SIMULATED SOCIAL JUSTICE? PARADOXICAL DISCOURSE AND DECISION-MAKING WITHIN EDUCATIONAL VIDEO GAMES DESIGNED FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

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Video games that aim to create social change are on the rise. Their goal is to foster empathy for social change. However, few scholars have critically examined how players make in-game decisions based on hegemonic discourses that shape their emotions. Drawing on transnational feminist and postcolonial theory, this dissertation considers how location and positionality within a postfeminist, neoliberal landscape shapes and mutes the perceived representations of characters within games aimed for social change. My primary site of inquiry looks at players of the development game: *Half the Sky Movement: The Game*.

Central to the game’s narrative is global women’s empowerment. This study was interested in exploring the discourse of dissent and acquiescence framed around the game’s narrative. More specifically, it problematizes who is rendered (in)visible through narrative, representation, and gameplay. Drawing on the gameplay review method (Kirschner & Williams, 2014), 29 participants journaled about their experiences playing *Half the Sky*. Participants examined their feelings, thoughts, and decisions throughout gameplay. Then, 10 individuals participated in a follow-up interview in which they played the game *Life is Strange*. Formation, identification, and meaning-making process of each player’s opinions on women’s empowerment were recorded and analyzed. Comparing both games and the decisions made throughout each game, findings suggest that players drew on emotions rooted in past experiences and development imaginaries rather than creating *asymmetrical reciprocity* (Young, 1997, p. 49). Ultimately, I argue that this genre of games needs careful consideration of the postfeminist, neoliberal media ecology that shapes both its developers and players.
To my students. Thank you for making every day unique.
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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION TO GAMES FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

I grew up in a family full of female gamers. From the first day my parents brought home a Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) for our family at Christmas, video games have consumed my life. I remember nostalgically a time when my mom would leave notes in my lunch boxes, asking if I wanted to play Super Mario Bros after school. There are many associations with gaming and gender, but for me, gaming never had a gendered association. My mom played video games more often than my dad, and when he did play, he would regularly fight with my sister and I over who would be Princess Peach.

I played video games all throughout junior high and high school. In 9th grade, *The Sims* came out for PC and it consumed my life for years. I taught myself to program so I could modify my characters (although at the time I didn’t realize this was what I was doing) and spent hours building and creating my own unique material I could embed into the game. If I were to calculate how many hours I have spent in my lifetime playing videogames, I would easily say 10,000 hours (about 10 hours a week).

Gaming was also presented in school as a novel way to teach us skills. I can recall playing *Oregon Trails* (1985) in the early 1990s to teach us about history, *Lemonade Stand* (1979) to learn basic math, *Reader Rabbit* (1986) to learn spelling, and *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* (1985) to learn geography. These serious games became a central part of my learning process. Therefore, it is no surprise that present-day educational games seek to teach about large-scale issues like poverty, social injustice, and even feminism.

This project explores one specific game, *Half the Sky Movement: The Game* (2013). Created by Nicolas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. The game focuses on women’s empowerment around the world. Against the backdrop of transnational feminist and postfeminist media theory,
I examine how individuals play *Half the Sky Movement: The Game* (HTS). Like the choices we make in our non-digital lives, in-game decisions are shaped by experience and discourse. My aim for this project was to study what specific experiences (or lack thereof) and postfeminist discourses shape the way individuals perceive and play this game about a subaltern woman who saves women around the world. Placing this study in context of current political and academic paradigms, this chapter is divided as follows: First, I will discuss how the current political milieu shapes the importance and relevance of this study. Then, I will place this study within the field of game studies by providing a brief literature review on games, gender, and information and communication technologies for development (ICTD). Finally, a rationale, significance, and research questions are provided.

**Building a Conjuncture Through Defining Terms**

Historically, feminism has been viewed in waves. I, myself learned about feminism in waves (although, ironically, we never got to the third wave, as it was always placed at the end of the semester). Each wave represents a specific historical context. Yet, current conversations in feminist media studies have been challenging this analogy by suggesting that the waves interpretation of feminist activism leads to generational dissent. Instead, scholars like Winch et al. (2016) have pushed for a more *conjunctural* analysis of feminism. The term conjuncture has roots in cultural studies. Invented by Antonio Gramsci, conjuncture refers to “power dynamics, the character, the balance of social, political, and cultural forces at a given time that gave a particular moment its shape (Winch et. al, 2016, p. 562).” Conjuncture is more than context, as it looks at a specific moment from multiple viewpoints.

We are at a particular moment in time in which “cruel optimism” marks current neoliberal formations in society (Berlant, 2011). As I collected data and wrote this dissertation,
several monumental events happened. I conducted my follow-up interviews during April 2016. At this time Hillary Rodham Clinton ran and as the first female Democratic Party nominee for president of the United States. It was in April when Clinton and Bernie Sanders competed for the nomination, and there were major conversations in the media about Clinton, her lack of connection with individuals of color, and her work on women’s rights around the world. Her iconic phrase from the 1994 Global Women’s Conference in Beijing, “Women’s rights are human rights,” was widespread online and throughout her campaign. Outside of this narrative were many disenfranchised working class White individuals who felt left out of dialogues surrounding issues of class, access, and poverty. By April 2016, Donald Trump was the presumptive nominee for the Republican Party, and many who voted for him felt that he often spoke to these issues throughout his campaign. His supporters believed that Trump would utilize neoliberal policies via “trickle down economics” as a way to help the working class. Conversely, Hillary Clinton’s campaign ran on the premise that the United States was not as bad as Trump has painted it to be and championed free trade policies for several decades. Despite differing on many issues, both used neoliberal frameworks to purport women’s empowerment while ignoring the larger systemic and economic issues that lead to poverty in the first place.

Yet despite the specific turn of events this past year, conjuncture examines larger power structures. In terms of this project, I was interested in how neoliberalism, in conjunction with postfeminism in its current social, political, and cultural state, shapes the way individuals make decisions in a low-risk setting (such as a video game that bares no consequences in their everyday life).

We are currently in what many contemporary feminist media scholars suggest is a postfeminist moment. This neither means that we, as a society, do not need feminism anymore
nor that feminism is over. Notably, the term is often viewed in a variety of ways, but most agree the term represents a series of cultural moments that have emerged in the past 20 years. Gill and Scharff (2013) explicate four ways to view the postfeminist moment. First is an epistemological shift within academic feminism. “Post” is used to mark a moment in cultural studies in which other paradigms that challenge hegemonic and colonizing ways of thinking (post-modernism, postcolonialism) cleave together to create a perspective that is more nuanced than traditional feminist analysis (p. 3). The second way of viewing postfeminism signals a temporal location in feminist history. This viewpoint suggests that “post” implies that feminist activism of the 1970s is antiquated. Some have equated the third wave feminist movement as the postfeminist wave. The third way of viewing postfeminism refers to the backlash feminism receives currently. This materializes in the form of equating “political correctness” as tyranny, and the assumption that since “women now have equal rights, we don’t need feminist movements.” Finally, postfeminism can also be viewed as a sensibility. In this particular framework, postfeminism takes on what Angela McRobbie’s canonical essay calls a “double entanglement.” In this, there is a “doing and undoing” of feminism, in that postfeminist branding takes on elements of women’s empowerment while still upholding hegemonic systems of power (p.4). In many ways postfeminism has repackaged rhetoric of women’s empowerment alongside neoliberalism.

In *The Brief History of Neoliberalism* economist David Harvey contends that the policies of the late 1970s and early 1980s shaped what is now considered to be a neoliberal economy. The deregulation of industry and the blending of politics and power characterize what we see today as neoliberalism. Harvey suggests that the economic policies produced through this framework view liberty as a result of the neoliberal practices. Only through free markets and free
At this point in US and world history, the way the US engages in global politics is through neoliberalism. Harvey draws two separate examples that demonstrate this phenomenon. First, the “little September 11th” in Chile. Harvey suggests that the insurgent of the democratically elected Chilean government was premeditated by the business elite who were threatened by socialism. The US had its hands in shaping this event, as many US corporations backed the coup. Also, the US media portrayed the deregulation of the labor market as liberating. The second event was the Bush Administration’s push for war in the Middle East. Appealing to the ideology of freedom, the CPA created an order for Iraq that included deregulating the labor markets and privatizing free enterprises. Under the guise of freedom, neoliberalism became the common discourse that has shaped the global and political economy for the past 15 years.

Harvey also argues that embedded liberalism plays a role in how neoliberalism is shaped. What he means by this is that the deregulation of labor markets is intrinsically linked to the political realm. This is quite salient with how media shapes the discourse about global politics and more specifically, women’s empowerment. Neoliberalism positions the empowerment of women and other marginalized individuals through the assumption that gaining access to jobs will diminish inequities (Wallis, 2009; Nakumura, 2009). As a result, political policy focuses on social justice through means of capital and more often than not fails to look as the social structures of oppression. In upcoming chapters I unpack the specific elements of postfeminism and how it together with neoliberalism takes form during gameplay.
The Study of Video Games

Video games have become a major pastime in the United States. Almost half (115 million) of the United States population plays some form of video game (Entertainment Software Association, 2015, p. 2). Moreover, pushing back on traditional stereotypes of “gamers,” there are twice as many adult women who play video games than boys under 18 years old (p. 3). The video game market has become increasingly popular, as over 15 billion dollars are spent on video games annually (p. 12). This section represents a survey of current literature regarding the major issues raised in video game research in terms of: 1) Gender and race representations, 2) The rise of serious games, 3) The extension of serious games to activist gaming, and 4) The dissemination of activist games in an information, computer, and technology for development (ICTD) context.

Representations of Gender and Race in Gaming

Since the early 1990s, research on the representations of gender and race have become a primary focal point in feminist video game research. The following section outlines this research and discusses how the scholarship has been used to define women’s empowerment within gaming spaces.

Ostensibly many video games portray women in a negative light. We can attribute this knowledge to the early studies done by feminists who examined how women are represented in video games. One such study is Tracy Dietz’s 1998 study which examined the roles female characters play in the context of violence. Selecting the most popular Nintendo and Sega Genesis games at the time, Dietz’s content analysis found that the most common portrayal of women was a complete absence of women (p. 434). The second most common portrayal is the infamous damsels in distress trope that is still pervasive today (Sarkeesian, 2014). This trope positions
women as objects to save or obtain through gameplay. Often these female characters are sexualized, victims of violence, and rarely given agency (via control over that character’s avatar). The examination of gender representation within video games has been replicated since Dietz’s original study and has found similar conclusions (Heintz-Knowles et al., 2001; Dill et al., 2005; Downs & Smith, 2005).

Notably, Dietz’s study was done almost two decades ago and little has changed. Research done by Williams et al. (2009) continued Dietz’s work of content analysis and analyzed 150 games across 9 different gaming platforms. Their findings show that, of the characters analyzed, 85.23% of the characters were male while only 14.77% of the characters were female (p. 825). Although Williams et al.’s work only examined the presence of male or female characters, other studies have had similar results in terms of the roles women play in games. One such study was done by the independent scholar Anita Sarkeesian, whose work has become a popular mainstay amongst those interested in gender and gaming. Sarkeesian’s work has argued that female avatars serve only a few functions in most popular games. These tropes include: 1) The damsel in distress (2013); 2) The Ms. Male character in which male characters are repackaged as female characters (2013); 3) Serving as non-playable characters (NPCs) but instead acting as background decorations (2014); and 4) Acting as a reward for playing the game (2015).

Yet, despite the large attention toward equal gender representation in gaming, very little attention has been given toward representations of race. The aforementioned study done by Williams et al. (2009) found that 80.05% of characters were White, 10.74% were Black, 2.71% were Hispanic, 1.39% were Biracial, 0.09% were Native American, and 5.03% were Asian/Pacific Islander. This paralleled to Dill et al.’s (2005) work that found that more than two-thirds of characters were White (p. 123)
A key element to the research previously discussed is a lack of attention to “casual” games. Although a contentious term that is usually feminized (Vanderhoef, 2013), game scholars tend to identify casual games as games that can be played on mobile phones or web browsers, possess simple graphics, and cost very little to play (Anable, 2013). Many arcade games fit this definition as well as puzzle-based games like Bejeweled. As of now, only one study has looked at the representations of gender and race in casual games. This study, done by Donghee Yvette Wohn (2011), found that 42% of primary characters were female while only 12.5% were male (p. 201). Notably, the rest of the analyzed games did not have gendered avatars. In addition to a major female presence, the majority (72.4%) of female characters wore “unrevealing” attire (p. 203). In terms of race, of the 200-person sample, only 8 (6%) games presented a non-White character (p. 201). The paucity of non-White characters led the researcher to conclude that further analysis would be inconclusive due to such little data (p. 203).

The high representation of nonsexualized female characters might be one of the many reasons why games are so popular amongst female players (Entertainment Software Association, 2015). What can be taken away from Wohn’s analysis is that these games are often marketed toward women. Due to this, gaming communities often view casual games as culturally insignificant; yet, this is far from the truth. Anable (2013) argues that casual games are often about work and leisure. They are often presumed to exist on the desktops—always operating behind an office worker’s “real work.” Yet, they also reflect a sentimentality of work nostalgia, privileging a narrative of (often feminized) hard work, as such is the case for Diner Dash or even The Sims series. Casual games have become so pervasive that even education systems have adopted models of gamification (as demonstrated by the small anecdote provided in the beginning of this chapter).
Gamification and Education

Gamification is everywhere and has become increasingly popular in work and education. This section discusses the major findings over the past decade in terms of serious games and education. The subsequent section will continue this literature review with a specific emphasis on games that focus on social change and activism.

Serious games are often defined by their “serious nature.” A classical definition of serious games would define them as digital games whose primary goal is to educate or encourage production over entertainment (Chen & Michael, 2005). Although serious games have become more popular over the past decade, games have been considered for educational use since the early 1970s (Abt, 1970; Jansiewicz, 1973). Since then, serious games have been considered more earnestly by communication scholars, as they are now used for media literacy, health care campaigns, advertising, politics, and development. Djaouti et al., (2011) provide an overview of classifying serious games and encourage using the Gameplay/Purpose/Scope (G/P/S) model. Foundationally, the authors argue that the major difference between serious games and games that aim to entertain is the intended purpose. Serious games are developed and produced with an intention to educate whereas entertainment games can educate but are produced with the intention to entertain.

The G/P/S model stresses the categorization of both entertainment games and serious games through three aspects: gameplay, purpose, and scope (p. 8). In game studies, gameplay is multifaceted and has many interpretations. Djaouti et al. draw from Portugal’s (2006) work, suggesting that gameplay has five elements, the first of which is Rules. Rules allow for formal deconstruction as this is the design set-up based on the codes constructed by the developer. For example, in Super Mario Bros., if Mario runs into a goomba (an enemy) the developer-generated
rule is for him to shrink in size or die. This is linear in formation, as there are no other options. Caillois (1961) suggest there are two types of rules in games: *ludus* (a defined set of rules) versus *paidia* (open-ended rules that emphasize play). This is applied to videogames and is often referred to linear (ludus) versus sandbox (paidia) games. Sandbox games do not have any defining goal and can’t be won. Games like *Minecraft* or *The Sims* series are known for their open-world play. Djaouti et al. argue that open games, or play-based games, allow for educators to add an “educational dimension” (p. 127). Purpose then becomes the second element of the G/P/S model.

Like gameplay, purpose is also multifaceted. Both Djaouti et al. (2011) and Sawyer and Smith (2008) create a taxonomy of purpose for serious games. Sawyer and Smith (2008) suggest that there are seven major categories for purpose while Djaouti et al. extend their work by suggesting that serious games can be classified into three primary purposes: 1) Message-broadcasting; 2) Training; and 3) Data exchange. Yet, despite this specific delineation, both authors fail to mention how socio-cultural systems influence purpose. This is a lacuna in the research of serious games.

Finally, scope encompasses the target audience analysis. By looking at rating systems, the extent to which a professional field uses the game, and how the game is used can offer insight into scope. Yet, similar to purpose, the authors do not discuss how games can be “hacked” in order to educate, nor how unintended audiences might utilize the game and change its meaning.

It is important to note, that despite these classifications, some scholars like Gee (2003) and McGonigal (2011) argue that games that are entertaining can also be used as educational tools. This, too, is quickly overlooked by Djaouti et al. (2011) and needs to be further examined.
There’ve been some major criticisms of serious games and more specifically the gamification of culture. It has been found that learning is not actually impacted by reward-based game features (McKernan et al., 2015). Furthermore, what is missing is a dialogue about the cultural context in which these games are produced. Video games burgeoned during a time when discourse around productivity and work shifted from industrialized labor to digitized labor (Anable, 2013), and “ludocapitalism.” Ludologists, or those who study game play dynamics, found that many games link pleasure and economic value. As such it is displayed in many of these games that are an apparatus of Empire (Dyer-Witheford & de Peuter, 2009). Finally, social-system simulated games are reflections of cultural norms and fantasy and don’t always mirror reality, thus leading to multiple realities, many of which are contingent on the player’s experience and understanding of socio-cultural place within the simulation (Woods, 2004). This will be examined more closely in the following section.

Games for Social Change – Activist Game Development

From games that teach literacy to math skills, serious games—games that focus on educating their players—have become a popular pedagogical practice. Similarly, scholarship on serious games examines acquisition of knowledge (Bayart et al., 2014), development (Katsaliaki, 2013), and the use of serious games in collaborative learning (Wendel et al, 2013). Yet, few games educate players on social justice issues. Games for Social Change then becomes a novel idea in that it claims to “facilitate the creation and distribution of social impact games that serve as critical tools in humanitarian and educational settings” (G4C, 2015). This study fills this lacuna by examining how one of their most popular games that focuses on what the game claims: to educate players on real-life issues women face around the world. The term empowerment has
multiple connotations, yet it has become a popular mainstay in media. Yet, empowerment is an under-examined area of research in the context of serious gaming.

James Gee (2013) argues that video games are effective tools for teaching in that they create a space for experiential learning—a type of learning that has been lauded by many educators since Dewey (1938). As such, there is great possibility for games to teach about social justice issues in an engaging and ethical way that challenges societal norms. Mary Flanagan (2009) notes that at its core, games embed symbolic meaning that is reflective of society (p. 223). Her work examines many games that “reskinned” traditional games to subvert existing social structures. For example, Flanagan examines the game *September 12*—a political game that speaks against U.S. policy after the attacks on September 11th, 2001. The game developing team, led by Gonzalo Frasca, create the game to simulate *Sim City* but they (re) coded it to ask players to shoot the terrorist. Notably, all of the avatars look identical, rendering it impossible to not shoot innocent civilians. Central to the game’s narrative is the argument that innocent lives will be taken if one partakes in retributive violence acts. What this game points to is a parallel system of gaming development—one that aims to subvert rather than reinforce the status quo.

It is important to note that these games intend to catalyze dialogue and are not aiming to create *direct* change. Flannigan quotes Frasca, “The goal of these games is not to find an appropriate solution, but rather to trigger discussion . . . games work as metonyms that . . . guide discussions and serve to explore alternative ways of dealing with real life issues” (p. 248).

Yet, despite this there has been an increase in games that do aim to create direct change by garnering philanthropic endorsement while playing the game. How is this put into practice? Bulut et al. (2014) examined the development-based video game *Free Rice* against the backdrop of theories of ludic sublime and neoliberalism. Using these theories, Bulut et al. argued that
technology is now hailed to be the source of philanthropy in our contemporary era. The ludic sublime creates a space in which the meshing of philanthropic endeavors and the entertainment of gaming exists. It is in this space that the scholars have created the term *philitainment*.

Philitainment is dialectically divided between the Global North and South. The Global North is positioned as a sophisticated actor where the Global South is acted upon.

The authors draw from the work of Samantha King, whose analysis of the modern breast cancer movement lead them to believe that philitainment practices create certain subjectivities rather than partake in problem resolutions. The activism ends once the pink product is purchased. Similarly, in terms of games that aim for activism, activism ends once the game is played.

The *Free Rice* website is an example of this. They chose this site due to its popularity but contend that their theory can be applied to other games. The premise of *Free Rice* is to answer a series of trivia questions. If answered correctly, 10 grains of rice is donated to the World Food Programme. Yet despite the game’s success, Bulut et al, argue that *Free Rice*’s positioning of its questions on Western cultural artifacts (art, history, geography) presuppositions the notion that Western knowledge about Western topics is powerful. In other words, the centering of the Western canon in *Free Rice*’s question bank demonstrates a hierarchy of knowledge and positionality. Instead of educating players to critically look at current events or even offering basic education about the global prevalence of poverty, the subject of consumption, the individual who lives in the Global South, is overshadowed by trivia questions and rendered mute. Although the game garners attention from those who want to play for philanthropy, the eventual consequence is the loss of interest. The authors conclude that philitainment games like *Free Rice* do not create a philanthropic subject but rather a modernized, Western subject.
What the previous work demonstrates is that the way games studies have looked at marginalization, specifically games that aim for social change, is based on traditional models of information and communication technologies for development. The following section examines these traditional models and addresses the gaps within this framework.

**Information and Communication Technologies for Development**

Since the rise of digitalization, information and communication technologies for development (ICTD) have been universally praised by many who research development communication. Often these frameworks are situated on notions that access to ICTs will create change in people’s lives (Zheng, 2009). Access to the Internet and “the digital” are viewed as solutions to reducing poverty (Kenny, 2014). This access has become a top priority for many scholars studying development. In fact, the measure of access to “the digital” is now part of what is considered a standard of living (Avgerou, 2003). As such, ICTs have been lauded as a platform to decrease cost and increase productivity, thus providing a solution to gender inequality.

Information and computer technology for development (ICTD) presupposes that access to digitization will engender long sustainability of culture and economy. This field of study is a child to the field of development communication, whose primary focus is presupposition on the diffusion of innovations theory founded by Everett Rogers. Within this framework, empowerment is circumscribed by the transference and adoption of ideas. The study of diffusion began during World War II separate from the Academy (Rogers, 2003). Its primary focus considers how messages are received by individuals who are new to the “innovation.” It assumes that the receiver of the message has had no previous experience with the message content;
therefore, the diffusion of innovation theory examines awareness-knowledge, attitude change, decision-making, and implementation of the innovation (Rogers et al., 2010 p. 419).

This theory underscores much of the research done within ICTD. Scholars aim to examine how to effectively disseminate access to technology to those without access to digital spaces. Yet, what is often not considered, both by Rogers and many who do ICTD, is how power influences what is being diffused in the first place. In other words, it doesn’t look at how or whether “innovations” are a good fit for the ecological, political, and cultural systems which it aims to change, nor does it consider input from the perceived receivers of the innovation.

The above sentiments are echoed by feminist scholars who critique ICTDs. As previously mentioned ICTs are often considered a tool for women’s liberation. Yet, this “just add women and stir” approach assumes one solution will universally help all women (Harding, 1995). Echoing this sentiment is Anderson and Shrum (2007) who argue that we need to examine empowerment beyond Westernized women’s liberation and examine how ICTD’s challenge existing hierarchies (p. 230). Drawing from 10 years of research in South India, the scholars call for a revision of the way we view empowerment through ICTs. She primarily argues that, once stripped from our Western context, ICTs do very little in terms of physical and social mobility (p. 236). Familial obligations to marry, have children, and “not be a burden” to one’s husband is reverberated throughout their research (p. 242). Despite this, it is important to note that ICTs are not innately bad; there is always a complex balancing act that exists within development. As Anderson and Shurm, 2007) discover, the women who were a part of the research project applauded their new ability to network internationally, thus giving them a more extensive and stronger network than men in similar social-economic situations. What becomes important in this research is the ability to look at ICT through a non-Western lens of empowerment and discourse.
ICTD: Leisure Frameworks

A gap that exists in ICTD is leisure-oriented behaviors that include but are not limited to gaming, social networking, and blogging. Arora and Rangaswamy (2014) argue that this is primarily due to the fact that much of the work done on ICTD is rooted in development studies and is socioeconomically driven (p. v). Productivity is often measured in development in terms of capital. Yet, the authors contend that by refocusing the gaze, non-unitarian technologies will garner a better understanding of how ICTs influences behavior. By centering leisure at a site of inquiry, we are able to find an alternative way to rearticulate productivity.

In relationship to empowerment, Gajjala and Tetteh (2014) note that we must understand how traditional ICTD frameworks fail to acknowledge how time spent during productivity versus time spent during leisure is set within binary forms. This dualism limits the ability to examine how leisure frameworks offer alternative ways to examining development, labor, and human behavior (p. 36). As such, in the contemporary markets of prosumers, individuals who spend time with leisure materials (in this case, M-PESA, a mobile money transfer system used in Kenya) produce as they consume. As users of M-PESA consume its content, they also produce a discourse of development. Notably, the examination of labor and consumption has been popular within fan studies for almost a decade. Drawing from the work of Terranova, the authors argue that one must consider leisure frameworks and free labor in terms of ICTDs.

What is key is that labor and leisure is never value-free (p. 36). Both rest on socio-cultural systems. More specifically, M-PESA shapes a discourse around labor and leisure that is gendered—one that suggests that if women are consumers of M-PESA, they will be able to empower themselves. The authors note that the selling of labor-saving technologies as empowerment is nothing new, as this discourse often is aimed at women but actually compounds
labor (Gajjala and Tetteh, 2014; Wacjman, 2013). In this context, leisure becomes synonymous with empowerment. The act of relaxing implies an upward mobility of socioeconomic status, as evidenced by the M-PESA commercials in which those who are “leisurely” are perceived as upper class.

**Gaps in ICTD.** Kenny (2014) argues that in order to understand the impact of ICTDs we must examine how power operates on both a macro and micro level. Her work draws from previous research that suggests that political considerations are made in donor behavior, especially when the donor agency is funded by the government (Alesina & Dollar, 2000) or has a history of colonization (Riddle, 2007). In this context, economic trade between countries supersedes development.

Using her ethnographic work on a local NGO as evidence, Kenny (2014) found that, on a micro-level, many NGOs are aware of the political problems that exist within ICTD. The employee’s solution was to espouse a belief that they were unique and did not partake in the oppressive behavior. Often employees would criticize problematic practices and claim they were independent from that culture yet still respond to the whims of their donors. What this reveals is that the political problems that exist in development are often ignored or overlooked as “individuals ignore their inescapable involvement with those around them” (p. 18). Thus, a constant interrogation of macro-systemic influences on ICTs in conjunction with micro understandings offers the best understanding of how ICTDs operate through political and socio-cultural powers that be.

**Video games and ICTD.** With the rise in popularity in video games, games that focus on social change and development have become especially popular. One such example is the Games for Change Organization that features games that “serve as critical tools in humanitarian and
education efforts” (G4C, 2015). The work on this site is regularly praised and has received awards from the MacArthur Foundation and the Microsoft Education Award. Despite their burgeoning popularity, few scholars have examined Games for Change using a critical lens.

In the United States, video games are everywhere. This pervasive form of media is now a popular mainstay in United States’ leisure, work, and education practices. This section provided a foundational overview of the research related to representation, education, social change, and development. A lacuna was presented in that few scholars are examining the socio-cultural and political influence that impact games developed to create social change. My research focused on how postfeminist and neoliberal discourses in conjunction with socio-cultural and political factors influence the decision-making process during gameplay of a game that serves as both a video game and an ICTD, *Half the Sky Movement: The Game*.

**Background and Rationale**

Although some scholars have taken notice of *The Girl Effect* (Hickel, 2014; Switzer, 2013; Banet-Wiser, 2015), few have examined how video games are also used to espouse its master narrative. The *Half the Sky Movement: The Game* is a popular game that uses Facebook as its platform to play. Developed by Zynga and published by the company Games for Change (G4C), the game is influenced by Kristof and WuDunn’s book. Similar to the book, the video game has gained great success with over 1.3 million players worldwide (Games for Change, n.d.).

The *Half the Sky* video game echoes the successful book’s narrative of global women’s issues. It follows five fictional characters around the world. Like a “choose your own adventure,” players take on the role of the main character, a woman of color from rural India named Radhika. Radhika is described as a “simple woman” who needs help ameliorating her position of poverty.
This is done by playing various mini games that are emblematic of “causal” games like Candy Crush and selecting narrative options to save the day. For example, the game begins in India with Radhika and her husband. Radhika’s child is sick but her husband will not allow her to spend the household’s money. The player must decide between challenging the husband or finding a way to raise money behind his back. Despite the two options, the game forces its players to have Radhika subvert her husband’s will. This game’s coding that forces its players to choose between the two options has distinctive rhetorical arguments that frame the discourse of empowerment. Despite its forced coding structures, there is still the illusion of choice. As such, this study aims to look at how players make decisions during their gameplay.

A cursory glance of the game (and the book it is predicated on) and one can see reservations about Kristof and his subsequent work. He situates himself as an expert of global women’s issues. He even notes that it was not until he brought attention toward gender inequality in a global setting that it became a political mainstay (2009, p. xiii). What Kristof’s statement proves is the muteness of the work done by the long lineage of scholars, many who are women of color. Whiteness and maleness bear great weight in this incidence, as he is seen as the “expert” of global women’s issues and is often featured on many news sites as such. His non-critical admittance to purchasing a woman from Cambodia for 150$ to “liberate her” and stating, “One of the reasons so many women and girls are kidnapped, trafficked, raped, and otherwise abused is that they grin and bear it (p. 47)” only proves this point.

My discomfort about Kristof and his influence continues. Over the past few years, I have had numerous colleagues associated with Communication Studies and Women’s and Gender Studies inform me that they used Kristof’s work (both his book and his documentaries) in the classroom as source to speak on transnational feminism. Finally, what is particularly problematic
is that policy is being shaped due to this book. In early 2015 Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) used *Half the Sky* as a primary source to represent the voices of trafficked women in order to persuade congress to pass the Justice for Human Trafficking Act of 2015.

Yet, what is important to note is that I want to point out that Kristof and WuDunn’s book is not unique in its discourse. This piece of work is representative of a larger project set forth by the United Nations and other policy makers. It is my suspicion that the dominant narratives of Western feminism, specifically rooted in postfeminist rhetoric, have shifted from gaining equal rights and choices to a new feminism that is rooted in neoliberal philosophies positing that individualism and unregulated free-trade capitalism are liberatory.

Some scholars have argued that the postfeminist rhetoric that suggests that feminism is no longer needed because women are equal is the root cause for millennial women to partake in The Girl Effect (Switzer, 2013). This project uses *Half the Sky* as a primary text to suggest that postfeminism in conjunction with neoliberalism frames common discourse around contemporary global women’s empowerment. It serves as a case study of a larger formation set forth by policy makers and journalists like Kristof and WuDunn.

As The Girl Effect becomes more pervasive in the media, further research must be done on this. By positioning women from developing countries as optimal neoliberal subjects, there is great potential for further oppression. More research needs to be done on the impact of microfinance longitudinally. Furthermore, we need to take caution by asking who this predominantly serves in the end. The woman? Or the economy? Once we begin to interrogate these questions more closely, it may become evident that through centralizing women as the primary instrument to economic grown, the need to resolve the systemic issues of patriarchy, colonization, racism, and neoliberalism is unmet. What is considered the solution to eliminating
poverty might create more problems as the symptoms of systemic inequity are solved with Band-Aid solutions rather than challenging the structural status quo.

**Purpose of Study and Research Questions**

Looking at empowerment, one might find that without a subversive lens, empowerment is always ethnocentric. Similarly, the work presented in this section speaks to a conjunction in history where postfeminism, neoliberalism, and gender development form The Girl Effect. This form of development needs further examination, specifically in terms of its (re)imaginings within gaming spaces. It is my goal to extend the literature explicated in the upcoming chapters to my own research on gender, development, and gaming spaces.

This project’s goal was to examine how discourse that is influenced by postfeminism, empowerment, and The Girl Effect shapes the opinions and actions of women in non-marginal spaces. I use the phrase *non-marginal space* as an alternative to the terms “developed” or “First World” as there has been a long and contentious history of both terms. For the purpose of this project, the phrase non-marginal can be operationalized within a history that positions a philosophy and understanding through the Western canon. More specifically, I am interested in women who are middle to upper class, college educated, and often White (although not mutually exclusively White). These women are often labeled *Can-do* girls for their willingness and belief that action through capitalist means begets social justice (Harris, 2004).

*Can-do* girls are often stereotyped as “cultural dupes” who see capitalism as an avenue of empowerment. Yet, this too is an essential trapping. It is easy to brush these women aside and fall into the trap that assumes these individuals are cultural dupes. I would like to extend the work done on The Girl Effect and ask: What is the paradox between liberal feminist frameworks that positions capitalism as a solution to global gender inequity and transnational feminist
frameworks that challenges this? I am interested in looking at the complex deconstruction of The Girl Effect and the motivations behind it. Furthermore, I am interested in examining how individuals interpret the discourse circumscribing global women’s empowerment. What I am looking for is discourses of friction.

In the introduction to her book, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connections*, Anna Tsing (2005) discusses how one studies “the global.” She describes friction as the grip of worldly encounter (p. 1) or awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference (p. 4). Her delineation of postcolonial research suggests that scholars in this area tend to focus on the “culturally specific” while ignoring the history that has shaped what are considered universals. What is interesting is her line of argument that examines how, despite our ever-vigilant point to be self-reflexive of our locations in globalization, we too are defined by universals. Her book focuses on how to build a methodology to explore this. She asks, where do we locate the global? (p. 3).

In terms of capitalism, she posits that globe-crossing capitalism is uneven and awkward in its linkages at times. This is important because it is the effects across difference that tells scholars something about universality and history. I think this applies directly to my work as I examine Western perspectives on those who might be considered subaltern individuals. I am interested in those moments of friction between women who play *Half the Sky: The Game* and how their solutions and ideas affect women in marginal spaces worldwide. The gameplay review method (GRM) is a great way to examine the “friction” on a cognitive level. One is able to examine those moments of dissent as well as moments of agreement more accurately through an interview-like process (this will be discussed in further detail in the following sections). The elements found in the GRM parallel with what Tsing is getting at in that, yes there is a universal
understanding of the global, but these often arise through messy negotiations instead of complete assent.

Friction exists amongst paradox. It is knowing that there are not clear-cut answers to human behavior. What is most intriguing about Tsing’s work is her focus on universality as a subject. She suggests that closely examining universals unveils important structures of power. The universal becomes her site of inquiry. She pushes postcolonial scholars to “let go of the universal as self-fulfilling abstract truth” and rather look at universals as situational (p. 1). Similarly, we must examine global issues not as a monolithic framework, but rather as a complex system shaped by context, power, and resistance.

In terms of The Girl Effect, we need to examine how non-marginal individuals might frame those who are often deemed as helpless, but also, we must find points of resistance and frustration within the same non-marginal individual. As Tsing states, “Universal knowledge projects cannot be understood without attention to gaps” (p.172). It is within those gaps that I find what I am interested in. The gaps that sit between the discourse the movement is predicated on and the reception it receives by those involved. As a process, it becomes imperative to spend time with individuals beyond a basic survey to understand these gaps. This leads me to my research questions as highlighted in the following section.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide my study:

RQ1: What discourses influence the player’s decisions during gameplay?

RQ2: Do those who play Half the Sky reflect on their own positionality and power?

RQ3: How does avatar subjectivity influence decision-making in the game?

RQ4: Does Half the Sky inspire behavioral change? Why or why not?
RQ5: What is the friction (or paradox) that exists for those who play *Half the Sky* and feminist theory?

**Outlining This Project**

My research project includes two parts. The first part is a qualitative survey of 29 students who played *Half the Sky* as an extra credit project for their course. The second half includes an extensive follow-up interview of 10 students who partook in the first stage of the study. Using the gameplay review method (GRM), these individuals played *Life is Strange*, a game in which the mechanics are similar but the game is not centered around a subaltern Indian woman (like *Half the Sky*) but rather a White high school girl from the Pacific Northwest. This game served as a comparison between how avatar subjectivity and positionality shapes decisions regarding social justice.

Across the chapters of this dissertation, I seek to demonstrate the subtle ways in which postfeminist and neoliberal feminism permeate common discourses surrounding women’s empowerment. This volume does not follow a traditional social scientific model, but is rather split up thematically into five chapters. This chapter, Chapter 1, explored the conjuncture at which this project sits in terms of The Girl Effect and postfeminism. Chapter 2 includes my methodology and methods. Chapter 3 foregrounds frameworks of postfeminism and women’s empowerment by providing an extensive literature review. I then demonstrate how this framework materializes among my participants by providing information set forth in my first part of the study (the qualitative survey). Chapter 4 begins by extending this investigation, giving a widespread literature review of The Girl Effect and its critiques. Then, I demonstrate how perceptions of the protagonists in *Half the Sky* and *Life is Strange* in conjunction with master narratives about The Girl Effect and development shapes decisions during gameplay. This is
done by providing evidence from the second half of my research study. Finally, Chapter 5
coalesces my observations from both parts of my study and provides conclusions and answers to
my research questions. This chapter finishes with future recommendations.
CHAPTER II: METHOD

“I’d like to begin with what should be an obvious point. That the translator should make an attempt to grasp the writer’s presupposition, pray to be haunted by the project of the original (Spivak, 2012, p. 256)”

Feminist Methodology

Upon considering research ethics, scholars often focus on the laws and code created after World War II that advocates for informed consent. Although important, feminist methodology tends to suggest that we must also look at research practice in addition to formal governance and policy (Bell, 2014, p. 75). From the impetus of a research question to the dissemination of findings, a feminist methodology critically analyzes all elements of the research process. This section examines three key elements central to feminist methodology including: a feminist ethic, a feminist epistemology, and reflexivity. Each element works in conjunction with the others to challenge the status quo.

Feminist Ethics

A few years ago, I attended a keynote presentation by renowned feminist artist Judy Chicago at the Brooklyn Museum. Creator of the installation “The Dinner Party,” Chicago told a story about one of her art students. The female student had painted a scene that represented herself. It was a simple painting with dark colors. Upon presenting it to her male art professors, the student was criticized for her lack of depth. Chicago noted that if the professors had used a feminist ethic and viewpoint, then they would have observed that the student had painted about her rape. Although, I don’t necessarily agree that women have a singular and unique way of viewing the world, I do think Chicago’s assertion that feminist ethics are important to us all as individuals in the academy. Chicago was speaking to the importance of sensitivity and awareness to how marginalized individuals live. This awareness can, and should, be applied to feminist
research. Feminist ethics challenge researchers to examine how scholarship and knowledge production represents the *Other* through its understanding of reasoning and representation (Madison, 2015, p. 117). Many feminist scholars argue that a feminist ethic is a continuous examination of how participants are given agency and represented. An example of this includes Madison’s (2015) use of Maria Lugones’s (1987) work on *world traveling*.

Lugones (1987) argues that world traveling becomes a featured experience among minorities. Similar to code switching, world traveling is when marginalized individuals adopt behaviors and beliefs of those in power around them. Lugones describes this phenomenon as an individual’s tension between the “mainstream construction of life” and the “other construction . . . where she is more or less ‘at home’” (p. 3). Often world traveling exists as a survival mechanism in which an individual seeks acceptance and understanding. Madison (2015) uses Lugones’s work to suggest that researchers need to be cognizant of this experience when researching marginalized individuals. Feminist ethics challenge researchers to be continuously aware of how their work continues the colonization and codification of marginalized bodies. A major critique of minorities is the fear of being “used” for research. There is a long history of individuals in power using the marginalized body as space for research or investigation. Lugones also notes that those who have ease in the world—those who do not have to world travel—are given the ability to “play” with ideas. As such, it is not surprising that those who adopt the role of “playing devil’s advocate” are typically cis, White men (Schwartz, 2014). “To be playful in a world means that it is both safe and appropriate for one to take risks” (Madison, 2015). Feminist ethics encourages researchers to become aware of their role in playing with people’s identities for the sake of research, and challenges them to embody a more loving, more open interpretation
of humans and their behaviors. Often this openness is intrinsically linked to repositioning how knowledge is formed through epistemology.

**Feminist Epistemology**

Central to feminist epistemology is that research is value-laden (Jaggar and Wisor, 2014, p. 504). This begins through an interrogation of what knowledge is considered reputable and “worthy.” Feminist research recognizes that gender is abstract and shifts based on temporal and special locations, as well as varies based on race, nation, class, ability, etc. As such, feminist epistemology pushes on a traditionally masculine line of knowledge production by suggesting that, through the redistribution of valued knowledge and the placement of undervalued epistemological standpoints at its center, scholars are able to better understand how power operates within human behavior. For decades, feminist researchers have challenged the notion that the scientific process of knowledge production and inquiry is “value-free” or free from power relations. This is especially true for those who take a positivist approach (an approach that assumes that there are universal “truths” that can be discovered through scientific inquiry). One such challenge to this line of inquiry is Sandra Harding’s interrogation of objectivity.

Harding (1993) examines epistemological standpoints from the margin. She argues that standpoint epistemology is not in contention with notions of objectivity, but that we must draw attention to historical context and positionality of one’s standpoint to become more objective. An activity I do in my classes that explores standpoint theory is when I ask my students to get into five groups, each representing the major subjects in the K-12 education system: science, math, history, literature, and social sciences. Then, I give the students five minutes to come up with as many names of people they learned about in school as they can. I have done this activity for about five years now and unsurprisingly, out of the 100 or so people the class comes up with,
less than five are women or people of color. Traditional methods fail to examine the context of
discovery (p. 102). In other words, traditional methods fail to acknowledge the historical and
educational erasure of those on the margins. Furthermore, the privilege of those with
epistemological power often overshadows the standpoint and understandings of those who are
marginalized. This further eclipses the notion of objectivity.

All research is gender and racially biased. We as humans use our social knowledge to
form inquisitive thought. As such, the questions we ask as researchers are limited to the social
world we know. Biases happen because we live in a world in which bias is pervasive. Feminist
methodology asks researchers to make efforts to be aware of this by decenter voices of power.
This more often than not includes the researcher themselves, as most academics carry a lot of
cultural weight as experts in their field. Androcentric paradigms that assume masculinity and
Whiteness are the norm in human behavior are commonplace in academic scholarship. As a
result, those positioned in the margins are often overlooked, forgotten, or conflated with the
majority. Feminist methodology subverts traditional frames of philosophical thought by
suggesting alternative viewpoints or standpoints.

This project aims to push on a method rooted in the Western canon. Kuan-Hsing Chen’s
(2010) work in *Asia as Method* asks for scholars to recognize the limits of knowledge production
and that epistemology and method must be deimperialized in order to ethically examine the
global world (p. 4). In terms of feminist practice, one example of deimperialization of research
methods is Mohanty’s (1988, 2003) canonical work examining Western feminist research
published in Zed Press’s “Women in the Third World” series. She argues that the binary between
Western scientific discovery and indigenous knowledge is not the only issue that must be
challenged by feminist scholars. Rather, we should also be concerned about the colonialist and
corporate power within scholarship, as well as the normalizing and centering of the values of capitalism (2002, p. 512). Drawing on the work of Chen and Mohanty, I believe the best methodological practices both unpack one’s own understanding of epistemology and decolonize feminist projects that position Western knowledge and values as its epicenter.

**Reflexivity**

As readers will find, this project, both in its methodology and findings, is about reflexivity. From a research perspective, reflexivity is acknowledging how one’s social background, identity, and assumptions shapes the research process (Hesse-Biber, 2014). The best reflexive practice is to actively challenge your methodological rationale throughout the entire research process. This includes examining how your research question is shaped, exploring how an interviewer influences a participant’s response, or acknowledging human biases during analysis. Despite being humans ourselves, ironically, this process is undervalued in most research on humans. In social scientific research and other projects that take on a positivist viewpoint, reflexivity takes the backseat to neutrality. Most of science-based scholarship is rooted in the notion that one should eliminate personal viewpoints from research and has led to several decades of debates within the field of media and communication.

Reflexivity is nebulous at best. As Faulkner et al. (2016) point out, scholars who utilize reflexivity possess multiple perspectives on what reflexivity actually is. For this project, I view reflexivity as taking a critical examination of oneself within the context of one’s research project. It goes beyond acknowledging privilege but rather aims to explore how privilege shapes and molds a research project. Reflexivity draws focus to power positionality and, in many ways, is a “turning back” on ourselves (Davis, 1999). By looking within, we hold ourselves responsible for the decisions made during the research process. The research design then becomes a piece of you
rather than a replication of another’s work. As Madison (2012) states, “When we turn back, we are accountable for our own research paradigms, our own positions of authority, and our own moral responsibility” (p. 8). I view this process as two steps. First, one must acknowledge one’s own bias shaped by privilege. Then one must unlearn privilege (Spivak, 1996).

Similarly, I think pointing to my own biases offers a more honest position in my own work. Throughout this project, readers will find multiple moments in which I interrogate my own positions, thoughts, and biases. Trained for years as a social scientist, I was taught to be “neutral” about socialized biases. This caused great tension throughout this project as I found myself operating between multiple dialectics of expert/student, teacher/research, and someone who studies both social science and humanities. With a major emphasis in scientific objectivity in my own educational background, I am uneasy about revealing my positionality, as I have been taught that to be perceived as biased is negative. That said, I believe reflexivity makes us better researchers, as we are able to explore ideas while acknowledging that flawed perceptions exist. For example, McIntosh and Cuklanz (2014) argue that a key element of feminist research, specifically feminist media research, is to be cognizant of how your relationship to your chosen text and its context informs and influences you (p. 287). Referring to work of Haas (2009), the authors note that the feminist media scholar often becomes the sole arbiter of textual analysis; thus, it becomes even more important to be reflexive of your identity, power, and biases. Haas’ work on online infertility forums is couched in her transparency of her own infertility issues. Her ability to be aware and reflective of her own positionality offers readers a better understanding of Haas’ framework and biases. In this particular instance, her biases were considered assets to her research rather than a hindrance.
Drawing from Haas’ work, I too believe that by challenging and exploring my own positionality in parallel to my participants, my project is stronger. The most salient of privileges is that I am White and from the United States. In some cases, my female body allows me to navigate spaces in unique and powerful ways. For example, the feminist movement is often perceived as a White woman’s movement.¹ My body and positionality makes my voice heard within feminist activist spaces, as they were originally created for women who look like me. In academia, as a White person, my voice is almost always viewed as more valuable than my non-White peers.² Moreover, my position in academia, and the power that comes with being considered an “expert,” puts me in a place of great privilege. I have had the ability to spend years of my life learning about feminist practice and theory, and the individuals I am researching have not. Far too often, feminist activists and scholars alike fail to remember the long (and sometimes painful) process of feminist consciousness raising. Therefore, assuming that my participants are ignorant or unassuming would be a missed opportunity to learn and understand how and why individuals choose to support issues regarding global women’s empowerment. Finally, my position as a Queer-identified individual who grew up working class has immensely shaped my

¹ As evidence of this, I point to a recent movement online in which a woman of color started the hashtag #solidarityisforwhitewomen. The inventor of the hashtag, blogger Mikki Kendall, created the hashtag in reaction to the lack of support women of color were getting from their White peers in the feminist blogosphere. More specifically, well-known White feminists such as Jill Filipovic and Jessica Valenti supported writer Hugo Schwyzer despite his long history of using black women as fodder in his writing. Kendall argued that White feminists were “dismissing women of color in favor of a brand of solidarity that centers on the safety and comfort of White women” (Kendall, 2013).
² A simple example of how this is reinforced is the fact that most people in my networks know my name and my work. Yet, many of my Asian counterparts are regularly conflated with each other. I have sat in classes where professors from multiple departments regularly called my non-White classmates the incorrect name, and then unforgivingly told them they need to “learn to adapt to American ways,” and they were graded poorly because they mispronounced words. Reflectively, I wish I would have used my privilege and said something in the moment, but I did not because I feared repercussion.
understanding of the world. These perspectives were challenged throughout this project in hopes to start the process of unlearning privilege.

To unlearn privilege (Spivak, 1996, p. 4), we must be able to consciously be aware of how our work speaks for women in marginal spaces. As mentioned in the prior section, transnational feminist theory has critiqued this and emphasized that research should speak with women themselves in these spaces. Notably, this project does not aim to speak for women in subaltern spaces, nor with women in subaltern spaces. As readers will find, the primary audience for games aimed to educate people about social justice issues are individuals in a similar positionality as me. This project does not aim to critique the authenticity of representation in the game, as I, myself, can’t speak to that authenticity. Instead, my sites of interest are the reception and interpretation of video games designed to educated players about economic development propelled by Western, liberal, feminist paradigms. I am speaking to and with other individuals in similar positionalities, and in some cases, individuals who possess more privilege than I due to access and gender.

The process of reflexivity is difficult, as it requires extra time and care that scholars in a neoliberalized system of education cannot afford. Even feminist scholars can fall into the trap of bias. These failures are often pointed out by Black feminist scholars and those who are engaged in postcolonial studies. For example, Stuart Hall (1992) argues that episteme produced in the West 1) Classifies and characterizes societies into essentialist categories 2) creates a monolithic imaginary by condensing multiple images into one 3) creates a standard for comparison where difference from the West is centralized and 4) creates a model of evaluation in which countries are ranked. Smith (2014) extends Hall’s work by suggesting that Western research derives from this “archive of knowledge and systems, rules, and values” of the Western episteme (p. 58).
Work that fails to acknowledge this episteme can be dangerous, as it has real, material effects on marginalized individuals. As noted in the previous section, Mohanty (2003) showcases how feminist research rooted in Western frameworks of scientific discovery can lead to conflated images of the Third World Women. Although her work was over 15 years ago, this conflation still occurs on a regular basis today, as researchers are pressed for time and money due to the recent shifts to capitalize research.

This project drew inspiration from the challenges posed above by those pushing to be more reflexive in their work despite the recent climate changes in academia. It also draws from work that parallels feminist academics – feminist activism. An activist’s reflexivity possesses the same intention as a feminist academic but operates differently in activist spaces. The dichotomy between feminist activism and feminist academics is a long and contentious one. It is of my personal opinion that they operate in parallel to one another instead of opposite. That said, I must point out that I am first a feminist academic then an activist as my activism operates within the confines of academia, a powerful institution that is the epicenter of colonizing knowledge production. Every day I am surrounded by individuals who do activist work in the classroom and would vehemently assert that feminist academia and activism are one in the same. Yet, it is important to note that these voices are legitimized by the academy via publication. I want give credence to the many activists (who have little association with the academy and live incredibly precarious, non-tenured lives) who argue against calling feminist academics, activists as they see the role of the academic as colonizing and harmful. Special care to keep this critique in mind became center to my research process. I designed the project to include my participants in every step of the process in hopes to give them agency over their own opinions and representation.
As such, this project was inspired by both academic and activist spaces. As Maxey (1992) notes, if done poorly, academic reflexivity can lead to a concealment of power. To claim complete understanding of one’s power and privilege ironically reinforces notions of expertise and authority, and overlooks the long, continuous battle of challenging one’s own privilege and subject position. Reflexivity is constant work, a feeling of being “haunted” (Spivak, 2012). As the opening quote of this chapter suggests, researchers are translators between their findings and their audience. To be “haunted” is to possess constant reappraisal of your research’s ethics, reflexivity, and epistemology. For this project, reflexivity emerges as I explore my role as educator, interviewer, and researcher, determining influences within my scholarship, and participating in a constant exploration of my position as a self-identified White Western feminist, who I so often critique in this project.

**Research Design**

As Chapter 1’s rationale indicates, there is much work to be done on building a method around video game play. Shaw’s (2013) call for new gaming methods influences my primary choice of method for my future dissertation project. Drawing from the work of Kirschner and Williams (2014), one aspect of the project aims to use a method called gameplay review method (GRM). The aforementioned authors propose this innovative method as a way to examine engagement through gameplay. The method examines how the player interacts with the game. The authors suggest that because gameplay is an interactive process, gameplay requires negotiation and a sense of self. Moreover, since individuals act based on past and present experiences, GRM offers agency to the study participant in the articulation of their motivations and decisions in gameplay (p. 594). Originally created to examine how players interact with new games, I adapted this method and examined how individuals who play social justice video games
interpret and react to the messages created by video game developers. This project used two
games, *Half the Sky Movement: The Game* (Zynga, 2015) and *Life is Strange* (Dontnod, 2015) as
tools to answer my research questions.

**The Video Games**

*Half the Sky Movement: The Game.* The video game *Half the Sky Movement: The Game* was developed by Zynga and published by the company Games for Change (G4C). The
game is based off the *New York Times* bestseller, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into
Opportunity for Women Worldwide*, written by Nicolas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn. The book
draws on liberal feminist frameworks by arguing that the best solution to female empowerment is
access to capital through microfinance and education. The book garnered great traction in 2009,
which lead to a social movement and the creation of the video game. The game itself has had
great success, with over 1.3 million players worldwide since 2012 (Games for Change, n.d.).

*Half the Sky Movement: The Game* echoes the successful book’s footsteps through its
narration of the issues women face globally. The protagonist, Radhika, is an Indian woman who
travels the world to help other women eliminate oppression. Players help Radhika make in-game
decisions to ameliorate situations of poverty, violence, and disease.

In addition to the narrative, players also engage in various mini games. These mini games
have a similar structure to the mobile game *Candy Crush*, asking players to collect resources for
Radhika and the women she is helping. The game adopts a pay-to-play model in which Radhika
only has so much energy to proceed on. Once players run out of energy, they can wait for
Radhika’s energy to fill back up or pay money to continue playing. *Half the Sky Movement: The
Game* is unique in that several non-profits have sponsored this game, including the Ford
Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, Intel Corporation, United Nations Foundation, and the
National Endowment for the Arts. When players purchase extra “energy” for Radhika, the proceeds are donated to several different NGO partners including the Fistula Foundation, GEMS, Heifer International, ONE, Room to Read, the United Nationals Foundation, and World Vision. Since its launch in 2012, the game has “had 250,000 book donations, donated $204,900 for fistula surgeries, and contributed $500,000 in direct and sponsored donations” (Game for Change, 2015).

For this project, I asked my participants to play the first part of the five-part game. During this section of the game, Radhika is introduced as the lead character and players help her through a series of problems. These problems include: 1) Finding money to get healthcare for her daughter; 2) Starting a women’s empowerment group in her local village; 3) Helping her daughter get access to education; 4) Obtaining a microfinance loan; and 5) Purchasing and raising a goat to start a business. During each set of problems, players are asked to make ethical decisions. For example, the game begins in India where Radhika’s child is sick, but her husband will not allow her to spend the household’s money. The player must decide between speaking up to the husband or staying silent (Figure 2.1). This project was particularly interested in the decisions players make during the game as they take on the role of Radhika, a perceivably subaltern woman.
Figure 2.1 *Half the Sky* decision one. Radhika confronts her husband. In this scene players have selected to “Remain Silent” when Radhika’s husband challenges her.

**Life is Strange.** In order to explore if avatar subjectivity influences decision making skills in gameplay, I had participants also play *Life is Strange*. Developed by Square Enix, the game is similar in structure to *Half the Sky*. Players take on the role of Maxine Caulfield (Max), a high school student in the US who can time travel. Max is put through a series of decisions in order to save herself and her friends. Similar to *Half the Sky*, the premise of the game is to make a series of ethical decisions (i.e. whether to report a shooting to the police, steal money, etc.). Structurally, both *Half the Sky* and *Life is Strange* run on a similar coding logics in which game designers give players the appearance of agency in the game, but it still follows a linear major story arch. Yet, *Life is Strange* is about a White, upper middle-class girl—an identity similar to the participants in my study. Participants played *Life is Strange* during a follow-up interview after playing *Half the Sky*. The juxtaposition of both games lent itself to a deeper analysis of how decisions are influenced by cultural discourses.
The story of the game centers on Maxine (Max) Caulfield’s realization that she can manipulate time. After moving away from her birthplace, players find Max returning to her former hometown to attend a private arts-based boarding school in mythical Arcadia Bay, Oregon. The story begins with her trying to navigate the cliques of high school while uncovering the mystery of a missing female classmate. Upon first impression, one might think that the central narrative to this game is relatively trivial. Yet, as the story unfolds, one can understand why it is rated M+. The game touches on issues such as bullying, date-rape, abuse, and gun violence. Notably, *Life Is Strange* is unique in that violence is central to the narrative but is never the solution to the problem. Instead, Max must use her skills in communication to progress in the game.

The game is popularly known for its episodic nature in which the developers, Dontnod Entertainment, released five segments of the game (episodes) over the span of a year (2015). Players are given a myriad of decisions which influence the outcome of the next episode. This structure of gameplay is unique in that each individual player will have a variety of individualized outcomes, as each player is faced with hundreds of decisions.

*Life Is Strange* became popular among feminists when *Bitch* magazine featured the game as one of four-feminist friendly games of 2015 (Dadoly, 2015). As an avid reader of the magazine, I came across this article and immediately downloaded the game to play. I was enthralled. Here was a game that starred not only one woman but two.³ Max returns to her childhood home to find her childhood best friend, Chloe, in a state of severe depression because

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³ This in itself is a rarity, as studies have shown that about 15% of popular video game characters are women (Williams et al., 2009). This includes *all* characters, even the non-playable ones. Furthermore, many of the female characters are only placed in the narrative to fulfill the hero’s heteronormative desires.
her girlfriend was missing. Max decides to help Chloe, and the two rekindle their friendship with the potential to evolve into a romance. Unlike any other best-selling video game, this game is about female friendship.

My primary demographic of study is those who are the target audience of *Half the Sky*—young millennial men and women. As such, all of my participants are young millennials. The topics covered in *Life Is Strange* are incredibly relatable, as it tackles issues important to millennial lives. Using the gameplay review method (more on this in the proceeding section), my interviewees play Episode 1 of *Life Is Strange*. This episode introduces the characters Maxine and Chloe and asks players to make a series of difficult decisions. Although there are over 100 decisions made throughout the game, I am primarily interested in a few major ones that relate to the themes of this project. The decisions omitted from analysis in this project were not germane to the project. For example, one decision requires players to decide whether or not Max should water her plants. The ending consequence is that the plant lives or dies. Although my participants engaged with these smaller decisions, they do not impact major moments in the game. As such, I will focus on five major points in the first episode that are significant. The following section outlines each decision within the context of the narrative of the game.

**Key decisions in Life is Strange.** After players discover that Max can alter time, they are faced with their first decision. Early in the game Max decides to go to the bathroom. While in the bathroom, a male classmate named Nathan sneaks into the bathroom. A blue-haired woman follows Nathan and starts threatening him.⁴ She blackmauls Nathan by telling him that she knows he is selling drugs to classmates and that he needs to give her money to stay silent. At this time,

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⁴ Later we find out that the blue-haired young woman is Chloe, but in this scene she is without a name. Chloe’s anonymity is a key element to this scene since players might make a different decision if they knew that Nathan was threatening a friend.
Nathan pulls out a gun and threatens Chloe. Max is able to stop Nathan from shooting Chloe by reversing time and pulling the fire alarm. After this scene, Max leaves the bathroom and is confronted by the principal, who asks her what is going on. In this moment, players are given the option to tell or remain silent (Figure 2.2). Based on the player’s decision, the principal doesn’t believe Max when she accuses Nathan, or they accuse Max if she stays silent.

Figure 2.2 Life is Strange decision one. Here Max is confronted by her principal. She, too, can either “Speak Up” or “Remain Silent.”

As players navigate the halls of Blackwell, we learn that the school is run by a clique of popular girls whose queen bee is Victoria Chase. Similar to Max, Victoria is a photographer and competes for the attention of their teacher by bullying Max and a meek girl, Kate. This bullying

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5 Notably, there is no positive outcome, as the game is trying to establish corruption in the school system. We later find out that Nathan’s parents are huge donors to the school and have been altering his school records to present him in a positive light for years.
becomes a major theme throughout the game as Vitoria and her entourage throw notes in Kate’s face, whisper about Max in the hallway, and take pictures of Max unknowingly.

After class, Max walks back to her dormitory and finds Victoria and her friends sitting on the entry steps. Victoria refuses to move and proceeds to make fun of Max by telling her that she is a poser and her photography is subpar. She concludes her harassment by taking a photo of Max and then telling her to go “fuck her selfie.” The scene continues as Max now must figure out how to get Victoria and her friends off the stairs. She rewinds time and turns the sprinklers on. Then, Max tampers with a nearby construction site that sends a paint bucket (and paint) in Victoria’s direction. Covered in paint, Victoria’s minions run inside to retrieve a towel for Victoria while she is left sitting alone on the steps. It is in this vulnerable moment that players are able to either make fun of Victoria or be nice (Figure 2.3). The relationship between Max and Victoria begins to alter based on the decision, and she eventually moves to let players inside the dorm.

![Image](image.jpg)

**Figure 2.3 Life is Strange decision two.** Here Max is given the option to make fun of class bully, Victoria, or be nice.
After Max does some things in the dorm, she receives a text message from her friend, Warren. She proceeds to meet him in the parking lot, where she encounters an aggressive exchange between David, the school’s security guard, and Kate, Max’s shy friend. David is accusing Kate of doing drugs and leans into Kate’s face to yell at her. It is in this moment that players are given the decisions to “Take a Photo” or “Intervene.” Although players do not know the consequence, Kate responds positively to Max if she intervenes but negatively if she does not. The photo, if taken, can later be used to implicate David for harassing Kate.

David becomes a prominent and complex character in the story as players are led to be suspicious of him. David is an ex-veteran who is both aggressive to the women around him and keen on putting security cameras around the entire school (including the dorm rooms). We find out that David is Chloe’s stepfather, when Max and Chloe are hanging out later in the game. Chloe explains to Max that the missing girl everyone keeps talking about was Chloe’s former girlfriend. Chloe is convinced that Rachel ran away but Max is not so sure. This dark conversation leaves Chloe in a state of sadness as she reaches for a joint. While Chloe is smoking, Max is left to explore her room. David storms into the room to catch Chloe smoking pot, and players can make Max hide, take the blame for the joint, or stay silent. Based on the player’s decision, David will threaten Max or hit Chloe (Figure 2.4).
Figure 2.4. *Life is Strange* decision three. In this scene player chose to take the blame for Chloe’s drug use.

In the final scene of Episode 1 we find out that Chloe was originally blackmailing Nathan because he had raped her. A major decision that players must make is to encourage Chloe to either speak to the police or remain silent (Figure 2.5). Regardless of the decision, Chloe chooses to take matters into her own hands and start investigating Nathan on her own. Convinced that either Nathan or David are linked to Rachel’s disappearance, Chloe convinces Max to help her.
Figure 2.5 *Life is Strange* decision four. Here Chloe confesses to Max that she was date-raped. Player are given the option to encourage Chloe to call the police or not.

**Part I: Recruitment and Initial Survey**

Central to my research agenda is feminist pedagogy. I am always interested in how to improve my teaching. As more schools adopt models of gamification to encourage learning, it only seemed appropriate to include students in this study.\(^6\) Students in my Interpersonal Communication course were given the opportunity to play *Half the Sky: The Movement* as extra credit. They were asked to play the game, take a survey, and then journal about the decisions the game.

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\(^6\) Originally, I had intended to have two different studies for this project. First, I aimed to survey individuals who played *Half the Sky: The Movement* on their own. Then, my plan was to have students play *Half The Sky: The Movement* and *Life Is Strange* using the GRM. Unfortunately, during the time of recruitment, *Half the Sky: The Movement* shut down indefinitely. Luckily, I had pilot data from my previous students that I used to shape my interview questions. This became a blessing in its own way, as the data shaped this dissertation project to reflect a more accurate representation of the questions I wanted to ask. More specifically, how do students (who are in a formal education system) make decisions in this game, versus players who choose this game?
they made (Appendix A). Of the 50 students given the opportunity, 29 decided to play the game for extra credit.7

After the semester ended, I contacted those who did the assignment individually and asked them if they were interested in a follow-up interview. Of the 29 students who did the assignment, 15 responded to my e-mail and 10 completed the follow-up interview. Participants who completed the follow-up interview were compensated with a $50 VISA gift card.

Part II: Follow-up Interviews

The gameplay review method. The gameplay review method (GRM), itself, requires a four-phase assessment of a participant’s gameplay. This method extends Whitton’s (2010) model for digital game engagement by including player interpretation. Whitton’s five-factor model aimed to categorize player engagement. Drawing from previous studies on games and learning, this model argues that five non-mutually exclusive factors impact one’s ability to be engaged. These factors include: challenge, control, immersion, interest, and purpose. If one of the factors is not present, then Whitton argues that players will not be engaged. Kirschner and Williams argue that this model fails to acknowledge player interpretation and suggest that the GRM should serve as an important measure to fill this lacuna. My project took Kirschner and William’s work and applied it to feminist research. This method allowed me to answer the questions: 1) How and

7 A critic might argue that students felt compelled to compete in the assignment, as it was linked to a grade. I want to address this because a feminist ethic of methods challenges scholars to address recruitment methods (Hesse-Biber, 2014). This activity was one of several extra credit opportunities in the class. One reason so many students might have selected to complete this activity is because of the unique nature of the assignment. Upon explaining the assignment to the class, my students appeared excited to play the game, as they had never been given an opportunity to play a video game in a college course before. Moreover, students were prompted that grading would be based on completion rather than a right or wrong answer. Since this activity was given late in the semester, in conjunction with the fact that I require my students to meet with me during office hours, I had spent up to 40 hours with these students at this point (3 hours per week).
why do players make decisions during game play; 2) What social justice discourses influence a player’s decisions making; and 3) How does interactive game play influence understandings of gender and development? The following discusses the GRM in four phases.

**Phase One** required a basic interview that asks about demographic data, previous gaming experiences, preconception of the game or social movement, and for their opinions global women’s empowerment (Appendix B). The goal for this phase is to gather an individual’s baseline of knowledge in terms of non-profits, global gender issues, and demographic issues. Structured as interview questions, this will “uncover the subjugated knowledge of the diversity of women’s realities” (Hesse-Biber, 2014, p. 184). During this time, I also asked players the same questions from Appendix A, the original questions from the extra credit assignment where students played *Half the Sky: The Movement*. The interviews were almost four months after the assignment thus this allowed me to capture the most memorable parts in the game for the student. Finally, participants were asked reflect on their previous answers and explore how their opinions might have changed over time (Appendix B).

**Phase Two** asks players to play the game *Life is Strange*. During gameplay, I took an audio and visual recording of the participants and their gameplay. This served as a record of what happened during their gameplay session. A visual recording of the player’s face was originally used to examine non-verbal expressions of emotions but was dropped from analysis as this was beyond the scope of the questions asked in this project. While the student played *Life Is Strange* I was present in the room to remind the student gently to state their reactions and gameplay decisions orally, to give guidance on basic mechanics of the game, and to take field notes which were used to create personalized follow-up questions to answer after they completed the first part of the game.
Although the *think aloud technique* has been used since the early 1980s, this procedure models after van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg’s (1994) work that asks participants to verbalize their decision-making process. Rooted in cognitive psychology the *think aloud technique* is considered to be one of the most effective ways to assess higher-level thinking (Olson et al, 1984). The theory behind the *think aloud technique* is that it aims to unveil the working memory. Since the working memory has little capacity to hold information, the *think aloud technique* draws out verbal reports of the thought stream (Ericsson and Simon, 1993).

One might have reservations about the influence of my presence in the room, but it is important to point out that the goal of this particular method was not to trick or manipulate my students. From my perspective, students appeared a bit uneasy at first but after 30 minutes into the game, students were relaxed and felt comfortable as many of them reacted in ways they did not in the formal classroom setting. For example, my research space had arm chair I brought from home for participants to sit in and I found many of them sprawling out in a comfortable posture, pulled out snacks while playing, and using profanity. Because of the unique positon as their instructor, I was able to juxtaposition this behavior with the over 40 hours spent with them in the formal classroom. The difference in behavior between the two settings was noticeable and I contend this was due to them feeling comfortable around me. Notably, I am over a decade older than most of my students but look young so this, too, played in a role in their ability to be enjoy the experience and be honest.

*Phase Three* entails both the participant and I reviewing selected moments of their gameplay. These scenes were selected based on the notes and observations in *Phase Two* as well as my student’s input on what scenes were most memorable to them. This process is vital as participants were able to analyze their own behaviors and point out things that I might have
misinterpreted or did not notice. For example, after playing the game, one of my participants, Anita\(^8\) and I watched the video feedback of her playing. This phase was important in this process as it created a certain level of trust between Anita and I. Anita was able to see that I wasn’t trying to trick her and that I valued her opinion in the analysis process. I asked Anita if there was anything that stuck out. It was Anita that pointed out that she quickly selected “Speak Up” in the first scene. Her focus on the speed in which she clicked the button surprised me and I asked her why that was important. Her response was that because her speed indicated that she was passionate about this issue. Without reviewing the video with her, this important finding would have been overlooked.

Phase Four is the final follow-up to questions based on my field notes, observations, and selected video clips. This phase entails asking what motivated them to make a particular decision in the game and how decisions made between *Half the Sky* and *Life Is Strange* compared and contrasted with one another. This phase explores why players make various gameplay decisions and whether or not the game has influenced (or parallels) their thinking in terms of the feminist movement and global women’s empowerment. This information was determined by asking how the game holistically changed their feelings about women around the world. Notably, I was interested in knowing whether the game created an emotional affect to the issues raised in the game (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010).

Coding and Analysis

After collecting data from the surveys, I used in vivo coding to shape questions for my in-depth interviews. Researchers using in vivo coding look for terms created by the social actors being researched (Lindlof and Taylor, 2011, p. 251). For this study, I moved answers into an

\(^8\) Names have been changed to protect their identity.
Excel spreadsheet. This gave me the ability to match responses to demographic data. Each column represented a question and each cell was an answer. I examined each column separately looking for key terms or phrases that were consistent throughout each question. For example, a common theme used throughout the survey was the notion that feminism was a “belief.” I marked this theme a specific color and created a codebook in which I used to examine the journals and create follow-up questions for the interview portion (see Appendix C).

After the interviews were completed and transcribed, I used a method of analysis and interpretation set forth by Hesse-Biber (2014). During the interview, I wrote field notes. This helped with highlighting key moments during each interview and helped shape questions for the next interview. For example, one of my participants, Roger, noted that he played liked embodying characters of certain games. This gave me a lot of insight into how each person plays with characters differently depending on the narrative of the game. I decided to add a question about this in my later interviews. After each interview, I created a memo to remind myself of key moments. Finally, after all interviews were completed, I created a write-up of general themes based on my transcriptions, field notes, and memos and looked for connections between both my survey data and my interviews.

**GRM as Feminist Practice: Drawing a Method Rationale**

At its core, the gameplay review method (GRM) is feminist. It centers player agency and expertise as its primary focus (Kirschner & Williams, 2014, p. 594). Kirschner and Williams’ original intent for the GRM was to determine the engagement process of learning while playing video games. The genesis of the GRM and the *think aloud technique* does not have ties to feminist research, yet the following section argues that the GRM is, fundamentally, a feminist method. As such, I believe that the GRM offers a novel way to examine gaming that puts various
feminist ethical considerations first. These features include: 1) A decentering of power relations between the researcher and participant; 2) A push for participatory, inclusive research; 3) A building of connection between those researching and those researched. The proceeding section examines each of these features more closely.

**Decentering Power**

The relationship between researcher and researched is one that has been examined by feminist scholars for decades. One central question is: How do feminist scholars accurately represent those who participate in research? The GRM offers a new way to examine how players interact with videogames. This interaction is reminiscent of Radway’s (1983) work on romance readers. Her canonical work argued that researchers must consider the interpretation of women when examining how popular culture is digested. Her findings suggest that there is typically a plurality of reasons why individuals read romance novels.

Similarly, if GRM is used to examine why individuals make specific decisions while gaming, it gives players the ability to “leverage . . . [their] knowledge and to refine, add to, or even reject/displace a researchers’ interpretations” (Kershner & Williams, 2014, p. 599). In the lineage of feminist gaming research, few studies give players the opportunity to influence the method. Interviews done by previous scholars get to the crux of player interpretation and decision making, but the GRM lets players decided what is important in their own gameplay through their observations of themselves playing. Furthermore, by giving players the ability to observe themselves, the division between researcher and researched is “unveiled” as players see what the researchers see. As in the example with Anita, she noted that she appreciated the fact that she was able to see “the other side of research.” As such, I believe that Anita felt more comfortable knowing what type of information I was examining.
A Push for Inclusive Action

Bootin and (2014) suggests that participatory research radically changes the system from within as it aims for transformation *with* others rather than *for* others (p. 448). Participatory Action Research possesses three characteristics: investigation, evaluation, and action (Maguire, 2014, p. 417). Although, participatory action is typically used for grassroots activism, I argue that GRM allows participants to make a direct impact on games studies research and this is a form of activism. Players are able to investigate their own gameplay through verbal articulation of gameplay and self-observation. This is rarely done in game studies research. Similarly, through self-observation, participants evaluate their own decision-making moments. Finally, players are given agency to take action in the research by deciding on what parts of the gameplay observation is important and should be further investigated during Phase 4 of the GRM. In Anita’s case, this was very apparent, as she was able to understand her own behavior better than I as researcher could. The previous example of Anita’s observation of her clicking demonstrates this.

Building Connections

GRM allows for transactional communication between researcher and participant. Belenky et. al (2014) argues that there are two types of knowing: separate and connected. Drawing from previous work on knowledge, separate knowing is an epistemological orientation that suggests impersonal rules and understanding toward a non-human subject or person. Conversely, connected knowing draws on the relationships between individuals and a subject (p. 236). Their research notes that typically individuals who use separate knowing are those who occupy elite spaces and are college educated.
In terms of research, the researcher is typically positioned as an expert of a participant’s experience. It is a feminist researcher’s job to subvert this positionality, and GRM does this by giving participants access to the process of procuring knowledge and understanding of said participant. Thus, GRM becomes a connected way of knowing as participants and researchers observe the participant’s gameplay. Participants do not become subjects of study but humans who participate in knowledge production. Anita’s willingness to examine her own behavior offered a space in which she, too, became a part of her own analysis. This in turn made my own analysis deeper and stronger.

Analysis

The goal of this project was to better understand behavior in the context of video games studies and transnational feminist scholarship. Using the gameplay review method, this project argues that methods that center on gaming can be feminist. Once the data was collected, the surveys, journals, and transcriptions of the follow-up interviews were used to draw themes based on the question prompts and the literature on postcolonialism and postfeminism. First, using open-coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 251), I looked for coherent meaning and similar attributes and cleaved them together. Then, once similarities came forth, I created a codebook in which I used axial coding (Lindlof & Taylor, p. 252). Using critical discourse analysis (CDA) as a guide, I drew out similarities between responses centered around how empowerment is framed in these games and how players are interpreting this information through gameplay. CDA analyzes how social and power structures are enacted, perpetuated, and reproduced through talk, non-verbal enactments, or text (Lazar, 2005). It assumes that language and linguistics inherently possess power. CDA positions language as an artifact of ideology that articulates and rearticulates itself. This project presupposed that neoliberal, postracial, and postfeminist
frameworks foundationally shaped the opinions and viewpoints of these participants. More specifically, I was interested in how the participants in this study situate themselves within the framework of self and Other (Lengel, 1998). Thus, codes were created with that in mind.

Theoretical analysis utilizes grounded theory. This is based on induction and features a theoretical account of empirical observation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Lindlof and Taylor (2011) note that emergent theories are grounded in the “relationship between data and the categories in which they are coded” (p. 250). Interpretation of themes will use Tsing’s concept of friction in mind.

Demographic Overview of Participants

This project consisted of two major parts. First, my lower-level Communication Studies students were given the opportunity to do an extra credit activity in which they were asked to play Half the Sky, answer a series of questions, and journal their thoughts while playing (Appendix A). Of the 50 students given the opportunity, 29 completed the activity (a 58% completion rate). The other 21 students did not do the extra credit option in the course or chose to do an alternative assignment—an essay on a global event related to the class. After the semester was over, the 31 students were contacted for a follow-up interview using the gameplay review method outlined above. Ten students completed the follow-up interview process (a 34% completion rate). The following section outlines the demographic data from both the journals and the follow-up interviews.

Gender

For both the class assignment and the follow-up interview, participants were asked the open-ended question: What is your gender? Of the 29 who completed the survey assignment, 14 (48%) identified as female and 15 (51%) identified as male. Although the goal of this project is
to not generalize my findings, I want to point out that 44% of video game players are female (ESA, 2015) despite the common misconception that gamers are White men. Of those who participated in the follow-up interview, 6 of the 10 were women (60%). For a further exploration on how gender shaped the identity of my participants, please refer to Chapter 3.

Race

Although there has been burgeoning research on gender and game play, very little has been done to examine race. As such, there are few statistics pointing to racial demographics of gamers. One such reason for this is that widely-accepted stereotype that gamers are White, due to the extreme paucity of characters of color in video games. Of those who completed the class assignment, 24 (82%) of them identified as White, 2 (9%) identified as Black or African American, and 2 (9%) identified Hispanic or Latino. Of the four individuals of color who did the class assignment, three followed up but one completed it. As a result, 10% identified as non-White. Notably, the mid-Western university this project was conducted at has very little diversity in terms of race, as 80% of its population is White.

Class

An important question on both the survey and the follow-up interview was whether my participants came from families that made over the median US household income ($50,000). Notably, only 3 out of the 29 individuals (10%) wrote that their family made less than $50,000. This was a surprise to me, as my own perception of the student population was that many of the students were local and did not go to some of the larger schools in the state due to the higher costs they required. This was far from the truth. During the follow-up interview process, I was shocked to find that most of my participants (90%) had little-to-no student loans, as their parents were paying for their college. This was reiterated in the classroom when I did a unit that focused
on socioeconomic class. Students were asked to speak about class in whatever way they felt comfortable. Organically, most of the students decided to share that they were lucky that they didn’t have student loans, and that their parents paid for their schooling. Follow-up statistics suggest that about 66% of the student population have “financial need,” a federally-mandated category in which a student’s family income or savings is compared to the cost of education. This too surprised me, as the cost of education is almost $24,000 a year for in-state tuition. In other words, a third of the school’s population has family that can afford this and do not obtain student loans to fund college. This will be further explored through this project as I explore how this identity-marker (or rather what readers will find, a lack of class identity) shapes how students played the games that centrally focus on poverty.

**Education Level**

All of my participants identified as millennials and ranged from 18-24 years of age. Age, itself, was not of particular interest to me, as very little differed whether a person was 18 or 24. Similarly, all of my participants were upper-level Communication students, but this had little influence on whether students were able to accurately interpret the intent or goals of the two games. Instead, education became contextual, as knowledge of the video game industry and feminism had more bearing on the outcomes of how students played the game. This will be explored in detail throughout the subsequent chapters.
CHAPTER III: POSTFEMINIST IDENTITIES

[It is] a dangerous kind of appropriation, one that incorporates many of the insights and practices of various feminisms but strips out their identification as such, thereby eliding the many ways in which feminists and feminist paradigms have effected change. (Wernimont, 2013, p 1)

I remember my first feminist moment vividly. It was the early 1990s. I was eight years old and in third grade. Each week, my teacher presented to our class a prominent person in history. I can recall many of these lessons still today. The first week was George Washington. The next several were Lincoln, Alexander Graham Bell, Henry Ford, Theodore Roosevelt, Leonardo da Vinci, Mark Twain, King Arthur, and JFK. I remember sitting there week after week, frustrated. Finally, toward the end of the year, I got the courage to raise my hand. “Mrs. Buist?” I asked. “Why do we keep learning about boys? Can we learn about girls?” To my shock (although as an eight year old girl, I think I was more embarrassed), my teacher said, “We did learn about a girl, remember Erika? We talked about Betsy Ross earlier this year.”

I think about this time and believe this was my first realization that women were unequal. Retrospectively, I think about how that teacher might have negotiated the fact that a student was calling out the fact that she was not teaching about women. Yet, who can blame her? She was taught about men her whole life. Just the same as her teacher before her.

Later in my life, I was faced with the notion that some people believe that feminist beliefs are bad. I grew up in a family in which my mother was the breadwinner, and I never realized how odd that truly was until I moved to a small village with less than 300 people. I spent many days in high school feeling isolated from my peers, as most of them were evangelical Christians and staunch Republicans. My civics teacher even told my mom once that my peers would like me more if I “got rid of my urban ways.” He implied that I was too liberal for the community. To him, I was a girl who grew up in Detroit (although, I grew up in Livonia, one of the Whitest
cities in the state, 20 minutes from Detroit) who spewed “liberal propaganda” to my peers. For me, it is weird to think about that perception of me, because more than anything I did my best to fit in. I was a cheerleader, dated the head basketball player, and became a prominent figure in the local church. All to fit in and survive this space that I always felt was suffocating me.

These two anecdotes point to the fact that feminism has always been a part of my identity. Yet, I too, was terrified about the prospect of taking a Women’s Studies class in college. I think I was scared that I would not be accepted. I identified as a feminist, but my perception of feminists (hairy-legged lesbian women) scared me. Finally, a friend convinced me to take a class, and I found my home, my passion. Little did I know, I would become that hairy-legged lesbian woman for some time. For me, Women’s Studies gave me a sense of peace and a community I longed for since I was eight.

I think of this college moment and my desire to fit in when I interview my participants. They too have particular perceptions of feminism. Some felt included in the feminist movement and identified as such while others felt like an outsider for various reasons. Yet, central to all of my participants was the idea that their perception of what feminism is, fueled whether or not they identified as one. Notably, in this political milieu, feminism has become the forefront in the media.

From t-shirts that have bell hooks quotes to a myriad of celebrities “coming out” as feminists, feminism is now everywhere. Feminism, itself, is nothing new, but the fact that mainstream feminism is now apolitical (Gill, 2016) is an important issue to explore. The following section explores how feminism has mutated into what many media scholars now label as the postfeminist moment. For some individuals, feminism is antiquated and not needed. For
other individuals, feminism is a commodified identity that can be used for social capital rather than a political and revolutionary movement that “grabs at the roots” (Davis, 1990, p. 14).

Finally, many individuals view Western feminism as a solution to global poverty and inequity around the world. Often these individuals are painted by media scholars as young Western millennials whom the media markets to (see Douglas, 2010). I want to push on these notions a bit and suggest that there are plenty of women in their 50s (baby boomers) who adopt similar ideas. But more importantly, I want to contend that the adoption of postfeminist values is complex. My findings in this chapter suggest that individuals negotiate feminism in various ways that are not as simple as many postfeminist scholars suggest, and it becomes even more complex when one explores global development. As such, this chapter answers the following research questions: 1) How do young women and men view and identify with women’s empowerment and feminism? 2) How do these views reinforce and subvert postfeminist and development frameworks?

This chapter explores how my participants navigated traditional definitions of women’s empowerment and feminism. More specifically, it examines how the current cultural moment influences how one identifies as a feminist, and how participants articulated empowerment discourses. This chapter is split into three parts. First, I will give a current literature review on my project’s primary framework: postfeminism. Then, I will discuss how postfeminism influences the adoption of the identity of feminist in juxtaposition with that of global development and discourses of empowerment. I conclude with a discussion on how my interviewees navigate their own identities, and the identity of the subaltern Other prior to playing the Half the Sky video game.
A Framework of Postfeminism

One of its earlier users of the framework, Angela McRobbie (2007), describes the postfeminist phenomenon as common discourse that frames feminism as antiquated. With social media, the saliency of postfeminism is ever present. For example, in 2013 there was a popular meme in which women take selfies with a handwritten statement on why they do not need feminism. Statements ranged from “I don’t need feminism because I made my own choice to be a stay-at-home mother,” to “I don’t need feminism because I don’t see me being a woman as a disadvantage.” Although these individuals erroneously characterize the feminist movement, these statements should not be overlooked, as they represent a larger rhetoric that dismisses the importance of evaluating inequity on a systemic level rather than an individual level. Many scholars continue to examine why millennial women dismiss feminism (Douglas, 2010; Press, 2011; Gill 2007). Their deconstruction of the term postfeminism becomes a stepping-stone to a larger project that examines how postfeminism works to mute women from subaltern spaces.

So how do feminist scholars use a postfeminist framework to research media? Rosalind Gill (2007) outlines criteria for analyzing postfeminist texts. She suggests that there are eight major themes to postfeminism, including: femininity as a bodily product; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitory and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. Although Gill’s work focused on print and video media, her work has been used consistently in postfeminist research on gender and media and can (and should) be used with new media.
Yet, even though Gill’s work about postfeminist sensibility has been well regarded in the field, some have critiqued this framework, suggesting that there is a modern reemergence of pro-feminism in the media, and thus postfeminist readings have little to offer. Currently, feminism has become prominently fashionable in the cultural milieu. From declarations about feminism from Beyoncé and Taylor Swift to mass-produced feminist fashion, feminism is currently en vogue. Gill’s most recent analysis of the media extends her previous work, while engaging with her criticisms that suggest that postfeminism, as an analytical media category, is irrelevant or antiquated (Gill, 2016 p. 611). The feminist researcher suggests that postfeminism, as a scholarly framework, still has just as much importance in analyzing current media as it did in the late ‘90s and early 2000s.

Her counter to these critiques draws to the uneven visibility that has created what appear to be two contemporary feminist movements in the media: a visible and invisible feminist movement. Notably, what is visible in the media is what is palatable. As Rotenberg (2014) notes, the visible feminist movement is the neoliberal/corporate feminism in which the works of Sheryl Sandberg (2013), Sophia Amoruso (2015), or Amanda Palmer (2014) push for women to look inside and find what is wrong internally, whether it is not being “boss” enough or not asking for help. In this framework, sexism is generally structured as an individual rather than systemic issue and rarely connected to other forms of oppression or neoliberalism (Gill, 2016, p. 616).

Moreover, the aforementioned best-selling books have little to do with most forms of political feminism. Instead this type of feminism focuses on individual achievement and accomplishments and endorses rather than critiques capitalism (p. 617). Gill notes that this feminism has the most visibility in media, as it puts the onus of inequality on the self. Positive thinking toward the self and empowerment of other women, with no critique or self-reflexivity of self and other, are the
beacons of this type of feminism. This particular form of feminism is arguably harmful, as it polices women in the media. It makes feminism compliant to larger systems that many Marxist feminists have argued contribute to larger systemic issues. Of course, neither Gill nor I suggest that those who adopt this type of feminism are *not* feminists, as the identification is incredibly personal and still possesses repercussions or backlash. For example, Emma Watson, the paragon of the contemporary feminist movement, recently received anti-feminist backlash for her role in the HeforShe campaign (Balía, 2016). Yet, importantly, as Gill points out, “Claiming a feminist identity—without specifying what that means in terms of some kind of politics is problematic” (p. 619).

Feminist activism has received heightened visibility with the rise of Web 2.0. This includes individuals that many critics have noted Gill overlooks. She points to the important work that feminist activists do daily but argues that the media rarely covers them. This is the invisible feminist movement. Feminist-based protests rarely make media coverage despite the thousands of individuals who protest daily. Similarly, the media coverage feminist activism gets typically follows similar logics as the neoliberal/corporate feminism, as protests are typically framed as an individual rather than a larger group. Such examples include the rape culture protest done by a singular Colombia University student, or Amal Clooney’s campaign to end ISIS’ sex trafficking. As such, campaigns to help create an “Orientalist fantasy of rescue” (Koffman, Orgad, and Gill 2015) are prominent while other campaigns led by women of color are rarely in the media. Gill, too, points to the notable backlash these campaigns receive, as evidenced by GamerGate and Donald Trump’s presidential victory, suggesting that these are also equally important to categorizing the current state of feminism.
Gill’s conclusion is that we still need to examine contemporary media through the lens of postfeminism. Rather than treating postfeminism as only a framework, an epistemological formation of knowing, or position of understanding, we should acknowledge that it, too, is an object of analysis (p. 621). Postfeminism then becomes a site and space to examine contradiction or paradox. Gill asserts that through a postfeminist lens we are able to view what might be ostensibly feminist at the surface as completely removed from political if not “actively resistant” to feminism (p. 622). Finally, notions of “empowerment” and “choice” still remain postfeminism’s central motif. The particular lexicon used in postfeminist media is through the assumption that by “choosing” to reinforce the status quo, all of a sudden it is feminist. It is through this interrogation of modern day feminism in the media that I use my analysis of *Half the Sky*. Yet, equally important is the examination of how postfeminism operates in a transnational context.

**Postfeminist Sensibilities and Development Fables**

Gill and McRobbie’s work has been used to examine postfeminism in a transnational context. Dosekun (2015) for example examines how women in Nigeria, Lagos, repeatedly voiced postfeminist sentiments of “already empowered” and thus embrace femininity in ways similar (although not exact due to context and history) as Western women. Moreover, the idea of postfeminism operating as an exclusively White, Western, middle class, heterosexual, cisgender subject needs to be further interrogated.

Parallel to the rise of neoliberalism and an institutionalized focus on development and gender, postfeminism has become equally popular. Notably, all three of these systems operate together to form the contemporary discourse on global women’s issues. This discourse suggests that women from the Western world need to help (often rescue) women from developing
countries achieve the same equality they have achieved. Often mainstream feminist activism, which centers on global equity as its central project, does not consider how discourse creates a binary between women in developing countries and women in developed countries. If discourse is suggesting that women in developing countries are perpetual to *male-only* violence, it positions women in the United States as devoid of all forms of oppression and ignores how standards of White, Western feminism might have played a role in oppressing subjects of subalternity. Deconstructing postfeminism, therefore, becomes an important part of this research.

In conjunction with postfeminism, Cornwall et al., (2007) argue that various fables in gender development exist. Careers in NGOs and non-profits focused on development are at an all-time high, and authors argue that the rise of these fables of development may be due to its institutionalization over the past 30 years (p. 1). The authors note that this institutionalization and the disillusionment of what has become of gender and development became the motivation behind the Beyond Gender Myths and Feminist Fables conference at the University of Sussex. The scholars critique the pervasive tropes that women are less corrupt than men, closer to the earth, or inherently peaceful. They ask, how have these representations become embedded within development discourse?

Using scholarship on myth and fable, the authors argue that these tropes are used to motivate action (p. 5). Myth offers us a familiar symbolic meaning that resonates with the emotional affective dimensions within culture (Cornwall, 2007). The universal essentialism that often permeates through gender development discourse occurs for multiple reasons. First, it creates community, comradery, and a presence within the political environment. As Butler (1990) once said, the subject of women is framed by feminist movements in such a way that it lends itself a political voice and representation (p.2). In this framework, the universalized tropes
of a “woman’s disposition” provides feminists interested in development an imaginary that is predicated on a united understanding of oppression. In terms of *Half the Sky*, and similar development projects under the umbrella term The Girl Effect, a major myth that exists is the notion that micro financing women serves a community best because they are less risky than men. Women are presumed to be a good investment because they will use the money gained through employment to invest in their families rather than themselves.

These fables paint a binary between the men and women in subaltern spaces and a paradoxical understanding about these individuals among Western individuals who consume media that endorses the development fable. In the preceding section, my findings provide a better understanding of how young adults view and identify with women’s empowerment and feminism and how it shapes their understandings of development.

**Findings**

The following section discusses the findings from the two journal questions: *How do you define women’s empowerment?* and *Do you identify as a feminist? Why or why not?* Participants who interviewed with me after the journaling were given an opportunity to follow up on their answers. The general findings from this follow-up interview are also included.

**How Do You Define Women’s Empowerment?**

Students were asked to define women’s empowerment in their own definition. This task was not easy for them, but I wanted to see if there were general themes on how my participants viewed women’s empowerment and whether this empirically reflected the way in which scholars who use a postfeminist analysis view millennials and young individuals.

All 29 individuals (14 women and 15 men) responded to this question prior to playing *Half the Sky*. Upon analysis, several themes unfolded. These themes include: 1) supporting
women; 2) individualism; 3) an emphasis on personal choice; 4) a focus on economic equality; 5) and valuing masculinity. The following discusses each in detail.

**Supporting women.** One major theme that arose out of this question was the fact that almost half of the women (43%, n = 6) mentioned that women’s empowerment was about supporting women. For example, one White woman wrote, “I define women’s empowerment as a woman or women being in a supportive and encouraging environment where she/they are able to be supported for their ideas and aspirations, whether or not they be fitting to the status quo.” Although six women had similar answers, the three women of color in my class had an answer similar to the one below. For example, one Black woman wrote:

> Women’s empowerment in my opinion is the educating and standing up for other fellow women. It signifies all women, no matter the race or background. Uplifting women, making sure that you support women! Bringing each other to the table, not leaving your sister behind.

Notably, none of the men mentioned anything about supporting women. Many of my participants who did the follow up interview continued this sentiment several months after they did their questionnaire. For example, upon asking Anita, a White woman, if her opinions of women’s empowerment had changed, she responded:

> I would say it is still that just also that women encouraging each other and being positive towards each other. Well I would just say overall, everyone supporting each other and women supporting women, men supporting women and then having positive encouragement with whatever they want to do.
I followed up by asking her to explain what she meant by “positive encouragement” and she replied that positive encouragement lacks critique. Rather bringing each other down, women should support each other. An example she gave was when people tell girls they can’t be scientists. Anita also mentioned that she felt women critiqued each other too much, especially on social media. For her, women’s empowerment would dissolve this. Similarly, Miranda, a Latino woman, echoed what Anita said:

I think it starts with a woman herself because I feel like in order to empower someone else you need to be empowered yourself . . . I heard you can’t pour from an empty cup, so you need something to give to someone else. So I think it's all about empowering yourself by just continuing to be who you are and like following your dreams type thing. Being happy because that rubs off on other people and you can really be a role model for other people surrounding you.

One paradox that exists with this, is the line drawn between policing bodies in a sexist way versus “calling out” a person because they were being offensive. This line was blurred often in my conversations with my participants, as many of my interviewees, like Anita and Callie, saw women’s empowerment as something that should be completely positive and respect each other’s opinions regardless of whether that opinion was rooted in systemic racism or sexism.

**Individualism and personal choice.** Another major theme that arose from this question was that many participants (n = 12, 41%) suggested that women’s empowerment is about giving women the ability to be “independent,” to be able to “take care of themselves,” and to be “self-reliant.” This perspective was evenly distributed among both men and women. For example, one White woman wrote, “Women’s empowerment is a female being able to make her own decisions
and identify herself as a strong independent woman.” Similarly, one White man wrote, “Having the ability to be self-reliant and be able to live on your own.”

The ability for a woman to choose was a central theme among respondents. Seven respondents (24%) noted that women’s empowerment is about “choice” and “making one’s own decisions.” This opinion was fairly even among both men and women (4 men noted this and 3 women). For example, one White woman wrote that empowerment was “Women feeling the confidence and having the ability to live their lives in the way they choose is best from them as individuals.”

The focus on independence was pervasive throughout the interviews. For example, Tiffany, a White woman, noted:

I guess for me, empowerment would be an affirming sense of value and self . . . somehow like self-determination that women have the power to make decisions for their lives and to voice their opinions. So, I guess making women feel not weak and helpless but that they have the opportunity and giving them the abilities to make their own life decisions and determinations for themselves.

Tiffany saw empowerment synonymous with self-derived strength. This was echoed by Kathy, who stated:

I think of women's empowerment, I think of like somebody talking about how they got abused or they've been a victim of domestic violence and then they are standing up against that and they are saying no, I'm not going to take this and I need to raise awareness for it.
Like Tiffany and Kathy, many also felt that choice was a big part of being independent. For many participants, independence was equally as important as the ability to make one’s own choices without the influence of society.

**Economic equality.** Although most participants mentioned that women’s empowerment is about equality, several participants gave the example that (21%, n = 6) women’s empowerment was about equal pay or equal access to work. Notably, this was the only specific example of women’s empowerment that that male participants gave. For example, one White man stated, “I would define it as women having the same opportunities in life that men have. For an example, I believe women should be able to earn the same pay from jobs as men in their careers.” Similarly, others defined “opportunity” as access to capital.

Throughout the follow-up interviews, the focus on economic conditions of women and men was prominent. This was particularly true for when interviewees framed a definition of women’s empowerment. For Zeke, central to women’s empowerment was the ability to get a job they wanted. For example, Zeke said:

Women's empowerment, I guess if a woman believes she can do it, then she should be allowed to do it . . . If they want a Fortune 500 company, do it. If they just want to own a bakery, do it. If they want to go to college for engineering, do it.

**Valuing masculinity.** Finally, one surprising finding was that some participants viewed women’s empowerment as jettisoning traditionally feminine roles for “being more assertive,” “defying stereotypical feminine roles,” and making women equal to men by acting like men. Four individuals (2 women and 2 men) expressed this explicitly. For example, one White man stated that women’s empowerment is “Empowering women to aspire to achieve more outside their stereotypical gender roles.” Although this was a minority (14%), I want to also note that
half (n = 8) of the men mentioned the importance of equality for men as well. For example, one White man mentioned that women’s empowerment is making situations “fair for both genders.” Notably, only one woman mentioned men in their definition of women’s empowerment.

The surveys indicated an often masculine-leaning framework of independence and empowerment for women. Similarly, the interviews echoed this. For example, Anita noted that women’s empowerment is for women to have as much power as men. Upon asking what that looks like to her, she noted that women should be more assertive and confident like men. An example she gave was that women should be able to play sports because “women should be strong too.”

Do You Identify as a Feminist? Why or Why Not?

In addition to examining how young adults view women’s empowerment, I also wanted to know whether they identified as feminists and what this identity meant to them. The 29 students were asked about their feminist identity. The proceeding section discusses their answers to this question as themes. At a surface level, 59% (n = 17) of participants said that they identified as feminist. The other 12 said they did not. Yet, as scholarship has pointed out, opting to identify as feminist is complex. Therefore, it is worth a closer examination. The findings that emerged include: 1) A connection to gender identity; 2) Feminism as a belief system; 3) An emphasis on liberal feminism; 4) The viewpoint that feminism leaves them out; and 5) That privilege shapes whether one adopts a feminist identity.

Connections to gender identity. Gender identity influenced whether participants identified as feminist. Of the 17 who said they identified as feminist, 11 were women and 6 were men. This was 79% of the entire group of female participants and only 40% of men who did the questionnaire. Compared to statistics that look at national rates of adopting feminism, this is
rather high for both. *The Washington Post* and the Kaiser Family Foundation recently did a randomized poll about whether individuals identify as feminist. Their findings suggested that of the 1,610 adults (1,122 women and 488 men), 60% of women and 33% of men identified as either a feminist or a strong feminist (Cai and Clement, 2016).

One reason this group of students might be more inclined to identify as feminist is because they have had women’s studies education about feminism both through me and the department the course was housed in. The department, itself, generally encourages a critical perspective in media and communication. As such, many of my students knew what feminism was prior to entering my course. That said, there were still biases about feminism as the following examples will demonstrate.

One of my interviewees, Zeke, expressed that he felt that men could not be feminist. I asked him to expand on this during his follow-up interview and he noted:

I guess I support the feminist movement but I don't feel as though I could contribute to the feminist movement and I feel like if I can't contribute, then I shouldn't identify. I'll support but I don't understand where woman are coming from because I'm a White guy; I'll always have everything handed to me in this country and I know that. It sucks, it sickens me but the most I can do is just keep people aware of it.

Zeke continued by saying that his girlfriend was a strong feminist and he felt that to support her, he too, must be feminist. Zeke saw his feminist identity entangled with his interpersonal life but also felt that men should not identify as such because men do not live the lives of women. From his perspective, positionality based on gender and race played a huge role in whether one should identify as feminist. Zeke’s perspective is interesting because although he shared similar beliefs
as many of those who did identify as feminist, he saw the movement as connected to gender, a position shared by many men.

**Feminism as a belief.** One major theme that arose is that many of my students saw feminism as a belief system. Evidence for this includes that 17 of the 29 (79%) noted that they chose whether they identified because of the beliefs they had. For example, one Latino female noted, “Yes [I identify as feminist], because I believe in equality for all genders.” For this woman, feminism equated a belief. This is not surprising as one major argument many instructors use in introductory feminism units (both in women’s studies at large and locally within the department) is telling students that if they believe in equal opportunities for women and men, then they are feminists. This is similarly demonstrated by the fact that one White man noted, “No [I don’t identify as feminist] because I don’t believe in the kind of equality that feminists look for.” Although there were no follow up questions regarding what equality looks like, it is important to note that this man felt he didn’t believe in it. As such, feminism to these individuals was an ideology rather than a political view.

Callie was one of my interviewees. After four months, we came back together and I asked her the same question, *Do you identify as a feminist?* Callie had changed her mind from not being a feminist to now identifying as a feminist “for the sole fact that [she believed] women and men should be equal.” Callie echoed a similar sentiment as others who viewed feminism as a belief at this point. She saw feminism as an ideology, but she did want to continue pointing out that she was not an activist, political, or radical feminist. I asked her what an “activist feminist” was and she described her friend who she later noted was a radical feminist. Below is this exchange:
Callie (Interviewee): I think - in my mind that would be like a radical feminist who is very there- like one of my friends from home is actually- she's had these views developed while she's been in college and she's very radical, she's rallied in DC, she's going to all these events. She's the president of her Feminist Club. So I think she's an activist and I would not consider myself an activist.

Erika (Researcher): How do you define the word radical?

Callie (Interviewee): Radical is someone who is very- well, that's hard. A radical is just - that's hard. Someone who is very far to one side of a view [...] This is kind of a minimal kind of thing but [my friend] is very- she gets offended by things that she never used to get offended for now. Like if someone goes by they or them pronouns now and you accidentally say something, she'll get very offended if you don't call them by they or them. I mean, I know that that's someone's personal belief but if you say something wrong, I'm not going to be offended by it and I'm not really going to feel bad about it because it's not... (emphasis mine).

Throughout our dialogue, Callie struggled with defining radical as she tried to grapple with her friend’s identity. She continued to reverberate that her friend, who was “offended easily” had a belief system that was different than hers because she didn’t get easily offended by pronouns. In Callie’s perspective, the use of gender-neutral pronouns was a belief rather than a personal identity marker. Callie’s frustration with her friend was apparent as she noted that her friend would fight with her group of friends about this despite “years and years of friendship.”

**Emphasis on liberal feminism.** Like women’s empowerment, many of my participants also saw feminism through a liberal feminist standpoint. Originating in the workplace and propagated by many second-wave feminists, liberal feminism is one of the more popular forms
of feminism. Its focus on sexual harassment in the workplace, equal pay and promotion, and equal access to labor is predicated on the fact that women and men should be judged as individuals via merit. This framework was common among my participants as 35% (n = 6) of them noted that the reason they identified as feminists was because they believed in economic equality. For example, one White woman noted:

Yes I do. I identify as a feminist because I believe in equality of all. I believe women should make the same pay as men. I believe that women should have all the same rights as men do. I believe in humanity being equal.

This perspective is not surprising, as the current feminist milieu supported by the media centers around these issues. As Gill (2016) notes, there is a heightened visibility only for certain feminist issues—mainly White feminist issues that focus on the individual. These issues predominantly include employment, maternity leave, and access to health care. At the center of this framework are notions of representation and meritocracy that become the central driving force for success. Feminism then becomes about individual issues rather than collective building.

The contemporary focus on feminist individuals became apparent when my participants chose not to identify as a feminist. This is most salient by the fact that many of those (most of whom were men) who did not adopt the identity chose not to because they, as an individual, did not benefit from feminism. Yet, some women espoused this position as well. For example, one White woman noted,

I wouldn’t necessarily define myself as a feminist, as I am not one to strongly voice my opinion over woman’s power because of the fact that it has never been a huge issue to me. But, I do greatly believe in the empowerment of woman and that if man can do it then why can’t a woman?
For this woman, feminism was not needed because she, herself, felt that she was treated equally to men.

Liberal feminism was also emphasized throughout the follow-up interviews. One question that I asked the interviewees that I did not ask the students who took the survey was “Who comes to mind when you think of a feminist?” About half of them picked Emma Watson and Hillary Clinton while others picked people in their interpersonal life. For example, Roger, the only self-identified male feminist of the group of interviewees, said he thinks of his girlfriend. Similarly, Zeke, the male participant who supported feminism, said he was dating a feminist. Others spoke of friends and faculty. Yet, despite the wide-range of individuals, upon asking them why they thought these individuals were feminist, all of them had similar responses—that the women were independent and spoke their mind. What is notable is that when I asked them what they meant when they said that the individuals were independent, each student mentioned that the individuals who were feminist paved their path without the help of others. For them, feminism equates to traditional notions of the American Dream, bootstrap mentality, and liberalism. These two characteristics, independence and speaking one’s mind, become a central premise throughout this project and will be discussed in detailed in Chapter 4.

**Underrepresented identities in the feminist movement.** Although one could argue that “feminism is for everybody” (hooks, 2000), as noted in my previous chapter, historically feminism has been perceived as a White woman’s movement. This was reverberated in my findings as one Black woman stated that she did not identify as a feminist because:
No. I’m more so a supporter of equality for all people. My struggles don’t just come from me being a woman, it also comes from me being black. I’m really on the short end of the stick, so I identify more with race issues versus gender.

This woman felt that feminism was centrally focused on issues of gender rather than race. Unlike the White woman who did not identify as feminist because she felt she didn’t need it due to her privileges, this woman was concerned with her individual identity as Black woman and felt that feminism did not focus on issues that oppressed her. This perspective is important, as many Black, female activists have argued for decades that feminism needs to adopt a more intersectional approach to gender issues (Crenshaw, 1991).

Others felt that feminism did not include them because they saw feminism in stereotypical ways. One such example is the fact that most of the men did not identify as feminists; not because they didn’t believe in gender equality, but because of the fact that they believed men can’t be feminist. This was noted throughout most of the men’s answers. The stereotype that men cannot be feminist is a common one—thus the push for campaigns like the United Nation’s HeforShe in which men are encouraged to take on feminist issues. The campaign’s goal was to “provide a systematic approach and targeted platform on which men and boys can engage and become change agents toward the achievement of gender equality (HeForShe, n.d.).” Yet, despite the UN’s disassociation from the word feminism, they did not reach their goal of one million committed men worldwide within 10 months of its launch in 2015.

While Zeke felt as though he could not be feminist because men couldn’t be feminist due to privilege, other male individuals expressed that feminism was solely for women because its aim was for women to overpower men. For example, Doug saw feminism as a movement for
women. “I don’t identify as feminist because I think men and women should be equal,” noted Doug. I asked him to expand on this. “Feminists generally want men to be lesser than. So I don’t agree with that.” Doug spoke to coming across a feminist Tmblr in which the women were making fun of men. To him, his encounters with feminism were limited to social media and particular subgroups of feminist communities who used humor as activism. In some cases, this humor was crude and blunt toward men.9

Common stereotypes of feminism not only framed the men’s answers but the women’s as well. For example, three different women wanted to disconnect themselves from the “radical” or “crazy” feminist groups. One White woman noted, “Yes [I identify as a feminist] though I do not identify with the radical feminists. I believe in equal rights for all. Which means to me both men and women should be held to the same standards.” What this speaks to is the fact that feminism, although it touts inclusion, has a history of exclusion and bad media marketing. This is for various reasons. Susan Faludi’s (1991) work has been one of many studies that have examined the backlash against feminism and noted that negative perspectives of feminism have been pushed by conservative media pundits like Rush Limbaugh. 10

Privilege. Finally, although many students saw adopting a feminist identity as a belief or ideology, five (one woman and four men) said they didn’t identify as feminist because the issues didn’t pertain to them or they had never thought about it. For example, one White man noted, “I

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9 Retrospectively, I wish I would have asked Doug how he came about finding this Tmblr. He did mention that he clicked on it through Twitter, but what is curious about this situation is that Twitter has algorithms in which tweets in your newsfeed are presented to you based on who you follow. What this means is that it is quite possible Doug had networked with someone who was vocal about feminism on Twitter thus making me wonder if he knew whom.

10 Limbaugh has been noted for coining the term “femi-Nazi,” a phrase he attributes to Macaulay Endowed Professor of Economics Thomas Hazlett. The term has since been used as a pejorative, although it has become antiquated among this particular group of millennials who are unfamiliar with Limbaugh and the term.
do not [identify as a feminist]. It is just not something that I have taken too much time to look into and identify with.” His answer, in conjunction with the previous White woman who did not identify as a feminist because the “issues never spoke to her,” points to a place of privilege and individualism. Looking at feminism through a liberal framework, many of these students come from middle and upper-middle-class families and rarely have had to think about making money. If this is how feminism is being identified by many of these students, it would make sense as to why they don’t see the need for feminism. Many of them have jobs in the service industry only for extra living money, and most have little to no student debt. Finally, since all my students are traditional students, none of them have children and none have ever had to face issues regarding maternity leave. Due to this lack of experience (not necessarily naïveté, but rather just not encountering these issues due to age and access), one can more easily see how privilege can shape whether one adopts a feminist identity.

In addition to the previous examples, some individuals viewed that to identify as a feminist, they must be an activist. During her follow-up interview, Anita, a White woman, admitted that she did not identify as a feminist because she felt that feminists were active about women’s issues while she was not. Upon asking her what activism meant, Anita noted that she was not a feminist because she “didn’t stand up or discuss problems that women have.” For Anita, feminism was about being active about these issues. She, herself, was inactive because she felt she had equal rights currently and therefore didn’t see it as a major part of her life. Although she believed in equal rights, she also believed she had them already.

What is interesting about Anita is that she had taken a Women’s Studies course prior to this interview. Central to many of these courses is consciousness raising in which the instructor and students share their lived experiences of oppression, yet, Anita still felt she had equal rights.
Like previous students, this speaks to a certain amount of privilege that race and class offer Anita. Her positionality as a traditional college student with middle to upper-class roots has shaped her perspective.

**Analysis**

For my analysis, I will be using Gill’s (2007, 2016) themes of postfeminist media as a general guide. The goal for this is to see whether my students frame women’s empowerment and feminism through a postfeminist discourse. As previously discussed, Gill asserts that the media presents various postfeminist sensibilities which include: 1) Femininity as a bodily property; 2) Sexualization of culture; 3) Creation of a sexual subject; 4) An emphasis of individualism, choice, and empowerment; 5) An emphasis on self-surveillance and discipline; 6) A focus on the makeover paradigm; 7) A reassertion of sexual difference; 8) An emphasis of sexist irony; 9) Uneven feminist activist visibilities; 10) An emphasis on corporate or neoliberal feminism; and 11) An apolitical position via celebrity and style feminism. For the proceeding section, I will be using Gill’s work as a framework. More specifically, I found four themes from my data. First, I found that my students viewed women’s empowerment and feminism as having little to do with the body but rather more to do with the economy. Second, my participants emphasized a corporate and neoliberal (Gill, 2016) perspective of feminism. Third, perspectives of feminism were apolitical and women’s empowerment did not challenge the status quo. Finally, in terms of development, several paradoxes existed when students were asked to compare women’s empowerment in the United States versus “underdeveloped” countries.

**Sexual Subjects**

As Gill notes, postfeminist media have led to an increased focus on the body and the idea that “possessing a sexy body” is synonymous with empowerment (p. 149). Yet, how does this
discourse transpire when talking about women’s empowerment and feminism? Of the 29 individuals who did the journaling, none of them explicitly mentioned the body. Not even reproductive rights. Yet, this doesn’t necessarily mean that this isn’t still a held belief among individuals. For example, one of my White female interviewees, Kathy, did express the fact that sexuality should be a choice. The lack of attention to a woman’s right to choose whether to be sexy or not speaks to a new-age group of feminists whose views on sexuality are so normalized that there is an assumption that there is little need for critique.

Gill notes that in the postfeminist media milieu, women are now perceived as active subjects who chose to present themselves as objectified (p. 151). Based on my findings, I would agree with this but extend her assertion by noting that sexualization is so normalized that very little reflection exists on why women partake in objectification. When pressed for this reflection, most did not see their lack of critique as passive agreement of sexualization. Instead, they saw critiques as a form of “slut shaming.” Thus there was little room for individuals to nuance how participating in sex culture is sometimes reinforcing the sexualization of women. Instead, I found that students veer away from shaming women on their sexualization. Or rather, they believe that women should not do it. Several of those who did the journaling believed that women should build each other up rather than break each other down. This sentiment is pervasive in women’s empowerment discourse. Despite this position, there seems to be two types of critiques existing when one “breaks each other down.” The first is blatant sexism and the policing of women’s sexuality. This exists in calling women “sluts” and “whores.” The second is one that I will address further later on—that when women are “called out” for their privilege, and this is perceived as “creating a negative environment.” This is apparent on student, Anita’s comment on women’s empowerment:
I don't pay that much attention to the news but I always see girls [who identify as feminist] will treat each other poorly. It's almost like the people who are encouraging them are actually bashing women at the same time.

**Neoliberal Feminism**

Gill asserts that a major underpinning of postfeminism is the rise of neoliberal feminism. Her 2016 work primarily draws inspiration from Catherine Rottenberg, whose 2014 piece suggests that “No longer concerned with issues, such as the gendered wage gap, sexual harassment, rape or domestic violence, ambitious individual middle-class women themselves become both the problem and the solution in the neoliberal feminist age” (p. 432). My findings suggest a similar trend but paint these issues as more nuanced. Yes, many of my participants saw feminism as a means to gain access to choice and individualism. For example, most eluded to the fact that women’s empowerment and feminism was about the choice to live life how one chooses. In this particular framework, the focus on individual beliefs and identity was privileged over equitable social distribution. A key point that prominent socialist feminist scholar, Nancy Fraser argues in her current research is that the late second-wave poststructuralists turning to individual identity politics stripped any critique of materialism, thus leading to neoliberal feminist frameworks (2012, p. 220).

Notably, none of my students took on a socialist framework in which they saw capitalism as problematic. Instead, for those who did mention economic precarity, it was in terms of access to high paying jobs. For many, the solution to gender inequality was not to give access to material goods to everyone but rather give individuals access to obtaining the goods based on the American Dream of having a high paying job. In many ways this position permeated throughout
the interview session as many saw solutions to global inequity through a framework of neoliberalism.

**Apolitical Empowerment**

Central to a postfeminist sensibility is its focus on individualism (Gill, 2007, p. 153). As a result, public issues like racism, sexism, homophobia, and xenophobia become privatized and perceived as personal issues. Conversely, empowerment becomes synonymous with voicing one’s opinion. This narrative, that to voice one’s opinion is central to women’s empowerment, was pervasive throughout most the journaling, surveys, and interviews. Yet, key to this finding was that even if the opinion was problematic and possibly oppressive, it was still considered empowering.

A great example of this was my conversation with Callie, a White woman who identified as a feminist. In the preceding section, I noted how Callie was conflicted by the fact that her friend was a “radical feminist.” As we continued this discussion, I asked if she saw her friend as empowered. Callie saw her friend as more empowered than her because she expressed her opinions “loudly.” I followed up by asking Callie if this viewpoint was linked to a political position. Callie responded that even if someone was opposite to her friend, for example someone who supported Donald Trump as President, she “would still consider them empowered because they feel very, very, very strongly about their beliefs. They're very outspoken about it; they are very confident in what they believe in.”

A similar sentiment was expressed by Miranda, a Latina woman. Similarly, for Miranda, women’s empowerment was apolitical. She notes:
I think [women’s empowerment] starts with a woman herself because I feel like in order to empower someone else you need to be empowered yourself. So I think it's all about empowering yourself by just continuing to be who you are and like following your dreams type thing. Being happy because that rubs off on other people and you can really be a role model for other people surrounding you.

In a similar vein, for these individuals, feminism as an identity had little to do with politics but rather was based on personal beliefs and characteristics. As demonstrated above, none of my participants saw feminism as linked with reproductive rights and few mentioned civil rights. Instead, most of the focus was on economic access or the ability to express one’s beliefs in public. For example, Miranda did not identify as a feminist because she felt that she did not verbally express her opinions. Tiffany, a White woman, viewed that she was a feminist “because she was a great leader.” And, Zeke, a White man, did not identify as a feminist but his girlfriend did because it is more “personal for her.” Each of these individuals point to one major issue—the idea that feminism, for them, was about a personal belief or ideology that was not about political beliefs but rather the ability to express one’s opinions or possess confidence. This sentiment was echoed throughout the interviews during gameplay, as students viewed Radhika (the protagonist of *Half the Sky*) and Max (the protagonist of *Life is Strange*) as empowered only after they spoke up about their beliefs, regardless of political position and access to privilege and power.

**Development Fables**

In many ways, neoliberal feminism has created an “erasure of the issues that concern the overwhelming majority within the USA and across the globe” (Rottenberg, 2014). Yet, my findings point to two paradoxes when it comes to empowerment and feminism. The media often creates narratives and fables about the developing world. As Cornwall et al. (2007) pointed out,
these fables create (often visually symbolic) myths which provoke an affective response among consumers of this media. In response, I found my participants forming a paradoxical understanding between self and Other. These include a paradox of oppression and a paradox of choice. In both cases, there was no erasure about global issues but rather the erasure only existed within their own life.

In terms of oppression, I found that when prompted to answer questions about whether women’s empowerment differs around the world, most of my interviewees agreed that it differs because access to rights and politics differs. Here lies the first paradox: empowerment and feminism within their own lives as US citizens was about choice and was apolitical. Yet, when prompted to explore women’s empowerment and feminism outside of one’s own positionality, then it became very political. Most of my participants felt that women in other countries did not have the same rights as women in the United States. I asked them why this was the case, and most pointed to corrupt government or systemic patriarchy (their words). For most of my interviewees, they were well versed in what the textbook definition of feminism was. They understood patriarchy and felt comfortable talking about it, but when prompted to apply concepts of patriarchy to their everyday lives, some of them felt they had never experienced sexism. This was the case for Anita, who said she had never experienced sexism but would probably identify as a feminist later in her life when she had to think about wages and maternity leave. Their youth played a large role in their conception of sexism in their own lives while understanding that in spaces outside the US there was extreme inequality. Paradoxically, they did not see this extreme inequality in the US as their imaginary of the United States was shaped by their own positionality.
In terms of inequality most expressed this in terms of having a voice. For example, Callie, noted,

Well I think [women’s empowerment is] definitely a cultural thing. So in the United States we're way more better off than someone in a lesser developed country . . . We're fighting for more developed - developed that's not the right word- but we would be fighting for things that are more advanced than what people would be fighting for in other countries. [For example] it's still a thing here with wages. That I feel like is more advanced because there is people in other countries who are still fighting for the right to speak up.

For many of my participants, the ability to voice their opinion was a basic right that women in developing countries had little access to. This was always expressed in singular ways with little nuancing. As Callie noted, she understood that the term “developed” had problems associated with it but did not consider that individuals might not have a right to speak in the United States. For her, only individuals in developing countries could not speak their mind.

Another major paradox was the option of choice. Central to their argument was that women’s empowerment and feminism was about choice, regardless of whether that choice and belief system was harmful to others. In their eyes, the ability to choose to do things was available to them. They believed they had access to pick the perfect job and live where they wanted. Conversely, they saw women in developing countries as not having this choice. For example Tiffany pointed out:

I think [women’s empowerment] differs in the . . . ability of woman within their society to reasonably be able to make decisions for themselves and to be able to survive in doing so. So in the United States, I definitely feel like even though there is occasionally
discrimination women are able to now . . . financially support themselves and that women can survive on their own without a man. In a third world country, women aren't permitted to be by themselves or they aren't permitted to have a job . . . they literally may not be able to survive and to be able to make decisions for themselves on their own. Paradox subsumes Tiffany’s comparison between women in the US and women in developing countries. More specifically, Tiffany was able to flesh out the complexities of sexism within the United States. She pointed out how women generally are able to choose to support themselves but also noted that sexism exists. Conversely, there was little nuancing in her analysis of women in developing countries. For her, it was completely linear despite having several lessons that negate this imaginary.11

In this chapter, I introduced my primary framework for my study on postfeminism and examined how my participants enact, internalize, and conceptualize women’s empowerment and feminism. In the following chapter, I will explore how this perception influenced in-game decision making in both Half the Sky and Life is Strange.

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11 One activity that I did with my students during the semester was to have them explore the hash tag #TheAfricathemedianevershows. This hash tag was popular a few years ago in which individuals from Africa posted photos that showed Africa in a positive light. I felt that students had come from that class session (which Tiffany also attended) understanding that the media tends to portray Africa in a very linear way, and that there are spaces (like Rwanda) in which women play a central role in politics are more represented than women are in the United States.
CHAPTER IV: PLAYING WITH THE GIRL EFFECT

would
you still want to travel to
that
country
if
you could not take a camera with you.
-- a question of appropriation (Waheed, 2013, p. 11)

I grew up in a pseudo trailer park in one of the poorest counties in Michigan. My mom was the breadwinner in our family on a nurse’s salary. I can remember the day my parents bought a Nintendo in the early 90s. I was ten. My parents were so excited and proud to own their first gaming system, but it was overshadowed by the fact that they had spent their entire Christmas budget on this machine. A few nights before Christmas, my mom came into my room crying to let us know that they bought us a Nintendo for Christmas but we would not be getting any other gifts. I can’t imagine what that felt like for her—to tell your children that they would not get gifts but rather a box with wires. This story still haunts me to this day and shapes the way I view my world.

Fast forward to 2013. I was at a holiday party in Rochester Hills, Michigan. Like most of metro-Detroit, its primary attendees were White upper-middle-class suburbanites. Amongst the dinner chatter about the lavish gifts they would be getting their children for Christmas, an acquaintance asked me if I had ever read the book *Half the Sky* by Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn (2009). Knowing that my master’s degree was in Women’s Studies, she exclaimed, “This book is the reason why I am feminist today!” I found her declaration incredibly profound, as Sayantani DasGupta (2012) has argued that Kristof often positions himself as a savior to the women depicted in the book. Thus, when I responded with my reservations, she retorted that
Kristof, despite being White, a man, and from the United States, is an award-winning journalist and credible source to talk about women in marginalized countries. I left the conversation with a sense of unease and thus begins my several-year journey to figure out how such a phenomenon is lauded among educated individuals (including those who study feminist theory).

In chapter 3 I showed how, despite the complexities of how feminism and women’s empowerment is defined by academics, most individuals who do not consider themselves activists or scholars in the field frame and identify with two terms in specific ways. More often, than not, these frameworks are rooted in liberal (and neoliberal) feminist ideology. Yet, how do these frameworks and identities translate to the play of a game whose primary goal is to “raise awareness and funds to empower women and girls across the world” (Half the Sky, 2015)? This chapter explores how participants in this study interpreted key issues presented in *Half the Sky Movement: The Game*, and how my participants’ view of women’s empowerment around the world shaped decisions made in the game. The outline of this chapter is as follows: First, I will give a literature review of current research done on the primary solution that HTS purports: The Girl Effect. A discussion of the various critiques of The Girl Effect will follow. Second, I will provide data on my participants’ interpretation of both the objective of the game and portrayal of its female and male characters. Findings regarding how the game shaped personal viewpoints of women’s empowerment and feminism will also be provided. Finally, third, I will explore how the protagonist’s subjectivity (in terms of situation, race, ethnicity, and nationality) shaped decisions in the game by providing a juxtaposition of *Life is Strange*, the comparison game the 10 follow-up interviewees were asked to play.
Literature Review

This section provides literature on the following: 1) A detailed understanding of hegemonic feminism as it relates to transnational feminist work; 2) A description of The Girl Effect; and 3) Scholarship that critiques The Girl Effect.

Transnational Feminism

Since the United Nation’s World Conference on Women in Mexico City (1975), transnational feminists have been challenging dominant, hegemonic feminism (Brenner, 2003, p. 27). This history of discontent argues that Western, hegemonic feminism treats the issues surrounding sex oppression: 1) As the ultimate form of oppression through essentialism, 2) through marginalizing the voices and worldviews of women of color, and 3) by creating a dualism between marginal women and men of color that lend themselves to overused tropes. As such, this framework has been critiqued and coined “hegemonic feminism” by Sandoval (1991). More specifically, hegemonic feminism fails to examine difference. This section examines how Western hegemonic feminism has invoked these three traits and how transnational feminists have pushed and challenged these issues. Finally, I will conclude with an overview of how transnational feminist theory has contributed to practices within the field of Media and Communication.

Essentialist oppression. In feminist theory, essentialism is an argument that suggests that women have innate and unique experiences that homogenize them together though oppression and resistance (Fuss, 1989). For decades, many feminist scholars have challenged hegemonic feminist paradigms that suggest all women share similar experiences. This is especially true for scholars focusing on race, class, and colonization. The following section
examines how essentialism has been utilized by some Western feminists and how transnational feminists push back on this framework.

Although each transnational feminist has their own distinctive history and perspective of feminism, their overall critique of Western feminism remains the same: that Western feminist projects that focus on global development often fail to encapsulate the complex historical moments that influence their subject of research. Some authors argued this is primarily due to dominant discourse that is grounded on the essentialist presupposition that all women share a unique experience solely based on gender classification. In fact, this is Judith Butler’s first argument in her canonical book, *Gender Trouble*. Known for her work on performing gender, Butler has become mainstay in feminist theory. Yet, many forget that the impetus for Butler’s interrogation of gender was her interrogation of “women as subject of feminism” (p. 2). For Butler, the representation of women in the feminist movement was a political process; one that aims to center and legitimize the female experience in a patriarchal world. This process was not without its pitfalls as Butler points out. In fact, Butler even suggests that the universalization of feminism’s subject, the woman, undermines the goals of feminism (p. 6). Despite her highly praised theory of gender performance, one downfall to Butler’s book is her lack of examining transnational contexts in terms of performing gender. Thus, scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak become equally important in examining the theoretical underpinnings of transnational feminist theory.

Challenging the White feminist’s appropriation of marginal struggles, Chandra Mohanty (1998, 2003) in *Under Western Eyes* contends that a form of colonization has manifested within the contemporary Western feminist movement. What is most salient, is Mohanty’s frustration with the Western, monolithic view of the third world woman. She frames colonization as a
“mode of appropriation” that, through Western scholarship and knowledge, often serves the Western gaze. Despite the pluralistic attitudes of Western feminists, several themes remain the same in terms of the third world woman. In the texts she examines, women are 1) defined as victims of male violence; 2) victims of the colonial process; 3) victims of the Arab familial system; 4) victims of economic development; and 5) victims of the Islamic code (p. 54). Her 1984 essay unpacks these areas and contends that despite the variety of sites and frameworks, the coherent victimization and framing of the third world woman remains the same.

Western feminism creates an illusion of consensual issues that all women must galvanize around. For example, Mohanty analyzes how a singular third world woman is presented while positioning the West as objective and arbiter of the third world woman. Calling this the “third world difference,” Mohanty explicates that Western feminism assumes that the sexual differences that a monolithic patriarchy presents is universal, thus oppressing all women in the third world that lack historically rooted themes of Western feminism. Through this homogenization of issues and patriarchy, Western feminists colonize the various lives of these women (p. 51).

Notably, Mohanty drew much of her work from Gayatri Spivak. More specifically, Spivak’s understanding of representation. Her constant focus on the subaltern subject, or those who are ignored or forgotten in development discourse, is often scrutinized, adapted, and applied in contemporary postcolonial work. One of her most prominent theories is her extrapolations of Marx’s use of the German words *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*. *Darstellung* means to represent. For example, a portrait will represent a person but it does not embody the essence of the corporeal body. In contrast, *Vertretung* is actually “walking in one’s shoes” (1996, p. 6). Spivak argues that many of the mistakes made in feminist scholarship are the conflation of both terms.
This conflation dissolves the difference between the representation, or portrait, of one’s reality and the actual reality that exists. Spivak spends a great deal of time examining how gender development in the 1970s and 1980s has done this with the subaltern subject. When she asks in her essay, “Can the subaltern speak?” she concludes that no, indeed, they cannot speak because the reality depicted in Western scholarship often fails to capture the intricate histories that shape oppression within subaltern spaces, specifically southern India. Therefore, challenging dominant discourse, which situates itself within a canon that conflates Darstellung and Vertretung, has an immense impact on scholarship and social change.

Silencing marginal voices. One central argument deployed in gender development projects is that women in non-Western contexts are victims of patriarchal oppression. This, itself, is an essentialist trapping, because it assumes all women and men are the same and dissolves any other cultural markers of power such as race, class, or nationality. Furthermore, it positions women as perpetual victims of male oppression despite resounding evidence that women play a role in oppressing other women (Mernissi, 2001). Finally, this framework ignores the impact that colonization has played in shaping oppression in each specific locale. Notably, it was Spivak’s work on subaltern women that began this line of inquiry.

Spivak was one of the first scholars to critically examine how colonization affects subaltern women in India. In her aforementioned piece, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” she examines the influence of British colonization and codification of Hindu law on widow sacrifice. She draws attention to Macaulay’s (1835) infamous work on Indian education. Macaulay states, “We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions who we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.” This piece of evidence was not unique to British
colonization in India but often pervasive in Western doctrine that examined the Other (O’Hanlon, 2000). Texts like Macaulay’s demonstrate the attitudes of colonization. The need to “educate” individuals about high culture, class, and morality based on definitions created by Western culture became reasoning (and sometimes motivation) for colonization and imperialization. If the subject of Western disapproval needed help, then it justified the horrendous consequences of colonization: erasure of history and culture, stripping of political agency, and even murder.

Due to access to dissemination of knowledge, there are no documented alternative understandings of widow sacrifice at the time. Yet, Spivak cautions nostalgia for the past. Both act as a dialectic: The Indian nativists who suggest the women wanted to die in contrast to British law that suggests widow sacrificing to be immoral. Both positions fundamentally legitimate and feed off one another. However, Spivak contends we should not capitulate to either side, but rather focus on giving a voice to the women who partake in these offerings. As such, Spivak has dedicated years of her work to examining the multiple dialectics in this discourse. Through deconstruction, her work aims to give a greater understanding to subalternity. Spivak’s work has influenced many feminist scholars—many of whom are housed in Media and Communication.

**Creating dualistic tropes.** Research today still finds various essentialist trappings that create a dualism between women and men of color from marginal contexts. This binary presents women of color as victims and men of color as predators. The following section gives contemporary examples of each and discusses how scholars housed in Media and Communication examine each trope.
Marginal women of color as victims. In terms of Media and Communication, some have argued that women had served as a symbolic marker of nationalism (Yuval-Davis & Stoetzler, 2002, p. 366). Nationalism is usually depicted by material items and physical boundaries. For example, a flag, a flower, an animal, sports teams, or mapped lines based on natural elements (e.g. a river). Yet, often these are chosen and decided through patriarchal measures (war or politics). Yuval-Davis and Stoetzler ponder: do descriptors, boundaries, and borders, in terms of nationalism, change when gender is considered? The authors conclude that boundaries, or physical demarcations of landscapes, and borders, or nonmaterial markers of inside identity, change when examining nationalism and gender. Often, women are perceived as passive agents, child bearers of a country’s people, and a marker of tradition (or the past). Alternatively, men are often represented as active agents (as politicians, sports figures, or key figures in the media). Due to this, women become a symbolic border and representative of the nation’s honor (p. 336).

Drawing from the work of Anderson’s (1991) concept of “imaginary communities,” the authors argue that individuals rely on symbolic representations to create an imaginary community of the Other. Often this imaginary narrative is rooted in essentialist frameworks which assume that women, specifically women of color, are “closer to nature” and devoid of technology. This perspective is still pervasive today. The association of Whiteness with technology has been charted by many individuals. For example, Hobson’s (2008) work explores the racial and colonialist roots of contemporary media and how it positions individuals of color as “primitive” beings outside of technology’s reach.

Contemporary media has delivered contradictory narratives of progress. For example, in *The Matrix* a digital divide exists between Morpheus, who plays the “guardian of reality,” and Neo, the white savior of the human race. Morpheus’s role “authenticates . . . oppositional
identities . . . in cyberspace” (p. 118). In contrast, Hobson’s research examines subversive websites produced by individuals of color. Drawing from Jean Baudrillard’s notions of hyperreality, she challenges the assumption that cyberspace is populated only by the elites with the fact that access is often replicated in popular culture. Only amongst subversive websites do we find alternative truths to this narrative. Hobson draws the conclusion that subversive spaces online created by individuals of color debunk the myth that technology is a space only for Whiteness.

Men of color as oppressors. In her book, Diana and Beyond: White Femininity, National Identity, and Contemporary Media Culture, Raka Shome (2014) contends that despite the large amount of scholarly attention given to representations of Muslim men as terrorists, little to no scholars examine how Muslim men are portrayed through the lens of White femininity. Using Princess Diana’s relationships with Muslim men, Hasnat Khan and Dodi Al-Fayed, as a case study, Shome argues that the media’s portrayal of these two individuals created a dualism between what is a “good” Muslim and a “bad” Muslim (p. 173).

Shome’s work echoes Mamdami’s (2005) work on the dualisms between good and bad Muslims. She argues that Muslims are considered “good” when they become invisible. Hasnat Khan was often portrayed as a good Muslim, as he was often silent and tried to avoid the national spotlight. His self-erasure is what made his media reputation positive. In contrast, the Al-Fayed family, including Dodi and his father, Mohamad, were (re)inscribed troupes of Westernized views of Muslim men. They were deemed overly sexualized and seductive womanizers. This image, in turn, creates the antitheses to the good Muslim. What is key to Shome’s argument is her examination of how White femininity aims to keep White women
“pure” and virginal and how this trope is regularly used as a lens to interpret Muslim masculinity.

This dualism between men and women of color still leads to a misrepresentation of reality. Elia’s (2006) article contends that contemporary media tends to favor Muslim women over Muslim men due to the fact that American media positions Muslim women as helpless victims. She notes that this prejudice predates 9/11, as Muslim individuals have always been seen as Other in Judeo-Christian culture. In the context of the United States, studies have shown that Arab American women are seen as non-threatening while their male counterparts are seen as terrorists.

Moreover, those individuals who denounce Islam are favored over those who still practice it. The primary site for this evaluation is the United States mass media. Through her analysis, Elia finds that the Bush administration never had the intention of improving women’s circumstances. It was only after 9/11 that they wanted to improve Muslim women’s lives while simultaneously invading their countries and destroying their homes (p. 157). Female empowerment became a convenient outlet for the U.S. military. Moreover this sentiment works in conjunction with religious oppression. Elia points to Palestine, and Israel, in which women from Palestine are oppressed under Israeli rule. Notably, Israel gets financial support from the United States. She concludes her essay by drawing parallelisms between European colonization two centuries ago and this situation in which, under the guise of women’s empowerment, the United States is creating a counter-productive current which positions the United States as a stakeholder in Arab culture.
The Girl Effect

In 2008, the Nike Foundation, in collaboration with the NoVo Foundation and the United Nations Foundation, began a non-profit initiative to eradicate global poverty. They commenced their initiative by launching several 3-minute films at the World Economic Forum and on YouTube. Each video has had over 1 million viewers, the video “The Girl Effect: The Clock is Ticking” as their most viewed video with over 1.9 million views. Despite its recent popularity, The Girl Effect has been an underpinning framework for development and is still heralded as an excellent model for alleviating gender inequity and poverty. This section examines how current feminist discourse, specifically one that contests postfeminism, can offer a new, more critical examination of The Girl Effect and the solutions it proposes. I will begin with a brief overview of postfeminism and how the fables that are propagated through development discourse shape the foundation of The Girl Effect. Then, I will give an overview of the literature on feminist critiques of microfinancing—the main solution of empowerment for which The Girl Effect calls. Finally, I will conclude with a summary of contemporary research focused on The Girl Effect, its relationship to postfeminism, and consumer culture.

Foundations for The Girl Effect: The Economy

The Girl Effect is based on the predication that through education and economic support, global poverty will be eliminated. The burdens of the world and its onus are placed upon young women and girls. As the website states, “Girls are the key to ending global poverty” (thegirleffect.org, 2015). This mentality has become pervasive in many economic initiatives by suggesting microfinancing as the solution to poverty. Yet, as the following section demonstrates, microfinance does not come without its drawbacks. More specifically, there is still a need to critique the contradictions to the claims of microfinance institutions and those who encapsulate
The Girl Effect. More specifically, we need to question how these organizations connect the young women from marginal spaces to a dominant, capitalistic culture.

The investment framework that The Girl Effect supports was inspired by the work of Muhammad Yunus in 1983. Inventor of the Grameen Bank, Yunus speaks of humanizing capitalism. His banking model connects locally-based non-government organizations (NGOs) to microfinance institutions (MFIs). These MFIs offer low-interest loans to either individuals or groups of individuals (most of whom are women) in exchange for financial literacy done by the NGO. This model has become the cornerstone for development and is ubiquitous today as millions of microloans are given each year.

Yet, despite its magnitude it is important to acknowledge that the success of Yunus’s model has led to a market in which individual investors are able to profit off the poor. This is the central problem Ananya Roy takes on in her book Poverty Capital. Roy draws a genealogy of Yunus’s model and describes a shift from the model that originally aimed to help the poor to becoming a neoliberal framework that positions the poor as a subject of investment and profit. She notes that the establishment of the Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP) in 1995 marks this shift. Housed in the World Bank, CGAP at one time included Yunus on its advisory board. His influence caused CGAP’s focus on poverty to become synonymous with the microfinance. Although Yunus’s work served as an inspiration to the World Bank, after Yunus left, CGAP’s focus had little to do with poverty elimination. It broke from Yunus’s model, minimalized it by stripping any type of social service, and began to only focus only on giving the poor access to credit (p. 45).

The transformation of credit by CGAP has led to a system that aims to “construct a global financial industry” (p. 47). The model had created a market in which microsharks exist—
organizations that take advantage of this market to make extreme profits. As more institutions adopt microfinancing, the assets made from these individuals are astronomical. At 6.5 billion dollars in assets (Reille and Glizovic-Mezieres, 2009), microfinance becomes its own form of capital as individuals make money off of those who are in poverty. Some of the loans are at a 100% interest rate which essentially “enslaves” these individuals to a lifetime of debt. Since the agenda of microfinance is monopolized by those in dominant spaces, Roy cautions us to think about the repercussions of the global impact of microfinance. This transformation of development as a social service, to development as a commodity, is emblematic of the current market in which Roy calls *millennial development*. Markers of millennial development include a neoliberal deregulation of loan practices and an increased surveillance of the poor.

The discontent of this surveillance is best described by Lamia Karim’s work. Karim (2011) notes that this emphasis of NGO surveillance needs to be contextualized to a neoliberal framework—a framework that values deregulation of government entities within welfare causes. In fact, the microfinance model is lauded for being individualistic and localized. Yet, what Karim notes is that NGOs replace the government’s roles in regulating individuals. Coining the phrase *NGO governmentality* her ethnographic work in Bangledesh shows how “NGOs manipulate existing kin and social relations to regulate financial behavior of individual borrowers” (p. xvii). The use of governmentality is especially salient when the desire is to harness behavior among women who desire loans.

Karim’s ethnography speaks to a cultural understanding of honor/faith (maan/imaan) and shame (lajja/sharm) amongst Muslim men and women. Honor and shame are intrinsically related to debt landscape, as Islamic codes state it is mandatory to pay back one’s debt before death (p. 61). In conjunction, shame is often a descriptor used by and for women. Karim observes that in
the specific villages she analyzed, the NGOs appropriated this cultural tradition of shame and honor to publicly shame individuals into paying back their loans (p. 84). This ranged from repossessing material items to “selling off” one’s home publicly.

The manipulation of behavior rests on Yunus’s original model that primarily focused on risk. The model was shaped by the belief that women were better investments than men because women were more likely to invest the profit made from their small business back into the familial unit. Yet, this belief is essentialist and creates a binary between men and women. Rather than including everyone in the conversation, it puts the onus on women without considering the contextual gendered histories and cultural belief systems set in that particular space. There is potential for great danger in this as evinced by the 2010 suicides in India which some have argued may have been due to the aforementioned shaming and manipulation that is often perpetuated by the NGOs and microsharks (Associated Press, 2012).

The use of risk assessment employs old-hat methods of giving credit to those deemed worthy based on credit scores. Ironically, this method is part of the reason why structural inequality exists, as those who are considered “at-risk” are given higher interest rates. In the most blatant terms, this is “using the master’s tools to build the master’s house” (Lorde, 1984). Contradictory, the Grameen bank argues that poverty is symptomatic of social injustice. The distribution of wealth and access to credit becomes the focus. Unfortunately, mainstream MFI s fail to “redistribute” the wealth, because these institutions are often run by individuals with great wealth to start with and who profit off the interest rates of those who pay back their loans. In the end, the wealth gap increases even while claims are made that microfinance is an exchange system that positions the poor as entrepreneurs of their own empowerment.
Notably, the negotiations and contracts made are mostly through digital spaces. Therefore, it is important to recognize how the actor (the investor) and acted upon (investee) are digitally mediated through sites like Kiva.org, lendwithcare.org, and microplace.com. As Gajjala et. al (2013) point out, the mediated staging of authenticity within these sites gives way to a need for a complex interrogation of “voice” within a contextual space and time. Their findings demonstrate that, despite the mediated presentation of a “lateral” connection between investor and investee, there is still a “larger power structure” that positions a specific cultural belief system as its center (p. 51).

In many ways, Kiva and other organizations like it act as a portal between the subaltern and those in dominant spaces. As previously discussed, MFIs are able to select what type of person “fits” the role of investee. It is important to note that this “fit” is predicated on numerous gendered frameworks that suggest that investing in the right kind of women has value and that investing in men is risky. This model creates a binary between “good women” and “risky men” and leads to surveillance by a NGO presence within the rural landscape (Roy, 2010, p. 50). This type of “risk” has been found to be based on the generalizations that are made from highly contextually specific circumstances (Jackson, 2007). Moreover, women have been found to take financial risks, and that often marriage is not a source of subordination but a site for security and entitlement. What this research demonstrates is that we must continue interrogation of these sites, asking how these individuals are represented and what purpose does this representation serve?

Finally, by following the model that positions a traditionally patriarchal/paternal method of surveillance often fails to consult women. Premchander et al. (2009) fills this lacuna with 10 different case studies which included the participation of the women who have received
microfinancing. Their findings show that many NGOs failed to consider how power systems within one’s village play a role in long-term sustainability in terms of gender wage gaps in agricultural jobs (p. xviii). For example, women are often excluded from making decisions about property ownership. Therefore, the credit that is often channeled through agricultural frameworks reinforces the exclusion of women (p. 196). Premchander et al. conclude that often MFIs encourage credit to be used in the creation of short-term solutions instead of sustainability. One such instance of this is the fact that investing in wells that are used for irrigation lowers the water reserves for the community and increases salt in the water. Finally, although the microfinance model aims to mitigate poverty, it fails to support the poorest of the poor (p. 201).

The scholars found that many women who did have enough to save did not invest (as instructed by the NGO or MFI) but instead distributed their income to others in need. The scholars conclude that the language of empowerment appropriated by MFIs “obscure” and create a division between how women actually view credit and how external MFIs intervene in their livelihood (p. 216).

**Critically Examining The Girl Effect**

Notably, The Girl Effect is predicated on the notion that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is the pinnacle of development, modernity, and improvement. By standards of development, growth is the end game, and this growth is measured by the GDP. Yet, despite this, there are many pitfalls to positioning this number as the beacon of global success. Economist Dirk Philipsen is a leader of the GDP’s critique. Philipsen (2015) uses an excellent example to demonstrate the limitations to the GDP. He writes:
Imagine a pill-dependent smoker who, on the way to his divorce lawyer, crashes his oversized car into a school bus because he is texting about an impending derivatives trade. Then suppose he survives, pays his many legal and medical bills, and continues to consume expensive gas, harmful cigarettes, and addictive pharmaceuticals. Contrary to common sense, he fits the profile of a modern economic hero—someone who purchases a lot of goods and requires a lot of services, including fossil fuel, gadgets, medical care, lawyer’s fees, and financial advice . . . according to standard accounting, his path . . . boosts “economic growth” . . . and contributes to our collective “well-being.” After all, he has added more than his share to the GDP (p. 2).

This small but poignant anecdote gives indication that standards of improvement centered on economic growth ultimately limit and ignore many other facets of life. Most importantly, the “GDP is a blind meter: it only counts outputs, it ignores costs and losses.” These costs and losses include environmental depredation via industry pollution and waste growth, long term health effects, and even a potential loss of happiness. Thus, many scholars have looked at The Girl Effect and have critique its message and solution for global poverty.

In her keynote address at the 2012 conference meeting of Consoling Passions, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that McRobbie’s work on the ambivalence between consumption and pleasure needs further examination. There has been a shift in economic frameworks that have positioned women as both objects of consumption as well as consumers themselves. Women are now considered the primary consumer, specifically young women. Furthermore, there is a large push to “empower” women in underdeveloped countries. Yet, these two positions are not binary in nature, and thus Banet-Weiser pushes for a more nuanced examination of empowerment and economy. Due to this, she argues that two forms of economy have emerged within the context of
postfeminist neoliberalism. The first is an economy of visibility. Drawing from Wiegman’s (1995) definition, Banet-Weiser extends Wiegman’s original definition by suggesting that in the era of brand culture, we must consider beyond how epistemologies of the visual inscribe race and gender categories (p. 56).

Banet-Weiser suggests that in an economy of visibility, specifically one that centers girls and women, *buyers and sellers interact to trade or buy goods.* (p. 57). Yet, the *product* being sold is the female body while the consumers are both *Can-Do* and *At-Risk* girls. As Harris (2004) notes, the Can-Do girl is painted in opposition to the At-Risk girls. Notably, the Can-Do girl is typically White, originates in the developed world, and is middle class. In contrast, the At-Risk girl is typically a girl who is susceptible to poverty, early pregnancy, and lacks career ambition. Although both Harris and Banet-Weiser suggest that this binary typically includes the racial divide between white women and those of color, I would like to extend this line of thinking to consider other demarcations of identity. For example, how might the Can-Do/At-Risk binary transpire in spaces in which there are caste as well rural/urban divides (i.e India)?

Regardless of identity markers, what becomes key when examining The Girl Effect is how empowerment is marketed and commodified within and to each group. As such, Banet-Wiser has argued that there is a market of empowerment that permeates current economies of visibility (p. 61). For the Can-Do girls and women, this empowerment discourse links traditional patriarchal forms capitalism to empowerment in a way in which women are encouraged to buy products that emphasize their femininity and femaleness. A juxtaposition to Can-Do girls demonstrates that At-Risk girls are considered the agents of change in development. One such example is the aforementioned example, Kiva, in which the primary goal is to give women from
underdeveloped countries access to small loans in order to start a business and build the economy. Notably, these loans are marketed to women.

What is key in this dynamic is that in this context, Can-Do and At-Risk girls become both the *product* and the *consumer*. Can-Do individuals purchase items (whether it be a TOMS shoe or a donation that is blasted on Facebook in the form of social capital) for the perceived benefit of At-Risk girls who then use that money to make a business and become a part of the global world market. This framework has two primary issues. First is that the solutions to the empowerment market relies on individual changes rather than systemic changes. The second is that empowerment is too liberally used to be effective, therefore Banet-Wiser argues that when exploring notions of empowerment, we must ask: For whom? And for what? What are we empowering girls to do?” (p. 59).

She continues to argue that if we were to ask these questions in the context of The Girl Effect, what we find is that the frameworks used to “empower” these girls are far from feminist. The girls are not empowered to challenge the status quo. Instead, both Can-Do and At-Risk girls are expected to maintain the status quo through purchase and social capital.

Notably Banet-Wiser’s work is an extension of other work that is focused on The Girl Effect. Such work includes Switzer’s (2013) work on school girls in Kenya. Her research notes that The Girl Effect not only presents a binary between “can-do” and “at-risk” girls, but that it also presents a binary between “two diametrically opposed options for adolescent girls: [one] of choice, autonomy, productivity, and promise and [one of] tradition, confinement, reproductivity, and peril” (p. 346). Her ethnographic data and her experiences in Kenya give her evidence of how this social campaign distorts the lived realities of Kenyan girls.
Examining The Girl Effect PSA videos posted by the NIKE Foundation, Switzer points to a universalization of the global South. Against the backdrop of the previously discussed Cornwall et al.’s (2007) work on development fables, Switzer argues that the videos promote a neoliberal framework in which empowerment is linked to individualism and approved decisions are based on capitalist-endorsed paths of doing. This female exceptionalism centers commodification of the female body by suggesting a tradeoff—a trade between the global North and global South based on access to education (and deferred reproduction) for political investment (p. 350).

As previously stated, the solution to global poverty relies upon the regulation of bodies of girls from the Global South. Upon watching the video, the viewer becomes the intervention through the process of investment (whether it be actual money or just extending the discourse via communication networks). Consequently, the body of the girl is acted upon via political intervention and expected to perform.

Switzer’s work parallels Banet Wiser in that it argues that The Girl Effect asks for individual changes to systemic issues, and that it centers the female body, reproduction, and change as a solution for mitigating world poverty. Similarly, Switzer’s work examines the binary between “the durable sexual subject (embodied in the schoolgirl) and the disposable sexual subject (embodied in the pregnant child-bride),” which can be linked in many ways to Wiser’s “can-do” and “at-risk” girls. Although Banet-Wiser’s work draws a binary in a global setting, Banet-wiser misses this mark by suggesting “can-do” can only be found in Western/Northern spaces. Switzer’s work demonstrates that similar binaries can be made locally. As The Girl Effect videos illustrate, the girls who are not able to attend school are seen as failures and are often forgotten as evinced by Switzer’s ethnography.
Findings

Like the previous chapter, 29 participants (14 women and 15 men) played *Half the Sky Movement: The Game* (HTS). Players were asked the following questions: 1) *What were the major social issues raised in the game?* 2) *How were the women and men portrayed in this game?* and 3) *Did this game change the way you view women’s empowerment or feminists?* Notably, this question was re-asked during the follow-up interviews. During these interviews, more than four months had passed since the interviewees had played the game; thus the question became a useful tool to explore what was most memorable in the game long term. Using thematic coding (Appendix A), the following section outlines the overall answers to these questions from both the questionnaire and the follow-up interviews.

**What Were the Major Social Issues Raised in the Game?**

The participant’s responses addressed three major social issues. These included: 1) gender inequality; 2) poverty and an unjust economy; and 3) access to health care. The following section unpacks each.

**Gender inequality.** The most prominent social issue my participants acknowledged was that of gender inequality. This ranged from an umbrella statement that recognizes gender inequality to specific issues like domestic violence and sex trafficking. Numerically, gender inequality was equally addressed by both men and women who played the game (n = 9, N = 18). For example, one White female noted that:

> [In Half the Sky] Women were treated as if they had to keep everything a secret from their husbands. They had had to stay at home with the kids and they couldn’t have their own businesses or their own things they loved to do.
While one White male noted, “Inter-social treatment is one of the issues raised because the woman in the game had to check in with her husband about doing certain tasks and that is considered sexism.” Both female and male participants felt the game’s primary focus was gender inequality.

During the follow-up interviews, participants echoed similar sentiments. For many of them, they felt that the game emphasized the importance of giving women a voice as the game’s central purpose. For example, upon asking Anita, a White woman, what the major social justice issues raised in the game were, Anita responded, “I just remember the wife had little say in anything and her life revolved more so around her husband. Like she wasn't supposed to work or something.” After not playing for four months, this was the most memorable moment for Anita. Similarly, Callie, another White woman, noted, “From what I remember, Radhika (I think) made decisions like - you can either be soft spoken or you can be outspoken. So I think the game was definitely about women's empowerment.” In this exchange, I asked Callie to expand; she responded by referencing two specific moments in the game in which Radhika must speak up or stay silent. The first is the scene previously discussed in which Radhika asks her husband about spending money on their daughter’s medicine. The second is a scene in which Radhika learns about her friend’s abusive husband and players are prompted with the decision to speak up to the police and find help for the friend or stay silent. Callie notes, “I specifically remember the friend who was in an abusive relationship and she had the choice to just be quiet about it or speak up and say, hey, this is wrong.” Zeke, a White man, also pointed to this scene in his response,

I think the biggest scene I remember was when the main character had to help a friend who was in a domestic abuse situation, to report it to the police. The friend was nervous and didn’t want to report her husband because she believed that he wouldn't do it again. I
believe that was how that one went. I think that one stuck out to me the most because it made me so angry.

I followed up Zeke’s response by asking him why it made him angry. His response:

It made me angry because some women believe that they're stuck in that situation and there's nothing that they can do. I convinced Radhika to go and report it to the police and then I was even more angry because the police said ‘You need like proof of this’ … something along those lines. Like he basically all but said, ‘I am not going to help you.’ Which made me more angry.

Zeke continued and noted that he felt that, despite the lack of police support, women should still speak up no matter what about domestic violence. Zeke viewed speaking up as the central solution to domestic violence for Radhika’s friend. Notably, he did not address the possible consequences of speaking out against an abuser nor the complexities of the abuse cycle. Although, it is important to note, the game did not address this either.

**Poverty and an unjust economy.** Participants felt that the second major issue raised in the game was poverty. Like gender inequality, this was equally addressed by both women and men. For example, one White man stated, “Most of the social justice issues I could pick up on had to do with wealth. How to raise money to raise the animals, get medicine for her daughter, get books for the school.” For this individual, access to economic goods was central to the game while gender inequality was not as big of an issue, as there was no mention of gender inequality in his answer.

Accessibility to economic goods was also a major discussion point during the follow-up interviews. I asked Miranda, a Latino woman, what issues stuck out to her, she responded:
“The character didn't have much money, food, and stuff because I think I had to grow my own stuff and harvest my own stuff from a cow or a goat or whatever it was. I couldn't just go to the store and buy it because I didn't have any money I don't think there was any place for buying that stuff.”

Since it had been over six months since Miranda had played the game, I followed up by asking Miranda if she recalled where the game was located and why. Miranda responded, “India because she was dressed in colorful attire.” Miranda was unable to remember the word for sari but recognized and remembers the outfit Radhika wore.

Similarly, Elsie, a White woman, noted that the most memorable thing for her was that “they didn't have enough money for basic things like healthcare or school or that they really had to make use of like the fruit and the goats and stuff like that.” Yet, unlike Miranda, Elsie was unable to remember the setting of the game’s narrative. She knew it was not in the United States because, “In the United States- we don’t typically…sell goats or collect fruit…to pay for hospital bills. And they lived in, like, a hut.”

Both Miranda and Elsie shared a distant memory of the game, but both recalled that poverty outlined the narrative and scenes. More specifically both had vivid memories of collecting milk from a goat to get an income for Radhika. Although, the game offered this as a solution to poverty: to obtain a small business via selling goat milk, both women saw this as a marker of poverty.

**Health.** Finally, some of my participants saw access to medical supplies as a key issue in the game. Notably, only four individuals addressed this, and of the four individuals, all were women. For most, participants referred to a scene in the game where Radhika must get medicine for her daughter. These four individuals pointed to the importance of access to health care and
addressing HIV/AIDS. These responses were basic in nature and just addressed the issues in a macro way. For example, one White woman noted, “The game focused on healthcare such as access to hospitals and medicine.”

One of my interviewees, Doug, a White man, really found the lack of access to healthcare as something he could relate to; thus for him, healthcare stuck out. Doug noted, “I’m older (27) and now that I am not on my parent’s health insurance, this is something I am thinking about. Especially, since we are required to get it here at [University].”

Although healthcare was important for Doug, it is not surprising that healthcare was not a prominent issue that stuck out for most of the other students. Many of them were less than 26 years of age and on their parent’s health insurance. Thus, similar to Anita’s statement on feminist issues, very few students addressed healthcare and its expense in their answers. Although it is important to note that this is speculation, and that further research would be needed to prove this.

How Were the Women and Men Portrayed in This Game?

Both the men and women in the game have distinct portrayals in HTS. None is more prominent (or more memorable for my participants) than the scene (see Image 1) where Radhika must decide whether to lie to her husband about spending their family money on their sick daughter. In Kristof and WuDunn’s book, this issue is prominently addressed as the author’s note:

Because men now typically control the purse strings, it appears that the poorest families in the world typically spend approximately ten times as much (20 percent of their income on average) on a combination of alcohol, prostitutes, candy, sugary drinks, and lavish feasts as they do on educating their children” (Kristof and WuDunn, 2009, p. 192).
This quote draws from second-hand data that includes weddings and funeral ceremonies in its estimation. The assumption by Kristof and WuDunn is that men are the only ones making the financial decisions in households around the world. As both the quote and Image 1 demonstrate, women and men play different roles in the stories presented.

**Women.** The women in both the book and the game are showcased in positive ways. For example, Radhika is the heroine in the game’s story as she travels the world helping other women. She is never shown in a negative light. For my students, they saw the women in this game as complex characters and acknowledge that many of the women in the game were both empowered and disempowered. For example, one White woman noted,

> For some of them, such as the main character and the women’s empowerment group, the game portrayed them as strong, resourceful, and motivated people who wanted to change the world and help those around them. Other women, such as the one abused by her husband, seemed scared to act, timid, and a bit helpless. However, this just goes to show the effects of the situations those women were in, not necessarily traits that are being portrayed as inherently tied to being female. There were also women in the narrative, such as the woman running a brothel, who showed that some women contribute to the plight of other women, it is not simply men.

> For this woman, she could acknowledge the myriad of roles women play in HTS. Yet, other participants felt that the game portrayed women as weak. For example, one Black woman noted the game portrayed women as “Very weak! They lacked power, self-dignity and to me it portrayed women as useless and dependent.” Notably, many (41%, n = 12) expressed similar sentiments despite the game possessing a protagonist who combats global gender inequality.
Finally, the choice logic of the game, in which players are asked to choose the best option for Radhika, influenced some students’ interpretation of how women were portrayed in the game. For example, one White woman noted,

The game portrayed women in different ways, it depended on what options you choose when in a situation for instance I could of decided to lie and not tell my husband that I joined the women’s club but instead I told him the truth. If I would have not have told him the truth and would have hid it from him then I would have seemed to fear and be worried about my husband’s opinion more than myself.

For her, the choice to stay silent was the weaker option. For another woman, the game’s logic of choice, which relied on players to choose, innately implied weakness. This individual saw the player’s intervention as a sign of weakness. She wrote, “This game portrayed women as needing help and support because we had to choose the decisions she made beforehand – we could not just make them without having to think about the ‘right’ choice.”

The follow-up interviews also reinforced the fact that the women in the game bore complex representations. For example, Elsie, a White woman, noted that she felt that women were portrayed in a positive light. She noted, “I think it portrayed them in a positive light because she was doing so much to help her family.” Elise saw Radhika’s ability to put family first as empowering. Conversely, Jake, a White man, noted he felt that the representation was contingent on the choices you made in the game. A positive representation was linked to the correct choices. He quotes, “I think . . . you could to choose what kind of role they took. I think generally, at least in my game, she was powerful and important to the family. She did a lot of stuff as far as working and doing the crops. She was doing a lot for her kids and just the overall family.” Both Elsie and Jake, despite having different perspectives on whether players made a
choice in representation of the game, believed that playing a maternal role was linked to her positive portrayal.

Like the questionnaire, most interviewees agreed that HTS’s representation of women was fairly accurate despite not knowing first hand. Tiffany, a White woman, instead felt that there was an overrepresentation of Radhika’s knowledge about women’s empowerment. She notes:

Partially, I don't know if it's accurate because I don't think I'm familiar enough with that culture to know if it's accurate or not. I think that definitely the main character especially, seemed like way more informed than I would have expected… But at the same time, you want your main character to be knowledgeable so US women can identify with her.

Tiffany believed that the main character’s role was to be taken on by players in the United States. As such, her answer speaks to an interesting binary in which women in the United State are presumably more knowledgeable about Indian women’s empowerment than women in India despite Tiffany’s admittance to her lack of knowledge.

**Men.** Conversely, the men in both the book and the game are presented in a very linear way. Except for a few male characters, most men in the game are corrupt, lazy, violent, and abusive. Half of my students saw the men in the game as villains. Both the men and the women in the study equally expressed this. For example, one Latina woman noted that “Men were portrayed as strict and scary because women were faced with the decision of whether to tell them certain things.” Although, many expressed that this was the portrayal in the game, there was a divergence between whether they felt this was an accurate representation. Most (78% n=11) women felt that the game accurately represented men when it came to power structures. For example, one White woman wrote, “I feel the men were depicted as the dominant figures and
were in the positions of power…This depiction is probably very accurate in many societies
because men have more rights and opportunities for education and success than women do.”

Although most of the women could agree that, in terms of power relations, this was
accurate, the men on the other hand felt that “not all men” acted like the men in the game. Yet, a
key finding is that when the men did say it was an accurate representation, it was met with the
qualifier that it was an accurate representation of Indian men. For example, one White man
noted:

Personally I do not know much about the culture of men in India but I do believe that it
was accurate. They show the man questioning the woman about everything because he
did not believe she was able to accomplish many of the goals….The only thing I can see
that could be a problem is, is the fact the man never got mad. Many men want to be
known as the breadwinners and sometimes get offended if a woman does something that
he cannot.

Similarly, another White man noted, “The game didn’t portray very many men, just a
couple of scenes with Radhika’s husband and he let Radhika do whatever she wanted to so I
don’t think it had a very accurate portrayal of men in India.” In both cases, the two White men
felt that the game underrepresented how misogynistic men from India can be.

The follow-up interviews echoed the above sentiments. Similar to the questionnaires,
most of my interviewees saw the men in the HTS game portrayed in a negative light and had
very little to offer in terms of nuancing their original answer during their original journaling. For
example, a White woman, Callie, noted that the men in the game were “portrayed as very
authoritative… as very manly. Not manly in the sense of big and strong but manly in the sense
of, like ‘I'm superior.’ Like her husband was definitely like, I'm the superior one in the
situation.” I followed up Callie’s comment by asking her if she felt this was an accurate representation of men in India, and she replied, “I would think so. I don't really know a lot about their culture, their society, so I don't know if I could speak to that but in my head, I would say… yes.” Similar sentiments were expressed by a Latina woman, Miranda. She stated:

They just portrayed men like they had all the power to make decisions and things like that. It's not like they had any- without any title to back them up even and they would still be- I don't know, it's like they were empowered by their sex.

Like Callie, Miranda felt this was also an accurate representation of men in India. Both women expressed similar positions that the men in the game were portrayed negatively yet accurately. I asked both how they know it is accurate and both expressed similar answers, as did most of my interviewees. Miranda replied, “Well, I don't know exactly because I’ve never been to India, but I do think that you hear about stuff in the news.” Notably, none of my students could give specific examples of neither news articles nor media examples of poor representations of men from India; they just spoke of an affective feeling produced by the media milieu.

Did This Game Change Your View of Women’s Empowerment or Feminists?

Although, the logics of the game allowed for players to take on various feminist issues around the world, few participants were impacted by this game. Of the 29 participants, 22 (76%) felt the game had not changed the way they saw women’s empowerment nor their opinions of feminists. For many, this was primarily because they felt the game did not provide any new information that was unknown to them. For example, one White woman noted:
No [this did not change my opinion of women’s empowerment], because I have always viewed women empowerment as taking charge and making something happen for yourself. I have always seen it as speaking out and bringing attention to the inequalities. For this woman, she felt the game reflected the way she viewed women’s empowerment. Another White woman echoed the importance of self-empowerment in this game:

In this game… women are not in any powerful positions and they still show empowerment through the decisions they make, the activities they do to help others, and the way they conduct their daily lives. Women’s empowerment is not defined by the environment but greatly depends on the woman and how she chooses to make decisions and capitalize on opportunities.

Similarly, the men were in agreement that the game did not change their understandings of women’s empowerment or feminism. For example, one White man noted, “This game aligns with how I currently define women’s empowerment. The game showed that women can make a difference if they take steps to advocate for themselves.” These individuals expressed similar understandings of women’s empowerment in that the onus is placed on the woman to stand up (or speak up) for herself. Notably, there was no mention in any of the responses about patriarchy, systemic change, or broader issues. Instead the students focused on individualistic elements in the game such as self-empowerment.

Even though the majority did feel this game did not change their viewpoint on women’s empowerment, a small group of individuals did feel the game changed their opinion on the importance of community. For example, one White man answered, “Yes [the game changed my opinion of women’s empowerment]. I now know that women’s empowerment groups want to better communities and lives of everyone in them, not exclusively women.” For this gentleman,
he felt the focus on community efforts changed his mind about empowerment. This sentiment of building community was echoed by 3 other White men and 2 White women.

During the follow-up interviews, I asked my interviewees if, even after four months, they still felt that the game did not change the way they viewed women’s empowerment. Most of them agreed that the game did very little to change their opinions of women’s empowerment. For example, Callie, a White woman, noted:

It only slightly altered it because I already had this idea of empowerment is just speaking up and being independent and being confident and being outspoken, that kind of thing. So by giving those options, it kind of solidified what I think is empowerment at the same time.”

For Callie, the game did not alter her perspective of women’s empowerment but rather reinforced her original perspective. Similarly, upon asking Jake, a White man, the same question, he noted, “I don't think so particularly, it helped me think about it, that's for sure but didn’t change my mind.”

**In-Game Decision Making**

This section of my findings uses the previously described gameplay review method (see Chapter 2). The 10 interviewees were asked to play the game *Life is Strange* and then analyze and compare their own gameplay between *Life is Strange* and *Half the Sky*. The following section is broken down as follows. First, I will explore how subject positionality and interpretation of both the main characters (Radhika, a woman of color from India, and Max, a White teen from Oregon) shaped the way participants described their decision making while playing the game. Then, I will provide a contrast and comparison of the rationale behind the decisions made in both games. Finally, I will provide an analysis of how my participants viewed both games against the context of women’s empowerment and feminism.
Self-Identification with Radhika Versus Max

One major finding during gameplay was the player’s self-identification with Max and not Radhika. Most of my students (regardless of gender and race) could relate with Max more than Radhika. This was evident throughout the game as players vocalized their gameplay decisions in first-person while playing with Max and in third-person while playing with Radhika. For example, Callie, a White woman, described her decisions with Radhika:

Initially starting this game, I was surprised to be immediately prompted with a decision of whether to speak up or to keep quiet. Growing up with my circumstances, I am not accustomed to feeling oppressed and quieted. Radhika had to choose between speaking up and confronting her husband about getting medicine for her sick child. I really didn’t give it a second thought and immediately chose to speak up... This is basically how the rest of the decisions I encountered in the game went. I chose the more aggressive approach each time, but each time I found myself thinking about what that choice meant for Radhika.

Although scholars have suggested that video games curate a “magic circle” in which the “real” world blends away with complete immersion (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), while Callie journaled her thoughts, she saw Radhika outside of herself. She draws attention to this when I ask for a follow up on her decisions. “For Radhika, I chose decisions that I would think would be good for her.”

When Callie played as Max, Callie outlined her decision process as follows:
Max was a quiet person so I picked what would be best for the narrative or storyline. For example, I didn’t want to tell the principal about my magic powers so I originally picked stay silent but then decided to speak up.

I asked her to follow up with that and elaborate why she made the decisions to speak up to her principal. She responded, “I'm going to report the guy because it is the right thing to do… He has a gun and that is dangerous.” During her follow-up interview, I asked if she felt she made decisions based off her own experiences and she replied, “Yes. When I was in school we had a couple of bomb threats. It was really scary even though nothing came of it.” Callie drew from her own experiences in high school. She recalled the fear she had and felt that it was important to report the violence.

The gender of my participants did not influence the decisions and self-identification of the female protagonists in the game. Like the women who participated in the follow-up interview, the five men who played the game expressed similar first-person and third person subjectivities. For example, Roger, a White man, discussed his decision making throughout the game:

Well, I really connected with her [Radhika] when we were going out and doing things. I liked trying to make a difference and I saw that I liked encouraging her. I liked helping her achieve her goals. Not like I was channeling her, but her and I were kind of working together kind-of-thing.

Similarly, Jake, explicitly mentioned that his goal for Radhika was “to be a badass” and chose decisions based on how that would unfold. Yet, both Roger and Jake shared a similar out-loud thought processes when it came to choosing for Max. When prompted by the principal, Roger exclaimed, “What!?! Why is he questioning me! I didn’t do anything!... I feel like the principal is
out to get me.” Jake, similarly, noted, “Oh man, this dude is out to get me. I don’t have any evidence, though so no one is going to believe me.”

Although both individuals had different life experiences as men, both could relate to Max in terms of the issues set forth in the game. Both men felt that Max was easily relatable because as Zeke put it, “Max was the quintessential, cliché brunette with no personality so you could easily place yourself onto her.” I found Zeke’s comment insightful as it spoke to the relatability of Max in comparison to Radhika, in which Zeke regularly noted he had “little knowledge about India or Radhika’s experience.”

Decisions

Although Radhika and Max are in different spaces around the world and encounter different problems, the choices made for both characters were similar. Yet, despite this, the rationale behind each choice differed. Radhika, a character of color, takes on the role as savior to other women of color, leading to a series of implications when my participants who play the game are natives to Western, developed spaces. As such, most of the decisions made for Radhika differed from the decisions for Max. For example, in both games the first major decision for both Radhika and Max is to speak up to a person of presumed authority. In Half the Sky, Radhika must speak up to her husband, while in Life is Strange, Max speaks up to her principal. Although all of my students selected “speak up,” their reasoning differs. For Radhika, each player singularly selected that she should speak up to her husband. As previously demonstrated in my findings, it was outlined by many that her husband should not control Radhika. Journaling and gameplay decisions were affected by this belief.

For Max, players felt that she should speak up because they picked options that reflected how they, themselves would react in a similar situation. For example, Tiffany noted, “I’m
choosing to report Nathan because I [in real life] trust authority figures.” This was a general theme in Tiffany’s choices. She reported Nathan to the principal, wanted to report a different scene of violence (that didn’t give the option to report), and chose to encourage Chloe to tell the police. As a White woman, Tiffany noted that she has always trusted authority figures. Although, notably, she did not mention how her race and gender may influence this trust. Instead, she mentioned that throughout her life when she was in trouble, authority figures were there to help her. Thus, when Max had the option to seek help, it was an obvious pick for her.

Similarly, Tiffany chose a comparable option for Radhika when given the opportunity for police intervention as a possible solution to a problem in *Half the Sky*. Radhika’s new-found friend from Kenya tells Radhika that she is a victim of sexual assault. In this scene, Radhika is given the option to encourage her friend to report her husband or again, stay silent.

Max, like Radhika, is faced with a similar decision. Max’s best friend, Chloe, informs her that she was date-raped by a schoolmate. Max is faced with the decision to encourage Chloe to tell the police or to respond “He is still dangerous” (Image 5). When my interviewees encountered this final scene in the game, many were shocked to find out that Nathan raped Chloe. In some cases, some of my students even responded audibly with the second option. For example, while Kathy was playing the game, she exclaimed, “That’s fucked up!” prior to giving the prompt in the game. Kathy laughed in delight to find the irony of the game reflecting her own personal response to the game. For Kathy, she chose this answer because she felt the game was speaking to her own reactions. Kathy further mentioned she wouldn’t encourage Chloe to go to the police because she would need evidence and Chloe had none. Notably, all my interviewees unanimously said that Chloe should *not* go to the police. As mentioned in one of the preceding sections, Zeke felt that although he wanted Radhika to stand up to the police, he was frustrated
because he thought that they would never do anything. Yet, he still had Radhika say something. Conversely, in the final scene of *Life is Strange*, Zeke had Chloe stay silent. Zeke saw the complexities of power in Chloe’s positionality as a woman who was date-raped. Zeke noted that there was little evidence. Yet, in a parallel world where Radhika’s friend was being abused by her husband, she was unable to provide a similar complexity. For him, it was black and white, and although frustrating, he felt that it was the “right thing to do.”

**Analysis**

**Filled Gaps**

In between the lines of this data, one can see that there are many gaps of knowledge. The paucity of knowledge about developing countries and non-US spaces was often addressed by my participants. For example, upon asking my participants what women’s empowerment might look like in India, one White male noted:

I have never been to India so I can't really speak but I've heard how women are treated differently and what is their culture is like, at least from my second-hand point of view.

So I've never really experienced it but I could imagine it's different.

This response was echoed by many of my participants who did the follow-up interview. Upon learning about the interviewee’s opinion of the representation of women and men in the game, I followed up with the question, “Is this an accurate representation?” Of the ten interviewees, eight said they did not know because they had never been to India. What is interesting is that, for them, merely visiting India would give them insight to the gender representation of India.

What this points to is the human capability to take knowledge that is formed based on experience and fill in the gaps of one’s imagination. This is especially true for unencountered cultural groups—often people from marginal spaces around the world. The imaginaries created
about developing spaces have been addressed by several scholars like Anderson (1991). Like Anderson, I found that often when participants described the major issues in the game or how the men and women were presented in the game, most participants filled the gaps to their imagination. For example, one White woman and man noted a scene in which Radhika and her women’s empowerment group goes to a loan officer to obtain a microloan. Typically, many microloan organizations will offer loans to groups of individuals rather than one individual since it allows for more accountability. Yet the interpretation of this scene (Image 2) is interesting, as the female participant noted, “Women were thought of as homemakers basically and that they could do no more. They also couldn’t take out loans unless there was more than one of them but I’m sure for men this was different.” Similarly, one White man wrote,

The banker was questioning why I was there so early to give him the 900 dollars that he needed for my loan. I guess he thought that I was a girl so I needed extra time for paying off the loan. I’m handing you money, why does it matter if I’m here early or not?

For him, this exchange was gendered despite no evidence of such. What this speaks to is the importance of education serving as that “gap filler.”

Similarly, Elsie, a White woman who could not remember where the game took place, recalled that the place was in a “third world country.” Elsie knew it was not in the United States because “we don’t live in huts.” Elsie, used her imaginary, shaped by media, to place Radhika in a third-world country based on symbolism and markers of poverty. As such, this imaginary formed incredibly limited interpretations of the characters in the game.

_Half the Sky_ relies on its players to fill these gaps. Its primary goal is to not necessarily create critical thinking skills, but to draw awareness and to encourage players to donate money to the non-profits linked to the game. Thus, players use previous imaginaries and feelings to make
decisions. This could be potentially dangerous as the United States pushes further from facts and focuses on feelings to determine information (Oliver, 2016). Players of this game continually recalled issues that created an affective response. For example, when several participants noted their frustration with Radhika’s husband or how Zeke noted that he felt angry about the Kenyan woman not speaking up about her abusive husband. Participants recalled their feelings of frustration rather than the details of the game itself. In a sense, then, the game was successful because it garnered a memorable feeling and desire to help others, even though they said their opinion of women’s empowerment hadn’t changed.

**Representations of Subaltern Women and Men**

The goal of this project is to not ascertain whether the game garners authentic representation of subaltern individuals. Spivak, herself, speaks to the complexities of representation and voice since authentic representation valorizes the subaltern (Spivak, 1988, p. 90-91). Instead, this project aims to determine how players viewed and interpreted the representations created by the developers of *Half the Sky,* and to see how these representations shape gameplay. In terms of female representation, the women in both games were viewed in complex ways. For example, as demonstrated above, some participants viewed the women of *Half the Sky* as weak while others participants viewed the women as strong and empowering. For many participants, they saw a variety of female characters that possessed a wide variety of traits while other viewed the characters as empowered via in-game choices. Regardless, the female protagonists in both games were perceived in complex and sometimes conflicting ways.

Conversely, the men in *Half the Sky* were viewed in an absolute negative light. Yet, the interpretation of whether players felt this was accurate differed. Many of the women felt this was an accurate representation while most men felt this was not accurate representation of all men
but that it could be an accurate representation of men in India. As discussed in the previous section, imaginaries are filled by previous knowledge, and when one’s only knowledge is how the media portrays individuals, humans are limited in their perception of others. As such, there is no surprise as the game reinforces troupes of masculinity in which subaltern men are perceived as the perpetrators of inequality while the women are victims. In *Half the Sky*, all the men are portrayed in a negative light. Yet, this is also true with *Life is Strange*. The principal, Nathan, and David are all men who create significant barriers for Max. Yet, every one of my follow-up interviewees (both women and men) indicated they felt it was not the best representation of men and unequivocally inaccurate of all men.

During gameplay, participants wanted to choose options to help the woman regardless of the game. In the end, the players felt connected to the protagonist in some way and wanted what was (in their perception) best for the main character.

**Empowerment, Protagonist Subjectivity, and the “Right Thing to Do”**

Although both characters encountered similar issues like domestic violence, each protagonist’s reaction to the issues, in conjunction with general presence throughout the game, differed. Radhika is unabashedly helpful. She wants to help other women in the community. Max, on the other hand, is a quiet nerd who is apathetic to her surroundings until her bombastic friend, Chloe, is in trouble. Despite the disparity between personalities, players felt both characters were empowered using the same choice logic. Central to Max’s story is the notion of the “everyday hero” that Max strives to be. Players who played the game felt that Max was empowered when she used her superpower (to control time) to be an everyday hero. Most of my participants felt the game was neither feminist nor about empowerment. This might be because although the issues were very like Radhika’s, empowerment was normalized throughout Max’s
narrative due to her subject positionality. Conversely, players described Radhika as empowered when the perceivably “right” decision was selected by my participants.

Players asserted that Radhika was empowered because she was “speaking up” and embodying the same Western neoliberal logics of empowerment encouraged by the United States. As my students noted, Radhika was empowered because she was seeking out a job (for the sake of her family), speaking her mind, and helping the community. Moreover, students felt empowered to help Radhika make these decisions. For example, one White woman noted:

One aspect of the game that I really liked is that when it prompted me to make a decision for Radhika, it offered a possible reason that could possibly sway her from not getting the goat, finding the medicine, etc. It made me think about the decisions I was making and I thought of all the consequences that could stem from my decision… I chose to have Radhika get the medicine, invest in the goat, obtain the permit for her addition to her house, and join the women’s group every week because I thought those choices would enhance her life and were best for her…It was actually very empowering to make those decisions for her and gain that sense of control that she can do whatever she thinks is best for her life.

On the contrary, Max, who already embodies Western neoliberal logics via her subject positionality as a US high school student, does not have the same expectations of empowerment. For Max, she already is empowered by the mere fact that she is given choices. Even when the option chosen by the participant was ethically wrong, Max was still empowered. For example, Zeke and Kathy both chose to make fun of the local school bully. For them, it was empowering to stand up to Victoria, despite its malign intent. My participants felt that Max did not need to obtain good grades or social mobility (via popularity) but instead felt that her empowerment was
contingent on “speaking up” in social interactions. Regardless if the game presented consequences. For example, every single participant chose to intervene when Max’s friends were being harassed by authority. Yet, for Radhika, players felt that authority figures played a central role as savior through obtaining a loan or intervening in a domestic abuse situation.

As such, one might conclude that players felt that Radhika was empowered due to intervention and the choices made to help Radhika, while Max was empowered by the mere fact that she is speaking. Notably, speaking up as a white woman is empowering while speaking up as a woman of color is also empowering but only when what is said reinforces neoliberal feminist discourse.

In addition to filling gaps of knowledge, the game expected players to express similar sentimentalism in terms of women’s empowerment. This is especially true in that the game mirrored many of my participant’s beliefs in neoliberal feminism. Another major finding is the fact that the game expected players to view feminism through a neoliberal lens.

This chapter explored how The Girl Effect shaped gameplay decisions. More specifically, it showcased how my participants discussed how avatar subjectivity shaped the way they described their gameplay choices. Conclusions regarding the findings in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 will be discussed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this project, I conclude three things: First, the *Half the Sky* utilizes players’ understanding of neoliberal feminism to create in-game action purported as empowerment. Second, the game does not engage with (and sometimes encourages) reductionist views of empowerment and representation. Finally, players are given no opportunity to self-reflect on their own subject positionality, thus leading players to choose options rooted in privilege and power. The game does not deconstruct these two important aspects of gender inequality, thus players leave the game feeling the same about women’s empowerment as they did prior to playing. In this final chapter of my dissertation I will answer my original research questions and explore each of my conclusions by providing evidence based on my findings. I will then conclude with recommendations for future research.

**RQ1: What Discourses Influence the Player’s Decisions During Gameplay?**

It appears that several major discourses influence a player’s decision during gameplay but the three most prominent are postfeminist, liberal feminist, and development fables and imaginaries. The following section discusses each.

**Postfeminist**

Postfeminist discourse permeates throughout this project. Yet notably, it develops differently from the four types of postfeminism that were discussed in the literature reviews of Chapter 1 and 3. Most of my participants identified as feminist but in many ways their views of feminism were reductionist and, for many, apolitical. The lack of political nature is, then, postfeminist (Gill, 2016). For example, during gameplay, many of my students chose options that they saw as “the right thing to do” rather than “the feminist thing to do.” In this setting, decisions were often made because it was viewed ethical rather than political. Regardless if the game, itself, is quite
political, players perceived the game as apolitical. Similarly, most of my students contend that *Half the Sky* was *not* a feminist game. Instead, players used postfeminist discourses to describe their decisions. For example, all students selected “speak up” when Radhika was confronted by her husband and each supported Radhika’s endeavor to obtain a job. For this group of students (and I surmise most millennials), women are expected to speak their mind as well as have jobs. Since these issues are so normalized in their everyday life, their decisions were based on their understandings of their own lives rather than political beliefs.

**Liberal Feminism**

Although postfeminist discourses influenced decision making, so did liberal feminist discourse. Like postfeminist discourses, liberal feminist ideology was so normalized among this group of students that none of them identified it as a feminist framework. The solutions pushed in the game to combat global gender inequality includes individualism, meritocracy, and access to equal rights. Similarly, my students believed in these ideologies prior to playing the game. The most prominent opinion shared by my participants was that Radhika should speak up to her husband and the police, regardless of consequences. This sentiment was also pervasive for the decisions made for Max in *Life is Strange*; although students were more considerate of the consequences that Max would endure. Similarly, participants felt that by giving Radhika access to a job, she would get out of poverty. There was no reflexivity on how poverty can still exist while having a job. Instead, players agreed that by obtaining a loan, “Radhika has a shot at achieving her dreams” (Doug, White male). Little consideration was given that Radhika’s dream was never mentioned in the game but rather having a loan to buy a goat and sell milk became Radhika’s dream in the student’s filled imaginary.
Development Fables and Imaginaries

Notably, upon starting this project, I expected my students to become educated about The Girl Effect. Yet, what I found was that The Girl Effect was already imbedded in their belief systems in specific ways. Central to The Girl Effect is the notion that there are individuals who deserve help (Switzer, 2013). Most my players wanted to help Radhika achieve her dreams because she wanted to get out of poverty. Radhika was, in this narrative, perceived by my students as a Can-do woman despite her subject positionality. Evidence for this is the constant reference back to the desire to help Radhika because she wanted change in her community to occur. Students connected to this.

Many students mentioned their lack of knowledge about the Global South. As such, they relied on imaginaries of how these spaces operate. Such was the case that many thought the men and women were realistic representations of subaltern India and that few even believed they didn’t have grocery stores. This is not the fault of the student, but rather the lack of education about these spaces. *Half the Sky* relied on this lack of knowledge to promote its own agenda.

**RQ2: Do Those Who Play *Half the Sky* Reflect on Their Own Positionality and Power Through Digital Roleplay?**

The allegory “to walk in one’s shoes” has been used for social change for decades. *Half the Sky* embodies this phrase in hopes to create a digital simulation where player experience the life of a subaltern Indian woman. Its goal is to educate and encourage behavioral change via activism and donation. Feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young (1997) tackles this concept in her book *Intersecting Voices*. As educators, we encourage our students to think of the world through the lens of another. Feminist educators take this a step further and encourage students to perceive life through the eyes of the marginalized. To see the world through another’s eyes,
Young notes, is a key element to moral communication but when this framework becomes systematized, problems emerge (p. 38).

Young points to Benhabib’s (1992) and Habermas’ (1983) work on moral communication. Habermas, Young argues, expects communicators to become impartial to their own personal perspectives during moral communication. In other words, this type of communication expects the self to adopt a sense of neutrality. Benhabib expands on this by suggesting that there must be reciprocity between the self and other in addition to impartiality. Young contests that this assumes that reciprocity is equal between the self and the other and fails to acknowledge how power operates between two individuals thus preventing a neutral stance. As such, Young argues that taking on the perspective of the marginalized other is both impossible and impedes social justice projects. Adopting another’s position by imagining another’s life fails to recognize how one’s social position shapes their imaginations.

Symmetrical reciprocity has been the primary framework for many social justice projects worldwide. I have seen these emerge in a multitude of ways but this framework particularly resonates with development. Most people never travel the world and even fewer go to marginalized spaces around the world. As such, these individuals rely on their own imaginations (shaped by the media and education) to perceive the world. Many development projects often aim to go beyond educating individuals about the facts by creating an experience with the goal to utilize symmetrical reciprocity. One such example is the Half the Sky.

The game aims to create a simulated experience of poverty and empowerment through digital roleplay. Roleplaying has been used in the classroom as an effective tool for peer
mediation and in some cases teaching social justice. It is aimed to create a simulated experience of oppression to garner symmetrical reciprocity between the self and other. Young argues that symmetrical reciprocity fails in most of these cases because in individual will always project their own fears and fantasies about themselves rather than adopting the actual viewpoint (p.42).

Role-playing in the classroom has long been examined by scholars focused on education. Its goal is for participants to take on another identity outside themselves to provide insight for participants and observers. For example, McCaffery (1995) examines how classes focused on social justice can lead to positive learning outcomes but only if met with proper care and planning. An example the author gives is an experience he had several years ago while doing a training. He asked for volunteers for the role-play but no one raised their hand. He found out later that the participants were reluctant because previous role-playing sessions led to participants being tricked and presented as fools. McCaffery notes that role-playing is the most misused educational tool (p. 18) and provides three commons mistakes: 1) They are used for the wrong purpose; 2) They are poorly designed; 3) They are incorrectly delivered. In many ways Half the Sky echoes these mistakes in a digital space.

McCaffery notes that role-play should primarily be used for building skills and where practice helps build this skill. In the case of Half the Sky, no skills were being built. Instead,

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12 For example, a few years ago I was in a class where the instructor had placed cards on our head. Each card read a race and gender. To simulate racism and sexism, we were supposed to treat each other in the stereotypical way that the person would be and the person was to guess which card they had on their head. As one can imagine, this activity was met with unease. I want to think that the instructor was well-intended and wanted to create a space where white individuals might experience racism or sexism. Yet, this moment relied on the student’s imaginary of what the Other might experience and was predicated on the presupposition that the individuals in the room became neutral when they put the “card” on their head.
players were synthetically encouraged to become a subaltern woman. This fell flat in many ways because my students were unable to build critical thinking skills. Instead, players engage in very little questioning of the issues raised. Often, those who aim to teach social justice via role-play fail to design the activity properly and in many ways players felt a lack of connection to the issues raised in the game’s poor design. Many felt that, although, they enjoyed playing “the mango game” (the mini game in which you must match mangos up to collect them), students were unsure about why they were doing it in the first place. There was no objective to it.

Finally, timing is everything in the educational process. If the activity is not prepped with proper readings or information, the learning outcomes fall flat. Similarly, with Half the Sky, my students felt unsure the authenticity of the game due to their lack of knowledge. Games that aim for social change would significantly benefit in educating students about issues in conjunction with theoretical frameworks that aim to create critical thinking skills.

Although McCaffery’s work is looking at the rudimentary use of role-play, I want to extend his critique to add a fourth common mistake. Role-playing in the social justice classroom

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13 For example, as I was writing this dissertation, one of my friends from another graduate program across campus told me about her experience in her class that focused on LGBT issues. She noted that her professor had everyone in the classroom “embody” what it would be like to be non-heterosexual and write a coming-out letter to their parents. Although well-intended, this left my friend feeling extremely isolated as she was the only Queer-identified individual in the room. Not only was this triggering for her as her own experiences of coming out were quite difficult, she felt silenced as her heterosexual classmates describe and experience she lived. Better planning of this activity would have led the professor to reconsider how teaching empathy could further place oppressed individuals in the margins.

14 Such is the case from the above scenario. My friend reflected on the class and noted she felt that the role-playing session felt “impulsive” and reactive to the conversation in class. The class session was conducted the day after the Orlando shootings and emotions were high in the class. My friend noted she felt that the professor wanted to focus the few individuals who derailing the conversation. One or two individuals made some unsavory comments and instead of moving forward, the professor stopped the conversation abruptly and decided to proceed with this activity. Again, timing is everything. If the professor would have let the graduate students continue the discussion, there could have been potential learning moments.
should consider power and risk. Implementing digital role-playing into the classroom can potentially cause further harm for those who are already marginalized. Often in the social justice classroom, roleplaying is focused on giving privileged individuals insight to oppression. Yet, this insight is false as students are asked to create simulated experiences based on, and limited to, their own knowledge base.

Role-playing is a central process in many video games and particularly those who aim for social change. These games provide a space for digital role-play and have been perceived as both liberatory and limiting. In the early 90s cyberfeminists have explored the limits and potential to adopt new identities online as liberatory.

Returning to Young’s work, she suggests several criticisms of symmetrical reciprocity. First, she argues that the notion of walking in one’s shoes adopts a perspective that humans are mirrors. This obscures differences between one another. It assumes that by placing ourselves in another’s life, we can recognize ourselves in others in neutral terms. This neutrality fails to recognize power and privilege. When a privileged person puts themselves the shoes of the underprivileged, their perspective is still from the view of being privileged. Moreover, privilege is often invisible to the untrained eye thus without acknowledgment of this first, very little learning happens as the take-away is distorted from a privileged perspective.

Offering an alternative to adopting another’s standpoint, Young develops the concept of asymmetrical reciprocity. Individuals come from different standpoints and histories and possess a multitude of social perspectives of the world. Asymmetrical reciprocity acknowledges these standpoints and centers difference as the galvanizing force towards moral communication. Instead of assuming a mirror of symmetry, individuals “respect each other’s irreducible points of view.” She suggests that through moral humility, or the notion that we must admit our lack of
knowledge and listen to learn about other individual’s perspectives, we are able to create
stronger bonds between one another.

Yet, what happens when the stories and histories of the Other is mediated and translated
via development projects? As Young noted, when symmetrical reciprocity is systematized,
problems occur. Social justice video games that focus on social change, not only systematize an
affective response of its player, but codify it. The imaginary of living another’s life is presented
to the player through narrative and decision-making. Developers build videogames with the
belief that players will adopt the perspective of the protagonist through gameplay and narrative.
When fully present in the game (or when there is full embodiment), this is often referred to the
magic circle. Since games allow for active participation, one can argue that they are more likely
to embody the protagonist’s perspective due to the magic circle. As Young points out, “a
communicative theory of moral respect should distinguish between taking the perspective of
other people into account, on the one hand, and imaginatively taking their positions, on the other
hand. (p. 39).”

As I have suggested, games developed for social change aim to create an emotional
response that garners symmetrical reciprocity between player and protagonist. Yet, through
gameplay and reflection, my participants were unable to be reflexive of their own positionality
within gameplay. Thus ignoring a key element in moral communication. Evidence for this is
demonstrated throughout this study. For example, when pressed for the major issues in the game,
most participants only noticed issues that they, themselves, were familiar with due to media
exposure (like gender inequality and poverty). Students did not address race or international
policies as a possible culprit to global inequality despite each being a person of color. I do not
suggest that my students are at fault for this but rather that the game, itself, was coded in such a
way (via narrative and ludic structures) that reinforced notions of neoliberal feminism rather than creating a space where students were able to critically analyze how race, nation, neoliberalism, and globalization might also play a role. This oversight is intentional, as the game (and book), markets neoliberalism. One such example is Kristof and WuDunn’s encouragement of sweatshops as a solution for women’s empowerment:

> These factories produced the shoes, toys, and shirts that filled America’s shopping malls, generating economic growth rates almost unprecedented in the history of the world—and creating the most effective antipoverty program ever recorded.... The economic explosion in Asia was, in large part, an outgrowth of the economic empowerment of women. “They have smaller fingers, so they’re better at stitching,” the manager of a purse factory explained to us. “They’re obedient and work harder than men . . . And we can pay them less. (Kristof and WuDunn, 2009, p. xix).”

Unknowingly, students engaged with this perspective as they unquestionably wanted to get Radhika a microloan and expected Radhika to always speak up regardless of consequences. What this speaks to is the lack of the game’s ability to explore how players, themselves, and their own positionality might shape the way we view women’s empowerment. This was especially true when students created a juxtaposition between Radhika’s friend and Max’s friend. Both friends asked the protagonist for help regarding if they should seek help from the police. Yet, my participants always encouraged Radhika to seek help while simultaneously expecting Max to keep quiet since the police are not to be trusted. Zeke, for example, knew that there were issues to police reporting in both circumstances but still expected Radhika to encourage her friend to report while at the same time expecting Max’s friend to keep quiet. Zeke saw consequences for Max but was unable to imagine consequences for Radhika. Similarly, Tiffany expected both
protagonists to report because Tiffany has always trusted positions of power. In both cases, these participants were not reflexive of how their own positionality and experiences shape their decisions.

**RQ3: How Does Avatar Subjectivity Influence Decision-Making in the Game?**

Players in this study played two games: *Half the Sky* and *Life is Strange*. Both games have similar ludology and tackle similar issues like domestic violence and women’s empowerment. Notably, several months (4-6 month) elapsed between playing both games and players still chose similar decisions for both characters. These decisions were rooted in neoliberal feminist frameworks and typically focused on encouraging Radhika and Max to speak up, regardless of the situation. Although, at first blush, most of the decisions were similar, the subjectivity and identity of the protagonist did influence the way my participants discussed each decision as well as their motivations behind each decision.

For Radhika, players noted they chose options that they felt would be “good for her.” There was disconnection between players and Radhika. Conversely, players continually identified Max in first person during gameplay. Most participants noted they selected decisions for Max based on how they, themselves, would respond. In other words, players could relate to Max’s subjectivity (as a White Western woman) while playing *Life is Strange* while only being able to imagine Radhika’s positionality through personal points of reference.

This is an important finding for the serious game industry. As we continue to build games that focus on social justice, special consideration needs to be given to the connection players makes to the protagonist. This is centrally important to the ability to be reflexive. Scholars have explored how interaction, engagement, and immersion have shaped the efficacy of serious video games (Gunter et. al, 2008). Interaction is the two-way flow of information (Salen and
Zhimmerman, 2004). Engagement is the willingness to play along. This included levels of emotional, intellectual, psychological, and physical engagement. Finally, immersion is the “active creation of a belief in the enveloping fantasy in a digital environment” (Murray, 1999). Gunter et. al, note that there is a hierarchy between each and at the level of immersion, belief systems can be created and disrupted (Table 5.1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of Immersion</th>
<th>Levels of Engagement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immersed</td>
<td>reciprocal action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>active participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interacting</td>
<td>belief creation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1 Serious game immersion hierarchy. Created by Gunter et al., 2008.

My findings suggest that Gunter et al.’s model still holds true but immersion is complex, particularly for games that discuss power and social change. The connection between protagonist and player subjectivity is important in shaping the way players learn. If players do not feel connected to the protagonist, or immersed into the landscape in the game, there is less potential for action and less possibility for asymmetric reciprocity to be created. This was demonstrated by the fact that most of my players saw Radhika outside themselves and described making decisions for or with Radhika rather than as Radhika. When discussing the issues addressed in the game, only a few of my 29 participants, Zeke for example, discussed outrage and frustration for Radhika. Conversely, players felt connected to Max. Most players identified as Max while playing the game by expressing the decisions they make in first person and sometimes reacting in unison with Max while playing. After the game was completed, most players could thoughtfully consider how the decisions in-game had consequences. Even the most trivial
decisions, like whether to water Max’s plant in her dorm, were a concern for some students. This attention to consequences was complexly missing while playing as Radhika. This may be in part due to the fact the most of my students could not critically examine how there might be consequences since there was such a lack of knowledge about India. This demonstrates how the imaginaries shaped by development discourse and The Girl Effect offer little in terms of critically thinking about issues regarding women’s empowerment. As a result, immersion in the way Gutner et al. describe is impossible because there is little knowledge and understanding to draw from. This speaks to the importance of teaching issues of women’s empowerment through a transnational feminist lens.

**RQ4: Does *Half the Sky* Inspire Behavioral Change? Why or Why Not?**

When I started this project, I was under the impression that this game would alter the way my students viewed global women’s empowerment. Instead, I found the game did little to change their opinions of both women’s empowerment and feminism. Based on my findings, most of my students felt that they were already educated about the issues raised in the game. Many even contend that the game was built for children, not adults. This may be due to the game’s cartoon-like graphics but the content also did not do an effective job educating my students. My students regularly admitted that they knew nothing about India or the developing world. This was *after* playing the game. Thus, one might surmise that the game left the students feeling under prepared to answer my questions about women’s empowerment in India.

My students also did not desire to continue playing. Most felt the game was boring and only brushed the surface level of issues. Only a few said they would recommend this game by the mere fact that the issues were important to address, not that the game, itself, does a stellar job at inspiring behavioral changes or shifts in paradigms.
Notably, games like *Half the Sky* need to provide more than echoing common development discourses set forth in the media. To understand gender and development, it is important to consider the knowledge base of your primary audience. For *Half the Sky*, my students were a primary part of their target audience. They are a gaming generation and yet they found the game uninspiring as a mechanism to educate about world issues. None of my students donated money (the key outcome that *Half the Sky* pushed for) and no one mentioned that they were interested in taking significant action after playing the game.

Similarly, *Half the Sky* did not change political beliefs about women’s empowerment or feminism. A study done by Nyhan and Reifler (2010) found that to change one’s belief system, one must offer a personalized positive outcome. Their work found that upon providing fact-based information that counters a person’s belief system, individuals will respond by creating a confirmation bias that “backfires” and strengthens ideological beliefs. Yet, if the person provided fact-based evidence with affirmation that asks player to recall a positive thing about themselves, participants were more inclined to change their opinion. Similarly, my students who played *Half the Sky* filled the gaps in narration with their own (sometimes incorrect) understandings of development. If the aim was to inspire students to make global change, then their in-game reward mechanism (via leveling up) was ineffective. This is in line with current research by McKernan et al. (2015) that suggests that most players who play educational games may enjoy reward-based game more but these games offer little in terms of efficacy of behavioral change. This creates the challenge: How can developers of social justice games encourage behavioral change (which entails the importance of privilege acknowledgment and reflexivity) while providing a positive outcome? The following section explore this more closely.
RQ5: What Is the Friction (or Paradox) That Exists for Those Who Play *Half the Sky* and Feminist Theory?

When it comes to development, friction exists everywhere. Although I can draw conclusive themes from my study that suggest the faults of the game, there were plenty of small moments of resistance that are important to address. This section explores my findings on this in hopes to offer a more nuanced outlook of both my findings and conclusions. Tsing (2005) notes, “Cultures are continually co-produced in the interactions [called] ‘friction’: the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference (p. 4)” Connections are made and remade as participants navigate through different spaces, talk to different people, and learn new things. As such, I do believe there is great potential for social justice games to build critical thinking skills about issues regarding global inequality.

The paradox that exists through friction is that games like *Half the Sky* are not completely problematic nor were my students complete dupes. This section explores both more closely. Then, I will offer insight on how feminist educators and game developers can use moments of friction to improve social justice game design.

One key finding was that some of my participants had never considered how communities could help each other combat issues of social inequity. Many referenced *Half the Sky*’s focus on women’s empowerment group as a site for community building and connection. One of the primary reasons the game included this scene was because many microlenders, like the company Kashf, “almost exclusively [lend] to women, in groups of twenty-five” (Kristof and WuDunn, 2009, p. 187). Yet, my students saw potential in joining together around women’s issues. In many ways, this pushed against the neoliberal logics of their own belief systems. For example, many saw individualism central to women’s empowerment and feminism. *Half the Sky*
combats this in a way the developers might not have intend. As a result, many of my participants noted that they had never considered how women’s empowerment should be reinforced in groups rather than by individual people.

My students genuinely cared about the issues raised in the game despite their admittance to their lack of knowledge. In truth, it takes a lot of strength and maturity to acknowledge one’s lack of knowledge about an issue rather than assume to know everything (something that Kristof and WuDunn often claim). In this admittance, I see a potential and willingness to learn and listen. There were many moments during my interviews (for example when I asked about whether they felt the game was an authentic representation) in which my participants struggled with question about authenticity. Most felt they did not have the perspective to answer it, yet, paradoxically many were convinced that it was accurate in many ways. It is in this initial questioning, friction exists as they explore their own imaginary of the Global South. My participants realized this was limited but could recall images from previous forms of media to determine authenticity.

It is in both moments of friction: where students are able to draw their own conclusions outside the logics of the game and are able to point out their own limits of knowledge in which change can happen. Social justice game designers need to create opportunities in which players can reflect on their knowledge and positionality. This is discussed further in the following section.

**Future Recommendations**

In conclusion, I offer two suggestions bred from my analysis. As this research has shown, there is much work that needs to be done towards the improvement of serious games aimed at social change. One important recommendation is the importance of continued scholarship
towards the change of deep-rooted beliefs. Games that aim to create social change and a change at belief system must work towards two things. First, their needs to be an element of reflexivity built into the game’s narrative and gameplay. As shown in my research, although *Half the Sky* aimed to educate players about women’s issues around the world, few players could recall important details to the game (for example, where Radhika was from). Players were far more likely to recall how they, themselves, felt about certain subjects. As such, building reflexive moments into the game, would lend itself to a more fruitful learning experience for students. More specifically, games aim to combat power structures should provide an element of asymmetrical reciprocity in terms of privilege and the reinforcement of power. Like most games aim at social justice, *Half the Sky*, hopes to empower players to individually make changes in their life. Yet, the game fails to explore how the individual contributes to oppression daily. This learning moment is sometimes painful for students but incredibly valuable. As such, there needs to be further research on how to create a game-based environment where students do the painful work of examining one’s own privileges while leaving on a positive note. One such area of research that would help is exploring how the action continuum has been used in social justice education initiatives (Adams et al, 2007).

A second recommendation is the continued research on how beliefs shape gameplay decisions. Although there have been some gains towards this, there is a paucity of knowledge focusing on serious games and changing belief systems. Instead, most of the research on serious games explores the effectiveness of meeting learning objectives. This research is valuable but, in terms of larger social justice initiatives, merely being able to memorize information about social justice is not enough. Instead, there needs to be further exploration on how serious games can hone critical thinking skills. I suggest that using the GPR method as key way to explore this.
Although, time consuming, the information collected from my participants would have been completely overlooked in a traditional survey form.

In sum, what this dissertation has demonstrated is that producers of games aimed at social change need to consider how previous discourses, and imaginaries created by those discourses, shape one’s ability to make decisions in-game. Current trends of women’s empowerment (among non-academic, non-activist individuals) promote a singular type of feminism rooted in neoliberalism. I argue there must be more than one singular framework of feminism offered as a solution in games centered on women’s issues. Finally, social change is a long and arduous process, producers of games for social change must consider how reductionist solutions may cause more harm than good. As such, developing a game aimed to educate individuals must include careful consideration to socio-cultural influences of their own goals as well as their player’s.
CHAPTER VI: EPILOGUE

Final Thoughts on Social Justice Education

Upon entering this program, I had numerous assumptions about teaching social justice to college students. Prior, I had singularly taught courses situated in Women’s and Gender Studies, had mostly taken courses in the field, and was deeply involved in feminist activist spaces. My first year teaching non-feminist students among non-feminist faculty and graduate students was a culture shock. For a long time, I saw the university as a safe space for feminist activism because I had spent all my time among feminists for several years. Through the process of interaction, conversation, and research I have learned a lot. The goal of this final section is to address a few key “lessons” I learned throughout this journey.

Lesson 1: Identifying as Feminist is Not Synonymous with Feminist Work

I completed my Masters of Arts in Women’s and Gender Studies. In my feminist theory course, I recall being shocked and surprised that the professor of that class didn’t call herself a feminist. For her, the term was seeped in Whiteness. I have grown to respect this and at times feel similarly. While working on this project, I realized that identifying as a feminist possesses little meaning beyond lip service. As our current political climate has unfolded, people who identify as feminists can do harmful things to women and people of color. Conversely, there are various reasons one might not identify as a feminist: for survival in a department that might not value feminism; for lack of education; or for complex political reasons. Regardless of the reason, actions truly speak louder than words.

Social justice scholarship has become somewhat of a “hot” area of research now. As such, I have seen a rise of submissions in the various social justice oriented divisions in the field of communication. This is great because we need more support, but I question whether those
who submit to these divisions are only trying to get another CV line rather than want to create meaningful change. I have seen far too many folks who are blatantly racist or sexist then submit papers about feminism. I have seen sexual harassers publish work about sexual harassment and witnessed several individuals who do work on race without acknowledging their Whiteness. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, I have seen the wizard of social justice academia. As a result, I realized that feminist work is more than just writing papers and calling oneself a “feminist,” it is living and breathing resistance the best way one can.

The same was true for my participants in this project. Many noted that they identified as a feminist due to their belief in gender equality but several of them noted they don’t do anything to help the “cause” of feminism. Conversely Zeke, who does feminist activism in his daily life doesn’t identify as one. As an educator and researcher, I realized that when it comes to teaching about feminism, lessons need more than just surface-level information and takes time to cultivate change.

**Lesson 2: Feminist Scholarship Needs to be More Accessible**

I teach public speaking courses and one of the main themes throughout the course is to “know your audience.” This is especially true for feminist educators. I have learned that only academics are afforded the luxury to explore a singular term for hours on end. In the field of Women’s and Gender Studies, debates form around the usage of certain term. For example, in this project I have outlined the various debates surrounding the term *postfeminism*. What is often missed in these debates is the lack of applicability to the everyday lives of our students. I learned this quickly upon entering a program that didn’t center its conversations on feminist politics.

Upon reflection, I realize that during my first year as a doctoral student, I was regularly frustrated. From my perspective, no one understood what feminism meant, several folks thought
that feminism was antiquated, and many were tangibly appalled when I talked about Queerness and trans rights (I had many moments where folks physically stepped away from me when I revealed that I was Queer). These conversations have not abated but my interpretation has shifted. It made me realize that the closed bubble I was in prior to this program did little to create change. I was truly preaching to the choir. I’m not going to pretend that these moments are not still painful and frustrating but I think I have become more patient with individuals who are uneducated about these topics and for that, I am thankful for this journey.

At the end of this process, I have noticed a significant shift in my teaching over the past four years. I used to jump straight into feminist politics early in a course. I assumed everyone knew the difference between sex and gender and that folks generally saw feminism in a positive light. After the realization that even faculty in our field might not know the difference between sex and gender, I revamped a lot of my lessons to start from the ground up. This dissertation project in conjunction with my experiences, helped me realized the importance of unpacking deep-rooted ideologies and that reflexivity, too, is a skill that needs to be taught. As more social justice educators use games to garner empathy in the classroom, it is my hope that in the future this project will offer guidance and to encourage other instructors to push on building reflexive practices in both their research and teaching. Real change takes time but change is possible.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A. ASSIGNMENT GIVEN TO STUDENTS
Extra Credit Assignment
Exploring Half the Sky Movement: The Video Game

The goal of this extra credit assignment is for you to play *Half the Sky Movement: The Video Game* and journal your experiences while playing the game. Please follow the steps below for your assignment.

**Step 1: Pre-testing your knowledge and opinions…**
Answer the questions attached (Part I) BEFORE playing the game

**Step 2: Sign into the game using your Facebook account…**
- Go to [https://www.facebook.com/HalftheGame](https://www.facebook.com/HalftheGame)
  - Log into your Facebook account
- On the lower left column you should see a button that says “Play Now on Facebook”

![Facebook Game Link](image)

**Step 3: Play and journal as you go…**
As you play the game, your character will encounter various decisions. For example, in the first scene, Radhika has to decide whether or not she will confront her husband about getting medicine for her child. You must pick an option. Please journal *why* you decided to select that option. Do this with similar encounters in the game where you have to make a decision. Similarly, please journal your thoughts, feelings, and findings as you play. Pay close attention to the narrative, the graphics, and the gameplay.

*TIP* This game is similar to Candy Crush-type games where you will need to wait to gain energy back. Therefore, you will have to wait during various moments. While you are waiting, take this time to journal.
Step 4: Finish the game…

Play until you are done with Radhika’s journey in India. You will know this section is done when you are able to leave India and go to a different country (see screenshot below).

If you want to play more, please feel free to do so!

Step 5: Answer the questions from the second half AFTER you play the game…

Step 6: Submit your assignment.

- Submit your assignment via Canvas, this includes:
  - Part I (pre-game questions)
  - Part II (post-game questions)
  - Your journaling of the game (include your journal after Part II)
Part I
Pre-game Questions
*Answer these questions BEFORE playing Half the Sky Movement: The Video Game*

1. What year are you in terms of education?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your race?
4. Do you make over $50,000 a year (the median income in the US)?
5. Does the household you grew up in make over $50,000 a year?
6. How long have you lived in the Bowling Green area?
7. Where are you previously from?
8. What are your previous experiences with video games?
9. Have you ever read *Half the Sky* by Nicolas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn?
   a. If so, what are your overall thoughts of the book?
10. How do you define women’s empowerment?
11. Do you identify as a feminist? Why or why not?

Part II
Post-game Questions
*Answer these questions after playing the game Half the Sky Movement: The Video Game*

1. How far did you play in the game?
2. What are the social justice issues raised in this game?
3. Which social justice issues stuck out the most to you? Why?
4. What parts of the game narrative do you agree with?
5. What parts of the game narrative do you disagree with?
6. How did this game portray women? Is this accurate?
7. How did this game portray men? Is this accurate?
8. Does this game alter the way you define women’s empowerment? If yes, *how* does it? If no, why does it not?
9. Would you recommend this game? Why or why not?
10. Did this game change your opinion of feminists? Why or why not?
11. Did you opt to donate real money to a nonprofit? Why or why not?
12. Did you know there is a Half the Sky movement?
   a. Would you ever participate in it? Why or why not?
13. How might you get involved in terms of the issues raised in this game?
14. What age group do you think this game is designed for? Why?

My Journaling:
APPENDIX B. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Gameplay Review Interview Questions

List below are guided questions for the gameplay review interviews. Questions are placed within the four phases given in the GPR method. Note, these questions are used as a guide and are not exhaustive.

**Phase 1 Questions (Asked prior to playing Life Is Strange)**
- What are your thoughts on video games in general?
- How often do you play video games?
- Have you played serious games (games that encourage education over gameplay)? If so, which ones?
- Have you played this game prior?
- Describe what activism means to you.
- What is your experience with non-profit activism?
- Have you ever donated money to any non-profits?  
  - If so, where? Why?
- How would you describe women’s empowerment?  
  - Is this definition different for women outside of the US?
- How do you define feminism?  
  - Is this different than women’s empowerment?
- How would you describe your gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status?
- Re-ask questions outlined in Appendix A

**Phase 2**
Player is asked to think aloud as they play the game.

**Phase 3**
Player is asked to give input on to which scenes were most memorable and reflect on their behaviors.

**Phase 4 Questions (Asked after playing Life Is Strange)**
*Note* - Questions are formed based on gameplay but should also include:
- What were the issues raised in this game?  
  - Which issues stuck out? Why?
- What parts of the game do you agree with?
- What parts of the game do you disagree with?
- Does this game alter the way you define women’s empowerment?  
  - If yes, how? If no. why?
- How would you describe your overall stance in terms of the issues raised in the game?
- Would you recommend this game? Why or why not?
- What are some alternative solutions to the issues raised in the game?
- How might you get involved in terms of the issues raised in this game?
### Appendix C. Codebook for Journal/Interview Analysis

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>In Vivo Terms or Phrases</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>How do you define women’s empowerment?</em></td>
<td>support; standing up for another; act of helping other women; encouragement</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>succeed in any way the want; achieve goals; self-reliant; rise above; standing up for themselves</td>
<td>Individualism</td>
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<td></td>
<td>equal pay; equal work conditions; careers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>choice; ability to do what they want; make own decisions; taking charge</td>
<td>Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>defy stereotypes of women; assertiveness; going outside female gender roles</td>
<td>Valuing Masculinity</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Do you identify as a feminist? Why or Why not?</em></td>
<td>it doesn’t connect with me; don’t care about the issues</td>
<td>Direct Connection to Privilege</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>men can’t be feminists</td>
<td>Direct Connection to Gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I believe; belief;</td>
<td>Feminism as a Belief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>equal pay; economic equality; positions of power in the workplace</td>
<td>Liberal Feminism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>race is more important; Blackness comes first; men can’t be feminists</td>
<td>Underrepresented Identities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>What were the major social issues raised in the game?</em></td>
<td>gender inequality; unequal genders; women don’t have power</td>
<td>Gender Inequality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>poor; access to housing; economy; poverty</td>
<td>Poverty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no vaccinations; bad hospitals; cost of healthcare</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>How were the women portrayed in the game?</em></td>
<td>strong; independent; hard working</td>
<td>Positive Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>weak; didn’t speak up; afraid of husbands</td>
<td>Negative Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey Question</td>
<td>Example</td>
<td>Code</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How were the men portrayed in the game?</td>
<td>strong</td>
<td>Positive Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>lazy; angry; mean; controlling; selfish</td>
<td>Negative Association</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<tr>
<th>Survey Question</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did this game change your view on women’s empowerment or feminists?</td>
<td>think about gender in a new way; I might tell my roommate about it</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>no; not really; didn’t change my opinion because I didn’t learn anything</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a project in which the chief purpose is to study the relationships between educational games, learning, and women’s empowerment.

You are eligible to participate if you are at least 18 years old.

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to play a free online game that focuses on women’s empowerment. You will also be asked to complete a set of questionnaires about your attitudes toward women’s empowerment, your involvement with non-profits, your game playing behavior, and demographic questions. Please know that your questionnaire answers are anonymous. You also may want to clear your internet browser history after participating on a work or public computer. This is primarily because your information might be monitored.

We anticipate it will take you no longer than 90 minutes to complete all of the questionnaires and play the game. You may notice some overlap in the types of questions you are asked, but please answer each question as best you can based on how you feel at that time.

The benefits of participating include helping us better understand the relationships between women’s empowerment and video games.

As an incentive, every participant will be automatically entered into a raffle to win a $25.00 Amazon.com gift card. Participation will still be completely confidential because we have programmed the survey software to keep personal information separate from your answers. Please note that your responses will still be recorded anonymously.

There are no obvious physical or psychological risks associated with completing the questionnaires.

Please note that you are free to decide NOT to participate. If you are a Bowling Green State University student, your decision will have no impact on your grades, class standing, or relationship with BGSU in any way. Additionally, participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw from participation at any time.

We hope to use the results of this study to publish an article discussing the results of the project.

We have no basis to assume that anyone who participates in this project will have a strongly negative or unpleasant experience as a result of participation. However, if as a result of participating in this study, you experience strongly negative or unpleasant feelings or sensations, you may want to contact your local counseling center or the national Crisis Call Center hotline at 1-800-273-8255.
In addition, if you have any questions about the study, you may contact either the principal investigator, Erika M. Behrmann, at erikamb@bgsu.edu or 419-372-0528, or the faculty advisor, Radhika Gajjala, Professor of Communications, at 419-372-0528. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chairperson, Human Subjects Review Board at Bowling Green State University, at 419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu.

BGSU HSRB:
IRBNet ID #:
EFFECTIVE:
ADULT CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: Half the Sky: Interviews

INTRODUCTION
You are invited to participate in a dissertation research study conducted by Erika M. Behrmann, MA from the School of Media and Communication at Bowling Green State University in Bowling Green, Ohio. Your participation in this research will contribute to the understanding of games that focus on women’s issues. Please note, you must be 18 years or older to participate in this study.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this study is to learn more about the ideas and opinions of players who play Half the Sky Movement: The Game and Life is Strange.

PROCEDURES AND ACTIVITIES
1. With your voluntary participation, you will be briefed on the purpose of the study and how their participation will contribute to it. You will be given a verbal explanation of all procedures and activities along with this written consent before any interviews are conducted.
2. You will be asked to make three appointments. Each appointment will take about three hours each. Your appointment dates are: ________________, ________________ and _________________. You are free to change your dates with no effect on the study or compensation.
3. Each appointment session entails the following:
   Session 1)
   a. A series of open-ended questions about your previous experience with video games.
   b. A video taping of you playing Half the Sky Movement: The Game
   c. A series of follow-up questions will be asked
   Session 2)
   a. A series of interviews questions about your experiences with video games.
   b. A video taping of you playing Life is Strange
   c. A series of follow-up questions will be asked
   Session 3)
   a. We will watch the video tapes together and discuss your gameplay decisions.
   b. A series of follow-up questions will be asked.
4. After all sessions are completed, you will receive compensation (a $50 VISA gift card).

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
Risk of participation is not greater than that experienced in daily life. I am asking you for your opinions and insights, so anything that you are uncomfortable sharing is completely at your discretion.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY
1. You will benefit from this study by being able to voice your own opinions of both games and your own gameplay. Often, you may not be openly invited to share this opinion, but here I am openly asking for it. This study will be a great way to get your voice out there and understood.
2. You will also be contributing to our understanding of why individuals chose to play Half the Sky Movement: The Game and Life is Strange and what parts of the game you like and dislike.
3. Upon completion of both appointments, you will be compensated with a $50 VISA gift card.

CONFIDENTIALITY
All information obtained during the interview will be kept confidential. Your name will not be associated with any written documents or reports about this research. This interview will have several materials involved: 1) A videotape of the session; 2) Notes taken by me; and 3) A auto-generated transcription created by Dragon Diction. These three items, including the consent form, will be locked in a filing cabinet in my locked personal office (13 West Hall). Reports and data will be kept in a password-protected digital file on my personal office computer that has firewall safety and a password for logging in.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL
You can choose whether to participate in this study or not. Deciding to participate or not will not impact your grades, class standing, or relationship with BGSU. If you volunteer to participate, you may withdraw at any time. Please note, you must attend all interview sessions in order to receive the $50 VISA gift card. You can refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study without forfeiting the gift card. Your decision to participate or to not participate in this study will in no way impact any relationship with Bowling Green State University.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS AND REVIEW BOARD
If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact: Erika Behrmann at erikamb@bgsu.edu, 1-419-372-8349 or her faculty advisor, Radhika Gajjala at radhik@bgsu.edu or 1-419-372-8349. If you have other concerns or questions regarding participant rights, contact the chair of the human subjects review board at Bowling Green State University at 1-419-372-7716 or hsrb@bgsu.edu. Copies of the consent form can be provided by contacting Erika Behrmann at erikamb@bgsu.edu or printing out this page.

SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I have been informed of the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.

Signature of Participant       Date
DATE: April 13, 2016

TO: Erika Behrmann, ABD
FROM: Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board

PROJECT TITLE: [860094-3] Half the Sky: Gaming Interviews
SUBMISSION TYPE: Revision
ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: April 13, 2016
REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of Revision materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board has determined this project is exempt from IRB review according to federal regulations AND that the proposed research has met the principles outlined in the Belmont Report. You may now begin the research activities.

Note that an amendment may not be made to exempt research because of the possibility that proposed changes may change the research in such a way that it is no longer meets the criteria for exemption. A new application must be submitted and reviewed prior to modifying the research activity, unless the researcher believes that the change must be made to prevent harm to participants. In these cases, the Office of Research Compliance must be notified as soon as practicable.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact Kristin Hagemyer at 419-372-7716 or khagemy@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Human Subjects Review Board's records.