technology. We might see this in women’s response to household technology that kept them tied to the home and more closely aligned to the domestic sphere at the turn of the twentieth century, as documented by feminist historian of technology Ruth Cowan.\textsuperscript{121} Another way in which technology intrudes on female life is as intervention by the medical industry, seeking to control women’s body and their reproductive capabilities. This can be illustrated by the example of the Visible Female Project. This project, which many cyberfeminists have written about, endeavors to make visible the human body by digitally mapping human cadavers. Curiously, this project is both invasive (as it attempts to represent the hidden or invisible anatomy of the human body) and essentialist (as the Stanford Visible Female focuses only on the female pelvis, as if a woman’s body, and spirit is reducible to her reproductive site alone).\textsuperscript{122}

What these narratives both suggest is that women are rarely ever seen as having power over technology, rather it has power over them. This is very different from the hegemonic masculinity, where men are masters over technology that Lori Kendall outlines and which I made reference to in the previous chapter.

The power to be master over technology spills over even in the very ways we communicate online, often giving men the authority to dictate how technological space should/will be used. Claudia Herbst has written about the ways in which men have


historically been granted greater access to literacy, both in language and technology, and that this access has given men the power to control and dominate spaces such as the internet. She writes, “In cyberspace, ownership of computer languages empowers men with authority over communication tools, as well as authority over the styles and content of transactions.” While I am not specifically talking about men and women’s production of code, I do think it important to understand the perception of women’s place in the gaming community as one of a lack of legitimacy through literacy. I do not mean to suggest that women are not as literate as men in terms of language or technology, or even of the logics of gaming, rather women consistently must prove her gaming literacy to be proved legitimate. Further, there persist multiple strategies to undercut depictions of women that are seen as masterful, legitimate, or empowering. The rest of this chapter explores these ways in which women’s legitimacy is undercut through language.

Susan Herring has written about the different gendered communication styles available to those on the net. After analyzing the communication styles of men and women on a Usenet discussion list, she noticed that men and women’s communication style followed broad, gendered patterns. This does not suggest that men and women can and do only communicate in one style according to their gender. Rather, as Herring writes, “the styles are recognizably—even stereotypically—gendered.” What this means is that far from being a space where gender, or other differences do not matter, the internet as a space of communication, reflects and reinforces gendered difference in the


“real world.” And, in the case of flaming, which has little correlation in the “real world” as a communicative trope, new modes of expression emphasizing dominance are created.

She continues, “The male style is adversariality: put-downs, strong, often contentious assertions, lengthy and/or frequent postings, self-promotion, and sarcasm.” A masculine style of communication on the net is often more assertive and more aggressive, but through that assertiveness, the poster shows ownership over the space. As seen in previous chapters, males are given more credibility as gamers because they are the normative demographic and their tastes are most valued, but they can also reinforce claims of credibility by communicating in an assertive or aggressive manner, which we will see evidence of later in this chapter.

Also, while not exclusively the province of the masculine style of communication; Herring suggests that men are more likely than women to represent themselves as experts. Showing an authoritative, self-confident stance helps to create the expectation that the speaker is an expert. If we go back to the chapter on hardcore, demonstrating expertise is a way to exemplify oneself as a hardcore gamer, so once again speech patterns are helping to reinforce normative ideals that men are the true gamers, the experts, and women are merely participants or bystanders.

Finally, masculine styles of speech often give way to the “flame,” which Herring defines as, “‘the expression of strong negative emotion’, use of ‘derogatory, obscene, or inappropriate language’, and ‘personal insults’.”¹²⁵ Flaming on game sites, which I will describe in more detail below, is a frequent means of communicating and expressing opinion within the gaming community. Many participants of the blog Joystiq suspect

¹²⁵ Ibid.
writers of posting specific news items guaranteed to generate flame wars (and generate comments, helping to highlight the popularity of the site), which they call flame bait.

Beyond the structure of the flame and within the flame itself, gender among many other markers of difference is used to create a sense of community by defining the limits of that community. This is accomplished by regulating normativity in gamer to gamer dialogue that uses difference as a weapon. Personal attacks within flame wars often take the characteristics of insulting someone based on feminized or non-normative traits that make the female or other non-normative gaming participant aware of her position as an outsider when she observes these outbursts, even if she is not the object—or victim—of the attack. So, for example, a gamer may flame another gamer by drawing on clichés of video game nerds: the guy who lives in the basement of his parents. What this does, though, is set up an anti-ideal that relies on tropes of masculine normativity—the flamed gamer is supposedly someone not capable of being financially independent or sexually powerful (he’s probably not having a relationship in the basement of his parents), which then reinforces the mainstream ideal of the normative male as successful financially and sexually.

We also cannot forget about the ways that the words “fag” and “retard” are bandied about so easily in gaming culture. These insults are meant to suggest a problem/deficiency in sexuality or intellect, which in turn suggests there is an ideal that gamers should conform to, promoting normative attributes as heterosexual and intelligent.

A final way to insult in the flame is to make reference to girlfriends—if gamers have them, don’t have them, or are lying about having them. Girlfriends here are treated as periphery characters, there as cheerleaders, ornaments, or proof that a gamer is
sexually skilled, and therefore not a jerk. That none of this has anything to do with being a good gamer is exactly the point.

All of these attacks stand to serve as a display of masculinity that normalizes sexual prowess, economic stability, and social grace and intelligence as markers of success. But in these discussions, being a woman makes these arguments unintelligible, because women do not have the same standards of behavior set by mainstream culture. Insulting a woman by saying she will never get laid has a different cache than when saying it to a man. Gaming space then becomes a male space with particular characteristics and as we will see, one that becomes inhospitable in some ways to women.

As Herring suggests, many women participants on the web are put off by flaming, so that in this space, they are not welcomed nor do they feel safe. Not only are many women put off by the space created by masculine speech patterns, but feminine patterns of communication can create a different type of space and community. Herring writes, “The female-gendered style, in contrast, has two aspects which typically co-occur: supportiveness and attenuation.”126 Herring suggests that the first style of communication is meant to create a sense of community-building and the second style expresses self-doubt and hedging. There are many examples of female-centric gaming spaces on the web, but one interesting example locates and examines a specifically female-friendly gaming culture. The article “Gaming Pink: Gender and Structure in the Sims Online,” by Jennifer Stromer-Gallery and Rosa Leslie Mikeal127 employs

126 Ibid.

ethnographic methodologies to explore the culture created in the game *The Sims Online*. They argue that as a game played mainly by women; rules of behavior and sociality were enforced by gamers to emphasize feminized notions of politeness already established in mainstream culture. Gamers who deviated from that behavior were sanctioned in various ways, from gentle reminders on manners to total ostracization and banning. This space of gameplay, where the fabric of the community is valued over individual freedom of speech is in direct contrast to masculine flaming styles on gaming websites.

Within the realm of websites for gaming fans, there are also many game sites that are friendlier to female gamers. Blogs like *Girls Don’t Game* offer an alternative to gaming sites that seem to focus on contention rather than community in the gaming world. *Girls Don’t Game* was created by female gamers who wanted to write about the games that they love. While they are not explicitly offering up a female-only or female-centric gaming community, or commenting only on things that would interest female gamers (whatever that might be), they are more concerned with the establishment of “safe” space than many other gaming blogs and websites. In their *About* Section, they write, “As the reader, you are invited to comment freely. Do note, however, that GDG reserves the right to remove comments or posts that are abusive, hateful, or defame anyone needlessly.”

This need to reestablish rules of communication and behavior which is inline with a more feminine mode of communication is something not found on sites like *Joystiq* or *Kotaku*. However, the hit rates for places like *Girls Don’t Game* in relation to *Joystiq* or *Kotaku* 197-210.

are much lower. While small sites offer many advantages over big sites, the lack of popularity does tell us something about the power and prestige that these sites have in the gaming community. Similarly, while online gaming is a very popular aspect of gaming, the Sims Online was not a popular game in relation to other online games. Is this another reaffirmation that feminine styles of communication and thus space are not as popular as masculine styles of communication or spaces in the world of gaming?

Thus, gaming sites that may be more friendly to a feminine style of communication have the worry of becoming ghettoized or devalued in the larger sphere of gaming. This devaluation of the tastes and habits of female gamers will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter on game reviews. For now, though, it seems important to note that the devaluation of female taste, habits, and space in gaming culture correlates to the devaluation of female gamers.

So, if feminine spaces are devalued, where does this leave the female gamer looking for community? In order to fit in, Herring writes, “It is tacitly expected that members of the non-dominant gender will adapt their posting style in the direction of the style of the dominant gender...Arguably they must adapt in order to participate appropriately in keeping with the norms of the local list culture.” This is similar to Lori Kendall’s assertion that those who are non-normative in the culture are tasked with conforming to the ideals of the dominant culture I mentioned earlier.

We can see this in action with Hot Gamer Girls, which is a website dedicated to proving that good looking women play games, and not just stupid casual games, but hardcore games with guns in them. While I am not trying to suggest that the purpose of

---

129 Herring, “Gender Differences.”
sites that focus on the hotness of their members is for the sole benefit of male gamers and the fantasies they may have about women, it cannot be denied that these sites are using male heterosexual desire to frame the content of their site and that this could be seen as a strategy for legitimacy in the gaming community. I also do not condemn or condone these strategies as I see this as fitting in with larger patterns of the gaming culture in which women are almost always seen as window dressing rather than the real deal. What I will question is whether or not this strategy is really effective in maintaining legitimacy in the gaming world because you still see forum topics such as: “Professional game girl teams are posers and fakes,” where one poster writes:

 Seriously what the hell are you girls trying to prove by having these so-called professional teams at these game tournaments? Wearing the same tshirt so you can tell people that you're part of a professional girl game team for these tournaments. You are all a bunch of posers and trying to act cool and cocky if you ask me130

Even when these female gamers try to play with the boys and conform to their rules, they still don’t get respect.

Once again this shows that the gaming community can be an unpleasant space for women. Herring writes:

 I have argued that women and men constitute different discourse communities in cyberspace – different cultures, if you will – with differing

communicative norms and practices. These cultures are not however “separate but equal”; rather, the norms and practices of masculine net culture, codified in netiquette rules, conflict with those of the female culture in ways that render cyberspace – or at least many “neighborhoods” in cyberspace – inhospitable to women.\textsuperscript{131}

While I have shown that gaming culture can be a space that is inhospitable to women, I want to turn the focus now to the specifics of that inhospitality, or what I see as moments where women are put in their place in gaming culture.

In the next few pages, I will be examining specific articles and forum discussions that argue about the characteristics and qualities of females and female gamers. What I want to show is that not only are women gamers made to feel uncomfortable by the very nature of the communicative environment of online gaming culture, but as a subject matter, their presence in gaming cultures online is also scrutinized and commented on in ways that add to the discomfort. In these debates, the place of female gamers is almost always in tension with normative ideas about game players, usually recognizable in the question of whether a female gamer is a real gamer. And, interestingly, through this dialogue about the place of female gamers, larger questions about the politics of social justice get enacted in the gaming community.

One of the first articles I want to bring up is “Gamer girls hate gamer girls; They must be on the rag” from the website Destructoid, a gaming website that features news, reviews, videos, and community forums.\textsuperscript{132} Certainly, the title serves as a not-so-subtle

\textsuperscript{131} Herring, “Gender Differences.”

\textsuperscript{132} Nex, “Gamer Girls hate gamers girls; They must be on the rag;” available from
reminder that female gamers are not respected or respectable because they supposedly irrationally backstab each other. The YouTube clip of cats fighting underneath the title does not really help either. There are several things going on with this article and title: first, it reinforces mainstream ideas about women that they are the worst critics of each other and the real problem is not men who judge women, but women who judge each other. This argument is great because it puts the blame for bad behavior on the backs of individual women who have a personality flaw, rather than the structure of society as a whole, which creates a scenario in which behaving in this negative manner generates rewards, whatever they may be. As such, this argument does not take into account female competitive behavior as a strategy for survival in a male-dominated world. This also works within the world of gaming. If men suggest that women cannot be real or authentic in the gaming world, one strategy for a woman is to assert that she is in fact authentic at the expense of other women, who are not. So, in the article, the author shares a conversation he had with a female gamer who expresses disgust at those women she feels are not authentic gamers, usually “hot” women. Having this critique come from the mouth of a woman creates a feeling that the discourse surrounding authenticity of gaming women should not be seen as sexist, because the sentiment comes from a member of the aggrieved gender. This in a nutshell is what the article is driving at: which female gamers are authentic and which are posers? And since women raise these questions, it cannot be wrong to ask.

Interestingly, the drive towards legitimacy by females in gaming culture creates a scenario in which authenticity seems to be in direct opposition to attractiveness.

Because, while there are many beautiful women in the gaming world, the question is, are they just booth babes,\textsuperscript{133} or are they there for the action? The article addresses this when it states:

> We had a recent article about a website called GorgeousGamers, a site which purports itself to have the most attractive gamers on the web gathered into one easy to sort through social networking site....Wondering whether or not they were really gamers, I struck up a few IM conversations with some of them, one of whom I'd like to tell you a bit more about.\textsuperscript{134}

Just like the arguments surrounding game journalist Morgan Webb, this article implies that if a girl is hot, she cannot be a “real” gamer. So these real gamers had to test her knowledge of videogames to make sure she really fits in. The author continues by stating, “We began by talking about her history in gaming, and it’s almost as extensive as my own.”\textsuperscript{135} It is clear that this comes as a delightful surprise to the author that an attractive female gamer would actually know anything about what she likes to do. And, to go back to the ideas of Herbst, by making this female gamer recite her gaming credentials, so to speak, is this not a way of challenging this female’s gaming literacy?

This article deplores the way in which women are stigmatized in the gaming world and treated like boobs and bootie, hence not legitimate, which makes women

\textsuperscript{133} A booth babe is an attractive woman, usually scantily clad, that works gaming booths at game conventions. It is generally understood that these women are paid to look good and attract attention to the booth but are not gamers.

\textsuperscript{134} Nex, “Gamer Girls Hate Gamers Girls.”

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
suspicious and demeaning toward other gaming women. Yet, this article is in fact contributing to the process in which women have to prove themselves as authentic through the gatekeeping activities of the author, who in the role of expert, quizzes the female gamer on her knowledge to make sure she belongs. But, we do find that hot women are good gamers!

Along with debates over whether or not good-looking women are actually gamers, another trope within the gaming community online is whether or not girlfriends game. Constantly asked on forums is: How do I get my girlfriend to like games? This reinforces the notion that only men game and women are unwilling to participate in this culture. Responding to this question, a female writer on *Destructoid* writes the article, “Why You Don’t Wanna Turn Your Girl into a Gamer.”  

Creating an imaginary scenario where a girlfriend starts gaming, the author suggests that all of the things a male gamer likes about his girlfriend will change. She will stop being pretty, because she will gain weight from not exercising. She will stop primping because she’s spending hours on games. She will stop cleaning the house and everything will become a mess. And she will want to hang out with her boyfriend more, which he should not want to have happen, because she will ruin the atmosphere of “guys” nights out. While meant to be a joke article, it also serves to reinforce heteronormative ideals about male and female gendered and sexual behavior. The woman is meant to serve the man sexually and domestically, and video games will get in the way of all that.

---

Related to the trope of the non-gaming girlfriend is the narrative of the girlfriend who does game, but who only likes certain games, usually casual. The question asked by gamers online then becomes: How can I get her to like the games I like? This once again reinforces the masculine privilege of being the arbiters of taste in the gaming sphere, which usually skews toward hardcore rather than casual games.

This brings us to discussions on the new visibility of girl gamers that the success of the Nintendo Wii has seemed to incite. One of the central problems and questions the new focus on girl gamers brings out is: Do female gamers like the same games as men, or different games? Obviously, the answer depends on the female playing the game. Yet, these debates show what it is like to be the targeted category, or in the words of WEB DuBois, what it feels like to be identified as a problem. As noted in earlier chapters, female gamers are constantly compared to the stereotyped ideal of the female gamer—or the casual gamer—which also as previously noted, is a negative ideal. For a female gamer hoping to escape stereotypical labels, how does she reject that label without rejecting herself as female: by denying any connection to those casual games, or trying to rehab the label by deconstructing the stereotype? Once again, on Destructoid a female gamer writes about how, while she likes to play masculine games like FPS, she also admits to having a guilty pleasure, games targeted at girls. She cites her willingness to play these games being triggered by the first game she played on the Commodore 64, Barbie, which gives her credibility as a gamer because she is old school. So that while


she can admit to liking games targeted toward women like *Cooking Mama* and *JoJo’s Fashion Show*, which are not really respected in the gaming community, she still has to identify these games as guilty pleasures, not really good enough to be proud of playing. While trying to confront the specter of the casual game and casual gaming, by admitting to liking these games against her will, has the landscape of gaming labels been changed?

Interestingly, in the comments section of this blog entry, many males and females applaud the author for acknowledging that these games are playable, and many admit to having similar guilty pleasures. So, it seems that gamers are aware that the dichotomies in gaming along the hardcore/casual spectrum do not necessarily add up. But, meanwhile, you also have comments like “Girls have cooties and shouldn’t be playing games.”

While more than likely a joke, these comments still serve to subtly reinforce the fact that female gamers and their perceived gaming habits are not welcome in the gaming world. What also becomes apparent is how difficult it is to separate female gamers from their femaleness, which in the context of the gaming world, is almost always denigrated.

Until, of course, game developers realized women have money to spend too and can and do spend that money on video games. While the denigration of female gamers is still a large part of the culture, seen by comments from gamers, the view from the top tells a different story. Game developers seem highly interested in paying female gamers the ultimate respect by making games targeted toward them. The question still remains, though, what are those games that women like?

This question further stirs the pot in the gaming fan community because this interest in female gamers by game developers seems somehow unsavory, as if by

---

139 Ibid.
blatantly courting the female demographic, the illusion that the community is run by higher motives than profit, such as art or the “integrity of good games,” is shattered. Also undesirable is the fact that the moves by those game developers seem at best stupid because they do not know what female gamers like, but at worst unfair because why should girl gamers suddenly get all of the attention? For example, in a *Destructoid* article debating the marketing savvy of game developers, the author writes:

Don Ryan, the new COO at Oberon Media (*AstroPop, Zuma Deluxe*), has somehow come to the *bizarre* conclusion that women can be just as competitive as men. Maybe if they’re competing in a pot roast cook-off, amirite?140

Once again, joking around about the supposed characteristics of women and their relationship with competition, the author does point out that marketing and market research aimed at women can be condescending. He goes on:

Honestly, I don’t even see why something like this needs stating. A person’s gender doesn’t automatically lend itself to what types of games they might favor, the sort of mindset they have while playing, or skill level. I’m sure there are plenty of girls that enjoy memorizing scores of complex combos in fighting games, just like there are plenty of guys that prefer having only one button to deal with.141

---

140 Justin Villasenor, “Wait a minute, female gamers can have the same mindset as men!?!;” available from [http://www.destructoid.com/wait-a-minute-female-gamers-can-have-the-same-mindset-as-men--89906.phtml](http://www.destructoid.com/wait-a-minute-female-gamers-can-have-the-same-mindset-as-men--89906.phtml); Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.

141 Ibid.
However, while attempting to defend the multiple attitudes of women gamers, he still references the default scenario where girls like simple games and boys like hard games.

Of course, the author is right. Marketing schemes often distill the characteristics of a demographic to its most basic stereotypes. No one wants to feel like a stereotype or have to work against a stereotype. But, females are already forced to do that—now they just might get a little power from it, in the form of creating a recognizable marketing coalition. So, is this not also subtly saying that people need to stop focusing on women gamers, especially now that they are not the butt of jokes? Because, at the same time, by suggesting that people need to stop making a fuss, in fact, ridiculing the idea that there is something to be made a fuss of in the first place, is a way of reinforcing that women gamers problems fitting into gaming culture could be solved by everyone shutting up and not talking about it. This works much like the way the ideal of a color blind society works. That theory suggests that once people stop paying attention to difference, equality will be achieved. The problem, of course, with this ideal is that inequality based on difference does not just go away.

The comments section of the blog show that the problem will not be solved by ignoring difference, because difference is acknowledged anyway. One commenter writes, “Yeah, girls buy/play games... with their man’s money. Snap. Yeah, I went there.”142 Another writes, “You see, a woman is a simple creature who has no individuality from her peers. Women have a hive mind of sorts; every one of them are only different in

142 Ibid.
appearance.”\textsuperscript{143} So, these depictions of women as stupid bodies who only spend the money of their man and who are only interesting because of their physical appearance must be ignored because to bring it up would be to shatter the illusion that gaming culture is an equal playing field. And, maybe, in the context of insults, both genders are equally mocked, as this commenter writes,” Having a stick in your pants automatically makes you want to memorize up-down-X-X-Y-Y. It’s a fact, I looked it up on Wikipedia.”\textsuperscript{144} Certainly, this depiction of masculinity as hyper-competitive challenges the assumption that men have anything to feel superior about. Yet, this comment lacks the bite of the other two that are directed at women.

The tension in the gaming world between gamers who want or need inequalities surrounding female gamers to be ignored and those who want or need those issues to be addressed came to a head in the comments section of one blog, that was, importantly, debating the politics of separate girl gaming culture. \textit{Joystiq} wrote a blog entry about several gaming websites geared towards girls that came out with an online Girl Gamer Award for the 2006-7 gaming year. \textit{Joystiq} suspected this of being a PR move and asked:

We've recently been talking about developing and marketing games for females, and this is a great example of how to do that -- find out what they're playing, not tell them what they should be playing. However, in all honesty ... this looks like a list of games that could have been pulled together from sites populated by only male gamers. Further proving that the line between girl gamers and guy gamers is something created by PR

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
and marketing, not the people who play the games. Our advice? Open up the voting to everyone, but have them identify which sex they are (Austin Powers: "Yes, please!) from the outset. Once the awards are done, give us the winners, and show us how the demographics break down by sex, age, toothbrush color, favorite type of pizza, etc. That way the marketers will see we're all just playing games.\textsuperscript{145}

Once again, the blog takes the stance that girls and guys as gamers are not that different, so people should stop making such a big deal. However, the comments section reveals what a big deal it actually is. At issue for many commenters was the perception that special categories like girl gamers that are created by market research or gamers themselves create a sense of special treatment or entitlement that is at odds with creating equality within gaming culture online. One commenter writes, “This is stupid. Why do girls always have special treatment. Its not like we have Guy Gamer Award. Lol, and they want equality. This is not equal at all.”\textsuperscript{146} Another writes, “they want equality and then they end up differentiating themselves by calling themselves “girl gamers”...And how can you take it serious when they put just a couple of games there and even into the wrong genre?”\textsuperscript{147} Finally, another commenter writes:

\begin{quote}
We are only talking about female gamers as a single group because female gamers decided to be regarded as a single group. Who do you think
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{146} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
came up with the idea for Girl Gamer Awards, or the PMS Clan, or girl gamer panels at gaming conventions? People who don't feel as if they are in power say that they are treated differently, yet want to be considered separate [sic] because that means they are getting preferential treatment.\textsuperscript{148} What all of these posts seem to suggest is that by marking themselves as different, female gamers can not be equal to male gamers because they self-segregate. We might interrogate this assumption a little by stating that female gamers are almost always already singled out in the gaming world, usually negatively, as seen in earlier comments that joke on female gamers. The attempt by female gamers to create all-female gaming clans or start awarding prizes for games geared toward women seems to me an attempt to reimagine and control the depictions of female gamers that does not rely on negative characteristics since, as a category, they are already visible. However, this is problematic to some gamers, because the only solution for equality within the gaming world is for females to conform to male standards because the act of separation becomes unequal and unfair.

The gamers who posted above appear to perceive these gaming developments as if it was a privilege or an entitlement, when, in fact, acknowledging the problem or attempting to self-segregate to avoid the problem is about attempting to reduce the hidden male privilege in the gaming industry that most gamers don’t want to acknowledge. Allan Johnson, citing Peggy McIntosh, writes, “As Peggy McIntosh describes it, privilege exists when one group has something of value that is denied to others simply because of the groups they belong to, rather than because of anything they’ve done or

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid.
failed to do.” In video game culture, that male privilege, in brief, allows male gamers the privilege of having games already targeted to their demographic, of easily fitting into the culture because they more clearly reflect the status quo, and of having control over the limits and nature of the culture as part of the majority. But all of this privilege is hidden and unacknowledged, so you have commenters writing, “If we made a Male Gamer Awards, we’d be called sexist. This is the latest step in the continuing idiocy.” Because male privilege is unacknowledged, self-segregation by female gamers or target marketing by game developers seems unfair.

Girl gamers, when they self-segregate, or enjoy their new positive visibility by game marketers, are not asking for preferential treatment, they are asking for equal treatment, which many male gamers take for granted, and which many female gamers perceive they are not getting when they pretend to be just one of the boys.

In this chapter, I have outlined how gendered assumptions about women’s relationship to technology inform the gendered dynamics taking place in gaming communities online. Of note, communicative styles within the gaming community that rely on assertiveness, aggressiveness, and flaming serve to reinforce gaming space as a masculine space, and one in which many female gamers may feel uncomfortable in. But also, within discussions in the gaming community, characteristics of femaleness and female gamers are debated in such a way as to further delineate that female gamers are not normative and, often, not respected. Because of new interest by game developers in the female gaming demographic, tension surrounding the place of female gamers has

---


150 Kelly, “Girl Gamers Award.”
come to a head. At issue is the politics of representation in which many gamers feel that interest in this “new” demographic creates entitlements for female gamers. At the same time, male privilege, which many male gamers enjoy but do not acknowledge, remains hidden. Yet, through debate over the place of females in gaming culture, one can not help but hope that this new visibility might bring changes within the culture that would allow female gamers to maintain a place within the community.
Much has been written about the structure of mediating technology like video games by both gaming and feminist scholars. For example, Sherry Turkle, in *Life on the Screen*, explores the ways that computer/internet technology changed self-conception. She writes of players interfacing with MUDs, “As players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction.” New interfaces and new media allow for a greater potential for self-exploration and self-creation.

While I take the above to be true, I am not so much interested in specific elements of design that shape individual gamer’s relationships with games and with self-identification. Rather, I want to examine how those game elements help to shape community. Games, as artifacts of the community, are reaffirming the values and ideals of that community. And to understand what is most valued, I look at the game review, which draws attention to the elements that are considered important in determining quality. As I describe below, the game review, like other aspects of gaming culture, is not neutral or free from the logics of gendered power. Questions about style, and if a game is hardcore or casual, often determine whether a game is considered more or less valid. Although I have briefly talked about the way in which games come to be labeled hardcore, particularly in relation to style, I want to write about the ways that the quality or value of these games comes to be constituted by the gaming community.

In summary of previous chapters, the style of a game makes a big difference in how it is perceived by gamers, whether it is seen as hardcore and therefore taken more seriously. I analyzed two games, *Animal Crossing*, and *Grand Theft Auto*, and explained that while the design of the games was similar in many respects, the look, feel and style of the games pushed one game towards hardcore and another towards casual.

Not only were these styles labeled differently, but these games catered to different fanbases. Studies have suggested that women tend to gravitate away from violent games.\(^{152}\) Traditionally, women have been pegged as liking certain genres of games, such as RPGs, puzzle games, and simulation games. Now, of course there are many women who do like violent games, just as there are many men who do not like violence in their games, but making generalizations as most marketers do, we see that women gamers are not inclined to like hardcore games that rely on violence for that label. Yet, because they are hardcore, these games get legitimized. And further, as previously mentioned, since women tend not to like the violent games that are seen as legitimate, they are not legitimate.

Here, I want to look at some of the ways the style/elements of games prohibit them from being respected critically within the gaming world. Once these games are derided by the gaming culture, the people who play these games are derided as well.

Some games are more respected than others; casual games are less respected than hardcore games, in general. If we start to look at how games are ranked in the game community, we see that some clear distinctions emerge. For example, looking at all games on the review site *Metacritic* for the gaming platforms of this generation, the Wii,

\(^{152}\) Cassell and Jenkins, *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat*. 
360, and PS 3 and sorting them by score, none of them would be games that a casual gamer could pick up and play. Further, of those top ten, seven of them have the trappings of our stereotypical “hardcore” game; graphics that shoot for photo-realism, mature or violent content, and most of those seven are shooters.\footnote{“Search Results from Metacritic.com;” available from \url{http://apps.metacritic.com/search/process?ty=3&ts=&tfs=game_title&sb=5&game_platform=PS3&game_platform=wii&game_platform=xbox360&release_date_s=&release_date_e=&metascore_s=&metascore_e=&x=28&y=0}; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009. Those games listed from highest to lowest are: \textit{Grand Theft Auto IV} (360); \textit{Grand Theft Auto IV} (PS3); \textit{Super Mario Galaxy} (Wii); \textit{Bioshock} (360); \textit{The Orange Box} (360); \textit{Legend of Zelda: The Twilight Princess} (Wii); \textit{LittleBigPlanet} (PS3); \textit{Elder Scrolls IV: The Oblivion} (360); \textit{Gears of War} (360); \textit{Halo 3} (360).}

Another example of how hardcore and casual games are skewed in reviews is to do a mini comparison of \textit{Wii Play} and \textit{Halo 3}, two games that have sold a lot of copies, but are considered casual and hardcore respectively. Their review scores show they have different levels of respect. \textit{Wii Play} is a game that was developed and published by Nintendo in 2007 in the US. It is a compilation disk of nine simple, shallow games that comes packed in with a new controller to help promote the idea of playing with friends. The games on the disk include target-shooting, table tennis, fishing, and other games that utilize the Remote’s motion-sensing ability so that you can aim your Remote like a gun, hold it like a tennis racket or a fishing pole, etc. and from there, easily grasp the point of the game and play.

All of the games on the disk are intended for casual play meaning they require no previous gaming experience. Over twenty million copies have been sold, yet on the
*Metacritic* site it gets a 58 (mixed or average reviews) score and a user ranking of 6.5 out of 10 (based on around 70 user votes).\textsuperscript{154}

*Halo 3*, in comparison, is a well-respected hardcore game that draws on the tropes of science fiction to create an action packed FPS game. Released in 2007, it is the third in a series developed by Bungie and published by Microsoft; *Halo 3* continues the story of *Halo*, released in 2001, and *Halo 2*, released in 2004.

Set several hundred years in the future, the United Nations Space Command (UNSC) begins planetary colonization through interstellar travel. In those travels, the UNSC encounters a very religious alien race called the Covenant, who because of cultural differences with humans, systematically begins to destroy our space colonies. At the beginning of the series, one last space marine (SPARTAN in Halo parlance), the Master Chief, escapes from the horrific battle of Reach with the Covenant only to find Halo, a ringworld much like Larry Niven’s world of that name. On Halo, he is forced to fight the Flood, a parasitic alien species accidentally released by the Covenant. Guiding him in his adventures is Cortana, a female AI with a sexy voice.\textsuperscript{155} He discovers that Halos are weapons of mass destruction built to fight the Flood, yet capable of destroying many vectors of space in the process and therefore dangerous to human civilization. In the end of the first game, Master Chief is forced to flee and destroy Halo. Master Chief returns to the location of the battle of Reach that started off the first game to join the survivors in a desperate bid to stop a Covenant invasion of Earth. In the second game,

---


\textsuperscript{155} Having a female AI/communications officer leading the male soldier is a common trope in video games and science fiction.
Covenant reaches Earth, where they are badly beaten. Master Chief and the Covenant Commander, the High Prophet of Regret, fly to another Halo, which must also be stopped from activating. Of importance in this part of the series is the added gameplay ability to play as either SPARTAN or Covenant, thus fleshing out more of the story. In the final installation, Master Chief, in the midst of a full-scale Covenant invasion of Earth, must travel to a place called the Ark, where a new Halo under construction is activated finally to destroy the Flood.

Sound confusing? While the story is in some ways incomprehensible to someone who has never played it, and its elaborateness makes it seem really important, the truth is that plot matters very little in relation to the gameplay. People play Halo to shoot other people, either AI characters or other gamers during online game play, and the plot can be boiled down to a battle between aliens and space marines, the oldest chestnut in science fiction.

As stated above, Metacritic gave Wii Play an average score while Halo received a 94 (or universal acclaim) rating and 7.2 average user rating out of 1988 user votes. Another respected gaming site, IGN, gave Halo 3 a 9.5 or incredible and Wii Play a 5.5 or mediocre. Finally, on the Gamefaqs website, where users can post reviews,

---

156 The sheer number of people who took the trouble to write a review for Metacritic also tells us something about the enormous popularity of this game and how those who are connected to the community are playing Halo (and writing reviews) much more than Wii Play. See “Halo 3;” available from http://www.metacritic.com/games/platforms/xbox360/halo3?q=halo%203; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.

157 “Halo 3 Review;” available from http://xbox360.ign.com/objects/734/734817.html#reviews; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009; and “Wii Play (with Wii Remote) Review;” available from
participate in message boards, or look up game walkthroughs, *Wii Play* gets a greater number of low scores from fan reviews than *Halo 3*.

Clearly, certain games are more legitimate than other games, evidenced by the better gaming review. But, does the gaming community pay more attention and give more credit to hardcore games in general? For example, I do not think there were midnight release parties for *Wii Play*. This game is derided as barely worth calling a game at all, yet for this generation of console games, it has sold more than any other game in this generation. Yet, despite or in spite of those numbers, it gets no respect in the gaming community as seen by those atrocious game scores.158

In comparison, *Halo 3*, the biggest seller for the 360 at 7.25 million is the cornerstone for the Xbox brand, described as the “killer app” that everyone wants that will push consoles and the Microsoft and Xbox brand. Gamers wait in line at midnight for the release, just like blockbuster movies. The series as a whole has received numerous game of the year awards. *Halo 3* won *Time Magazine*’s Game of the Year and *IGN* chose it as the Best Xbox 360 Online Multiplayer Game of 2007. An active fanbase produces machinima, consumes ancillary merchandise like action figures, novels, and even a Halo Mt. Dew introduced at the release of the game to complement the all-nighters that were sure to happen. The cultural impact of this game has even hit the mainstream, evidenced

http://wii.ign.com/objects/853/853786.html#reviews; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.

158 In fact, *Game Informer* lists the top10 games sold every month and comments on the top 5. *Wii Play* was at the top of the charts for quite some time. One month, they write, “No wonder this game is selling so well. A controller is inside the game’s packaging!” as if the games themselves are throwaways (and maybe they are, but someone is enjoying them). See “Charts: An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games,” *Game Informer*, 180, April 2008, 100.
by the wax replica of Master Chief being made for Madame Tussauds in Las Vegas. *Halo*, as I’ve mentioned above, has the stereotype of hardcoreness, which gives it a legitimacy that *Wii Play* does not have even though it has sold more games. So, even though *Wii Play* has sold almost three times as much, it gets much less attention and respect in gaming cultures than *Halo*. Why? Does it get more respect because it is a violent game? Or does it get more respect because it is a hard game? Though an elaborate story is tacked on, isn’t the *Halo* series essentially a pick-up and play game experience much like *Wii Play*, only with more blood and a higher skill set required?

How do gaming cultures perceive the difference? Here’s what NZGamer on *Metacritic* had to say about *Halo 3*: “Halo 3 is essential. An Xbox without a copy of the game is like a human without a heart.”\(^{159}\) Clearly, this is a rave review. In contrast, *1Up* (a gaming website) on *Metacritic* had this to say about *Wii Play*, “Play is made for people who don’t really like games, and if you’re someone who really does, that’s a problem. Sure, most of these minigames are fun...for about 10 minutes. But hey, maybe your grandma will want to marry it.”\(^{160}\) What is interesting about this contrast is that, in evaluating the game, the reviewer is also evaluating the gamer and the types of games he or she might play. Everyone who is a real gamer must love *Halo 3*, and only loser gamer grandmas like *Wii Play*.

The biggest fan critique of *Wii Play* is that it is not fun for very long. While both games in some ways are structurally the same (you can go online and play for 5-10 minute bursts, say, for *Halo 3*, which is like picking up *Wii Play* for a quick, casual

\(^{159}\) “Halo 3.”

\(^{160}\) “Wii Play.”
game), *Halo 3* has more lasting appeal because you can compete against other people, which adds interest and longevity to the game. If you are good and you like chess, it will hopefully never become boring, because the challenge comes from your competitors. However, once you have mastered the games in *Wii Play*, there is no challenge and hence no fun. Fan created reviews had this to say about *Wii Play* on GameFaqs, “Wii Play and *Wii Get Bored*” or “You are getting this just for the free remote right?” Fan created reviews for *Halo 3* in contrast had titles such as “The Halo series goes out with all guns blazing” and “Halo 3: Where Slaying Brutes, Grunts, and preteen brats is all part of the daily grind.” This is not to suggest that gamers are not also critical of the *Halo* series or appreciative of *Wii Play*. However, there does seem to be a clear consensus that *Halo 3* is quality and *Wii Play* is not. So what constitutes quality in the world of gaming?

What is usually cited as evidence of good or bad games are: graphics, game design, difficulty, fun factor, story, style, and art. These are all components of most game evaluations. It is important to note that this evaluation of games as good or bad represents a social discourse that helps to shape the community. Of critical importance to this discourse is the game review. Back before the internet, reviews would have been in gaming magazines that fans purchased to figure out if a game was worth buying (because who wants to get stuck paying $50 for *Dick Tracy* on the NES, right?) Along with the official review, gamers would find out about a game through word of mouth from friends.

---


or playing with others as well. But, certainly, friends’ opinions do not have the weight of authority that a review from a trusted source has.

So, the game review has a lot of power. There are so many game review websites that it would be impossible to list and evaluate all of them, but a few like *GameSpot*, *1Up*, and *IGN* are well-known in the community. You also have sites like *Metacritic* or *Gamefaqs* (in partnership with *GameSpot*, but focused on gamer-created content) that collate the results of others’ website reviews.

Adding a voice “from the people,” gamers also give their 2 cents worth either by writing their own reviews or commenting in message boards or on article/blog comments sections. The point is, now more than ever, people can get a sense of a game before they even play it or buy it.

That the game review holds such importance in determining quality is interesting, especially if we compare its power to shape and define the values of the culture with the power of code to shape and define the structure of internet space. As noted before, Claudia Herbst examines the ways in which computer code and who has access to writing it has contributed to continued devaluation of women net users. Those who are literate in the language of code have greater authority and power in that culture. She writes, “Online code literacy translates into authority and into the ability to back up words with action.”163 Those who have the power to shape the space have the power to shape the discourse. Not surprisingly, those most fluent in code are male. She writes:

That code literacy is a predominantly male phenomenon is a well-documented fact…Although dominant Internet technologies and

---

programming trends have far-reaching social, cultural, and political
implication, not a single woman has been credited with an internet
technology that has entered the mainstream.164

Because women are denied access to the perception of legitimate literacy, interests or
issues they might find important are devalued.

Similarly, as will be showcased below, game reviews have particular logics that
emphasize some qualities over others. Like code, then, they have the potential to shape
and constrain community values and concerns. And also similarly, but not surprisingly,
very few game reviewers that write for mainstream venues are women. Currently,
neither the popular gaming print magazines Nintendo Power or Game Informer have
female reviewers in their stable of 6 and 9 reviewers respectively. Online gaming sites
like IGN and blogs like Kotaku and Joystiq have similar statistics.165 While it is true is
that there are multiple websites and blogs set up to give reviews from a female
perspective, but again these are not incorporated into the mainstream. About the only
female reviewer who is mainstream and famous is Morgan Webb, and as I suggested in
chapter two, her claims to a “literate authority” are often called into question.

So, because this is a community of gamers that is familiar with reading reviews
and now writing reviews, the standards of what constitutes a good game are, well,
standardized. The “code” of the game review has determined the perspective in which

164 Ibid., 136-7.

Actually Get Paid To Play Video Games,” Game Informer, 196, August 2009, 4;
“IGN;” available from http://www.ign.com/ign-staff-bios.html; Internet; last accessed 01
October, 2009; “Leigh Alexander bio;” available from http://kotaku.com/5314570/leigh-
alexander-bio; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009; “About Joystiq;” available from
http://www.joystiq.com/about; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.
quality is constituted. That women are excluded from mainstream participation of the maintenance of this code is not surprising.

Moving on, what is the structure of the game review and how does that structure help to define qualities of games that help to devalue women’s gaming experiences (specifically, casual game experiences)? Looking at examples from game reviews, it is typical for a game review to give a brief description of the narrative plot of a game, or if there is no real plot, then the concept behind the game, such as a fighting game using Nintendo characters like *Super Smash Brothers Brawl*. Then, the reviewer usually writes about the gameplay: what genre the game is and therefore what to expect from the game. Further, the review usually goes into detail about whether or not the game was executed well. For example, if the camera that follows a player keeps moving around or conversely stays focused on the onscreen character too much, it becomes difficult to navigate the game and therefore makes playing tedious rather than fun. A reviewer might establish what the game did well or did not in the review.

But also, reviews tend to break games down via specific elements and give them a quantitative score. The rubric that IGN game reviews use is: presentation, graphics, sound, gameplay, and lasting appeal. Most reviews have similar criteria.

Presentation could refer to the concept, style, or theme of the game and how cohesive that is. For example, was the narrative, if necessary for the game, interesting or compelling? Was the idea behind the game generic or interesting? This, in some ways is determined by the tastes of gamers. For example, a gamer who finds the plots of Japanese RPGs labyrinthine and tedious might downgrade a game like *Final Fantasy*, while an RPG fan might see this as one of the greatest games ever. While professional
game reviewers try to keep their assessments well-balanced, it can be difficult to keep their biases in check. This is especially true of games that are seen as “quirky,” like *Cooking Mama: Cook Off* for the Wii. A cooking simulation catering to the casual crowd, it got a 6.5 in presentation for no real reason in an *IGN* review. When they describe the presentation, they write, “The general consensus: it works.”¹⁶⁶ So why did the game receive such an average score for this category if not bias towards its “quirkiness?”

Graphics refer to how good a game looks. While a game does not necessarily have to be as near to being photo-realistic as possible to receive a good score, it seems to me that gamers tend to idealize photo-realism over art direction. For example, when *Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker* was released, it employed cel shading to create a cute, cartoon-like look. Many fans found this off-putting and appealed for a return to a more “realistic” look, which was given to them in the follow up game, *Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*. Furthermore, games that attempt realism tend to get higher scores than games that attempt a more stylized graphics. In the review, part of the higher scores might reflect an attempt to honor technical achievement; it is harder to make games look like real life, because it takes more coding time and processing power. Yet, in doing so, are we honoring “mere technique” over art? Also, does realism make a person’s gameplay experience more enjoyable? This is up for debate. The importance of graphics is cited as giving players the ability to be more immersed in gameplay. That cannot be denied. Some old games, because they are so graphically simple, do not get to convey the same amount of information as new games. In fact, because of graphical limitation in the NES, the character of Mario in his red jumpsuit and mustache was created to help

distinguish his face.\footnote{Anjali Rao, “Shigeru Miyamoto Talk Asia interview;” available from \url{http://www.cnn.com/2007/WORLD/asiapcf/02/14/miyamoto.script/index.html}; Internet; last accessed 01 October, 2009.} Yet, who would Mario, and by extension, the game player, have been, if creator Miyamoto had had more graphical resources? Indeed, Scott McCloud has suggested that people identify most with a generic smiley face rather than a detailed drawing of a face.\footnote{McCloud writes about the process of amplification through simplification. The simpler the image, the more we are able to pick out the representative characteristics of that image. And, in the case of faces, the simpler it is, the easier it is to identify with. See Scott McCloud, \emph{Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art} (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994), 28-36.} Realistic characters (graphically, not personality-wise) then, might be a turn off to some because the player cannot picture him or herself as that character. Similarly, Alison McMahon, writing about the factors that contribute to players’ immersion states:

Most scholars and scientists seem to agree that total photo- and audio-realism is not necessary for a virtual reality environment to produce in the viewer a sense of immersion, a sense that the world they are in is real and complete, although this awareness has not stopped VR producers from aiming for photo- and audio-realism.\footnote{Alison McMahon, “Immersion, Engagement, and Presence: A Method for Analyzing 3-D Video Games, “in \emph{The Video Game Theory Reader}, 68.}

The fixation on graphics by gamers seems to me then to be another way for gamers to fetishize processing power, definitely a hardcore concern.

The reason I harp so much on this is because, for many reasons, female gamers tend to stay away from hyper-realistic games, perhaps because the game’s themes or plots do not appeal to them or other reasons. But, if the games they do like get docked down in
reviews for graphics, it creates an impression that female gamers like inferior games. Furthermore, Wii games are constantly downgraded on graphics because of the limitations of the hardware. It does not seem to be a coincidence that the Wii is also the console perceived as most appealing to a casual and female gaming market.

Sound is both the musical score and sound effects in the game. Done well, musical scores can be iconic like the Mario and Zelda themes of old or the Halo score of the present. Done poorly, music can be irritating and repetitive (such as the wrestling games my boyfriend plays; years later I can still hear music from those games running through my head). Even more so, sound can significantly heighten immersion into a game. I remember playing Resident Evil 4 and the whispering and murmurs of the monks in the castle section of the game freaked me out so much that I could only play for little spurts at a time and not at night! But, is sound as important as other design aspects that do not get explicitly mentioned in the review? Or, does sound also go back to the processing power (more processing power usually means better sound capability in the game) of the gaming console, and therefore its hardcore coolness?

Gameplay examines the actual play of the game. Obviously, this is absolutely important because if a game is designed well, gamers will have fun playing the game, if not, they might not play at all. There have certainly been many games that I had to stop playing because elements of gameplay were “broken” and it was too difficult or frustrating to play. Most recently was Zack and Wiki, a point and click adventure game for the Wii that had incorporated motion control elements into the game. For example, if you needed a key to open a door to continue on in the level, you would grab the key on screen then twist the Remote as if it was a key. As part of the gameplay that motion
sensing can be good if done well. It can break a game if done poorly. On one of the last levels of the game, you must sword fight a skeleton pirate using your Remote as a sword. Fun in concept, in reality, this was possibly the most frustrating thing I have ever had to do because the sensor bar would either recognize motions I did not intend or ignore the motions I did. I gave up on the game despite loving every other aspect of it, especially the cute skeleton pirates. This is a common criticism of this generation; the Wii motion controls are not always as responsive or easy as they should be. But, because some of these games are done poorly, it creates a feeling within the game community that all of these games are gimmicky and poor quality. In effect, a few bad apples have made the gaming community hyper-critical of the Wii.

Finally, lasting appeal is another criteria utilized by the game review. Whether or not someone should rent or buy a game is another way this might be phrased. Is the game long or short and can you play it again and again? When new games cost between $20-60, this is no mean consideration. Yet, this is not a cut and dried issue, either, as the tastes of gamers are varied (I tire easily of a 100 plus hour RPG unless the story is especially interesting to me) and the skill set of a gamer may determine how long someone will sit at a game trying to master it. If a game is too hard for me, I will not be playing it for very long, because failure is no fun.

For someone who has never picked up a game controller in his or her life, the slower pace of a game like *Wii Play* may be just what that gamer needs. The complicated controls of *Halo 3*, in relation to *Wii Play* may be too difficult for a gamer to master, making the game unplayable. The standards of what constitutes a good game are very much related to the skills gamers bring to their gameplay. Casual gamers more than
likely do not have the same skill set as hardcore gamers. Yet, the games targeted towards
them are still judged by the criteria of the hardcore set. Because they are not being
judged by their own standards, these games are often denigrated as shallow, boring, or
not fun for very long.

This all gets back to the issue at hand because different gamers have different
needs, especially between hardcore and casual audiences. While many reviewers
understand this in principle, there has yet to be a solid criteria of judgment for these
casual games. We are left to judge them by the standards of hardcore games, not always
relevant or fair, or not judge them at all.

Clearly, reviewing games is a subjective experience, which the gaming
community knows. Yet, the power of the reviews, and the scores given to games, can not
be denied. When Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess was released for the Wii and
Gamecube, it got an 8.8 from GameSpot, and fan outrage was heard across the internet,
spawning parodies of that outrage. So, there is no doubt that game reviewing creates
community consensus, even if gamers debate whether a score is deserved or not. The
larger project at work is creating the framework for determining how value, quality, and
fun is created.

We now think about graphics as highly as gameplay. Production values matter
almost as much as any other game element. The question of how much fun a player
should have with a game has also become standardized. But that standardization creates
unconscious assumptions about what games should be.

While some reviews do try to quantify a “fun factor,” fun sometimes seems like
the least important aspect of the game, especially if the game is hard. Player enjoyment
is less important that the gamer’s mastery over the game as it allows the gamer to brag to others on his or her skill. If you have ever seen a gaming competition, fun is the last thing that seems to be going on. What really matters is whether or not the game is hard. If a game is hard and a gamer can master it, then that mastery will lend legitimacy to the gamer. Again, I would argue casual players are not judging a game by this criteria, but they are being judged for not being willing to conform to this criteria.

These ideas were brought home to me forcefully during a presentation given by a classmate in a class on globalization and video games. Our assignment had been to give a presentation on our experiences playing video games and my classmate had played Rayman’s Raving Rabids and Super Mario Galaxy, both for the Nintendo Wii. Rabids is a compilation of minigames that centers on ugly/cute bunnies persecuting a duckman named Rayman. The controls are all motion control, very similar to Wii Play or Wii Sports in that a person does not need to have much skill to have fun. Mario Galaxy uses the controller more traditionally and follows a more traditional action-platformer genre, with the twist that gravity (because it is Mario in space!) affects your character, which is a bit tricky to negotiate at first. The pay off is the sense of satisfaction in completing a level. Having played both games, I thought there would be no comparison on which was the “better” game, Mario Galaxy obviously, because the game experience was so revolutionary and amazing judged by traditional “review type” standards.

Yet, my classmate said she liked Rayman more because she had more fun. Mario Galaxy was too hard. And having seen friends who regularly played games struggle with that first level in Mario before they got the hang of the controls, I could see that this game had a steeper learning curve than someone who never plays games might be able to
handle. *Mario Galaxy* was marketed as a game that was for everyone. However, if something is frustrating, it stops being fun.

Reviews of games imagine we all enter the game with the same skill set and experiences. This creates a structure of inequality that casual gamers, if they like games that skew more casually, might feel undervalued. Because, to reiterate, games are given certain labels that bleed onto the players that play them.

All this in itself is not really a problem, except that, as stated above and in earlier chapters, women are going to be seen as the target audience of *Wii Play*. We might see *Wii Play* as more stereotypically appealing to females and the *Halo* franchise as more appealing to men—not only because women make up the larger share of casual game players, of which *Wii Play* applies, but also because the gameplay is not hyper-violent—women might feel more comfortable playing a game such as *Wii Play*. Because playing “macho” hardcore games is a way to establish legitimacy, especially since these games are considered “better,” women who game, regardless of what they play, are seen as less legitimate than men because they have already been categorized as casual players by the culture. When the value or quality of these games becomes split along the lines of casual and hardcore, the devaluation of women gamers cannot be far behind.
CONCLUSION.
WHAT’S THE PROBLEM WITH WOMEN GAMERS?

In the past few chapters, I examined the ways in which culture, gender identity, and gaming have intersected in various ways. In the first chapter I explained that identity within the gaming community is tied to branded consumption. As part of that identity formation, gamers defend the brands they like while trashing those they consider inferior, seen in internet communication surrounding the most recent console war.

That branded consumption translates into arguments over the hardcore—what/who it is and who belong. As I noted in my second chapter, the idea of hardcore and its antithesis casual, help to delimit the space of the gaming community and who belongs in that community. Unfortunately, that hardcore/casual spectrum relies on gendered coding that places female gamers at a disadvantage within the community, often leaving them marginalized or deligitimized.

This gendered hardcore/casual spectrum gets reinforced by gendered communication within gaming culture online. Communication styles of posters online only reinforce the idea that gaming space is a masculine space, often leaving women gamers uncomfortable. Not only that, but dismissive characterizations of women and women gamers by some members of the community show a lack of interest in changing that space to be more inclusive of women.

Meanwhile, by creating a standardized value system used to constitute the quality of games consumed by hardcore and casual users, gamers, identified by the games they play, get further hierarchized.
One thing seems clear throughout this discussion: gendered discourse helps to create meaning and value for certain people in the community at the expense of others. Of particular note is how the video game community has used the spectrum of hardcore/casual to establish the limits of their community and that based on their perceived or real position on that spectrum, women are often seen as a “problem.”

This seems to be in direct opposition to the attention given to women gamers by game developers and marketers during this console generation. Women gamers are the “it” demographic of the moment, though game makers often do not explicitly cite them. Rather, appealing to women is coded in appealing to a casual, diverse crowd, and that new language of inclusivity can not be denied. Indeed, one only need look at the shift that has taken place since the 2005 E3 to the 2008 E3. I started this dissertation with a story taken from E3 of 2005, when J. Allard of Microsoft typified gaming females as the cheerleaders in the story of the hardcore male gamer bound and determined to play the 360 because she was too busy making stickers for games she would never play. The female “gamer” did not seem to be particularly important to the brand image in 2005 at the start of the release of the Xbox 360. Cut to E3 2008, and the landscape is much different. We now have content specifically being created for those supposed “periphery characters,” the casual gamers who skews female. In his keynote address, Don Mattrick, senior vice president of Interactive Entertainment Business, Entertainment and Devices Division of Microsoft, says, “Franchises like Rock Band, Guitar Hero...the success of these title proves that Xbox can deliver to EVERYONE.”

Continuing on, while

showcasing more hardcore fare in upcoming titles such as *Fallout 3* and *Resident Evil 5*, Microsoft made a concerted effort to show more gender-neutral fare like *Banjo Kazooie* and *Viva Piñata*. And, specifically targeting the casual crowd, extended demos of the games *You’re in the Movies*, *Scene It*, and *Lips* were showcased. *You’re in the Movies* is a game that records player movement during minigames and cuts them together to create filmed scenarios. *Scene It* is a movie quiz game and *Lips* is a karaoke-style videogame much like the successful *SingStar* for PlayStation. These games are particularly meant for the casual, party-game crowd. And interestingly, about as much time was spent on these three casual games as was the many hardcore or “traditional” games showcased earlier.

Even the look and feel of the Xbox brand got a makeover, as the company unveiled plans for several new components of their dashboard, or gaming interface. The first big reveal was the use of avatars to customize a gamer’s Gamercard (profile). John Schappert, head of Live services and software said, “The new look and feel is more fun, more social, and simpler to use...Express your personality and style, share it with your community and friends.”171 There is no doubt that the appearance of avatars on the 360 owes its existence to the huge success of the Nintendo Wii and its MiiS.

Beyond the avatars, the way in which people use technology to connect with other people shows that Microsoft envisions the 360 as more than just a gaming machine for hardcore gamers. Schappert continues, “The new Xbox is tailored for the living room,”172 suggesting an entertainment environment less fitted for that loner gamer in his

---

171 Ibid.

172 Ibid.
room, but rather a communal, family affair. With the new design of the dashboard, users can interface with a community channel that offers IM and other communication features, giving users the ability to have “live parties” and share content with friends. This to me shows recognition by Microsoft of the popularity of Facebook and other social networking sites and their attempt to create the same feel of these places (of which they are beginning to partner with in their Live services). But, once again, this is not particularly hardcore, which the Xbox brand has always seemed to embody the most readily of the major gaming consoles. Clearly, Microsoft has learned the value of the casual crowd and hopes to cash in on it.\(^{173}\)

But what of the gaming giant Nintendo, which, one could argue started this trend by proving there was money to be made in selling gaming consoles to those that had never played before by offering simple, casual fun? This generation, their greatest successes seem to come from the games marketed towards a casual audience. In fact, hardcore gamers have accused the brand of abandoning them, as seen by the lack of games showcased at E3 2008 that catered to a hardcore audience. Old franchise standbys like Mario, Zelda, and Donkey Kong, were not the focus of Nintendo’s conference anymore. Rather, showing the importance of the casual market to Nintendo, they focused mostly on their then soon to be released Wii Fit.\(^{174}\) This is a fitness game that trains players through yoga, strength training, aerobics, and balance games. It costs $90

\(^{173}\) At 2009 E3, Microsoft continued in the direction of mass appeal by partnering with Netflix, previously mentioned, and unveiling “Project Natal,” a project that eliminates the controller altogether, instead using body moments as input, making gaming supposedly more intuitive than ever.

\(^{174}\) Indeed, it seemed that the 2009 E3, where Nintendo unveiled many franchise favorites was an attempt by the brand to reestablish their credibility.
because one must buy a new peripheral called the balance board that measures weight, BMI, and center of gravity, yet since its release in May 2008, until very recently, it remained hard to find in stores. This game is so popular that it has sold over 22 million copies in lifetime sales. Comparatively, the PS 3 has only sold a little under 25 million copies in its 2 and a half year lifetime (though comparing a $90 game to a $400 or $500 dollar console is problematic). Enormously popular, *Wii Fit* is not without its critics. On *VGchartz*, one poster writes, “Wii fit is for people who think they are over-weight or out of shape. It is not meant for a true gamer but rather a person who has nothing better to do.” Of course, responses like that do not go unchallenged, as with the example of this poster who writes, “The anger this game elicits from some people makes me love it even more.” Yet, it is because of this controversy over the value of certain types of games and what should be respected that we begin to understand the stakes people have invested in this culture and how it helps to constitute identity, as I have illustrated throughout my dissertation. While not necessarily respected by all in the gaming community, it has its fans, as seen by comments like these and the enormous sales. Clearly, the model Nintendo has adopted in which everyone plays has worked well for them.

The connection between casual games, female gamers, and feminine styles of genre conventions is not always clear; after all, a fitness game can be for anyone even if it

---


177 Ibid.
does seem that marketers have a female demographic in mind. However, the creation by Ubisoft of its sub-divisional brand Imagine in 2007 that is explicitly targeting 6-14 year old girls shows the casual- female connection and the costs associated with it.

Ubisoft is a producer, publisher, and distributor of electronic entertainment based out of Europe. At E3 2007, they announced their Imagine series, which, based on “extensive lifestyle research on this audience,” creates games that allow girls to explore their hobbies and interests.178 Released for the Nintendo DS, these Imagine games include: Fashion Designer, Animal Doctor, Babyz, Master Chef, Figure Skater, and many others.

The Imagine brand shows that these games that are marketed to young girl players are assuming some very loaded assessments of who their market is. The outcry on Kotaku over Ubisoft’s press release in the blog and comments suggests gamers question the values of such a clear demographic stereotyping. Brian Ashcroft writes at the end of the blog, “Can’t wait for Imagine: Glass Ceiling!”179 Commenters are even more explicit in their distaste for the series, especially the Babyz game. TechnoDestructo writes, “Can you put the baby in the microwave, and then have child protective services come for them?”180 Game covers coated in sugar pink and glitter, the Imagine games have a very

---


180 Ibid.
particular type of femininity in mind. Are all little girls supposed to find these games enjoyable?

As Susanna Paasonen has suggested, the ways that media products address women can be understood in terms of Louis Althusser’s idea of “hailing,” where in the process of being addressed, we are also situated, or made intelligible in relation to gendered ideals. She writes:

Subjection means being addressed (hailed) and recognizing oneself as the object of address, as a subject. Girls are formed through the compulsory reiteration of norms that assume the continuity of body, gender, and desire as feminine, heterosexual womanhood.\(^{181}\)

Of issue here is that the Imagine games are really not marketed to an adult female gaming audience, but a young girl audience, so that the pink and glitter are of a set with other product marketed to that particular audience. While we might decry these particular products, the gaming world is not doing anything much different than Hasbro or Mattel, in that they are relying on particular elements of femininity to hail their audience. However, these games then come to represent the worst in the gaming community because they are considered cheap, crappy games. While these games are singled out, the gaming community fails to recognize that games targeting young boys are equally loaded with ideological images and are poor quality, too. For example, XPlay has trashed both Naruto and Dragon Ball Z games in the past. But they are only seen as bad games, not games that show that male gamers have poor taste and are going to “bring

down gaming as we know it!” As I talk about throughout this study and others have suggested elsewhere, this is an example of female gaming tastes marginalized to the gaming ghetto that tends to throw a pall on all female gamers, even if it represents only a specific population.182

Because, somehow, these games for girls come to represent the tastes of all female gamers, even if they are over fourteen. Here we need to see that there is a tension to identify all female gamers as being of a certain type, when the reality is that female gamers represent a diversity of play style and interest just as a male demographic does, especially when we look at the demographic being split further by age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and other markers of difference.

However, as some of the gaming critics have written, the purpose of these super girly games is not to serve an established female gamer population, but to bring new girl gamers into the fold in the only way marketers think they know how; spray it with pink. Given that having an interest in technology in a post-industrial economy has clear economic benefits, is it more important to get girls to play games than changing the status quo?183

However, going pink is not the only strategy available to game developers targeting girls. As the editors of From Barbie to Mortal Kombat write, “In this case, designing ‘games for girls’ misses the point. We should, rather, expand the range of

---

182 See Cassell and Jenkins, From Barbie to Mortal Kombat, 10-14.

183 Ibid., 18-24.
activities we can perform on a computer so as to encourage identity formation as part of a game. Otherwise, we are teaching girls to act like girls are supposed to act.”

However, has this dissertation not been about interrogating the ways that male taste comes to represent the normative? Even if the politics and aesthetics seem troubling, these “pink games” need more respect, not just because they are big sellers, but because some gamers enjoy playing them more than they would a FPS.

This tangent aside, while the rise of interest by game manufacturers on female gamers is good in this era where market attention means power, questions arise. Yes, it is good to be represented in the capitalistic matrix, but is the representation fair? This is ultimately what questions about big-breasted avatars or little girls in tiaras taking care of babyz are getting at. Are these representations for me, what others think I will like, or are they actually serving a male audience?

The backlash against casual gamers that I have documented throughout my dissertation shows that growing demographic power does not equal power within the culture. Part of this lack of power in the culture is caused by the very definition of who a casual player is. The new casual players are not necessarily interested in community. Because they are not trying to be part of the community, casual players are not necessarily being hurt by this backlash. The people being hurt are the women gamers who are lumped in with the casual illegitimate players because of their gender and disregarded because of that. While my dissertation did not specifically ask female gamers connected to the gaming community how they are responding to the pressures placed on them by a hardcore/casual dichotomy, the systematic examination of gaming

\[184\text{ Ibid., } 28.\]
culture as a whole shows that female gamers respond in a variety of ways. For instance, there continues to be a spectrum of discourse on gender and female gaming. While I focused mostly on the negative discourse, the dismissal or objectification of women gamers, women responded to negative depictions of female gamers by outright criticism of the system, as seen by the critique against the Imagine series; by subsuming their own gendered interests in order to fit in, perhaps by participating as a “Hot Girl Gamer” to satisfy the overarching male gaze (and retaining power from their ability to allure) while trying to play with the boys; or by creating their own community within the community, as seen by the many female-centric or female-centered gaming sites. The androcentrism of the gaming community does not go unchallenged.

Earlier, I had alluded to the fact that while the fan culture might see their community created through an appreciation of the art of the game, ultimately this is a culture centered around post-industrial consumption. That means that we cannot ignore how much the market and the bottom line matters. This culture will not change unless there is a financial reason to change. And while market research has suggested that change will bring in dollars with the incorporation of new players, the reflection of mainstream ideals of femininity and masculinity seen by these new “female-friendly” games shows that change is not always progress. And, too, the backlash against female gamers also suggests that change is not always wanted by everyone. As stated before, this is a culture with diverging interested parties, split not just by demographics like gender or race, but by primacy to the means of game production. Those mostly consuming (rather than producing) may be interested in preserving the status quo—
innocuous when it’s just an interest in retro gaming or the games of old, but troubling if that status quo can only exist at the exclusion of entire groups of people.

The changes achieved by feminist activists often come about by “doing,” or active intervention in the community needing change. Cyberfeminists especially have been active in this process. I am no producer of video games, so I cannot make games that express more gender-neutral values. But, as Jenkins and other fandom scholars suggest, because of convergence culture, the role of consumers is more active than ever before. Fans can help to create the community in which they belong by becoming active members. While this study has shown how difficult it is for women gamers to be heard in gaming cultures, we need to continue to voice concerns about gendered power dynamics if we hope to change the structure of these cultures. While this dissertation is removed from gaming cultures because it is targeted at the academy, as a first step in intervention within gaming cultures, I still would summarize the ways in which I believe these cultures need to change to be more inclusive of female gamers.

Personally, I do not think the new surge in interest in a female gaming population will bring positive change to female acceptance in the gaming culture if they continue to be lumped in a ghettoized “casual” gameplay demographic. This suggests that in order to make the gaming culture more inclusive towards women we need to either erase the stigma of certain types of games or divorce female gamers from those games. Because, ultimately if women get lumped into the casual market, they are never going to have traction with the community, even if they have marketers salivating. So, how can we change the landscape of gaming to make it more inclusive of a female gaming demographic?
First, though the very nature of a community or culture draws on labeling who does and does not belong to define the limits of that culture, we must be careful of the ways in which certain groups of people are othered. If a spectrum in which participation within the community defines your relationship to the community and your place within it, that is fine. This is a hardcore/casual spectrum that is not based on other assumptions about gamers.

However, as we have seen, gendered assumptions have been incorporated into that spectrum so that it is not merely how much one is invested in the community that illustrates legitimacy in the culture. The style of a gamer, how he or she communicates and with whom, the assumptions about the games he or she plays and the consoles he or she buys all shape a gamer’s relationship to the hardcore/casual spectrum, and therefore the community. So, we need to start by interrogating those assumptions that come with hardcore and casual, which I have attempted to do here.

We also need to imagine a gaming culture that does not rely on masculine posturing or other limiting communicative speech styles. I find it so interesting that cybertulture is imbued with libertarian ideals of freedom of space and freedom of expression. Indeed, as Julian Dibbell makes clear in “A Rape in Cyberspace” the question of governance and social control is tricky, especially in the face of user violation.\(^{185}\) Yet, as Dibbell also makes clear, laissez faire attitudes do not take into the account that the cyber playing field is not equal and that people have different requirements for feeling secure in gaming space.

The argument against social control on the net is that people do not want to be governed by rules and that people escape to the internet to be free to create a new social discourse. But, I find it ironic that this call for a free social space has us maintaining old speech patterns, power hierarchies, and social orders that exist in the non-virtual world while maintaining an illusion of freedom (for some). Furthermore, to suggest that we can ever be free from social obligation is a willful misunderstanding of what society is. Social rules are what make society cohesive. Becoming socially graceful, for example, utilizing some aspects of feminine speech patterns that help build community, need not be seen as some new rule being applied to virtual communities- rather it is a carry-over from the “real” world that would go a long way in making the virtual world more ideal. Rather than thinking of this as policing behavior, why don’t we think of it as politeness, which all of our mothers taught us?

We should also interrogate the style of the hardcore. Games like Okami or Little Big Planet are interesting and artistic and critically adored, yet they are not necessarily bloody or violent. So, let us start unpacking the values we place on certain form and narratives. That also includes starting to acknowledge multivalent styles of play as valid. We might think of this as unpacking hardcore. Many game critics already say that if you love gaming, you are playing all kinds of games, including those casual games.

However, the changes suggested above are all dependent on male gamers being willing to give up their privilege. This does not necessarily mean losing status, just status that is dependent on the devaluation of others. As Peggy McIntosh writes about the different advantages of privileges, “We might at least start by distinguishing between positive advantages, which we can work to spread, and negative types of advantage,
which unless rejected will always reinforce our present hierarchies.”  

A positive advantage of privilege, such as having the ability to feel a sense of belonging, can be advanced towards more than young, while, male gamers. A negative advantage of privilege, such as having the ability to dominate others like the examples of derogatory behavior directed at female gamers, needs to be acknowledged and discouraged. In these ways, perhaps we can make gaming culture a place where we can all play.

---


“Charts: An In-Depth Listing Of The Best Selling Games.” *Game Informer*. 180, April 2008.


“Wii Play.” available from
last accessed 01 October, 2009.

“Wii Play Reviews for Wii.” available from
http://www.gamefaqs.com/console/wii/review/935589.html. Internet. last
accessed 01 October, 2009.

“Wii Play (with Wii Remote) Review.” available from
http://wii.ign.com/objects/853/853786.html#reviews. Internet. last accessed 01
October, 2009.

“Wii Fit (Wii).” available from
http://www.vgchartz.com/games/game.php?id=7480&region=All. Internet. last
accessed 01 October, 2009.

Wilding, Faith. “Where is Feminism in Cyberfeminism?” available from
http://www.obn.org/cfundef/faith_def.html. Internet. last accessed 01 October,
2009.

Winterburn, Christina Faith. “Why You Don’t Wanna Turn Your Girl into a Gamer.”
available from
Internet. last accessed 01 October, 2009.


Wolf, Mark JP, and Perron, Bernard. The video game theory reader. New York: